Copy of *The Golden Thread* for the Oxford Editors.

Services required:

1. Proof reading
2. Copy editing
3. Assesment
4. Book proposal

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September 5th 2018

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for agreeing to edit and assess my book *The Golden Thread*. I have undertaken extensive research to hopefully provide an insightful and engaging read. It shares the same genre as *Women Who Run with the Wolves* and *Iron John*. Being a combination of mythology, folklore and fairy tales, with psychological, esoteric and self-help themes. I am also in the process of writing a reference section for the various terms, gods and goddesses, etc. mentioned.

Through the nine chapters, the narrative traces a single life, and a single mythological cycle of the earth. Each chapter consists of two stories, and one complimentary section. Focusing on the different stages of life, but always following the threads of love and suffering.

This book means a great deal to me. It has helped me through one of the most difficult periods in my life. (I am sure every writer says that!) I am however, very willing to make changes, in order to make it accessible, and ultimately suitable for publication.

As a little background I am 31 years old. I live in Bath, England. I have been writing stories and novels for about ten years, as well as attending a number of creative writing courses. However, I do not think that my grammar, and use of tense, etc. are good enough. I am also unsure about a few things, for example: the use of quotes, and whether to address the reader in the first or second person, etc. Due to this I thought it would be a good idea to contact you!

I look forward to working with you,

With very best wishes,

Amy

The Golden Thread

*Myth and the Labyrinth of Life*

Part I

Awakening

“Only mystery makes us live, only mystery.”

Frederico Garcia Lorca

Raven the Light-bringer

- Haida Mythology -

“Raven was not thought of as a god. He was thought of as the transformer, the trickster. He was the being that changed things – sometimes quite by accident, sometimes on purpose.”

Christian White, Haida artist

Raven soared over the tips of the rugged mountains. Coal-beaked, with prophetic speech, he extended his glossy, black wings. The wind surged through the forest, and on to where the nocturnal rivers flowed away into the sea.

It had been years since Raven had brought forth all life, raised the valleys and mountains from the sea, but still there was no light to illuminate his creation, no light for him to consume the berries of the land, or the fish of the sea.

On through the eternal night, he flew, salt-tanged air bristling his feathers as he hungrily fixed his mind on the upper world. For he had heard whisperings of a great, but selfish, chieftain, who lived with his daughter in a long-house, illuminated by gold and silver light.

Swooping low over the cedar forests, and volcanic islands, Raven flew on to the land of a thousand lakes. Wheeling upwards, he slid through a chink in the darkness, and up into the sky world.

Fluttering down onto a branch of a pine tree, he watched the chieftain’s daughter collect water from a stream below. Wrapping his wings around him he threw himself off the branch. Tumbling through the air, he shifted his shape into a seed that fell into the stream below. The daughter scooped up the water in her wooden bowl, and raised it to her lips, trying to sweep the seed off, but the seed slipped through.

It knitted itself into the dark space of her womb and, before too long, she noticed a change in her body. Time passed, and she readied herself to give birth, her father delivering a little boy: Raven reborn.

Holding him to her bare skin, she watched her father loosen the ties of a bag, from which a whole host of glittering stars rose to the rafters. At once, the baby opened his eyes and, with a cry, raised his hands to the twinkling starlight. The chieftain laughed as the stars fell, and he recaptured them. He undid a second bag, from which a silver light crept over the floor, patterning the walls, as the moon rose over the new-born and his mother. Entombed in the darkness of the bag once more, the chieftain reached for a third.

“This is my most precious possession,” he said, loosening the string, as golden light flooded the room, gilding everything it touched. “The sun,” he whispered.

The baby’s eyes glinted, his little hands outstretched towards it.

“Oh, no!” The chieftain laughed, as he returned it to the bag, and the long-house fell into lamplight once more.

The boy smiled at his grandfather but, in his heart, he knew the whisperings were true, that he selfishly kept all the light of the world for himself.

Resolved, Raven waited for his body to grow, and forge a voice with which he asked his grandfather if he might play with the sun, moon and stars. His grandfather found he could not deny the boy, and so withdrew the bag of starlight. Raven carefully loosened the tie, and rolled the bag over the floor. The sides peeled away and a whole galaxy of stars rose up . The chieftain jumped into the air, but they ascended, like a glittering river, flowing away from his fingertips, up into the heavens, where they settled. Raven lowered his head and smiled, as his grandfather took the other bags away.

Time went on and, for the next few months, Raven simply played with the bags until, once more, he rolled the moon bag over the floor, and let the ties go. The luminous orb rose up through the smoke hole and into the night. The chieftain cried out, as he turned on his grandson, who curled up on the floor, his little hands across his knees. Stooping down, he ran his fingers softly over his grandson’s black curls, and sat him upon his knee. Raven pointed to the sun bag, but his grandfather shook his head. “It is very precious to me”, he explained, before he carried him to bed.

The days came and went, and came again, and still he asked, and still he was denied. Many months passed this way until, finally, the chieftain consented, and carefully closed the smoke hole. Raven was put out by this, but he knew that, if he returned to his task day after day, something would change. The it did change when, one morning, the chieftain forgot to close the smoke hole. Raven opened the bag, shifted his shape, and rose upwards like a coil of smoke out of the hole. Concealing the golden sun beneath his feathers, he flew back down to the earth. Over the seas he flew, until he came to a river that flowed away from the mountains. In the darkness he saw some men fishing with difficulty, and cried out:

“If you will give me some of your fish, I will bring light to help you.”

Weary with their toil, the fishermen called out angrily, until Raven lifted his wings, and flooded them with golden light. Gladly they agreed, and flung a fish into the air. Raven caught it in his beak and flew on, over the mountain peaks, and on to set the sun in the sky.

All the oceans brimmed in his eyes, with the silver-scaled fish in his beak, as he flew on over the blue-green forests, and the snow-dusted mountains; forever onwards, over the glacial rivers where, below, swam his watery twin, his shadowy brother of reflection, hurtling through the waters of the earth.

The Hanged Man

Norse Mythology

“Some nights in the midst of this loneliness I swung among the scattered stars at the end of the thin thread of faith, alone.”

Wendell Berry

The sun sank beneath a ridge of snow-dusted mountains, a slither of copper flickering along the horizon. At the edge of the forest, away from the stronghold of the gods, stood all-father Odin. The leaves of the trees shimmered bronze, as he turned to watch two black-feathered birds glide out of the mist. He fixed his one eye on them; Ffor, the other he had long since sacrificed, in exchange for the wisdom that came by taking a single draft from the well of Mímisbrunnr.

The ravens, Thought and Memory, wheeled overhead, before swooping down, to alight on a nearby branch, croaking out into the stillness. Odin listened to all that they had seen and heard, until they flew away towards the frozen rivers of Jotenheim.

Returning to the fortress, Odin gathered his spear, Gungnir, and a portion of flaxen rope. With the mountains at his back, he descended to where Yggdrasil, the world tree, rose out of the primordial waters of the well, Urðr. Lifting his eyes, he viewed the ash tree that spread out in all directions, bristling with evergreen leaves and sprinkled with dew.

As night gathered its dusky veil over the land, he lowered his head, in a biting wind which encircled him. Staring down into the abyss of the well, he saw, beneath the dark water, where the bronze-scaled dragon Nidhog gnawed at the tree’s roots, the Norns appear. Odin whispered their names, “Urðr”: what once was; “Verðandi”: what is coming into being, and “Skuld”: what shall be.

In the silence, he saw them raise their hands to the trunk of the tree, their daggers glittering in the moonlight, as they carved runes into its supple bark. With each slice of the blades, the incisions glowed silver, before trickling up and down the tree; carrying the fate of the whole nine worlds in their forms.

Odin fixed his mind on seeking the wisdom of the runes. Casting the flaxen rope over a nearby branch, he watched it slither and coil like a serpent, before it descended and wrapped itself around his neck. Like a fish from the ocean it hauled him up, spinning its way from his neck and down to his ankle.

Hanging there in the darkness, Odin thrust the spear into his side. Blood dripped from his wound, as he listened to the dwarves beneath the dark fields, toiling away at the seams of copper, silver and gold. Odin closed his eye for a moment. His mind was swarming with fire demons, the forested land of the giants, and the impassable sea that encircles Midgard.

From the mountains there, he heard a voice call, and saw a woman sitting alone. Beneath her catskin hood, her hair was long, loose, and silver in the moonlight. Her tongue was wet with skaldic verse, and, in her hands, she held talismans of amber, and of bone. The völva turned them over in her palm, before casting them into a stream below.

Lashed by the winds and rain, Odin swung from the windswept rope-gallows. The screaming river, from the abode of Hel, ran through his veins, as if the lands of fire and ice surged through him. Odin felt the flesh melt away from his bones, and his thoughts wither, as the blood from his wound dripped into the water below. Still, he fixed his eye, urging the runes to reveal their secrets to him, but they would not yield to him so soon.

On the ninth day, incantations fell from his parched tongue, as the sun blackened, and the moon rose full of blood. The stars fell from the sky, as a host of black-winged birds burst from the canopy. Their feathers extinguished the last traces of starlight, as Odin hung like a withered leaf on the tree. Overhead, a serpent slithered along the branch towards him, as the rope frayed, and he fell through the darkening spheres of the nine worlds.

Suspended in mid-air, a rasping wind flowed down through the branches, and plunged into the depths of the well as, at long last, the waters parted, and the runes revealed their secrets to him. With a scream of exultation, his body crumpled, and the water received him.

From nothingness, on the high mountain peaks of Midgard, a single flame was kindled, followed by another, as the people of Midgard lit bonfires. Odin drew a full breath, and his body rose in the air. Slithers of opal, amethyst, emerald, and sapphire arched through the branches, before threading their way around him, and bearing him back to Asgard.

The Arcana of Nature

Creation. Identity. Wisdom

“I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle.” The Roman historian Plutarch recorded this inscription from a statue of a veiled goddess, depicting either Neith or Isis, in Sais, Egypt. The veiled goddess has long been equated with nature; the lifting of the veil symbolising scientific or spiritual enlightenment, beyond which lies understanding, wisdom, and the secrets of nature.

The themes of creation, and the pursuit of wisdom, are found in the tales of Raven and Odin. They are two primordial archetypes. They are “lost originals of the remote past”, as the poet William Blake would have called them.

It was in this remote past that imagination mingled with the landscape, and myths emerged, formed in part from a desire to understand the mysteries of life and the universe. To try and offer answers to the questions which still haunt us: why am I here? and, is there any meaning to life?

Carl Jung observed that “the primitive mentality does not invent myths, it experiences them”. To the ancestral mind there was no distinction between the inner and outer: the macrocosm and the microcosm, which are the seasonal, cosmic and transformational patterns, present in all myths.

They saw all things as connected, all present in each other. Today we know, as Carl Sagan told us, that, “The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies, were all made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff.” At every moment, we are being nourished and rebuilt by dying stars; we who are alive right now, because of a great number of unlikely events happening.

So what existed before the universe? Another universe collapsing into itself? A single singularity? The myths tell us that it was a time of chaos, of darkness and mist. Creator-gods were often depicted as hermaphrodites, which is a form in which all dualities are resolved. It is written in the *Tao Te Ching* that the, “Tao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, The Two gives birth to Three, The Three gives birth to all universal things. All universal things shoulder the Yin and embrace the Yang. The Yin and Yang mingle and mix with each other to beget the harmony.”

In Hindu mythology, Brahma is the lonely creator-god, who “yearned for someone to keep him company, and his thought split the temporary body he was using into two parts, like the halves of a clam shell coming apart. One of the two parts was male, and the other female. They looked at each other as husband and wife.” This is also seen in a beautiful passage from the Qu’ran. “I was a hidden treasure, and I longed [loved] to be known, so I created the world.”

The centre of this world was often symbolised by a pillar of gold, a world tree, or a Holy, or Cosmic Mountain, This symbolised order rising out of chaos; a bridge between humans and the great mystery of the universe. This central pillar, or point, was also seen as the axis mundi, which connected the three realms of heaven, earth, and the underworld. It was widely believed that, if the tree were to break, or the mountain crumble, then this would signal a reversion to chaos, and the end of the world.

This ancient cosmology reveals to us an alive and sacred world, and one that might be more alive than we realise. Scientists studying an 807 year old tree in Tajikistan found that the tree’s annual rings showed a definite slowing-down of tree growth with each known date of three supernovas. Thus we can say, “Every star that dies in our galaxy is perceived by trees.”

Trees provide plentiful analogies for many stages of life. An example of this is held by the Nanak people of Siberia, who spoke of “enormous, heavenly trees… that sheltered the souls multiplying in the form of birds. This stems from the belief in the Shamanic world tree, where human souls hang like leaves, waiting to be born, or received back into the “otherworld” after completing an individual life on earth.”

Isolated from mythic understanding, we may struggle to comprehend old beliefs and, in doing so, disregard the wisdom they hold – In some instances, this applies to historical facts as well. Because of this, the words ’God’, ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ may make you feel uncomfortable. This is understandable. We are pre-conditioned by society, and our own life experience, to label and define, to accept or dismiss. Alongside organised religion, although it has helped many, is a source of great trauma, with its history of bloodshed, and control through fear. It has caused many to turn away. The secret teachings have been forgotten, and the golden rule of love and compassion, widely neglected.

Now, I do not wish to convince you of anything. I believe that myths are for everyone, whether you believe in a deity, or you don’t. It doesn’t matter. However, the importance of thinking for yourself, of trying to balance opposing views before judgment, can never be overstated.

Whatever your beliefs, I feel that nature is the still point. As clichéd as it is, with its seasons and cycles, nature is the perfect analogy for life. Opposed to stagnation, it enlivens us. It nourishes and then destroys. We will, forever, be inextricably tied to its fate for us. Nature does not need us, we need it, but we are distracted, and have forgotten the invisible bonds between memory and landscape.

For our ancestors, mystics such as Henry Corbin, and poets like Dante, the realm of the imagination, *or soul of the world,* was a very real place. Such a sacred place is described in all mythological traditions, some of which are oral. Multi-faceted like a diamond, it is known by many names: The Blessed Isles, Avalon, the Isle of Glass, Tir na nOg, and the Garden of the Hesperides, to name just a few. These places are representations of this *otherworld*, an upper world and, sometimes, even paradise itself. Like a fully authentic life, they are aglow. Familiar, yet richer.

Joseph Campbell felt that “the first function of mythology is to transport the mind in experience past the guardians – desire and fear – of the paradisal gate to the tree within of illuminated life.”

This is seen through metaphor in the land of Uttarakuru, where the golden trees burn fire-bright. On the summit of Mt Kailash, it is written that the Hindu God, Shiva, meditates upon its “sparkling peaks sown with many-coloured precious stones.” In the Garden of the Gods, in the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, the Hero King found a paradise of jewel-laden trees.

Perhaps these mythic landscapes reveal to us “how things ought to be seen”, as experienced by Aldous Huxley, and described in his book *The Doors of Perception*. With his consciousness shifted by mescaline, he entered into another realm. It is a realm, glimpsed in dreams, and entered by shamans, during their initiations (a shaman being an intermediary between the natural world, and the spirit world, in certain traditional societies.). Nietzsche described something similar when he wrote, that: “in our sleep and in our dreams we pass through the whole thought of earlier humanity. I mean, in the same way that man reasons in his dreams, he reasoned when in the waking state many thousands of years....The dream carries us back into earlier states of human culture, and affords us a means of understanding it better."

Dreams are a beautiful mix of symbols and images. They can often feel mythic, as well as giving form to our inner loneliness and suffering. Even dreams which are not understood have a healing function. Over 4000 years ago, in Ancient Egypt, there were temples known as sleep, or dream temples. Here, the sick person was put into a trance-like state. Afterwards, the priests and priestesses would interpret their dreams, in order to gain understanding about their illness and, with hope, to find a cure for it.

I believe that myths hold a similar function. That they are able to mirror back to us parts of ourselves which we have repressed or neglected. Listening or reading myths is an intensely personal experience. 99% of the myth may mean nothing to you, but then there”s that 1 per cent. that sticks in your mind, and that”s the part that you needed to hear.

Myths and fairy tales helped me through the darkest period in my life, involving: anorexia, family cancers, affairs, and death. As usual, troubles all came at once but, within the stories, I found comfort. They gave expression to how I felt; to how we all feel at times. For human or animal, to me there is no distinction when it comes down to how incredibly hard life is, and how we are all just trying to make it through as best as we can.

Death, a theme so prevalent in myths and fairy tales, helps us reflect on our lives: on any regrets we may have, and any dreams which are still unfulfilled. When we take the concept of death into our lives it helps us live with authenticity; to tread the path to individualisation. This is not about some crackpot idea, or a theme for your Instagram page, but who we are deep down, and an authentic expression of your truest self.

Identity was the hell of the Greeks, and it is fast making us more anxious and isolated. However, image is the classic paradox. It is false, but it is also how we express ourselves, and judge others, within the first few moments of meeting them. Authenticity again is key. When you meet someone who acts with humility and grace you cannot help but respect them. They are the ones with the quiet strength who haven”t wasted years of their life trying to fit other people”s ideals. However, they will most probably have known a degree of hopelessness and loneliness, because that is the price of knowing yourself.

In Harran, now Southern Turkey, the Arabic historian Mas”udi, in the 14th century, recorded this inscription from the Temple of the Moon God Sin, *Know yourself, and you will become God*. This is very similar to the famous words in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece *…within thee is hidden the treasure of treasures! Know thyself and thou shalt know the Universe and the Gods.*

This idea that the answers we seek may be within us, is an old one. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote that: “Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is enlightenment.” Although many quotes become overused, they are a gateway to an ancient truth. When we look within, we are looking for, as W.B. Yeats wrote: “the face I had before the world was made.” This is similar to the Zen master, who commands you to show him the face you had before you were born.

This idea of a source, or a single point, may be seen, with the gods and goddesses, as many streams, flowing out from one spring. They are many radi. Another example is white light refracted through a prism. These concepts are eternal archetypes, which remain relevant because of their ability to be interpreted, and meditated upon, by an individual; which, in turn, brings deeper understanding, both of oneself, and the wider world. These abilities are lost with literal interpretation. The ancient gods, which were once living, transparent icons, have become rigid idols of dogma.

Now, sometimes, it is difficult *not* to interpret these myths literally, but I would recommend just reading, or listening to, them without expectation. Reserve judgment and see which bits resonate with you. They always have something to offer. Something you need to hear. They are eternal. They are not anti-feminist. If you don”t like the fact that Perseus rescues Andromeda, then you can see Perseus as the active, masculine principle in the psyche of women. This keeps the stories, and the wisdom contained within, available to everyone.

Another example of this may be seen in the dislike of spinning stories. It should be remembered, however, that spinning is synonymous with the creation of the world, or of the knitting of new life in the womb. Our ancestors, as some people still do today, rely on spinning skill to make clothes for the family, and to provide extra income. It is not for everyone to do everything. In the Atzec tradition, women who died in childbirth were given the same status as warriors in battle. I feel that we have to take care not to be so offended that we miss out. That we do not get so caught up in the details of the latest fad that we miss out on the bigger picture.

The great twentieth century mythologist, Joseph Campbell, said: “All the gods, all the heavens and hells are within you.” Indeed, anyone who has taken psychedelic drugs, or sought to know themselves, I”m sure will attest to this.

Nowadays, with knowledge fragmented, and the field of inquiry ever smaller, most are unaware of how interconnected all things are. In the ancient world, knowledge was viewed as a whole, with no aspect meant to be studied separately. This was exemplified in ancient Egypt, and with Pythagoras, who taught cosmology, numbers, geometry, and music.

In Cern, Switzerland, there is a statue of the Hindu God Shiva Nataraja, or Lord of the Dance. Owing to its placement, this metaphor of the cosmic dance unifies modern physics with ancient mythology and religious art. Fritjof Capra explains further, that modern physics has shown that “the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but is also the very essence of inorganic matter,” and that “For the modern physicists…Shiva”s dance is the dance of subatomic matter.”

In the Kybalion, it is written that “nothing rests; everything moves; everything vibrates.” Albert Einstein echoed this when he declared everything to be vibration; while the great inventor, Nikola Tesla, held vibration, energy and frequency, to be the keys to understanding the secrets of the universe.

The Norse God, Odin, was a relentless seeker after knowledge and wisdom. His myth can be viewed as both a journey within and without. His ordeal mirrors a shamanic initiation, that brings about transformation and understanding. Having already sacrificed an eye, in return for wisdom, he stands with one eye gazing outwards, and the empty socket gazing inwards.

As the initiate, Odin climbs the tree to hang in the liminal space between heaven and earth. As an initiatory theme, shamans have long reported being drawn upwards by a silver thread, or having climbed a rope of light into the sky. In reverse, we see the Hanged Man of the Tarot, Which is the figure who symbolises the human spirit hanging from heaven by a single thread.

Suspended over the world of illusion, Odin shifts his consciousness from a materialistic, to a more spiritual understanding. He also endures pain, suffers “death”, receives his vision, and is resurrected with an exultant cry.

Odin sacrifices himself to himself, and wounds himself with his own spear. As we shall see, this “dismemberment” is a key theme in shamanic cultures around the world. History also shows us the importance of the moon”s dismemberment, and the piercing of one”s flesh in sun rituals.

The indigenous Australians have undergone initiations where the spirit would “kill” them with a spear, carry the body into the depths of a cave, remove their internal organs and replace them with new ones. They would also insert quartz crystals, seen as solidified light, upon which his power would depend. These “wild stones” are mentioned as leading, and guiding, the cosmic serpent.

To these people, land and ritual are reminders that connect them to the dreamtime, when the spirit set the sun, moon, stars, and all things, into place. Similarly, in Siberia a spirit initiates a shaman in a tree, where his, or her, flesh is eaten and then restored.

Symbolically, Odin”s rite of passage, has been, and still is, undertaken by countless people, While journeying into the wild and remote places, often while fasting. What they seek can be seen in the experience of an Inuit shaman, who also seeks that: “which lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness, and can [only] be reached through suffering. Privation and suffering, alone, open up the mind of a man to all that is hidden to others.”

As Joseph Campbell said: “myths are the mental supports of rites, rites being the physical enactments of myths.” When we withdraw into solitude, it is a time for introspection. This can be both terrifying and enlightening.

Odin meditates on the runes, the runes here being symbolic, just as myths are symbolic. They are possessed of truth, but it is something which you have to discover for yourself. If I tell you, in no uncertain terms, that a myth means just one thing, but it doesn”t mean that to you, then we are in trouble. Myths are complex, and will always be open to a vast number of interpretations. The threads which I have chosen to draw out from the myths and stories in this book are just my interpretation of things, which resonated with me. If they resonate with you too then that is great but, if not, then I invite you to find meaning for yourself, to see what resonates with you.

Insight often comes from vision-quests and initiations, which help the young cross over the threshold between childhood and adulthood. These clear lines and instructions, from elders, help us on our way. Without them, we can find ourselves at the mercy of the modern world, and cultures which mostly drain and harm. It is from here that we become caught up in our own minds, adhering to things which maybe culturally acceptable, but are morally wrong.

This wisdom, however, is not often attempted to be taught in schools. It is an understanding that opens you up to new ways of thinking. After all, beliefs and theories should always be challenged and questioned. This is vital if the search for true wisdom is to have any value, because we: “can accept no barriers or preconceptions, and cannot ignore any aspects of beings or things. It traverses the most diverse civilizations, religions, and ways of thinking, and inevitably puts them into question.”

In his own search for wisdom, Odin, we are told, often descended to Midgard, to consult with the Völva. “During this time, all free Norse and Germanic women were expected to be versed in magic, however only a few women were witches, wise women, or priestesses. They usually lived alone, and unmarried, but not necessarily celibate.” This links well with Odin, when viewed as a shamanic god, or “the master of ecstasy.” He was also seen as a fickle trickster, and the name *Hrafnagud*, meaning Raven God, was associated with him.

All through world, mythological birds feature heavily. The Raven, sacred to the Haida people, is a continuation of the great raven spirit, Kujkynnjaku, which the Koryaks, of Far East Russia, brought with them to the Pacific Northwest. As Raven flies up and out of the smoke hole, so the shaman ascends through it, and into the spirit world. Seen as manifestations of the divine and personal collaborators, birds have long been associated, as mediators, between our world and “the more than human world.”

In the Old Testament, Elijah was provided for by ravens and, when Cain slew Abel, it was a raven which showed Adam and Eve how to bury the body. Like Raven, the crow is a bird of transformation, a psychopomp, or guide of souls. As embodiments of sprits, they were, and still are, seen as companions for the shaman on his journey. This is reflected in the shaman”s ritual dress, of feathered garments, and whistles carved from the leg bones of birds.

Further North, the mythology of the raven is enriched by the tongue of the Inuit, and their belief that Raven was the creator of all life. Born out of darkness, he was the one who taught them how to build canoes and clothe themselves. Migrating southwards, to the Ukraine, we are told that Raven once had beautiful, multicolored feathers, a plumage of sapphire, amethyst, citrine and quartz. Raven also had a beautiful voice but, when the angels fell from heaven, raven”s plumage blackened, and its voice became a guttural croak. It is believed that its former beauty will be restored when there is, once more, paradise on earth. In a similar story, Candace Savage explains in her book *Bird Brains: The Intelligence of Crows, Ravens, Magpies and Jays*, the origin of Raven”s black plumage according to the North American tribal lore:

"In the olden days, the raven and the peacock were close friends who lived on a plantation.  One day, the two birds decided to amuse themselves by painting each other”s feathers. The raven set willingly to work and so surpassed itself that the peacock became, as it is today, one of the most beautiful birds on earth. Unwillingly to share its glory even with its friend, the mean-spirited peacock painted the raven plain black."[[xiii]](http://www.perspectivesmagazine.sk/news/ravens-and-crows-in-mythology-folklore-and-religion/" \l "_edn13)

Other variations of this story suggest that the raven exhausted all the color on the peacock, leaving only black for itself.

In the Haida myth of Raven, he is the light-bringer; the one who steals the divine fire, like Prometheus, in Greek mythology, and the Polynesian trickster god, Maui.

Those who bring light often also bring chaos. Such is the nature of these trickster figures. They slip through the cracks and the fingers of the chief gods. They inhabit all the times of change and disruption: midday, or Pan”s Hour; midnight; dusk, and dawn. In a similar vein, Māori mythology tells us that no one could live in the world of the living without a soul, except during twilight and noon. In Northern Europe, this belief was explored further in the Celtic festival of Samhain, and the Scandinavian celebration of St John”s Eve, when it was believed that the veil between this world and the otherworld, thins.

Tricksters are opposed to stagnation. They work, often driven by their appetites, or personal gain, to bring balance, through disruption. They may be seen as the “clown figure working in continuous opposition to the well-wishing creator [who] very often appears in myth and folk tale, as accounting for the ills and difficulties of existence this side of the veil.”

The Trickster appears throughout world mythology and folklore. Connected by ancient roots, these stories reflect back to us existence itself: that the seeds of creation and destruction are present within each other. This is also true in life, and the search for wisdom and authenticity. There will always be a trade-off; a sacrifice is required. This stands at odds with what modern society tries to sell us, but we all know that an instant life has no indefinite longevity, no substance, and can never be worth it alone. We need to be called, to put aside the comfort and safety, and lift that “painted veil that those who live call life.”

Part II

Leaving Childhood

“When love beckons to you, follow him,

though his ways are hard and steep.

And when his wings enfold you, yield to him,

though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.

And when he speaks to you believe in him,

though his voice may shatter your

dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.”

From The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran

The Mermaid

Based on the tale by Hans Christian Andersen

“Love is a sea with unseen shores – with no shores at all. The wary don”t dive in. To swim in love is to drink poison and find it sweet.”

Rabi”a

In the northern sea, where the waves churn and glitter, a little mermaid swam through the depths. Feint sunlight rippled over her amber tail as, overhead, the tide washed its way towards the shore. The waters here were rich in memory, of the frosted dragon boats that had once sailed from the wintry north, spinning silken threads of trade, and songs of famine.

The mermaid spent long days, singing her silver song to the moon, forever arching and descending into the sea. She longed to ascend, to feel, and taste the salt-tanged air, but still she waited. As the years slipped by, one by one her sisters rose up, for their own glimpse of the surface world and, on their return, they told her of their experiences: of waves of gold, flocks of black feathered birds soaring over distant mountains, and caverns flushed deep with stars and skaldic verse.

All these things washed through her dreams until, on the day of her sixteenth birthday, her father kissed her on the forehead, and released her from his embrace. Laughter and joy ebbed away from her as she swam eastwards, a shoal of fish surrounding her. Their scales were shimmering silver, as she rose up, water pouring from her forehead, and swirling around her shoulders.

Overhead, she beheld the moon, bathing in the midnight sky, and smelt the fresh breeze, and the lingering trace of rain. Rose petals drifted on the air. Raising her hand, she caught one, and pressed its velvet form to her lips. Smiling, she turned to the east, and saw a ship, sails unfurled, decked with floral garlands, and lit with a hundred lamps. Cheerful music rippled over the waves, as young men and women danced the steps of the fair game.

The mermaid dived, hurtled on, and rose on a cresting wave, at the helm of the ship. Holding on to the carved wooden frame of the window, she peered in through the glass panes. Men were gathered round an oaken table, playing cards and drinking claret from glass goblets. She did not look at their faces, except for one, who sat in their midst. His blond hair was like spun gold, and his blue eyes glittered in the candlelight. The little mermaid gazed at him, as Psyche had gazed at Eros in the lamplight, and how Orpheus had gazed at Eurydice, as she stepped from the oak tree. A few men shuffled in their chairs, and slowly she descended back into the sea.

She swam away, thinking of the man who remained with the stars, beyond her world, until the sea began to rage, and she felt herself caught in its violent grip. Struggling, she broke through the foaming surface, to see a sky, swollen with storm clouds, and ravenous winds, that were driving the ship towards the rocks. With a swish of her tail, she fought her way through the churning water, as lightning struck the ship.

With a thousand tongues of fire, the flaming ship was driven onto the rocks, as through the bone-white waves she swam, until she saw the ship slip beneath the wild breath of seafoam. Timbers creaked and the mast snapped, smashing like a felled tree into the water. The mermaid dived out of the way, avoiding the rigging, as she swam on towards the man that she had seen. On and on, with all her strength, she went, and pulled him through the lashing waves. Grappling for a piece of timber, she hauled his limp body over it, and pushed on towards the shore.

A gull swooped low, calling out into the darkness, like a mourning bell, , as it flew on towards the coastline. Her bones aching, her tail sore, still she pressed on, until the waves flung them down on the soft sand.

The cove was a lonely, desolate one, bounded by dunes, a forest, and a ruined temple, all overrun with ivy. The mermaid placed her hand tentatively on the man”s shoulder and, nervously, she tried to rouse him, but still he lay there, his eyes closed, and his hair wet about his face.

The storm had fled into the west and, alone on the shore, she picked up a shell. From its swirling iridescent curves, she heard the song of the sea as, with her own clear voice, she began to sing over him, weaving threads of life and comfort around him. A tear escaped from his eye and, as her fingertips brushed it from his cheek, his chest began to rise and fall, until he half opened his eyes, and they gazed at each other, as if in a dream.

Voices cried out in the distance and, fearfully, the mermaid slithered back into the sea, retreating into the frothing waves, as a group of women made their way down to attend to the man, his eyes still staring out to sea.

The mermaid lingered no longer as, with a swish of her tail, she was gone. Through the seagrass meadows and on to her father”s hall, she went. This was arved out of the living rock, with coral archways, pillars of amber and pearl, and encircled by a garden. She swam towards a room on the eastern side.

“Dear grandmother.” She called, to a silver-haired mermaid, through the window.

“How was your first glimpse, dear one?” She asked, swimming over to her.

“I…” she paused, “...do humans live forever?” Her grandmother gave her a knowing look, as she swam through the window.

“No, my dear.”

“Do we live forever?” She asked more hopefully.

“We live to see three hundred winters, but the ones who dwell on the surface, they live but a quarter of that. However, they have an immortal soul which will pass from this world, and endure when they die.”

“What happens to us?”

“We turn to sea foam, and pass into the other realms of this world.”

“But that is unfair!” The mermaid said quite indignantly.

“The flood is our domain, dear one. We live and die here, but we never truly leave, for we are part of this world.” She paused, “You are young, do not trouble yourself with such matters.”

“Then, is there a way to gain a human soul?”

“No, and neither should you try!” Her grandmother looked her straight in the eyes. “You can visit the surface, if you are unseen, but no more, it is not your world! Look at the shape shifters, the Nixies, and Selkie”s of the north. They go ashore, and cast off their seal skins, but for one night. They always return in the end.” she said, and the mermaid hung her head and left.

For weeks on end, she would swim alone, through the depths, over old patterns of landscape, through the ice-flecked seas of the north, and the azure swell of the south. But always she returned to the seagrass meadow, near her father”s hall, for, there had come to rest a wooden figurehead, in perfect likeness of the young man.

From the moment of their meeting, hope and longing had kindled in her heart, growing like a wild vine until, one day, she could bear it no longer and, silently, she swam away, further into the west.

Over the tips of mountains she swam, through drowned forests, and over fabled cities. Beyond the blue rim, she felt the sun descend away, through the vales of foundered ships, as a marbled Ray glided overhead, and a gloom encircled her. Up ahead, a dwelling of whalebone became visible. Curiously, she passed under the arched rib-bones, carved with runes, and tied with seaweed, that drifted this way and that, giving the unsettling feeling that it was breathing.

Cautiously, she peered into the darkness. A plinth of rock rose up in the centre, set with a bowl of smoky marble. The mermaid drew closer, gazing at the water until, just for a brief moment, the young man”s face swam across the surface. She drew back, a wave coiling round her, and descending, as it slipped, like a cloak, from the bony shoulders of an old woman. They drew level with each other, and the mermaid saw her matted hair, as grey as slate, and her tail, that wove its way around her waist, and up across her breasts, like a tattoo carved into her skin, circling and forever spiralling.

“You are far from your father”s hall.” The woman said, her black eyes glittering with interest.

“Who are you?” She asked the old woman, who was coiling her long hair around her bony fingers.

“I am the one who sees. Sister of the Volva, who all father Odin consults. I sing the song of the Siedr, from the lonely hills, and I am revered like a water wraith, from the caves of the northern shore. I have circled this earth, quelling storms and summoning them. I have felt the waves of eternal years break upon my back. I have received golden rings from Provence, tasted the bread of the Bohemian fishermen, and drunk their pious prayers.”

“I do not know of what you speak.” The mermaid said, and the sea witch turned on her.

“Daughter of the spring tide. Spirit of the vast deep. Silver-voiced Nereid. Do you not know your hundred secret names?” She asked, and the mermaid shook her head, as a memory, deep in the bone, awoke.

“I wish to…” She paused, as the sea witch interrupted her, “…Be of earthly dreaming?”

“If you mean be rid of this tail, to have legs, and walk upon the earth, then yes…” The old woman smiled at her, “Is that all?”

“And to meet a man whom I rescued from drowning but two months ago, and…I wish for a soul. I wish for immortality!” The sea witch laughed a rattling, malicious laugh.

“A soul? That which is trapped in earthly flesh, abused and abandoned by those above? Those who sail the hollowed tree and raft of reeds; who discard what they wish to forget into the waters in which we dwell? Do you not wish to learn the ways of the shapeshifter? To be able to move freely between the worlds as once we used to?”

“It is not enough to inhabit only a half a life. I wish to go and never come back! I am less afraid of disintegrating into nothingness than being rid of my hateful form….” She replied sternly, and the sea witch ceased her chiding.

“What makes you think that I will bring this about for you?” The sea witch looked quizzically at the mermaid who replied:

“Because I ask.”

The sea witch smiled satisfactorily. “Indeed, I can prepare your bones, and lay the flesh of your desire, but the identity of the young man eludes you, does it not?”

The mermaid nodded in reply, asking:

“Do you know?”

But the sea witch pursed her lips, and withdrew a sharpened fragment of shark bone from the plinth.

“From your first breath, each and every step you take upon the surface will feel as though sharp knives are stabbing you.”

“I understand.” The mermaid replied.

“And it will require your tongue also. You will not be able to speak, or sing.” At this, the mermaid faltered but, glancing around, at the wilderness that lay beyond, she nodded.

“If the young man falls in love with you, and asks you to be his wife, then you will obtain a portion of his immortal soul for your own.”

“I am willing.”

The sea witch swished her tail. “However, if he does not, then you will walk the earth as an unbaptised child, a wraith dancing a cursed life, until the skin hangs from your bones, and you will dissolve into sea foam.”

The mermaid trembled at her words, but her longing was so great that she consented.  The witch steadied her gaze, and the bones overhead began to knock with a steady rhythm. Invocations ebbed from her thin lips, as the shells burned into the dark night, and the sea witch stilled her breath. Raising the jawbone, she slit the skin on her palm. Blackened blood trickled down the lines, as she placed her palm against the mermaid”s lips, and bade her drink.

“Come.” The sea witch commanded, raising her blade, and slicing through the mermaid”s tongue, red blood gushing over the black, as it fell like a torrent into the bowl. The sea witch sprinkled bone-white powder and seeds, which began to burn and crackle, like amber in fire.

“Rise to the surface, where a castle stands above the sandy shore.” The sea witch said, thrusting the jawbone to the east. “Go, now!” The mermaid swam away, as the sea witch dissolved into nothingness. Each flick of her tail was heavy as lead, as if the sea were dragging her back down until, at last, she reached the surface. Moonlight glistened overhead. A thousand stars glittered on the sea, as she rose up, her bronze scales cascading away, to reveal her newly-formed legs. She smiled, but it would not last, as her first steps were excruciatingly painful. It was as though her feet were being stabbed by a thousand daggers. She longed for release, as she gathered her hair around her, and sat down upon the sand.

The sea rushed around her feet, showering shells upon the shore. A faint cry rose from them, and she knew it was her sisters calling to her, but she turned away, towards the castle that rose over the foreshore. Closing her eyes, she felt the wind upon her bare skin, and heard, from the direction of the forest, the cantering of hooves. Turning, she saw a pale grey charger. Tiny, bronze bells jingled from its saddle, which was garlanded with wild flowers, and where, reins in hand, sat the young man.

Dismounting, he approached the shoreline, running his hands through the water, before whispering blessings over the waves. She leant forward to watch him and, in doing so, dislodged a rock. He turned in surprise.

“Good evening.” He removed his hat to her, and she went to speak, but there was no sound; only an ache, where her voice had once been. Hastily, she lowered her head, as a shifting rack of cloud passed from the face of the moon, and illuminated her in a pool of moonlight.

As he gazed into her amber eyes, he beheld something ancient gazing out at him, from her doleful face until, once more, darkness washed over them. Without words, he removed his woollen cloak, wrapped her in it, and carried her to his horse. Taking up the reins, they rode away from the sea, and into the greenwood, that bordered the castle. Through the overhanging branches, she saw the glinting eyes of the woodland elves, and the elders of the land, collecting healing rosemary for the coming year. For the night was St John”s Eve, when the veil between this world and that, thins.

On he rode, under the castle gate, and into a courtyard, where servants rushed from all quarters, to offer assistance. Dismounting, he lifted her into his arms, and the realisation washed over her, as a man spoke at his side.

“Your Highness, who is the girl? Your father, the King, will wish to know. You cannot bring in gipsies and wanderers!”

The prince turned to him.

“I respect you, Henriksen and, if you respected me, you would not need to inform me of such things. I found her on the shore, cold and alone and, I dare say, so frightened that she could not speak to me.” He continued up the stone staircase. “What would you have had me do?” To which, the servant replied, “Of course, your Highness. I will see to it that she is cared for.” With that, he rushed away down the hall. The prince lay the mermaid on a bed in one of the chambers, where she drifted into a deep sleep.

The morning star was visible over the sea, when the mermaid climbed up onto the window seat. Lowering her eyes, she saw three swans upon the moat and, before the wall, the prince walking through the rose garden, with his father. She watched them for a moment, until they came to a marble statue of a lady, surrounded by roses. The King shed a tear, before turning away. The mermaid withdrew from the window, and curled herself up in the silken sheets, the soft breeze rustling the brocade curtains.

“Good morning miss.” A maid, no older than herself, called from the door. She smiled at her, as the girl helped her choose a white shift, with a band of braided silver at the waist. Once she was washed and dressed, the mermaid followed the maid out of the door.

Breathing through her pain, she fixed her eyes on the marble walls, admiring the sweet scent and woodland feel of the evergreen and honeysuckle, entwined around the columns.

“Good morning.” The prince beamed at her, as she returned his smile, the staff shuffling uncomfortably, all around, as he led her out into the garden.

“Can I ask you how you slept?” He said and she nodded and smiled, as they crossed into the rose garden. Taking a seat, beneath an archway of cream roses, the prince spoke. “Your face is familiar to me.” She smiled eagerly, but still the silence remained between them. “I do not know if you can understand me fully, but I wish you to know that you are welcome to stay in this castle until your health is restored, and your family come to find you.” Her eyes dropped at this.

The clock tower chimed out the midday hour, and he stood. “Forgive me, but I must leave. The Princess Sofia has been invited to court by my father.” The mermaid grew anxious at this but, with a bow, he was gone, and she remained alone in the garden.

It was from the window that she watched Princess Sofia arrive, in her gilded carriage. Clothed in a gown of sapphire blue, like the prince”s regal attire. The mermaid waited at the window, strains of laughter and gentle speech rising in the stairwell. Sadly, she retired to bed and folded her legs into her. The sunlight flickered over the ridges of white plaster, like the sun on the cresting sea.

In the falling dusk, she left the castle, and ran down to the shore. Waves patterned the wet sand, as a plaintive strain of a violin reached her from the woodcutter”s cottage. Steadily, she began to move. One foot in the water, and one on the shore, she danced on through the pain, as, through the forest, the prince rode. He slowed his horse to a trot, as he watched her dance old and forgotten steps. he dismounted by a cascade of burnet roses, and she paused and turned to him.

“I did not mean to intrude, but I have come to this place every night since my ship was wrecked…” He paused to look out across the dunes, over his ancestral lands, and the haze of amethyst heather on the heath. “…A young woman, like a daughter of the sea, pulled me from the mountainous waves, and laid me down upon the shore.” He paused again. “But all I can remember is her voice. She sang to me, while I lay half dead. Her song sank into my bones, into my bruised flesh. Every night since then, I have heard her song trail over the sea. That is why I come here…” He broke off, and the mermaid extended her hand towards his. He looked at her, as a horse and rider galloped over the dunes, and into their midst.

“Your Highness, his Majesty wishes to speak with you.”

“Thank you, I”ll come right away.” The prince bowed low to her, and rode back with the messenger.

The mermaid watched him leave as, with a hope in her heart, she walked back along the shore, under the castle gate, and into the entrance hall. There, the prince stood, conversing with his father. Turning aside, she paused in the shadow of the stone archway, as he anxiously turned towards her.

“Father has arranged for me to marry Princess Sofia.”

She took a step away from him, as he continued: “What I told you about, down on the shore. I must ask you to forget it.” Lowering her head to him, she disappeared, back down to the sea.

Alone, the waves surged around her feet, soothing her pain, as she fell to her knees. Raising a shell to her lips, she whispered all of her sorrows. At once, her song, the ancestral one, which she had sung as a child to the sun and moon, and over the prince”s dying form, the wind took up, and the birds of dawn too, as they trailed it over the sea.

On her return, the Prince met her by the staircase.

“Please tell me you will stay and attend the wedding? Afterwards, I will help you find your family.” The mermaid nodded, and left once more for the woods, and the wild flower meadow beyond, where, she watched the birds leave the salt marshes, for their long migration south.

On the day of the wedding, the church bells rang in gladness, as, in the harbour, the mermaid watched the pennants flutter. Roses and honeysuckle garlanded the ship. Taking her place on deck, she smoothed out the silk of her sea-green dress. Glancing up, she saw the prince smiling at her, before he turned away. Under a bower of golden roses, the Princess Sofia walked towards him. The mermaid watched the lace of the Princess’s dress curl behind her, like the waves of the sea, before the mermaid slipped away, towards the prow of the ship.

Leaning upon the wood, her heart broke in two. Slowly the stars burned into the night, but still she remained, lost to the swell of the sea. Questions raced through her mind, but she knew the impossibility of the situation, without her voice. Without her song. She exhaled, and laid her head upon the prow. The waves were churning, as her sister rose up.

“The sea witch gave us this for you.” Bara said, handing her a sharpened dagger. “If you kill the prince, and let his blood wash over your feet, then you will become a mermaid again. You will no longer have to endure this mortal suffering, and you can return to live with us!” She smiled a hopeful smile at her, before sinking back into the sea.

The mermaid turned the blade over in her hands, and carefully approached the prince”s room. Through the glass panes, she saw their sleeping forms. Opening the window, she stood there for a moment, the blade glittering in the dusky light of dawn.

Copper and gold flashed across the sky, as she raised the dagger, and cast it into the sea. Throwing herself from the ship, the water swirled around her, and she began to dissolve into glimmering sea foam.

The ship sailed on, with clusters of rose petals spiralling on the wind. The clouds breathed, and drank deep from the sea, as the wind took up her song, and the shells of all the oceans echoed it. It was then that the mermaid came to realise that she would linger on: in the clouds that sail the midnight sky; in the summer rain, and in the distant, blue rim of the sea.

Beauty and the Swan

- Traditional Greek Folk Tale -

“Love gave my mind a shake, like wind striking oaks on a mountain.”

Sappho of Lesbos

The azure folds of the Aegean Sea rolled on, beneath scattered clouds. Day was breaking, in shifting shades of ochre and peach. The south wind descended over the coastal waters, swathes of golden sand and on, to where the olive groves pushed their way down to the sea. From here, it wheeled upwards, tracing the ancient donkey trails over rugged mountains and on, through pine-clad hillsides and up, over fertile valleys, and fields, brimming with clover.

Below, a miller and a nobleman stood together, on a bridge. They were childhood friends, meeting today, on the morning of their respective weddings. Watching the swans pass on by, they pledged their future children in marriage to each other.

The seasons turned until, a year later, the nobleman”s wife gave birth to a little girl. Wrapped in fragrant honeysuckle, they named her Tabitha, meaning beauty, and to her name she stayed true. On that same night, when the moon was rising over the furrowed fields, the miller”s wife also gave birth. Yet, it was sorrow, not joy, that washed through them. For their child was not a boy, but a dusty-feathered cygnet. They turned away from him, the villagers whispered behind closed doors, but Tabitha, alone, adored him. During the years that followed they spent each and every day together, until he grew into a beautiful, white swan.

One afternoon, when the swan was watching his father in the olive grove, he saw Tabitha”s father walk by. Hastily, he hid behind the windmill, and overheard them speak of the oath they once had pledged. Later that evening, he petitioned his father to keep his promise and, with sadness in his eyes, his father left for the nobleman”s house. Bound by their oaths, they both consented, whilst Tabitha”s mother wept bitterly, as the morning star rose over the mountains.

On the morning of the wedding, Tabitha wandered through an orange grove, the sun pouring down its golden honey over her. She smelt the sweet scent of the blossom, and entwined its creamy petals in her hair.

After the ceremony, oil lamps were lit in the stone alcoves of the walled garden, and crimson Bougainvillea cascaded over a little cottage, into which the couple entered. Closing the chamber door softly behind him, the swan unfurled his wings. Snow white feathers fell away, to reveal a shy, dark-haired youth, with almond-shaped eyes, and a beaming smile upon his lips.

“Who are you?” Tabitha asked, as she took a step back, and removed her golden crown.

“Why, Anteros. Your husband.” He said, taking her hand in his own. “Every night, when we close the door, I will become a man until the sun rises, and then I will be a swan once more. If you can keep my secret for fifteen days, I will lose my feathers, and be a man forever. But, if you cannot, then I will disappear. Such is the cruel destiny which the fates have spun for me.”

She moved forwards, running her fingers through his hair, her eyes glittering with happiness. “I will of course keep your secret.” She paused, “Wait though, can I tell my mother?”

“No!” He said quite sharply. “No one can know.”

Tabitha promised him but, in the days that followed, her mother fell gravely ill. On the fourteenth day, when she was so weak and pale from the sickness, Tabitha thought that she would die, and she put her lips to her mother”s ear and whispered:

“Mother. You must know that he is not a swan, but a cursed man - but only until tomorrow, when his fate shall change.” Her mother clasped hold of her hand, a joyful smile radiating from her features, and she sat up, her health restored. Tabitha smiled, and returned to the cottage, only to find that her husband, was gone.

She ran outside, the south wind encircling her, as she wound her way through the narrow, cobbled streets. She whispered her sorrows to the sacred well, as the wind flowed away down the hillside, and on to the lowlands. A deep hush descended on the village as Tabitha returned to her childhood home.

“I am to go out into the world to find him. Please, do not deny me. I will need three pairs of iron-shod shoes, and a purse of golden sovereigns. You have done everything for me, and my love will ever be yours, but I must find my husband and bring him home.”

“The World is boundless, child, what hope do you have?” Her mother said.

“Not much, but it will be enough.”

“No. Better let him be. Let him go to the marshlands and silver lakes of this world. We will not lose you.” Her father replied, as she turned away from them.

For three weeks, Tabitha remained in bed, curled up beneath the embroidered sheets, the wind smoothing her curls, through the open window. Each night she offered prayers to the starlit river.

“Please, you must let me go. I must undertake this journey.” She kept saying, until, finally, they knew that they could hold her no longer and, with the shoes and purse of gold, she ventured out into the world.

Through the wild flower meadows she walked, turning back, just for a moment, to watch the white wings of her husband’s father”s windmill turn slowly in the dusk. As the crescent moon rose over the snow tipped mountains, she walked along the windswept coast. Past mountain gorges, and hilltop villages, she went.

As Tabitha sat on the stony hillside, that tumbled down to the shore, she heard weeping, and found a young girl lying upon the earth. She too had once been married to an enchanted swan, but had spilled his secret on the twelfth night. Tabitha comforted her sadly, before walking on, her shoes worn down, and full of holes.

As the stars processed overhead, and the year renewed itself, she set off, wearing the second pair of shoes. Along blue-green rivers, through dense forests of oak and ash, and over fertile plains, her footsteps fell like leaves upon the Earth. Near the turning of the second year, she came to an avenue of cypress trees, where lay a cluster of ancient ruins. In the stillness, she lay down, exhausted upon the mossy ground, the lilac-coloured wisteria fluttering overhead.

For a few days she stayed there, weaving together strands of grass and wild flowers. Ready to leave, she offered the wreath to a crumbling stone altar. Turing away, she caught sight of a young woman standing within the shadow of a plane tree, her eyes wet with tears. Tabitha broke bread, and shared it with her, and the girl told of her sorrows: of an enchanted swan, and a secret she did not keep.

In the third year, under a sky flushed with amber, Tabitha purchased a small inn. For nearly a year, she gathered beans and wild greens from the hillside. She offered free board to travellers, in exchange for the strangest tale they had ever heard.

And so it was, on a moonless night, that two beggars entered the inn. Their hair was matted, their hands gnarled, and their clothes threadbare, but gladly she added another log to the fire, and fetched them some dinner.

“All I ask is that you would tell me the strangest tale you have ever heard.” She said, seating herself before them. The lame man looked to his blind companion.

“Oh, I have a story. Strange, it surely is, but it”s one that happened to me, not a week ago. If you”ll listen, I tell it.”

Tabitha nodded, the fire crackling in the blackened grate.

“I was sitting by the river that flows away, beyond the mountains, underneath an alder tree, that shaded me from the sun, while I ate my bread. My hands fumbled and the loaf fell into the river. I leaned forward to reach it, but lost my balance, and fell right into its murky depths. It dragged me along, nearly cutting the thread of my life, but I kept my head up, until I came to a waterfall. So white it was, like moonlight cascading over the rocks. Carefully, I hauled myself up onto the bank where, to my surprise, I discovered a door carved in the rock. With effort, I managed to open it enough to slide my body through. The cave beyond was dark although, immediately, lights were kindled. Like the stars at night they illuminated my path down a stone corridor, and into a vast cavern. The walls shimmered like mother of pearl, and the ceiling was studded with crystal glass, that glinted in the candlelight, from the table below. There were golden chairs, glass goblets, golden plates, and silver spoons, all laid for three. As I stood there, light flooded in, and three swans swam into the pool. I hid myself, and watched them climb the steps. Right in front of me, they shifted their shapes to young men, their feathers dropping from them, like cloaks.”

“Show me. Please, show me where you found them.” Tabitha begged, as the three of them set off for the mountains. When they reached the river beneath the snowy peaks, the beggar turned to her.

“We will go no further. Follow the path.” He said, and Tabitha placed the key to the inn, and the purse of golden coins, in his hand.

“Thank you. This is for your help. No longer will you have to wander through the world.” She said and, fondly, they bade her farewell.

Tabitha hurried away, beneath the oak trees, until she reached the alder tree and the waterfall. Placing her hands upon the damp rocks, she slipped behind, watching the gauzy veil conceal her. Running her fingers over the wall, she found the door, and let herself in.

Peering into the darkness, she saw a thousand lights, lit by unseen hands. Tabitha walked down the corridor and into a vast oval room. Candlelight rippled over the walls of mother of pearl, and sparkled on the pool of water. A fire was burning in the fireplace and, upon the mantle, she saw many wild flowers, and a small portrait of herself. She thought she heard faint music. Then, all of a sudden, the doors opened, and three swan came gliding into the pool. Concealing herself behind a silken screen, she watched them rise out of the water, droplets glistening like rain, as the feathers cascaded from their backs. Tabitha saw her beloved, robed in golden silk, the two other men were robed in black and red. They seated themselves at the table, and decanted wine into three glass goblets. The man in black, raised his to the ceiling and said:

“To my beloved, who could not keep our secret but three more days. We shall weep, and weep water.” At his words, water trickled down the walls and into the pool, as the second man raised his glass and said, “To my beloved, who could not keep our secret but two days more. Weep, friends, and weep water!” And, surely, the water flowed, and the men wept.

Tabitha watched as her beloved stood and raised his glass.

“And to my beloved Tabitha, who could not keep our secret but one more day. Weep, men, and weep water.” He said, and turned to the walls, but the water did not flow. “I said: weep water.” He cried out angrily. “Why will you not weep?” He turned away, the screen falling aside, to reveal Tabitha. She ran to him, and they held each other for a moment, before she stooped, and threw his wings into the fire.

“You have saved us, thank you!” He cried out, watching the wings blacken and disintegrate in the flames.

Leaving the cave behind, they found three, dapple-grey horses, tethered to the alder tree.

They bade each other farewell, and parted. The other two men rode away beyond the mountains, and on to the windswept coast, while Tabitha and Anteros, whose name means love, rode back along the riverbank, past the inn, and onto where the white-winged windmills turned on the horizon, a flush of rose pink in the sky.

Metamorphosis

Love, awakening and transformation.

“Some of you say, “Joy is greater than sorrow,” and others say, “Nay, sorrow is the greater.”

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember the other one is asleep upon you bed.”

Kahlil Gibran

In the frozen north, the sun rises over the boreal forest, with crimson and golden light creeping over the frosted earth, and the mythical, Slavic firebird flies through the dusk. Its feathers illuminate the earth, while its beak drops pearls into the hands of the heartbroken. A great longing is at the heart of its song. A longing which is echoed on the other side of the world, in the Māori phrase *Roimata Toroa*, meaning “the tears of an albatross”: the wanderer who soars high over the oceanic land, and distant seas; it is a distant memory to the Māori chieftains who had once seen unity in their form; they who had carved their bones into flutes, so that they might, once more, sing upon the wind.

Tears are a motif found in the two previous stories, and can feel like our constant companions, as we leave childhood behind. In folklore, they heal the body, cause rivers to flood and, ultimately, join souls. In Norse mythology, Freyja, the goddess of love and beauty, was married to Odr. The tales tell us that, when he was away, she would shake spring flowers from her hair, and weep golden tears, which turned to amber, when they fell into the sea.

In Ancient Greece, the Heliades were seven nymph daughters of the sun-god Helios. They wept for their brother Phaethon, when he was struck from the chariot of the sun, by Zeus. Beside the place where he fell, on the banks of the river Eridanos, they were transformed into poplar trees, and their tears into golden amber.

The mystic, Khalil Gibran, commented on the sacredness of salt, that is present in both sea water and tears. For the alchemists, salt represented wisdom; bitter wisdom, born out of disappointment in love. Tears symbolise purification but, as Hans Christian Andersen tells us, “a mermaid has no tears, and therefore she suffers so much more.”

When we are unable to express ourselves, unable to grieve, then depression enters. Grief is not reserved only for physical death. We can feel grief when a relationship ends; when we leave home, or enter a new stage of life. If we don”t recognise it, we may feel as though we are drowning, or stagnating, and we won”t be able to move on. Grief is opposed to this, for it is alive. It is in constant motion. it is a call to grind up and deal with all that has happened.

To acknowledge our suffering makes us vulnerable, but not weak. Austrian psychologist and holocaust survivor Victor Frankl, wrote that, in the concentration camp, “There was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest courage. The courage to suffer.”

Being able to cry helps one to realise the pain, and begin the healing process. Medieval alchemists believed that tears were crystallised thoughts. Viewed in this way, tears dissolve sad thoughts, and become the immortal water, from which the philosophers” stone is made.

When we feel alone, we can convince ourselves that we are no good; that no one likes us, and certainly won”t, once they get to know the “real” us. This anxiety can manifest into two distinct ways: shyness or hardness. Both of these leave us isolated. However, this anxiety often stems from old wounds; from all shades of betrayal and abandonment, that shatter our ability to trust.

This is, of course, understandable, but we cannot change others. We cannot make them apologise, or put things right. Change can come only from within each individual. Only alone can we steer the course of our own lives. It is our decision on how we move forward from suffering. We can either stay in the wound and grow bitter, or we can use it as an opportunity to grow and try again.

There isn”t much longevity in trying to hold it all together, and there is absolutely no shame in not being able to. The ones who love us will do anything to help but, if we remain hardened to them, it will certainly make everything a lot more difficult. Honesty, as always, is the key.

On November 3rd 1952, Silvia Plath wrote a familiar story in her diary: “My world falls apart, crumbles, “The centre cannot hold.” There is no integrating force, only the naked fear, the urge of self-preservation. I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralysed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought. I never wrote, I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going—and I am the one who has to decide the answers to these hideous questions.”

With familiar social structures being dismantled around us, we may feel uncertain about where we are, or what we can do. We should try not to repress and forget the balm that is kindness and self-care. This is the inner commitment which must be made, because taking care of oneself, is not really something that is widely practised. So much is focused on the outside that the inner you, the authentic you, gets neglected.

Itgets rejected, much like the rejection of the body, so prevalent in the last two stories. Most often, this rejection happens in puberty. We should not, but we may feel shame if our body doesn”t align with the cultural projections of our time.

For me, I was a thin child, who loved to dance and play but, as soon puberty arrived, I wanted to hide away. I wore only black, because I wanted to disappear. For me my body should have been an outward reflection of my inner world, but it wasn”t. I look back now, at thirty one, and realise how many years I have lost to this belief. lost to the abyss of five or so years, when I weighed less than a nine year old child.

Since attempting recovery, I have noticed how many people glamorise being thin, looking gaunt, or having an eating disorder but, anyone who knows, could never say this. The truth is that your hair turns to copper, because of malnutrition, and then it thins and falls out. Your body metabolises all of your fat, your muscle, including your heart. You cannot walk upstairs, because your chest hurts, and the tendons in your knees feel as though they will snap at any moment. It wastes you, and robs you, until there is nothing left.

An eating disorder is one of the greatest examples of how we cling to the illusion of control; anything that will slam the breaks on life. The Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch, perfectly captured this in his painting, entitled, *Puberty*. Ingrid Languard wrote of it, that: “…with a visionary capacity to comprehend the most secret depths in the human soul, he has – in this young girl”s form – managed to give visual expression for the feelings which have possessed her, and penetrated to her core. Her legs pressed together, eyes stiff with terror of the unknown which will steal her body from her by force, she tries – with a purely instinctive movement to stop the process which will so instantaneously transform her from child to woman.”

For many indigenous societies around the world, puberty is seen as a rite of passage. it is the upheaval which is both something to mourn and celebrate. For the Navajo of North America, Changing woman would come and dance a puberty ritual for young girls, in her dress of turquoise beads and white seashells. For her people, she is forever changing and evolving. Like the cycles of nature itself, she wanes during the winter, and becomes a beautiful, young maiden each spring.

For boys, initiation, as Mircea Eliade, noted, begins with two events: the first is a clean break with the parents, after which the novice goes to the forest, desert, or wilderness.” This is seen in the fairy tale *Iron John*, when the wild man, whom the boy has freed from a cage, tells him: “you will never see your mother and father again, but I will keep you with me, for you have set me free, and I feel compassion for you. If you do everything as I tell you, all will go well. I have much gold and treasure, more than anyone else in the world.”

The child holds a rather magical place in the eyes of many. For the Gnostic”s “the homesick child” was “the constellation of a wake-up call: that moment of yearning and longing for our true home.” We see this in all fairy tales, and what we would call “a happy ending.” Because, “naïve as it may seem, the Prince and the Princess getting married and inheriting the kingdom, ruling in peace and happiness, symbolizes, to the child, the highest possible form of existence.”

This belief really is the ultimate goal: the union of the masculine and feminine principles within us, which brings balance and wholeness to our lives. Many of us, though, loathe a happy ending. We see it as a misrepresentation, “for the world as we know it, as we have seen it, yields but one ending: death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the fructification of our heart with the passing of the forms that we have loved.” While the truth of this tragedy cannot be denied, comedy is its twin. The recognition of this gives breathing space, and rest in between the cycles of suffering, to which we are all bound. For me, it is appreciating what you have, while you have it. It is a personal thing, a thought process, which helps your outlook on life. Ignore what others do. They might look happy and plaster gratitude quotes everywhere, but it doesn”t mean much if they are not acknowledging both aspects of life.

This is the journey of the hero, the heroine, of everyone present in all fairy tales. Although now, more recently, they have been reserved for children, they contain so much wisdom for all ages, and stages of life. The twentieth century mystic, Manly P Hall, wrote that: “man thoughtlessly destroys not only the dreams of others, but makes his own world a nightmare peopled with hobgoblins of selfishness and egotism. The fairies of childhood are always benevolent, kindly, helpful, serving the poor in distress, righting wrongs, and doing many beautiful things; while the realities of later life are generally malevolent and productive of all the mysteries that the fairies of childhood sought to heal…”

There is always more than one way to look at things, and always more insight that can be gleaned from old stories. When we are on the cusp of adulthood we often think that the child needs to go. That we must cast off our “childish ways,” but the thing to remember is that there is a massive difference between childish and childlike. The child is a symbol of hope, and a source of wonder that needs to be nurtured and integrated into our adult-selves. If we fail to do this we can feel disillusioned and lost in the world. Always yearning for paradise.

We may also yearn for paradise if we feel we do not belong. This feeling would not make any sense to traditional peoples, and those who have taken psychedelic drugs. For the common report is a feeling of interconnectedness, and a sense of being an integral part of the wider world. Experiences like this can make us feel uncomfortable. Maybe, we don”t understand. Or, maybe, we too long to feel that connection, but would rather not admit it?

We have already touched on the idea of an interconnected world. Today, we may look at it in environmental terms, from our existence, which is dependent on healthy oceans. To our ancestors, however, specifically in Hindu mythology, this interrelated world was depicted as the net of the high god Indra who, it is said, “once made a net to enclose the world and, at each knot or intersection, he fastened a little bell…Nothing could move, not a man, not the wind, not a thought in the mind, without setting one bell ringing; and that one bell would set all the others going.”

I believe that the recognition of this truth, in whatever form most resonates with you, is key. We are living in a world where, as Leonard Cohen observed, “you are locked into your suffering and your pleasures are the seal.” We have to break out of the cycles of self-destruction, if we wish to find contentment. We have to dig in and find our role in life, in this world. Without this, we risk feeling in exile from life. Our anxieties manifest and we cut ourselves off, or cut ourselves, before anyone else has the chance to. The thing is, though, that everyone is so preoccupied with their own “flaws,” that they probably won”t notice or understand your hang ups.

In the western world, we are starved of real nutrition. This is the age of loneliness and fear, because truth and authenticity are lacking. We keep consuming, looking for sustenance in fake foods, and ending relationships because we are scared.

Finding our place in the world is no easy thing, and perhaps as Joseph Campbell said, that “life has no meaning. Each of us has meaning, and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer.”

Anteros is the animal groom who longs to find his place in an inhospitable world. His tale stands alongside Beauty and the Beast, and East of the Sun, West of the Moon, which find their roots in the myth of Cupid and Psyche. This ancient Greek myth is believed to be between 2,500 and 6,000 years old. It has all the same themes as Beauty and the Swan, especially the idea that: “love cannot dwell where there is no trust.”

A life of isolation, of exile, is a common theme in animal groom tales, of powerlessness and misrepresentation. I think this stems from the unrefined and unrestrained element of youth, symbolized by these animal grooms. Overall, through, the most powerful message is of the transformative power of love, and the importance of humility and grace, and of hope, which is born when beauty overlaps the world of shadow and despair; of a gentle heart, which is capable of love, and not just lust. Psychiatrist Karl Jaspers spoke of the “loving struggle to describe the relentless search for truth between two people who love each other; each helps the other find truth and become “their true self.”

Metamorphosis is a theme that runs throughout the pages of this book. It is something close to my heart because, ever since our ancestors tracked the stars across the sky, they began to contemplate life. If nothing outside of the “normal” paradigm is even allowed to considered, then human hopes and longing for meaning and transcendence are shattered. For me this finds its purest expression in love. Not Hollywood love, but true love, which asks lovers to help each other move through the resistance to change. For, whether to be broken or strengthened, it is best heated in the furnace of love”s flame.

This is seen in an amusing local variant of a Polynesian myth, where legend tells of “a maiden named Hina (moon), who enjoyed bathing in a certain pool. A great big eel, one day, swam past and touched her. This occurred again, day after day until, on one occasion, it threw off its eel costume and a beautiful youth, Te Tuna (the Eel), stood before her, whom she accepted as her lover. Thereafter, he would visit her in human form, but become an eel when he swam away.”

Stories involving animal grooms and animal totems are found all over the world: from Raven, in the Pacific Northwest, to the anthropomorphic gods of ancient Egypt and Sumeria. They reflect the world of our ancestors. In mythology, the snake and the bird were two of the earliest deities, and animal grooms/brides. Along with the butterfly, they symbolise metamorphosis and rebirth.

For Maori and Greek cultures, the butterfly symbolises the soul (or Psyche), while the Greek god Eros is represented by the swan. Long associated with love, the swan was sacred to Aphrodite, and was regarded as prophetic to the sun god Apollo. The primordial Greek Sun God, Helios, travelled in a barge, or chariot, drawn by swans, similar to the Slavic sun goddess Solntse, and the Baltic sun goddess Saule.

In the Celtic tradition, the swan symbolised the soul, the eternal and, of course, love. Irish bards wore cloaks of swan feathers, and would have known the story of the White Swans of the Wilderness, the children of the Tuatha de Danaan, who settled Ireland, and became the Sidhe, after the invasion of the Milesians.

Myths, like the Children of Lir, the Germanic Swan Maidens, and the Norse Valkyries, who were either cursed to become swans, or could shift their shape at will, are found all over Europe. The word “swan” has “the same root as the Latin word *sonare* meaning sounding…referring to the singing swan…the strange cry made by the old swans when dying on the ice is probably the hook for the projection of the *swan song*.”

Rooted in nature, animal groom tales speak of balance and harmony between humans and the natural world. As our ancestors would have tracked the stars, they too would have observed the migration paths of wild deer. They would have seen how the deer sheds its antlers, which then grow again. Indeed “any animal that has this kind of cycle becomes associated with the cosmic cycles.”

When awe is invoked, sacredness enters, and invisible ties are drawn between humans and the land. This is represented by the various nature deities found throughout world mythology. Connected to this, both the shaman and the hunter saw the importance of maintaining balance between all things. This is seen with Anteros, Cupid, and in tales of the seal and fox-woman. They take their cloak of feathers, their skin, or their pelt, and are gone.

Often, when we fall in love, we believe the tighter we hold on to them, the less likely we are to lose them when, in fact, the opposite is true. To the young heart, love is exciting and terrifying. At first, we are eager to wade into its mysterious waters, to the place where everyday life becomes remote. The trouble is that our perceptions of love and sex are heavily influenced by society and our parents. Mistrust and ignorance often take root and, from it, we reap what we sow.

Meaningless sex brings mostly loneliness and self-loathing. It is, therefore, imperative that you do not allow anyone to influence or dictate to you what is “normal.” It all comes down to respect, both for yourself and others.

I have always thought that there is so much possibility in this world. However, most people don”t want to put themselves out there. Many of us are like the Prince, bound up by conventions, and what others think of us but, as Manly P Hall wrote, if you long for the beautiful and the true, then you “must claim it from a heart of sorrow and sadness. Peace will never be found without labour. So go with the faith of a true prince into the world, which is a forest of nettles, for the world is filled with aggravating, prickling and tearing and wounding things…but there is beauty in all things. If your life has been deprived of it, go forth like the prince and claim it.”

In stories, royalty often symbolises a divine agency, or unseen, higher power, that carries us through difficult times. Being a prince is not about being rich, it is about strength of character, grace and humility. For as the Sufi”s tell us, “grace makes you irresistible, grace makes you invulnerable as your eyes shine like those of a drunken lover!”

Beauty and love strike us with awe and offer a gateway to something greater; to a deeper truth, bound up with the knowledge that love and suffering are inseparable. The troubadours, a mystical fraternity of medieval poet-musicians from France, believed this suffering was necessary and that, in the end, it would constitute their deepest joy. This is at odds with our present world, where we inflict the hurt or wound we receive on to someone else. Being vulnerable is never fun, but it should be the common ground on which we meet.

Unrequited love is also painful, but it brings understanding. Plato wrote of this in Phaedra, “[long ago, you see, the soul had wings] …like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are all aching and itching – this is exactly how the soul feels when it begins to grow wings. It swells up and aches and tingles as it grows them…but when it is watered and warmed by beauty, then all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy. When, however, it is separated…then the openings of the passages in which the feathers grow are dried shut and keep the wings from sprouting. Then the stump of each feather is blocked by desire and it throbs like a pulsating artery while the feather pricks at its passageway, with the result that the whole soul is stung all round, and the pain simply drives it wild.”

When the truth about life is withheld, we suffer. Our ancestors looked up to the elders of society, because they were willing to share their wisdom, and help the young learn patience and understanding.

The Sea Witch can be seen as a threshold elder, similar to Baba Yaga, of Slavic Mythology. They dwell beyond the boundaries of normality. For, they are ones who initiate the unsuspecting character into adulthood. They are the earth itself, perhaps even existence itself, concerned with blood and bones; Baba Yaga, here, representing ceaseless nature. She is always grinding up dead matter with her pestle and mortar.

Depression, an eating disorder, indeed, every stage of life, can be viewed as an initiation. Depression is not a bottomless well. I know it can feel like it, but it will end. Now, do not be mistaken. Depression is complex. There are many factors, from brain chemistry to childhood trauma but, by actively trying to understand the roots of our depression, we stand a better chance of working through it, to see it, if possible, not as a breakdown, but as a breakthrough; an opportunity to allow life to break us down, and then rebuild us, to end old patterns, which harm and drain us.

I have noticed so many times that if I don”t learn from my mistakes, from the lessons life offers me, I will find myself in the same situation, over and over again, until I do. Robert Frost said that: “our very life depends on everything”s recurring until we answer from within.” It has to come from within. A cliché though it is, we already have all we need. As it is written in the gospel of Thomas: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Experience is often a brutal teacher. It is like the gorgons’ blood, that heals or kills, but initiation can be transformative. It can help us move into a new stage of life. Young love can also be transformative, with some of the greatest lessons seemingly coming from unsuccessful love. This is seen in the story of the Mermaid. She gives up who she truly is, in the hope that the Prince would love her but, as she found out, for true love to blossom, looks are not enough.

Had she only been able still to sing, for singing, and sacred songs, have long been associated with creation, from the voice of the Holy Spirit, to the Hindu *Om,* which created the universe. Maybe, just maybe, if she had retained the gift, symbolically, to speak and sing, the Prince may have come to know the real her. Perhaps they would have fallen in love, because its roots were infatuation. Sadly, though, as it is often the way, things just do not work out, no matter how much we wish they would.

Hans Christian Andersen wrote the story of the Mermaid in the 19th century, at a time when equality did not exist, but the belief that some human beings did not have souls, did. The kernel of his stories speak of love and kindness, despite their sad reality. He knew life was hard, and so he asks us, how can we live in this inhospitable world without love and kindness? For, without connection, surely comes addiction, and then we stumble off to look for healing, looking to others, indeed, to anyone who isn”t ourselves.

Here, again, we see that the medicine we need is what the ancient Greeks termed *Philautia*, self-compassion, or love for the self, and *Agape*, which is the selfless love for others that enriches life. Ironically, it was *Eros*, or sexual passion, that was most feared, because the Greeks didn”t like being out of control. Eros, here, can be seen as the infamous “apple of discord”, the love that brings desire and harmony, as well as destructive jealousy and misery.

In Provence, we return once more to the Troubadours, a small group who had accepted the cult of amor from the Moorish *tarab-adors.* They also followed in the footsteps of the mystics of Egypt, and the Chaldean sages. They knew the importance of an “educated heart”. The Taoists called it the seat of understanding, while the Egyptians called it the “intelligence of the heart”. This intelligence allowed the Egyptian priests to see “inside” of the world, and what they saw was the natural state of all things, that of cosmic harmony.

For the Troubadours:

“The eyes are the scouts of the heart

The eyes go forth to find an image to recommend to the heart.

And if it is a gentle heart, then Amor, love, is born.”

As champions of the poor and oppressed, the Troubadours had wished to establish a Court of Love (world democracy), and a brotherhood of humanity. However, this was not to be, as they were persecuted and branded heretics by the church.

So, we know love transforms, but we must be willing to change, to listen to each other and, above all, to be vulnerable. This is not a vain hope for a happy ending, just a way forward, or perhaps backwards. The importance of language and vocalising ones feelings cannot be understated. I feel we should teach all children of the validity of their voice and, more than anything, the power that it holds, for “the tongue is a wild beast, when it is let loose, it wounds.”

Therefore, to share a kind word is much needed, but we must also be able to stand up for ourselves. Being strong should not be confused with being violent, but I think this comes down to tone of voice. Relationship psychologist Dr Gottman, in his book *The Relationship Cure,* reveals that “when it comes to assessing the meaning of what their partners are saying, only 7 per cent. of that meaning comes from the spoken word, while 38per cent. comes from tone of voice and speech pattern. Words that may seem neutral can become incendiary, if spoken with a sarcastic, demeaning, or contemptuous tone of voice, causing the listener to feel hurt and disrespected.”

When we are born, we cry out and, for the first time, our lungs are forced to work alone, as we are separated from the familiar rhythms of our mother. From here, we can often look for meaning, our whole lives. The German writer, Herman Hesse, wrote “[that] we insist that life must have meaning – but it can have no more meaning than we ourselves are able to give it. Because individuals can only do this imperfectly, the religions and philosophers have tried to supply a comforting answer to the question. The answers amount to the same thing: love alone can give life meaning. In other words the more capable we are of loving, and of giving of ourselves, the more meaning there will be in our lives.”

It is never too late to open yourself up to the mystery of it all, or to gather those fragments of yourself that you cut away to fit in. It is never too late to heal, but it does take time and effort.

At the end of the story of the Little Mermaid, she is offered a way back to her old form and life, but she does not accept it. Instead, she rises from the wound because she sees that, no matter how much she longs for it, it is just not meant to be. Joseph Campbell wrote truthfully that there”s “an ordeal, some anguish and suffering, essential to a soul”s growing into deeper love. Life must be lived. As Goethe wrote in his poem, *The Holy Longing*:

“So long as you haven”t experienced

this: to die and so to grow,

you are only a troubled guest

on the dark earth.”

One definition of Sufism is *joy at sudden disappointment*. The Sufi”s know that precisely the right disaster comes, at the right moment, to break us open to the helplessness that an opening of the heart requires. This is the harsh truth, but the truth. Union can only come when there is wholeness or, at least, a foundation of awareness.

“Love is not only a life experience

But also a mystical experience

In courtly love, the pain of love,

The impossibility of fulfilment

Was considered the essence of life.”

The Mermaid”s pain gave birth to something more enduring. In this literary imagining, she re-enters her true form. The minerals that compose our bodies are elements of earth and stars and, as the wind sings through carved wood, stone, and bone, so the mermaid”s song is heard once more.

“I will be born again, flowers,

Tree and grass I will be born again.”

Part III

Entering the Underworld

May the stars carry your sadness away,

May the flowers fill your heart with beauty,

May hope forever wipe away your tears,

And, above all, may silence make you strong.”

Chief Dan George

The Lindworm Prince

- Based on an old Norwegian Folktale -

“Like a snake, my heart has shed its skin. I hold it here in my hand, full of honey and wounds.”

*New Heart* by Frederico Garcia Lorca*.*

A young woman stood beside the ice-flecked sea, a crown of gold clasped in her hands. As the sun rose over the mountains, she turned away to walk through a forest of oak and ash. Loosening a ribbon from her crown, she tied it to one of the overhanging branches. Words of prayer upon her lips, she lifted her eyes to an oak tree laced with mistletoe.

It was a year and a day ago that her stepmother had, without her consent, offered herself in marriage to a prince, whom no one had ever seen. Whispers had reached her ears of missing women and scattered bones when, with an anguished heart, she had run from a monstrous prince whom no one had ever seen. With an anguished heart, she had run from the cottage and into the forest, where she fell to the earth, before an oak tree, and wept for three days.

On the morning of the fourth, she raised her hands, feeling the knotted bark, as the tree cleaved itself in two, and an old woman stepped towards her. Her hair was as ragged as seaweed and white as flax. Her dress was embroidered with moss and sprigs of wild flowers. The wind stirred in the trees, as she called Astrid, and told her to wear seven shifts beneath her bridal dress, and to embroider each of them in turn, paying particular attention to the area of the heart. Before she disappeared into the forest, she told her to ask for two scrubbing brushes and two baths, one of lye and one of milk, to be left in the bridal chamber on the day of the wedding.

Astrid walked towards the fringes of the forest. Shadows fell across her path, splashes of light flickering here and there. From the mountains, a flock of birds took flight, white-winged, over the distant forests. She watched them trace the course of a river, that wound its way past a settlement in the east and, where, beyond the high walls, stood a castle.

With apprehension, she passed through a wild flower meadow, that surged like an ocean all around. Poppies shed their blood-red petals onto the earth before her, as a bell tolled out into the overcast sky. Her eyes followed the sluggish river, that slithered its way along the bank, over rotting piles of wood, and on through the grazing lands.

The iron-studded gates were opened, and she passed through. The eyes of the people dropped away from her, as she stood in the courtyard, alone. Turning her back on the barren gardens, she ascended the stone steps. The wind sighed overhead, as she entwined her fingers. Her skin turned white, as she walked on, through damp corridors. For a brief moment, she thought she saw a shimmer of sapphire and gold but, turning, she found herself to be alone. Concealed upon the upper floor, the queen watched the young woman. A sadness rose within her, as she turned away, her eyes falling on the forest beyond the window.

In the years before Astrid”s birth, the harvest of the land had been bountiful, the rivers shimmering with fish, and the orchards heavy with apples. When the King and Queen married, the kingdom knew a contentment not seen for centuries but, what the people did not know, was that a secret sorrow grew between the couple.

Beyond the chamber door, the young Queen would whisper to the night, the nocturnal birds enfolding her longing in their feathered breasts, as they flew southwards. The years passed like an endless winter until, one day, when the Queen had given up all hope of a child, she ventured beyond the safety of the castle walls.

There, on the fringes of the forest, she met an old woman, whose hair was as ragged as seaweed, and as white as flax. The song of the river was upon her lips, and her pockets were full of mountain herbs. The Queen lowered her head and wept, as she listened to the words of the old woman.

Returning to the castle, the Queen repeated the old woman”s words, and the bed being brought down, from the topmost tower, and placed in the stables. As the sun slipped beneath the horizon, the king and queen lay together. In the stillness of the night, two flowers, one white, and one red, bloomed in the damp earth beneath their bed.

When they awoke, they knelt down, the queen stretching forth her hand. “Eat the white flower, not the red. The white.” The old woman”s words rang in her ears, as her fingers reached for the white. But they betrayed her. Plucking the red flower from the earth, she crushed its petals between her teeth, as it slid down her throat. The king looked away, as she snatched at the white flower, and devoured it too. In her belly, the two flowers mingled and swelled until, nine months later, she prepared to give birth.

In the topmost tower, she writhed and screamed, as a black-scaled serpent, a Lindworm, slithered from her womb. Upon the floor it coiled itself. The midwife swooped down, snatched at it, and flung it from the window. The silence was pierced, moments later, as a baby boy, with bright blue eyes, was born. The queen gathered him into her arms, as the Lindworm, alone, slithered away into the forest.

Eighteen winters passed, and soon the young prince left his parents, to seek a wife from the neighbouring kingdom. Wrapped in furs, with amulets of amber and bone around his neck, his horse cantered away beside the river, and into the forest. He rode on, beneath the low hanging branches until, by a lightning struck ash, a monstrous Lindworm reared up.

“Brother, a bride for me, before you!” It hissed, and the prince turned his horse around but, again, the Lindworm blocked his path, screeching:

“Brother, a bride for me before you!”

Rearing up, it coiled itself around a tree, its fangs dripping with spittle.

“I have no brother!” The prince cried, and the Lindworm became enraged, carving its way through the forest, after the prince, who rode back to the castle.

Angrily, he confronted his mother, in whose mind rose a dim shadow of a memory.

“Return to the forest,” she said, “and bring your brother home.”

As Astrid had climbed the steps, so the Lindworm had hauled its great body up and into the castle. In those days, a request for a wife for this shy prince was quickly met but, one after the other, twelve women entered, and never returned.

Astrid, the girl with the golden crown, was the thirteenth. Wedding vows upon her lips, a tail, glimmering like black basalt, slithered out of a nearby door, and coiled itself around her legs. She thought she saw, once more, that shimmer of sapphire and gold but, as the sun died in the west, she was dragged into the bridal chamber.

“Take off your shift.” Her new husband hissed at her, his tail thrashing the stone floor. She turned to him, candlelight flickering in his glassy eyes.

“Only if you will remove one of your skins, Prince Lindworm.” She said firmly.

“No one has ever asked me to do that before.” He replied, retreating away from her.

“Perhaps not, but I am asking you. Shed your skin.”

He viewed her, coiling away as he writhed, and began to lash his body against the wall. His scales turned translucent in the moonlight, as one skin crumpled onto the floor. Resting back, he watched her remove her shift. But, on seeing another below, he grew angry:

“Take off your shift!”

“Only if you will remove one of your skins.”

“No one has asked me to do that before.”

“Perhaps not but I am asking you, shed your skin.”

Many torturous hours passed this way until she stood, surrounded by an opaque mass of skins, layered between six white shifts.

“Remove your shift.” He hissed, with exhaustion.

“Only if you will shed your final skin.” The Lindworm consented, screaming as he sloughed off the last of his scales.

Bursting and fragmenting, they fell away, to reveal a grey and formless mass. Astrid did not recoil, but hauled him up and thenb down into the bath of ashes and water. Taking up the scrubbing brushes, she tore and gouged chunks out of the blubbering mass. Tears dripped into the bath, as a young man was revealed to her.

Moonlight crept over the floor, as she laid him tenderly in the bath of milk. Gently, she washed his face, his neck, his limbs, and took him into her arms.

A pair of white swans flew over the wild flower meadow, to settle on the glittering river. The queen watched them from the topmost tower, her son placing his arm around her, as they withdrew from the room, and approached the bridal chamber. Catching hold of her wrist, the prince held the Queen back, as a mass of scaled skin, and seven embroidered shifts, were revealed to them. He turned to close the door, but his mother pushed it wider, for she had seen what he had not, Astrid and the Lindworm Prince, young Sigurd, resting in each other”s arms.

Persephone

- Greek Myth -

“I am a forest, and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses.”

Thus Spoke Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche.

The succulent, citrus scent of orange blossom perfumed the air. intoxicating the grass, that rippled down the hillside. Beneath flowers of sweet nectar, lay the beautiful Kore, the maiden invocation of spring, whose presence ignited flames in arcane temples.

Sunlight spun strands of gold through her hair, as Zephyr floated overhead. His caressing breath stirred the flowers, whose heady cream petals spiralled down, to crown her forehead. She smiled at him, as he flowed on, over the olive groves that braided their way down, towards the sea. There, where the waves coiled and rushed in pearly foam, birdsong falling softly over the sea.

Phaeno, Lache, Melita, and Artemis danced and weaved through the trees. More nymphs gathered, as the sun poured down like golden honey. Kore turned back towards the west, where stood her mother, the goddess Demeter, Lady Deo, of the bountiful harvest, richly crowned with chaplets of golden corn.

Kore waved, as the lightness of her steps led her beyond the grove. Here, the valley undulated down towards the shore, washed by the azure blue sea. The daughter of Zeus cried for delight, as the whole earth seemed to surge, ripen, and bloom all around her. The maidens danced on, through the meadow of pastel-blue borage, raspberry-coloured sedum, and golden buttercups.

Gathering flowers for her mother, Kore peeled away at them, petals attaching themselves to her chiton. Caught in her own reverie, she noticed a trail of cherry blossom on the air. Curiously, she turned, and beheld the smoking volcano in the north, its hoary head dusted with snow. She placed her hands on the earth, felt faint tremors, and heard whispering voices.

Kore glanced up, and saw her friends, dancing away to the west. A smile flickered on her lips, and she made to join them, but something glinted gold from the corner of her eye. Turning, her eyes fell on a narcissus, growing at her feet. Her desire grew for its hundred petals, and she stretched forth her hand. Curling her fingers around the stem, she tugged gently. At that moment, the songs died in the throats of the birds, the flowers enfolded their petals, and the ground cracked.

Earthly jaws, smeared in soil, fragments of bone, and slithers of silver, gaped wide. As from the darkness, Hades, Polydektos, Clymenus; the son of Cronus, hurtled from its depths. His chariot was wrought of black and gold, and was pulled by four immortal horses. Their bridals glittered as they cantered, their coal-black hoofs thundering and pummelling the ground, as the god fixed his eyes upon her. Turning his chariot to the west, it flew over the meadow. Approaching Kore, he reached over the rim, placed his arm around her, and hauled her up. Terrified, she tried to escape, but he held her fast.

Storm clouds stretched across the sky, and the sea turned a sullen grey. As the volcano began to smoke, spewing molten rock, the horses galloped like a famine over the withering ground; blackening the barley, until they began to descend. Kore screamed in terror, her arms outstretched, as the roots of the trees clasped each other, over her head. Only Echo lamented her cry, as the image of the golden narcissus swam in the dark pools of her eyes.

The road ahead was paved with slabs of obsidian, which descended around an internal mountain. Through her tears, she viewed him: stern, dark of hair and aspect. He clasped the reins in his right hand, as he glanced at her, and relinquished his hold.

Below, on the river Styx, Chiron guided his rusty skiff to the eastern shore. Kore held onto the rail and lowered herself down, pulling her knees into her chest, as the interior of the earth whispered all around her.

Up ahead, bronze gates swung open, as Cerberus howled into the gloom, and the horses slowed to a trot. Hades outstretched his hand to her, but she did not accept it, and he turned away. However, not wishing to be left alone, she followed his steps.

Eternal lamps lined the marble walls, resembling the night sky, shot through with slithers of crystal and gold. Up ahead, a stream of pale light pooled on the floor, a single golden thread dangling there until, only a moment later, it fell inanimate onto the ground. As from the abyss, Thanatos, god of countless griefs, son of Erebos and Nyx, soared upwards on silver pinions.

“What was that?” She asked him, but he did not answer. For, he knew that Atrapos had cut another thread with her shears, thus causing the god of death to rise to the surface.

To the left and right, stood the gates of ivory and horn. A veil hung from both, which the Oneiroi, the dark-winged spirits of dreams, passed through, like a flock of bats. Kore closed her eyes, and followed him deeper into the descending passageway. The walls pressed in on her. Subterranean streams rushed through her ears, as shadows clawed at her eyes, and she collapsed.

Many hours passed, until she awoke. Looking about her, she saw that she lay in a bed of onyx. Turning towards the window, she saw him standing, staff in hand, his scaled leather and metal armour adding to his cold demeanour.

“Would you like something to eat?”

“I would like you to take me back to the surface. Now!” She commanded, her features hardening.

“You are here to be my wife.” He replied defiantly.

“I will never be your wife!” She spat at him, as he slammed his staff into the ground, and left.

Alone, Kore stood, and then walked to three-arched windows. Beyond, stretched the land of eternal dusk. Rain drenched valleys and brackish swamps. Kore turned, and noticed that a table had been laid with food, over by the door. A box, ornamented with mother-of-pearl lay at its side. Warily, she lifted the lid, and saw a necklace, wrought in silver, and set with lozenges of smoky quartz. She closed the lid, and retired to bed. Lying back, she watched the roots of the forests twitching overhead, interlacing and weaving the dreams into which she slipped.

For days, Kore remained in the chamber, unaware of dawn or dusk as, lying alone on the bed, she felt a deep grief stir and move through her body, cleansing her bones, and hollowing her cheeks. Tiny flowers sprouted from the cuts on her arms and hands, as pallid asphodels wove their way over the faded linen of her chiton.

“You must eat…” Hades entered her room, concern furrowing his brow. “…and why do you not accept my gifts and offerings to you?”

“I do not wish to be here. I do not desire treasure or glittering gems. I wish to return to the way things were before all of this.” She replied, in a faint voice, as she turned from him. At the sight of her frail frame, all gathered up like a child, he bristled with anger, as he withdrew from the room.

In the days that followed, Kore watched him wander through the grove of shady elm trees, beyond the window. Often rendered invisible by his bronze helmet, he walked amid the ghost souls, who flowed through the wetlands. The grey haze of the asphodel meadow beyond, was like a silver serpent on the horizon. To the east she saw a wellspring, beneath a white cypress tree. Her eyes passed from it, to the lake of memory, and on to the opposite side, where another spring rose, beneath another white cypress.

Laments and cries reverberated through the palace, as new shades arrived, trembling, anxious, and fearful of the bronze gates, that led into the abyss of Tartarus. Kore saw how the unmourned wandered hopelessly, and she longed to help them.

As the days wove wisdom in her breast, the disdain and anger, she held against Hades, slowly waned. For she saw that, although he was stern, his laws treated all as equals. His fate was to live in the liminal chaos, between destruction and creation and where, although he received all gifts, he never saw the fruition of the renewal that began in his domain. It was his lot to dwell in the kingdom beneath the earth, sunk below the starry sky and the whalebone sea. He was alone and, like her, longed for another to talk with, and hold during the silent hours.

Thoughts and feelings mingled within Kore as she washed, dressed, and let herself out of the room. The maidens of Nyx processed in front of her, their dusky veils rippling in the gloom, as they entered the hall. The warble of a bird echoed from the vaulted ceiling. The twisting roots extended, to coil around the slender columns of ebony and quartz. Incense perfumed the air, with threads of bronze, glimmering in the lamplight that washed over the marble, which was pale gold, like the moon upon the river, by which Demeter sat, wailing deeply in her grief, cloaked and hooded while, for nine days and nights, the queen of the harvest had ravaged the land.

On dawn of the tenth day, the tender-minded goddess, Hecate, lady of lunar charms, withdrew from her hillside cave, and called:

“Helios, God of the eternal sun, saw you your daughter?” Demeter turned to her, with red-rimmed eyes and thread worn clothes, as she threw up her arms and cried out to him.

“Brother, tell me what you saw!”

“Dear Lady, the earth is ravaged. The people will die if you continue.”

“Do not speak to me of the mortals. I turned the sisters Melpomene into sirens, cursed them forever in that form. I will do what I have to. Now, tell me, where is my daughter?” She said firmly.

“I saw Hades carry her off in his chariot into the underworld.” Helios said solemnly, as he saw the wrath in her eyes. “Sister, would Polynemos really be such an abhorrent match for your daughter?”

“I denied Apollo, of the bright ardour, and swift-minded Hermes, for she is but a child, Helios! She is my only daughter. So, tell me, what claim does Hades have? He who dwells in that infernal domain, and who is the receiver of all my gifts!” She shouted angrily, and he knew that no words could soothe her.

“Then you must speak with Zeus...”

Demeter turned away, as Zeus called to his sister, “Dear Lady, we beg you. Restore the earth.”

“You are her father, and you know what happened. Tell me!”

“Hades desired her for his wife, and the narcissus, which your daughter desired, I had grown in accordance with that wish. There is nothing I can do now.”

“You consented! You had that flower charmed out of the earth?” She trembled with anger. “I will waste the earth, and plague the people, unless you restore her to me!” She spat at him, mounting to her chariot and taking up the reins of the snarling lions.

Demeter continued to roam the earth, refraining from ambrosia, or the purifying, clear waters of the Ionian Sea. Only the broad tide of the river, and the nocturnal daemons of the wilderness, grieved with her.

After a while, stars fell from the sky, and splashed the earth, as her steps led her to the palace of Cleueus, the King of Elusius, in Attica. Behind an ornate stone pillar, Demeter shifted her shape into a crone, personification of the waning moon, of cleaving time and the withered rose of autumn.

Songs of lamentation quivered on the air, as she passed beneath an olive tree, and seated herself near the well of Parthenion. A group of young maidens, approaching to draw water, greeted her.

“Good morning. Are you travelling alone on this road?”

“Yes.”

“Then come with us to the palace of Cleueus.”

“I am grateful for your kindness.” She said, a faint glow, like the rays of the morning sun, emanating from her crooked form. Pulling her cloak around her, the light waned as they led her into one of the palace rooms, where a group of women were gathered by the fire.

“May we offer you some wine?” One of the girls asked, but Demeter declined, taking only kykeion, brewed from barley and pennyroyal, to soothe her throat.

Conversation flowed for many hours, until the fire waned, like the moon beyond the window, and Iambe began to jest with her sisters. Her jaw loosened by wine, her jovial tone soon caused the lady Demeter to smile and, as she did, her hood slipped from her head. Hair like a golden, sunlit river, flowed down her back, her eyes aglow. Hastily she pulled up her hood but, for a fleeting second, they had seen her eternal guise.

Over the weeks, the people comforted Demeter and, with her benevolent grace, she daily anointed Demophon, the king”s youngest son, with ambrosia. As nanny to the boy, she became so taken with him that, after a month, she prepared a fire with which to cleanse him of his mortality, and re-craft his body into that of an immortal.

The young boy smiled, as the flames licked the air, flashing blue and amber in the darkness. Demeter laid the boy down, but did not see his mother, Metaneria, watching. With anger and horror, she burst into the room, her screams causing the fire to burn ferociously, and devour the small child. Guards came running into the room, followed by the King, who drew his sword and placed it on Demeter”s neck.

“What have you done old woman?!” He roared at her and, slowly, she pushed the blade away, and lowered her hood, assuming her true form, as goddess of the harvest. Immediately, the guards, and the King and the Queen, fell to their knees, and begged for forgiveness and understanding.

Furiously, Demeter explained, and decided that she would, instead, initiate their eldest son, Triptolemos, into the divine mysteries. Calling him to her, a chariot, pulled by winged drakons, appeared beyond the window. She watched him leave, as a slither of moon rose through the heavens.

In the temples, plumes of smoke began to rise, from smouldering nuggets of frankincense, the wind offering its prayers to the god of the crossroads, to Hermes, son of Zeus and daughter of Maia, who descended to the earth. Onwards, through the skin of soil, and down into the infernal regions, his gilded, winged heels, shot through the darkness, like a star falling from heaven. His caduceus downturned, he crossed through the gates, with Cerberus”s triple-headed shadow falling across his path. Hermes trod the marble passageway, and on into the lofty hall.

Hades was sittin on his vast throne of ebony, all over-arched with a bower of fossilized cypress trees, that were lit with many lamps. However, as he approached, Hermes saw that even these eternal flames were eclipsed by the luminous, wise, and formidable beauty of Kore, who was now Persephone, robed in dark velvet, figured with silver, and with a diadem of opals upon her brow. She sat on her own throne, next to Hades, their hands entwined.

The messenger god walked through the forest of marble columns, and towards Hades, who held a pomegranate in his hand. Hermes, who had longed for the daughter of Demeter himself, watched the crushed, crimson liquid stain her lips, as Hades slipped its seeds into her mouth.

“My lord, Polydegmon, Eubuleus, your brother Zeus commands you to let Demeter”s daughter go.” Hades stood, towering over the messenger god, his pronged staff glinting in the low light.

“Zeus!?...” He began, shaking with anger at the sound of his brother”s name but, as he turned to his wife, he fell silent. he turned, and descended the steps, pausing to whisper into Hermes ear:

“She is free if she no longer wishes to stay.”

Hearing that she might be released from the underworld, a lonely tear ran down her cheek for, although she missed her mother, her love for Hades had taken root within her heart. Hermes”s eyes fell upon her, and the stain of the pomegranate that still lingered upon her lips.

“How many seeds of the immortal fruit have you eaten?” Hermes asked, his hand upon hers.

“Six.” She replied.

“Then I do not know what can be done, we must ascend, and consult Zeus.”

Persephone, Queen of Hades, turned back for one last glimpse of her husband”s frame, silhouetted against the window. Before Hermes led her away, ascending as the earth rent itself apart, and they passed through a gloomy cave, and out into the meadow.

Demeter embraced her daughter, as the fields erupted with corn and barley. Orchards full of apples and pears, and grove upon grove of orange trees. Vines of heady grapes burst from the ground, dewy crimson berries, ripening in clusters, appeared over the temples. The deathless gods, and the age-withered mortals withdrew into the meadows, to rejoice at the triumph over winter, and the defeat of the blackened months, the wraith of famine, and the return of Demeter”s daughter.

Wild flowers cascaded down the rocky slopes, revealing Elysium, rendered into earthly flesh. Zeus sent Iris, with her wings of gold, to Demeter, as a gesture of reconciliation. Graceful Nymphs bestowed garlands of flowers on Persephone, as it was decided that she would spent six months with her mother, and the six waning months of the year with her husband.

Persephone kissed her mother”s cheek, and met her eyes with gladness, before turning away towards the volcano in the north, bending her knee, and pressing her lips to the earth. With kisses, and words of promise, she left the dark, fertile stain of the pomegranate lingering on the soil.

The Night Sea Voyage

Shadow and the Dark Night of the Soul

“Oh sweet bitterness,

I will soothe you and heal you

I will bring you roses

I, too, have been covered with thorns.”

Rumi

Both the myth of Persephone, and the folk tale of the Lindworm Prince, deal with relationships and the underworld. Carl Jung wrote that “Seldom, or perhaps never, does a marriage develop into an individual relationship smoothly and without crises; there is no coming to consciousness without pain.”

Growing, and coming to consciousness, is painful. There are many paths that lead to it, but perhaps none is more testing than a relationship. The other person serves as a mirror for us, reflecting our hidden ways. When we come together, both our hearts and our shadows meet.

The poet and writer, Robert Bly, described the shadow as “the long black bag we drag behind us.” It contains parts of us our parents and society told us to get rid of. Slowly, we are reduced, until most of our energy ends up in the bag, and we hardly ever deal with our shadow, because it is painful. But “…your shadow… whom you cannot accept…will never forget you.” It is the disowned self, but it is not evil, it is our dark twin, our wild twin who, like the Lindworm Prince, grows hostile in exile. Carl Jung said that “whenever we give up, leave behind, and forget too much, there is always the danger that the things we have neglected will return with added force.”

The Lindworm Prince is, in his own way, the anti-hero. He is the the trickster who drags up the past, so that we don”t forget. So that we don”t repress. He upsets the balance which, in the end, brings new life and harmony to the kingdom, here symbolising the individual.

New life is only possible after the descent, after time spent in the wilderness. Spring only returns to the earth once Persephone ascends from the underworld. We cannot hope for authenticity, unless we are willing to do the hard work. This means facing disillusionment. However, the underworld is not really a place you choose to go to. It is more a place where you are dragged, kicking and screaming.

Most of us are adverse to it but, as myth shows, the descent is a natural part of life. Medieval theologian Meister Ekhart observed that: “the ground of the soul is dark.” To be forced down and out, ultimately, can be a good thing, but it is a long process, and we have forgotten, that “sorrow, suffering, and loneliness are the great builders of character. Man [can] never become truly great until his heart is broken.”

When we recognise this in another, lifelong friendship is possible. Kahlil Gibran wrote of this when he said that: “hearts united in pain and sorrow will not be separated by joy and happiness. Bonds that are woven in sadness are stronger than the ties of joy and pleasure.” Bonds woven in this darkness belong to the realm of Hades, to the place where chaos is made into cosmos, and where seeds germinate.

The symbolism of seeds, of pomegranate seeds in particular, is fascinating. We are told that, when the Greek god Dionysus died, “a pomegranate tree sprouted from his blood, coming from the tree sacred to Tammuz and Adonis, and the fruit which bound Persephone to Hades. For the fruit of the pomegranate tree, once opened, spoils immediately – heralding death – its black seeds, packed so densely together, evoke the souls of the myriad dead, stored safely in the underworld, awaiting rebirth. In Christian art a pomegranate often adorns the cloak of the Virgin Mary as a promise of resurrection.”

This hope for new life is seen when Astrid places the Lindworm Prince in the bath of ashes. In Viking times, young men were allowed two or three years of “ashes” when, in the long houses, they would lie between the fire and the ash pile. Here, they would roll themselves “in ashes, neither caring to employ themselves in anything useful… [They] would occupy this physical and psychic terrain until they felt they had moved through the underworld, where grief had taken them. While there, they become known as cinder-biters, this being the root of *cinder-ella*.

Ash speaks to what remains: “Ash [being] the ultimate reduction, the bare soul, the last truth, all else dissolved… it is a symbol of the immortal soul, which is released when the matter is destroyed.” The Hindu texts describe the god Shiva as “clothed with ashes.” This symbolises permanence, destruction, and the new life, that is born from a life destroyed. It is said that both Shiva and Kali inhabit cremation grounds, and that their devotees go there to meditate. Through their meditation, they reinforce the awareness of the immortality of the soul. That we are not solely defined by our bodies.

In fairy tales, the journey towards new life is symbolised by the forest. In Medieval times, “the knights of King Arthur”s court thought “it would be a disgrace to go forth as a group. Each entered the forest at a point that he himself had chosen, where it was darkest, and there was no path. If there was a path it is someone else”s path, and you are not on an adventure.”

So, rebirth means destruction and chaos. It demands change. Clinging to safety is no good. As Joseph Campbell wrote:

“There”s no security

in following the call to adventure.

Nothing is exciting

if you know what the

outcome is going to be.”

If the call to adventure is not heeded, then life becomes like a wasteland. Our days become a constant wait for “better times.” Rumi”s teacher, Shams Tabrizi, told him that “instead of resisting changes, surrender. Let life be with you. If you think “my life will be upside down” don”t worry. How do you know down is not better than up?”

Change often happens, or can be demanded, when we find ourselves at a crossroads; when we know that our life cannot continue on the same path anymore. Shams wrote about these opportunities, of death in life: “It is never too late to ask yourself: “Am I ready to change my life, am I ready to change myself?” However old we are, whatever we”ve been through, it is always possible to be reborn…But, to be reborn into a new life, you have to die before dying.”

Whether we are faced with change, or initiation, we will greet along the path one, if not two or three, periods of crisis. This is also referred to as the *dark night of the soul.* It may also be viewed as the underworld or the “belly of the whale.” In alchemy, it is seen as *Nigredo*. Associated with depression, confusion and anxiety, this is the stage of “decomposition”. Where the body is symbolically reduced to its original composition, and “cooked” in the dark earth.

Hades was seen as the “dissolver of the luminous world,” and Carl Jung wrote that “the dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences when it comes to delving too deeply into himself is, at bottom, the fear of the journey to Hades.” We are terrified of finding meaninglessness and annihilation there. Darkness, itself, is not evil. It is associated with the transition into new life.

This is seen in the myth of Odin, where the “dark night of the soul comes just before revelation, when everything is lost and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is needed…If you can wait just a little longer when you reach the terrible moment of the dark night of the soul, the Easter music *will* burst forth…” Kafka once said, in a moment of anguish, that the Second Coming of Christ would happen the day after the end of the world.”

In this way, Hades can be seen as a vast treasure house. He is the receiver of all earthly wealth. Often depicted as a young man with a cornucopia, symbolizing wealth and abundance. “The bounty of our life in his keep.”

This is also seen with Demeter, mother of the corn, and Persephone, the ripened grain. They are one and the same. The great mother and the dark mother. This constant flux is seen with the Hindu goddess, Kali, who wears a necklace of skulls, that can shift from flowers and back to skulls instantaneously.

This duality is also seen with astronomical black holes, which suck “matter into their event horizons, and spit out jets of ionised gas into space. The jets are bits of matter, accelerated by the event horizon they entered; rebounded so fast, they give off gamma rays, converting energy to light. This then heats space, and changes the cosmic environment, which may help spark new stars into being.”

Nietzsche said that “you must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.” Often, we find ourselves dragged down when we least expect it; at those threshold moments of life: at puberty, our first love, the loss of a loved one, a friend or a job. There are so many times when life feels out of control, with an endless run of bad luck, that leads us to a place between the worlds, a place where there “is no sense of time, time is endless and you cannot rush your stay, there is no morning, day or night. It is intensely dark and unforgiving.”

When we feel we are struggling, when we are unsure whether we have the strength to go on, so often, we try to numb ourselves. This is completely understandable, and everyone must move forward at their own pace, but that is the key, to keep moving on, through what is happening; patiently to seek understanding, knowing that the phase will end. It will. I know it doesn”t seem like it, but you will come out on the other side.

At all stages of life, through different struggles, we may find it difficult to imagine a life beyond. You may often feel that you have seen everything; that nothing excites you anymore. While this may feel true, I can guarantee, it is not. This is showing you that things in your life need to change. For me, music, art, creativity, in any form, can help create a life, and a future, beyond trauma and depression.

We all suffer, we all struggle, and no matter how much we look to others to help us, only we can help ourselves. We are all fumbling, in different degrees of darkness, because no one, alive right now, holds all of the answers. No one.

If we are able to look to the roots of addiction, sadness, and loneliness, we may be able to break old patterns and implement new ones. You may not think you need to change, that you don”t need to break the old patterns but, I can assure you, that is just your addiction speaking. When I weighed six stones, I was convinced my family were against me. If I hadn”t stopped listening to that voice, I would now be dead. It was so convincing, but it wasn”t actually true. When there are cracks in your life, it is a good opportunity to try to get back to yourself; to dismantle all your defences and external pressures. Steadily, you will come to the point where you live for yourself, for the good of the earth, and all who live here. After all, it should be remembered that our world crisis comes from the Greek *Krisis*, meaning “turning point in disease.”

Recognition may be seen as the first step, towards leading an authentic life, when honesty helps bring about meaning and inner strength. The recognition of self-worth is central; of knowing that you do not need to put aside those things which bring you joy, or passively just accept the way things are. Life, itself, is short and hard enough, to put people down or ridicule them. We must, surely, recognise what the poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, wrote, that: “every man has his secret sorrows which the world knows not; and often times we call a man cold when he is only sad.” Astrid saw this in the Lindworm Prince, and, in return, he did not devour her.

For some, like the Lindworm Prince, when he arrives at the castle, beauty is something to be destroyed. Ernst Jünger wrote in: *On the Marble Cliffs* that: “in base hearts, there lies deep-seated a burning hatred of beauty.” How does a heart come to this place? For the Lindworm Prince, his domain is the gloomy forest. It is his defence mechanism to be unyielding, to say “never again will I love anyone…never again will I trust anyone…” and, so, he becomes hostile, and full of rage. He devours women and perpetuates the misery. That is, until Astrid arrives. She is the one he has secretly been waiting for. She is the one who will challenge him, the one who will help him heal, and reveal his true form.

Robert Bly comments on this tale that, despite her being flung into the situation beyond her will, she recognises that “the suffering being was not the same on the outside as it was on the inside…” She knows that the rough exterior was a protection, over “wounds from past events, and she also has faith in the beauty of the soul”s interior.” Because of this, great healing is possible and, let”s be honest, who wouldn”t want this?

This tale is similar, in a way, to a beautiful Native American story, called the Bear Warrior. According to legend, a warrior longed to find love, for someone to love him, not for his looks, family wealth, or skills, but for his heart. He prayed to the Great Spirit, who answered, by turning the warrior into a bear. Viewing his paws, he padded over to a pool, and gazed at his reflection. Upset, he cried out: “Why has my prayer for love angered you? I don”t understand?” A deer approached him, and the Great Spirit spoke through it: “I will tell your people, once a week, to bring a young maiden to you.”

“But, I still don”t understand.” The warrior replied.

“You will. For, the maiden who sees you for yourself, will prove to be worthy of your love.” He watched the deer disappear into the forest, and he sought a cave, beside a spring, and lay down in the darkness.

As the Great Spirit had said, each week, a chieftain brought his daughter to the bear. At first, he greeted them eagerly but, as each one screamed and ran away, he retreated back into the cave. A year and a day passed, until a young woman appeared, with turquoise beads on her wrists, and seashells on her dress. However, the bear warrior didn”t even look up. He turned away, and waited for her to leave.

“Hello, are you the bear”s keeper?” She asked, as she crouched down beside him.

“What?” He turned towards her angrily. “Do you not see the bear before you?”

“No, just you.” She replied, looking past him, “Is he inside the cave?” At her words, the warrior”s outer appearance changed back into a man.

“At last, I have found someone who might love me for myself.” He thought, before he told her his story and, as is the way, they soon fell in love, returned home, and were married.

Here, we find the animal groom alive once more. The bear and the maiden is, perhaps, as ancient as the serpent and the maiden; this being the serpent of the earliest planters, whose myth spoke of transformation, through death and rebirth. In Egypt, one of the earliest beliefs was of the god Atum, who, as a serpent, was known for bringing things to perfection. This attainment I do not think should be viewed as physical perfection, or perfection by today”s standards, but the completion of our perfect selves, our authentic selves.

This attainment is, of course, painful. In the bridal chamber, both the Lindworm Prince and Astrid are extremely vulnerable. This is similar to the time when new lovers see each other, as they are, for the first time. When the projections die, and the real work beings.

It is:

“A night full of talking that hurts,

my worst held secrets: everything

has to do with loving and not loving.

This night will pass,

Then we will have work to do.”

This work is seen in the beautiful symbolism, almost ritual, that passes between Astrid and the Lindworm. The exchange of a skin for a shift. Rumi wrote of this process:

“There”s a shedding that”s really healing,

That makes you feel more alive.”

Many of us long to feel truly alive, but we turn away from what we know we have to do. Throughout our life, people may love us, with their whole being, but it is not enough. We have to let them. We have to be vulnerable and honest before them. We must take down the barriers we have put up, after every let down, every hurt, and every wound. We need to learn that love and suffering are inseparable.

We must give up the hope of a “magical other”, the notion that there is one who will complete us, solve all of our problems. Maybe, they might exist but, if they did, they wouldn”t challenge us, and we wouldn”t grow, we wouldn”t reach our potential. Just continuing to feel that we have not filled that hole within ourselves, we will go from relationship to relationship, hoping to find the one who will when, in truth, it is down to us. Love should “serve the growth of each party, toward becoming more nearly who he or she is capable of becoming… Love is supportive and caring…love asks independence of both parties, freedom, not control, not guilt, not coercion, not manipulation. Dependency is not love; it is dependency.”

As seen with the Lindworm Prince, you have to be willing to be vulnerable and honest. Any hope that someone else will do it for you is avoiding the task of growing up. As the Sioux say: “the longest journey you will ever make is from your head to your heart.”

It is hard work, no question but, as we have seen, whatever is forced into exile, becomes hostile. Once again, Rumi reminds us:

“The soul is a newly-skinned hide, bloody

and gross. Work on it with manual discipline,

and the bitter tanning acid of grief.

You”ll become lovely and very strong.

If you can”t do this work yourself, don”t worry.

You don”t have to make a decision, one way or another.

The Friend, who knows a lot more than you do,

will bring difficulties and grief and sickness,

as medicine, as happiness, as the moment

when you”re beaten, when you hear Checkmate,

 and can finally say with Hallaj”s voice,  
*I trust you to kill me*.”

When faced with change, we often cling to the familiar, but there is no life without change. Fragmenting life; compartmentalising ourselves, like our compulsions, narrow-down life. If we exercise control over others then, relationships will, most probably, be unfulfilling, and short-lived. Fear is one of the strongest emotions in the world and, so often, it causes us to lose sight of who we are. Through the eyes of fear, love becomes possession, and we end up devouring the other person.

After many years, the Lindworm Prince at last, receives the nourishment and healing he was denied. Astrid does not force his transformation. She is more of a guiding star. Manly P Hall wrote of this, that: “every life must not only have the power to accomplish, it must also have the inspiration to lead it on. Here we have the laws of polarity at work in life.”

The healing comes in the form of the bath, which is also a widespread redemption motif. In Alchemy, washing, or the immersion of the King and Queen in a bath, symbolises the process of washing, cleansing and distilling. The symbol that unites them is a dove. This is a nice nod to the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite, and the Holy Spirit, or Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom. The number given, in the alchemical texts, varies from 7, 9, to 15. This repetition may remind us of the work which takes place both individually, and between two lovers, like the embroidery on each of Astrid”s seven shifts. It echoes life, which can “read as a continuous upheaval of knowledge and equilibrium, in an attempt to gather meaning.”

The ashes, as we have seen, symbolise the ultimate reduction. While the bath of milk represents the stage of Albedo, or whiteness, which comes after the Nigredo, or blackness. This is the “hour of gold”, or the rising of the morning star which, at long last, heralds the coming of the new day. It is also where the masculine and feminine are united.

During the bath of milk, the Lindworm Prince symbolically receives the milk of childhood. This is the milk of our mother, which nourishes us, and helps us to grow. It may also be seen as the milk and honey of the sacred mysteries, which taught about death and rebirth. It is also symbolised by the white clay, limestone or chalk, which aboriginal hunters, and our ancestors, as initiates into the mysteries, would have been smeared in.

Initiation ceremonies make “a good illustration because they commonly include a symbolic death.” They always take place away from everyday life. For our ancestors, initiations were viewed as transformative. they reminding the initiates that they were more than “dust and shadow.” The ancient mystery-schools provided a second birth, from where the authentic self could emerge.

Philosopher, Martin Heidegger, commented that, for long periods of our lives, we are told by the anonymous “they” or “das man”, what to do, what to think, and feel. Heidegger also knew the importance of the eternal now; he said that: “If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - and only then will I be free to become myself.”

This is the essence of initiation, which etymologically means “to put on a path, to introduce someone into a way… [These] first steps will plunge the initiate into the darkness of a mystery... *Initiate* literally means “to set off on the path that leads within.”

One of the most well-known examples of an initiation, and spiritual journey, is in Dante”s *Divine Comedy*. There Dante teaches us to “unfold our eternal life.”, to understand that initiation may take place in a cave, or purposebuilt labyrinth but, ultimately, this darkness, where we are transformed, is found within. For, “although our voyage is to be outward, it is also to be inward, to the sources of all great acts, which are not out there, but in here, in us all, where the Muses dwell.”

The descent of Persephone, in the earliest versions of the myth, was her own choice. For a while, she had heard the voices of the dead on the air, and knew she had to descend into the underworld. There comes a time, in all our lives, when we know that we must move forward, and let old illusions die.

Kore (Persephone), like the Mermaid and Tabitha, are all on the cusp of womanhood. Once again, we find ourselves in the realm of the sea witch, of Baba Yaga, the threshold-dwellers, concerned with blood and bone. They are symbolic of the experiences that grind us down, in order for new life to be born.

The subject of menstrual blood is taboo in many countries. However, it was not always this way. In Ancient Greece, they used to mix blood with wine and pour it over the fields. The nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium would have, indeed, nourished the soil.

For our ancestors, blood was in the realm of fertility, the goddess, and the rose. It was also associated with wisdom. When a woman was pregnant, it was thought that she held onto her blood for nine months to nourish the baby. When a woman passed through the menopause, it was believed that she retained her blood, and the wisdom which it brought. More recently, though, with advancements in science, researchers are “seeking new and more abundant sources of stem-cells, for use in regenerative medicine [and they] have identified a potentially unlimited and inexpensive source – menstrual blood.” It is a natural part of life. There should be no shame attached to it.

Natural though it may be, many of the natural and instinctual ways of life have been lost to us. The rites of passage, and the understanding that went with them, have been driven into the primeval wild of night.

Most of us have an uneasy relationship with the dark. Perhaps because we can”t see what”s there, and so we assume the worst? The American writer, Henry Beston, commented that: “with lights and ever more lights, we drive the holiness and beauty of night back to the forests and the sea.” The blue light of our screens takes away from us the ability “to be alone in the dark…to drop back through the years.” If we were able to *fall* into darkness more often, perhaps we would see it as a refuge, instead? Carl Jung wrote that “if you comprehend the darkness, it seizes you. It comes over you like the night with black shadows and countless shimmering stars. Silence and peace come over you if you begin to comprehend the darkness. Only he who does not comprehend the darkness fears the night.”

Darkness, like wild places, breaks you down, dissolves and restores. This is life in constant motion. It is echoed in the dance of Shiva, in the whirling dervishes, and the winding, sevenfold path to the Ka”ba. Natural life is outside of our control: for, “the more a thing tends to be permanent, the more it tends to be lifeless.”

Many of us can no longer see the stars, that glittering arc of the Milky Way, which helps us feel “the deep mystery of being.” In the summer of 1888, while on a beach in southern France, Van Gogh wrote of what he had seen, “the deep blue sky was decked with clouds of a blue deeper than the fundamental blue of intense cobalt, and others of a clearer blue, like the blue-whiteness of the Milky Way. In the blue depths, the stars were sparkling, greenish, yellow, white, pink, more brilliant, more sparkling gemlike than at home – even in Paris: opals you might call them, emeralds, lapis lazuli, rubies, sapphires.” This treasure hoard, in the darkness above, beautifully reflects the treasure house of Hades below.

It is to this underworld that Kore loses herself. After a while, she feels compassion for the dead and, as with all stories of Death and the Maiden, learns to care for, and ultimately love, Hades. In a similar way, the Lindworm Prince returns from exile, as his mother and father make room for the serpent.

Darkness is integral to life and, without it, there can be no beauty. Time spent in the underworld is not wasted, it is vital. No matter how hard it feels. When Persephone returns to the surface, spring blooms, in a haze of cherry blossom. This shows us that there is always the promise of the return. Always, there is the sun god, who brings the light and, in doing so, kills the dragon of the dark months. As we look forward, we should remember that, for some native peoples, their word for ‘future’ means to go back, as in the Tao Te Ching it says:

“Going on means going far,

Going on means returning.”

Part IV

Healing and Sickness

“There is a dream dreaming us…”

A Kalahari bushman

Father of Sickness

- Based on an old Siberian Tale -

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

Carl G. Jung

Rowan berries garlanded the trees, glittering with frost, in the morning light, as a bird warbled its melodious song, out over the taiga. The sun warmed the snow-dusted trees, whose branches shivered, as a herd of reindeer moved beneath. A young man, Nya Nganas, trailed them through a forest of silver birch. Paper-white bark fluttered in the breeze. Snow tumbled down from the leaden sky, as he felt the mountains behind his back.

Mist curled and rose, in between the slender trees, growing denser, until he lost his bearings. Water rushed and filled his ears. Glancing down, he saw a river beneath his feet. He tried to jump across, but slipped on the wet rocks, and fell into the icy depths. Deeper and deeper, he fell, water gushing over him, until he landed on hard ground.

He lay upon the grassy bank for a while, watching slithers of amber fade into the sky.Then, he stood, and looked around him. He did not recognise where he was. It felt strange to him. Grass plains stretched to the four corners. A light-speckling of hoar frost glittering all around. The still air was punctured by the tinkling of bells.

Turning, he saw a young girl. A red scarf was tied around her waist. She was riding past on a reindeer, whose antlers were flecked with gold, and hung with tiny, silver bells. Nya called to her, but she did not reply, and he ran after her.

“Wait!” He shouted, as he drew level with her, and touched her on the shoulder.

“A sickness has pierced my shoulder!” She cried out, as the reindeer ran on, beside a frozen lake. The land was surging, like an ice-bound sea all around. Nya ran on, confused, for she looked like any girl he had ever seen, but it seemed that she could not hear or see him. As he ran, he noticed how unusual the reindeer’s fur was: toffee, copper and gold, rippling like the sun on the hillside. Up ahead, he saw five tents, huddled in the shadow of the mountain, a thin curling of black smoke, rising into the sky, where stars were beginning to flicker.

Following her into the tent, he saw the worried faces in the firelight, as they gathered around her. The smell of burning wood and sweet sedge filled his lungs.

“A sickness-spirit touched my shoulder.” She said weakly, sinking to her knees. They laid her down, beside the fire, covering her with furs and skins, as her father called for the shaman. Nya crouched in the corner, behind the birch pole, as the fire began to rage and hiss.

“Why is the fire so consumed with anger?” He heard someone ask, as it licked the air, and sent a cloud of black smoke through the aperture overhead.

The shaman entered the tent, his skin craggy, and carved by the years. He lay his iron-tipped staff down, the feathers rustling, and the bells chiming out into the tent. When he was finished, he turned to them and said: “Three days, and she will be cured.”

The wind stirred the crimson flames of the fire, as they held vigil for her. meanwhile, overhead, the sky remained bone white, the herb and grass taiga, was still.

Three days passed this way, but still she lay beside the fire, her eyes closed, and her skin tinged with blue.

“I heard that there is a shaman who lives in the forest. He is an orphan but, if we do not try, she will die.” Her father said, as her brothers went out to find him.

A wolf came down from the mountains, raising its glacial-blue eyes to the sky, as the two brothers returned with the shaman. Entering the tent, Nya watched the firelight dance on the bronze mirrors that were sewn to his robe, with unworked copper, and eagle feathers moving before his eyes. In their midst, the shaman pulled on his iron-shod, fur boots and, as he laced them up, he stole a glance at Nya, and then looked away. Nya hoped it had been a coincidence but, when the orphan shaman laced up his left boot, and stole another look at him, he knew that he had been seen.

The shaman took up his drum, as Nya hid behind the sick girl, and the shaman went to her left shoulder, the drum reverberating, as he struck it. He stepped to the right, beating his drum again, as he spoke:

“A sickness-spirit has come here, while you were travelling home, it touched you on the shoulder? Do I speak the truth of what happened?”

“Yes, you do.” She replied, before slipping away once more.

“You have the evil one, koga nguo. His sickness is upon you.” He said before turning to the man, “Why, Nya Nganas, do you grip the girl so tightly? You will sever her soul if you do not leave now. Tell us what it is you want?”

“Give me the reindeer that she was riding.” Nya said, from behind her.

“He wants the reindeer.” The orphan shaman echoed.

“Yes, anything.” Her father interrupted the shaman, as he gathered them around him.

“Brothers and sisters, you must build a reindeer out of wood.” They turned from him and collected wood, which they hastily began to carve and daub with charred firewood. They draped furs of toffee and caramel over it, while the orphan shaman, drummed. When the reindeer was finished, he began to jump up and down, and circle the fire. Nya Nganas rose up, and walked towards the wooden reindeer, as the shaman encircled him. Nya placed his hand upon its antlers, and rode away.

Throughout the whole journey, the shaman drummed and moved his body, until he fell down, exhausted upon the floor and, on the bank of the river, Nya fell from the reindeer. Dusting himself down, he saw that the reindeer was just made out of wood.

“What shaman did this to me?” He cried out, as he wandered homeward, through the forest. Silver-eyed night watched him return to his two brothers. He looked at them each in turn, and said to the first brother:

“You are fever.” And to the second: “You are smallpox. And I am a piercing sickness.”

At his words, the wind extinguished the fire, and scattered ash over the floor, as the three men became spirits of sickness, and were human, no more.

The Bear Man

-Cherokee Tale-

“It is the mythic experience, the mythic imagination that opens, reveals depth and mystery, which places the human in the context of the non-human, and so forces retreat, humility and awe, in the presence of the spaces beyond our will.”

~ Green Man, Earth Angel, Tom Cheetham

A serpent slithered through the forest where, beyond, on the horizon, rose a ridge of mountains. Stars burned over the peaks and crags, white with snow. Nocturnal birds wheeled overhead, before descending away. In the foothills, wild strawberries threaded their way between the trees. From the south, beside the lakes, a hunter tracked his way across the land. His face was patterned with black gunpowder and wood ash. His arms were smeared with red clay and bear fat.

Moonlight dappled the earth, the leaves cast their shadows all around him. In a clearing up ahead, he saw a black bear. His head was lowered, but the hunter knew it sensed him. Instinctively, he pulled the string of his bow taught, aimed, and loosed the arrow. It pierced the bears flesh, but it made no sound, as it slunk off into the undergrowth. The hunter quickened his pace, arrow after arrow, whistling through the air. As the seventh arrow struck the bear, he paused, and turned to the hunter. Pulling the arrows from his flesh, he said:

“It is no use for you to shoot at me, for you cannot kill me.”

Handing the arrows back, the hunter accepted them, and came to understand that this was no ordinary bear, but a medicine-bear.

“Come to my house and let us live together.”

The hunter looked warily at him.

“I won”t hurt you.” The bear read his anxious mind. “And for the food you crave, there shall be plenty.” He continued, the hunter following him, along a mountain path. The bear padded along in front, only pausing when he reached a hollow in the rock.

“This is not where I live, but there is council taking place, that we should attend.”

The rock rent itself apart, to allow them access, dim lights illuminating the darkness beyond. The hunter felt the granite beneath his fingers, as he edged his way forward. Ahead, the passage opened out into a vast cave. Flames flickered against the stone walls, illuminating a gathering of bears. Black bears, brown bears, and cubs, were all sitting around a chief bear. A white bear, whose fur was flecked with gold, padded gently towards the medicine-bear. The others turned as he passed, sniffing the air and grumbling, for they had sensed the hunter.

“What is that which smells so bad?” One said to the chief, who replied:

“Don”t talk so. He maybe a stranger, but he has come here to see us. Food is becoming scarce in the mountains, is that not why we have gathered here?” The bears nodded in agreement.

“There are many chestnuts and acorns to the south, but that is where he is from, he who carries the weapons that they use to kill us!” A black bear said, as he circled the hunter. “Perhaps, we should learn to use their weapons, and then we would be able to fight them.” It said, taking the bow and arrow from the hunter. From memory, it set the arrow to the bow but, as he drew it back, it slipped through his claws and fell to the ground.

“It is no use.” The chief said, “We must now prepare for our descent into winter.” He continued, and the bears began to leave.

The hunter followed the medicine-bear out of the cave, and onto the mountainside. In the cool evening air, he watched the procession of the stars overhead.

“This is where I live.” The bear said, leading him into a cave, and rolling a stone over the entrance. The hunter seated himself on the damp ground, hunger gnawing at him. The bear read his thoughts, and rubbed his fore paws together, until they were full of chestnuts. Gladly, the hunter ate, but found he was still hungry. The bear rubbed his paws together once more, until they became full of huckleberries, blackberries and acorns. Satiated, the hunter lay down, and slipped into the world of dreams. He felt himself tracking his way through the stars. The great celestial bear was at his side, the deep wisdom of the earth sinking into his mind.

Months passed this way until, in the first days of spring, the wild flowers bloomed, beneath the mountains. The long sleep of winter fell from the hunter, and he awoke. The snow had melted and, although he still walked like a man, his body was covered in hair. Turning to the bear, he saw that the winter had clawed the fat from his bones, and left him gaunt.

“Spring will call forth the hunters from your tribe, here, to the mountains.” The bear paused, to roll away the stone, sunlight creeping over the ground, to illuminate the hunter. “They will not kill you, but they will kill me and skin me.” The hunter shook his head, but he knew in his heart that it was true.

A few days later, when the hunter and the bear were sitting together, on a ledge, they sensed movement in the foothills. “There, the split noses and top-knots are coming for me.” He paused. “When they have killed me, they will drag me outside, skin me and cut up my body. You must cover my spilt blood with leaves. When they take you away, look back, and you will see something.” The hunter gave him a confused look, but nodded, as the men”s dogs found them, barking into the air. The bear and the hunter retreated into the cave,

“When you return, you must be left alone. In solitude you must remain for seven days and seven nights. Without sustenance, you must remain. There can be no exceptions…” The bear said, as the men slew him, with many arrows.

Stumbling, he collapsed near the entrance, the hunter watching motionless. Alone, he watched them drag the bear”s corpse out into the light, skin it and cut it up into quarters.

All packed up, the men made to leave, but one of the dogs, sniffing near the entrance of the cave, began to bark sharply. The hunter felt the air splinter, as a shower of arrows shattered against the walls. Crying out, he ran towards them. At first they recoiled, but then they saw the eyes of their old companion.

Each man took a load of bear meat before starting for home. However, the hunter paused, to pile leaves over the soil, still wet with the bear”s blood. As the men disappeared, the hunter glanced back, to see the slain bear rise from the earth and, with a shimmer of leaves, pad off into the mountains.

The group descended away, towards the lakes of the south. A hawk hovered overhead, as the hunter turned to the men, and repeated the words of the bear. The men agreed, and took him to a wattle and daub house, set aside from the others.

From that moment on, the hunter remained in the solitude, that would reclaim the bear nature, and bestow his human nature on him once more. However, soon, his wife discovered the truth. The men tried to protect the hunter, but his wife begged so hard, that they pointed her towards the hut.

And so, on the fifth day, the hunter went home with his wife but, later that night, he died. For, the bear nature had not left him, and he could not exist in the liminal space between bear and man. The medicine-bear had known that, had he fasted alone, for the seven days and seven nights, he would have become a man again, and would have lived.

Throwing the Bones

“Close your eyes and let the mind expand. Let no fear of death or darkness arrest its course. Allow the mind to merge with Mind. Let it flow out upon the great curve of consciousness. Let it soar on the wings of the great bird of duration, up to the very Circle of Eternity.”

Hermes Trismegistus

“There are two nights. The second one comes behind the night that everybody sees. This second night is under darkness. It tells the shaman where the pain is, and what caused the sickness.”

Shaman or “Saman” was used by the Evinki people of Siberia, which translates as “one who knows”, and has become a universal title for the role of this figure. A figure who may be viewed as an intermediary between humans and nature, maintaining power, and balance; adept in healing, and able to shift their consciousness, most often by drumming, in order to undertake shamanic journeys.

The shamanic initiation was, and still is, nothing to be hungered for. It is often a broken mind, and a fragmented life, that lead to the spirit road. It is said that you cannot decide to become a shaman; you are either chosen, or you are not. It is not a romantic way of living, but an authentic one. As Mary Mueller Schumann wrote: “Shamanism is not a path of “love and light” – as it is often made out to be – nor is it safe; instead, it is work that continually opens you up in both joyful, and distressing, ways.”

In Joan Halifax”s book *Shamanic Voices*, there is the story of how Tiuspuit, meaning fallen-from-the-sky, became a Yakut-Tungus shaman. “When I was twenty years old, I became very ill, and began to see with my eyes, to hear with my ears, that which others could not see, or hear; nine years I struggled with myself, and I did not tell anyone what was happening to me, as I was afraid that people would not believe me, and would make fun of me. At last, I became so seriously ill, that I was on the verge of death but, when I started to shamanise, I grew better and, even now, when I do not shamanise for a long time, I am liable to be ill.”

On receiving their vocation (Soviet anthropologists hold the view that the first shamans were women, and women alone), they undergo rigorous training, with gruelling initiatory ordeals. They come through, if they do, as a person superior to their fellow tribes-people: in wisdom, self-control, and strength of character. A guide, healer, and diviner, for their community.

Mircea Eliade echoed this theme, when he wrote that “the primitive magician, the medicine man, or the shaman, is not only a sick man; he is above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself… The shaman is the man [or woman] who knows and remembers, that is, who understands the mysteries of life and death.”

Alongside this, the shaman had to ensure that there were enough animals to hunt. The shaman, also known as “the technician of the sacred”, communes, and readdresses the balance between humanity and the whole of creation. William Lessa and Evon Vogt wrote of the journey of an Eskimo shaman who went to visit Sedna, goddess of the sea, when sickness and famine threatened the people: “These misfortunes are due to misdeeds and offences committed by men, and they gather dirt and impurity over the body of the goddess. It is necessary for the shaman to go through a dangerous ordeal, to reach the sea goddess, at the bottom of the sea. He must the stroke her hair and report the difficulties of his people. The goddess replies that breaches of taboos have caused their misfortunes. Whereupon, the shaman returns for the mass confession, from all the people who have committed misdeeds. Presumably, when all sins are confessed, the sea goddess releases the game, returns lost souls, cures illnesses, and generally makes the world right with the Eskimos again.”

This story is familiar, ancient, and relevant. To most people, nature has become a resource. Something framed by a window. Many of us have forgotten that we are a part of nature and, no matter how remote it may seem, we are inextricably tied to it. All we need to do is allow this truth to inform our decisions and, more importantly, to go outside and honour it.

Many of us have forgotten the primordial power of nature. In America, the Heyoka, or Sioux clown, is a person who has received the greatest vision of the thunderbird, a legendary creature of power and strength. The Heyoka remind their people that this “primordial energy of nature is beyond good or evil, and that it doesn”t correspond to human categories of right and wrong.” Carl Jung called the Heyoka “trickster clowns”, who represent the shadow, and “kept alive a living connection with it, so that it would not be repressed.”

The Heyoka is the loneliest of all the sprit paths, and where the shaman and trickster converge. These sacred clowns are also found in the Zuni Ne”wekwe or “mud-eaters”, and the Boogers of the Cherokee. Each one brings awareness of the opposites, through backwards’ humour. For example, if it is a hot day, they will wrap themselves in blankets and shiver. They will ride their horses backwards and, during the most sacred moment of the rituals, they will laugh and pass gas.

Their methods are unconventional, similar to the *Crazy Wisdom,* used in Tibetan Buddhism, which shocks the students out of their fixed ideals and psychological patterns.

In Siberian shamanism, the shaman symbolically combines the two sexes. “The shaman behaves as a woman, wears female clothing and, sometimes, even takes a husband. This ritual bisexuality, or asexuality – is considered to be, at the same time, a sign of spirituality, or dealings with the gods and spirits, as well as the source of sacred power.”

It is interesting to note that Native American cultures recognized three to five gender roles: male, female, two spirit female, two spirit male, and transgendered. Many Native American cultures also recognised that they held “special spiritual powers: of healing, of leading some ceremonies, and of seeing into the future.” This was one of the first things that the European settlers tried to change.

The Bear Man is a Cherokee tale, which shows the relationship our ancestors held with animals. This was also seen in the Paleolithic, great hunt (where the animals were considered as teachers), and in the practice of animism. Sir Edward Taylor gave a name to this earliest phase of magical and religious thinking, calling it animism, after the Greek word anima meaning “soul”. In animism, it is believed that the whole world, and everything in it, is possessed of consciousness, or spirit. A spark not just reserved for humanity.

Animals appear throughout world mythology and folklore. To the Ancient Egyptians, they were the universal power, the gods incarnate. While, to the Maori”s, animals are the “ancestral people.” They symbolise instinctual life, the elements and, when depicted in myths, the lower, animalistic nature of human beings. This is seen with Dionysus, riding a donkey, and wearing the skin of a leopard.

More recently, scientists have belatedly declared that mammals, birds and many other animals are conscious. We know that they form close family bonds. They can feel pain and fear. This is seen in the high concentration of stress hormones, cortisol and catecholamines, which flood their bodies, in the lead-up to slaughter.

Food is, of course, a vital part of life and, beyond simple nourishment, lies comfort and memories of shared family meals. However, what I will say is that, once you have seen what happens, you cannot un-see it. Once you know the damage and devastation animal agriculture and fishing wreaks on our planet, on our health, and on the fifty six billion farmed animals that are killed each year, you cannot forget it. Choice is ours but there must be education. There must be connection.

This is, of course, a highly contentious issue, but the truth must be known. Only once we have the information can we make informed choices about our lives. Smoking is the great example of this. Businesses are about profit. Our health and the welfare of the earth, as we can see, is not placed before profits.

Today the main link between humans and animals is though our pets. However, shamanic visons, cave art, and the deities of Ancient Egypt, show a much more interconnected world. Interestingly, these composite animal and human figures, and Therianthropes, i.e., shapeshifters, are reportedly seen during a psychedelic trip. The similarities between these visions and cave art are striking, and take us back to a time when magic was inextricably linked with spirituality and art.

One of the most characteristic examples of magical cave art was discovered in the cave of Les Trois-Frères. Joseph Campbell, in his book Primitive Mythology, writes that “in this awesome subterranean chamber, the beasts are not painted on the walls, but engraved – fixing for millennia the momentary turns, leaps, and flashes of the animal kingdom, in a teeming tumult of eternal life. Above them all, predominant – at the far end of the sanctuary, some fifteen feet above the level of the floor, in a craggy, rocky apse – watching, peering at the visitor with penetrating eyes, is the now famous “sorcerer of Trois*-*Frères.”

The Norse worldview, the wider Germanic worldview, amongst many others, contain a multitude of *land spirits*. Mythology is, as Henry Corbin said, “a densely woven inter- dimensional fabric,” and, by not living shoulder to shoulder with myth, we detach ourselves from this wider world.

In the *Doors of Perception*, when Aldous Huxley took Mescaline, he saw a vase of flowers as a miracle of naked existence. Colours became intensified, and a more subtle realm of their shades opened up to him.

As Shelley wrote, in his poem, Mont Blanc: “the everlasting universe of things flows through the mind.” Huxley wrote of this “mind at large”, commenting that: “in the final stage of egolessness, there is an “obscure knowledge” that All is in all – that All is, actually, each. This is as near, I take it, as a finite mind can ever come to perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe.” (That, under normal circumstances, our conscious mind filters out, because of the physiology of our brains, our perception is our only reality.)

The quote of William Blake”s, from which Huxley”s book takes its name is: “if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” This may be seen in terms of passing beyond the two pillars, or two poles, such as the Buddhist guardians of fear and desire. Beyond all of this is unity. It is the center of the cross where all things meet. it is the point of equilibrium, of primordial harmony, and eternity.

Huxley found this when the psychiatrist asked him to comment upon every day, mundane objects. He beheld them, stripped of their functionality, for they had become to him “as such”.

I wonder if the sensation he experienced was similar to aesthetic arrest, that James Joyce described as: ‘an enchantment of the heart’. As the mind raised above desire, and loathing, for a moment, or in the case of a true artist, for a lifetime suspended.

Many people have experienced moments in their life when the world seems, for a moment, transformed. For some, this is the feeling of love, which floods the brain and imbues the wider world with radiance and beauty. This is similar to the realm of imagination we glimpsed in Chapter one, where the trees of Uttarakuru glow fire-bright.

Ibn Stina, known in Europe by his Latinized name Avicenna, said that “there was a world Aristotle didn”t know of, in which spiritual presences live. One world is mud and stone; one world is divine, and there is a third world, an in-between world. The name given to it so far in English is the Imaginal World.”

Dr James Narby, author of the *Cosmic Serpent*: *DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*, along with many others, has described conversing, or interacting, with an “independent intelligence”, during a psychedelic trip, most notably after taking Ayahuasca. In ancient Greece, Plato wrote that: “the world is, indeed, a living being, endowed with a soul and intelligence…a single visible, living entity, containing all other living entities which, by their nature, are all related.”

Could it be that we are in a similar realm here to the proposed Multiverse, and Many Interacting World theories? For Shamans have long insisted on the “existence of an intelligent other, somewhere in a dimension nearby.”

An example of this can be seen with the brew Ayahuasca, a plant medicine from the Amazon. Although the bark contains DMT (Dimethyltryptamine), our stomachs contain an enzyme called MAO, or monoamine oxidase, which quickly responds to DMT and breaks it down. What the shamans have done is cook it with another plant which has an MAO inhibitor. But, how did the shamans manage to choose these two plants out of the estimated 150,000 plants in the Amazon? We don”t know, but the shamans tell us that the spirits had instructed their ancestors on how to make the brew.

The independent intelligence, as described above, is often said to appear as a woman, as Mother Ayahuasca, (although a male entity has also been reported), but often appears in the form of a snake. I am instantly reminded of the snake goddess, the Hindu goddess Kundalini and, of course, the wise serpents of antiquity. Many have reported seeing episodes from their lives, along with the hurt they have caused others, and the damage they have done to themselves. Because of this, Ayahuasca has been described as only the start. The real work beginning when you return home.

It is said that Ayahuasca, also known as the *vine of souls*, or the *vine of the dead*, is medicine for sceptics. I think we are all skeptic to some degree. Our beliefs are largely formed by our parents, by education, and society. However, it is interesting to note that a small pilot study, published in the Journal of Psychopharmacology, suggested that, after a trip, people felt more connected to nature, and less supportive of authoritarian views.

This feeling of unity is a common one. Certainly those who have taken Ayahuasca have said that “they felt validated for who they are. In spite of their frailties and short comings, they were acknowledged and appreciated by what they described as a divine presence.”

From my own experience with psilocybin, I can certainly attest. The first part was an oppressive state of fear and anxiety. This confirmed to me that no one really goes out of their way to take these drugs. As time went on, I re-visited all that had happened in the past six years of my life. The anorexia, the loneliness. Everything. It sounds strange, but I felt all of these things physically, as well as mentally. Eyes open, most things remained as they were before, only somehow more alive. Eyes closed, I saw a web of electric green, squirming with insects, before I began to relax. By watching my breath, and controlling my thoughts, I realised that I was the source of so much fear and anxiety. That I really am my own worst enemy. Beyond this realisation, I experienced an ancient presence. Nameless and formless, it is beyond description.

So, through my own experience, accounts of Ayahuasca and other entheogenic drugs, and also near death experiences, I am convinced that there is more to explore, and more to understand.

One of the stumbling blocks (although probably a good thing), is that the Ayahuasca brew is a potent mix. With an oily taste that has been described as sweet, salty, and sour liquid dirt. Ayahuasca is also known as La Purga *the purge*, as it is very effective in combating intestinal parasites).

So it is an ordeal, but it seems that plant medicines get to the root of the problem, whereas western medicine seems to sweep symptoms under the rug. I would like to say that I am not against modern medicine. Without it, my parents would have died and, as a premature baby, I would have probably not survived. What I would like to see is a better understanding of the mind and body relationship. Because I have seen, and experienced myself, how emotional stress can contribute to the development of illness.

Many scientists and researchers have run, and are continuing to run, trials which, so far, are showing promising results for those suffering from depression. It has been noted that “neurons that fire together, wire together.” Dr Rick Hanson says that “the mind and the brain are a unified system. As the brain changes, the mind changes. As the mind changes, the brain changes. This means that you can use your conscious mind, to make lasting changes to your brain, to bring about greater well-being and happiness in your life.” Professor David Nutt noted that psychedelics disrupt the process of the connections that get locked into a pattern of thinking and, instead, help to bring about a sense of connection and unity. There are also examples of psychedelics, most notably Ayahuasca, helping individuals” deal with past trauma.

Eduardo Calderon Palomino, a contemporary practitioner in the shamanic art of healing, from Peru, described the subconscious as “a superior part [of a person]…a kind of bag where the individual has stored all his memories…by means of the magical plants and chants and the search for the roots of the problem, the subconscious of an individual is opened like a flower.”

Without this understanding, we run the risk of being caught in the cycle of damaging actions and thoughts. The problem faced here though, is that pharmaceutical companies are in the business of making money. It is not good business if you take a plant medicine, maybe a few times in your life, as opposed to taking pills daily.

This can often be a strained area of conversation. Here, we return again to judgment and compartmentalisation. It is sad, but often we do cringe, if someone tells us they feel at one with the universe. For me, it is all about honesty and authenticity. If something does not ring true, then it probably isn”t.

When we are vulnerable, we often look to others to help us and, while there are many kind-hearted people out there, most people have to make a living. Or, they may feel uncomfortable with your struggles, and tell you to just “cheer up.” You have to, in a way, be a mother for yourself. Learn to care for yourself, and listen to your needs, not what people tell you that you need. It is all about connection.

In the *Unknown She*, Sobonfu Somé says that: “The web of life…is how we stay connected to the earth…It contains wisdom, knowledge and healing energy for the whole world.” This reminds me of the very fabric of life. What Joseph Campbell called the: “net of gems” after the Hindu “Net of Indra.”

The physicist Fritjof Capra writes, in his book the *Web of Life,* the importance of: “seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts. It may also be called an ecological view, if the term “ecological” is used in a much broader and deeper sense than usual. Deep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the facts that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on), the cyclical processes of nature.”

To be able to see all things as connected is a great gift with regards to healing. This can help us to understand how a traumatic event can affect a person, both physically and mentally. Often, as seen in the *Father of Sickness*, we do not realise that we may be the sickness, that we may be our own worst enemies.

It is a cliché to say that medicine comes from the wound. However, so often, it is true. So much in life is cause and effect. Debt always has to be repaid. Sacrifice is demanded. This is seen in how we treat our bodies. For so many years, we neglect our health, eat unnatural things, and wonder why we get ill.

Shamanic medicine is rooted in the earth. This is also true of modern medicine, aspirin and morphine being two examples coming from willow and opium poppies respectively. The Shamanic view of mental and spiritual illness also includes “the importance of ritual, initiation, rites of passages, and ceremony in life, as oaths of maturation for the spirit, all of which have been replaced culturally with materialism, consumerism, distraction, and the shattering of communal living.”

The mind, when faced with a great trauma, often fragments the event, so that we are unable to view it as a whole. Art and being creative, in any way that interests and fulfills us, is one of the greatest things we can do, when trying to understand and heal trauma. The myths of Hephaestus, Daedalus”, who built the labyrinth of the Minotaur, and the Fisher King, are great examples of this. The pain of existence, the pain of the festering wound, is alleviated, while they engage in crafting beautiful objects, escaping on “wings of art”, and fishing alone on the lake.

It is, as the shaman Semyonov Semyon said that, when he began to sing, his sickness usually disappeared. Here he is an example of the tender hearted shaman, who has succeeded in curing himself. One has to be wounded in order to become a healer. Ordinary, sick people follow patterns, but the shaman cannot be cured by the usual methods of healing. He, like the hero of many fairy tales, has to find a unique way, a creative way out, that is not already known.

Beauty is another great healer. Whether in nature or art, creating and cultivating beauty, is one of the most powerful things we can do in the concrete world. The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of this, when he said: “Though we travel the world over, to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us, or we find it not.”

Throughout history, our ancestors, not just shamans, sought to shift their consciousness. It seems that the psychedelic experience may have been, at one time or another, a regular part of life, of community life. Researchers have suggested that the Kykeon drink, which the initiates in Ancient Greece took, in imitation of Demeter, was infused with the fungus ergot, and potentially blended with other hallucinogens.

The sacred Vedic drink, called Soma, is believed to be based around honey and the fly agaric mushroom. The Ancient Egyptians venerated the Blue Lotus, for its medicinal properties and spiritual effects which, like a mild psychoactive, brought about subtle euphoria and tranquility. Interestingly, their tree of life, the acacia, whose bark, roots, leaves, and fruit, contain DMT, was used to make Yrp wine. Here, the tree of life becomes a bridge to the afterlife.

Although much stronger, owing to to its mescaline content, Native American peoples have been holding Peyote cactus prayer ceremonies for thousands of years. While, in Northern Europe, historians have suggested that the warriors, known as Berserkers, may have used the fly agaric mushroom, as it is known, to suppress fear.

In his incredible book *Bear*, Wolf D. Storl, writes of how the berserkers of the Germanic peoples are not a singular phenomenon. “They lived outside of society. They were ritually declared as already dead, and beyond normal laws; therefore, they had no need to fear death, as ordinary mortals do...Bearskins were so named because they wore…only a bearskin, which usually came from a bear they had killed themselves, often with only a knife as a weapon. They also slept on this bearskin.”

According to archaic belief, those who did not cut their hair, and wore the fur of an animal, had the power of that animal. Thus, the long-haired berserkers became animals. they became one with the unpredictable, ecstatic god of death and magic, Odin (Wotan).

Odin was known as a shapeshifter, often seen as a raven, a wolf, or a bear. We saw this in chapter one, where “ravens can fly out for the shaman, and find things that remain otherwise hidden.” It is recorded that the soul of the ancient Greek shaman Aristeas: “was seen flying from his mouth…in the form of a raven.” While, the Yaqui sorcerer, Don Juan, said he was able to: “transform his consciousness into that of a crow, if he wished to “fly” from his body.” This was also said to be the case with Odin. A similar story is told in South America, where the shamans, “while lying in trance, can send [their] spirit out, in the shape of a Jaguar, to roam the jungle.”

The idea of an animal as a familiar or companion, is a very old one. For the Native Americans, they were allies and, in Scandinavia, these animal Doppelgängers were “called “accompanying souls,” or *fylgia* (related to the word, “follow”). The souls of strong men or women were “believed to roam the woods as bears, wild pigs, stags, or wolves, or to fly through the skies as eagles, ravens, and swans,” and swim through the waters as salmon or otters.

The bear was seen as a forest human, as “grandfather,” or “grandmother”, who was possessed of a human soul. These embodied souls were also viewed as messengers of the gods. The bear was also held by many cultures as the original animal ancestor.

The Oroquen tribe, of Siberia, believe that: “a mystical female bear that lives in a cave on the dark side of the moon was their first ancestor.” Another tribe, the Evenks, tell the tale of a primeval ancestor as a child of a young woman and a bear.

Revered in many ways, bear worship, and Bear Feasts, which mirrored the dismemberment and reassembling of a shamanic initiation, are not exclusive to the Siberian and Native American hunting peoples. There have been great discoveries of Neanderthal bear cults in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, and: “the most well-known, Neanderthal bear ritual centres, found in Switzerland, such as Wild Chapel, Wild Cave, and Dragon”s Den, where the remains of over one thousand bears [have been] found.”

The bears” legacy is a mingling of history and legend, that has been preserved in the myths of Kallisto and Thor, and in our night sky, as the constellation of Ursa Major. We also find the King of the Forest, the old Germanic Totem animal, in the fairy tales collected by the Grimm brothers, most notably *Bearskin* and *Snow-White and Rose-Red*. In these tales, we also glimpse Mother Earth, or the “Lady of the Animals”, in her guise as Mother Holle, or Mother Hulda. She is the one whose favourite companion was the bear.

Only fragments exist now, half-remembered stories of men with golden souls, hidden beneath bearskins, of the Siberian bear, composed of starlight, and of the one who took the young maiden to his cave where, in the darkness, she bore him a half-bear, half-human child.

Women and bears have long shared a wild nature, and a natural expression of freedom, fertility and healing. Sadly, though, the goddess, bears, ravens, wolves, serpents, and shamans all suffered a similar fate, at the hands of the Christians. They were demonised and relegated to witches, and helpers of the devil. All things became literal. The Holy Land became a destination, and human beings became superior to all things. This was the arrival of Christian ethics, which was: “at odds with the old natural and instinctive way of life”, and so the forest had to be cleared.

Despite this, the seasons remember what we have forgotten. For, just as the goddess descends into the earth during the winter, to await her rebirth in the spring, so the bear goes into hibernation. During the winter, bears can slow their heart rate, and lower their body temperature. “Their state during hibernation is more like a trance. This is similar to that of the yogis in India, when they go into samadhi (these yogis are also able to survive the entire winter in Himalayan caves, snowed in, and without any nourishment.)”

When spring comes, the bears emerge, and the first thing they do is to quench their mighty thirst. As they have not defecated for many months they instinctivelly go and look for purgative herbs to eat. They mainly look: “for spicy hellebore, a strongly purgative and circulation accelerating plant… Brooklime, watercress, wild onions, chickweed, young nettles, sour dock, and many other edible spring plants that make up the bear”s first meals, and activate its metabolism and circulation, and also fire up its glands, and inhibit anaerobic fermentation and putrefactive agents in the intestines. They are the same herbs that our ancestors ate as a blood-cleansing cure – usually, also in the spring, after a long winter without fresh greens.”

This is a wonderful example of why the bear was viewed as a great healer, to many indigenous peoples. They also told of the bear appearing in dreams, and showing the shamans and healers the healing plants of the land.

Our ancestors also believed that the power or soul of a living being: “can live on for a long time in the bones, especially the skull, teeth and claws.”

In the northern hemisphere, dead bears were treated with as much respect as dead humans. In Siberia, “an entire bear skeleton was carefully buried or, as done by many Native American Indians as well, carefully placed on a platform, or in a tree.” We saw a similar ritual in the story of the Bear Man, where he lays leaves over the bear”s blood, so that the bear might be born once more.

Ritual is found at the heart of all shamanic practice. It is here that time and place become sacred. Two examples of this are the hours taken before a sweat lodge, to prepare the fire and stones, as well as the mind and body, for what it is about to endure. In the Amazon a special diet is eaten in the weeks leading up to an Ayahuasca ceremony, for many of the same reasons.

An example of this may also be found during the 1960s, where psychedelics were taken without understanding, without ritual, intent and, most often, in the wrong setting.

Ritual brings depth and understanding. Indigenous wisdom contains thousands of years of spiritual wisdom and healing, that has become lost to most of us. We have forgotten, or perhaps never known, what it feels like to be tied to something greater than we are.

Ritual is able to do this for us. It is a powerful thing, that connects us to our ancestors, and draws an invisible, golden circle inside the chaos of life. It is in this space where wondrous medicine is found. Where connection, is, with hope, felt.

Joseph Campbell wrote of ritual as being an: “enactment of a myth and, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth. Since myth is a projection of the depth wisdom of the psyche, by participating in a ritual, participating in the myth, you are being, as it were, put in accord with that wisdom, which is the wisdom that is inherent within you anyhow. Your consciousness is being reminded of the wisdom of your own life. I think ritual is terribly important.”

Part V

Separation, ordeal, and acceptance.

Though I am old with wandering

Through hollow lands and hilly lands,

I will find out where she has gone,

And kiss her lips and take her hands;

And walk among long dappled grass,

And pluck till time and times are done

The silver apples of the moon,

The golden apples of the sun.

*William Butler Yeats*

Ariadne and the Labyrinth

- Greek Myth -

“Love is the way messengers

From the mystery tell us things.”

Rumi

Stars rose over the nocturnal sea. The souls of the departed lingered among the olive groves. Beneath the horned moon, Ariadne, daughter of King Minos, traced ancient steps over the earth. Beads of malachite were set on her ankles, and bracelets of red coral on her wrists.

The wind stirred from the White Mountains, and the earth trembled. A serpent slithered past her, as stars rained down, in a shower of gold over the sea.

In the still night, lamps were lit, as Ariadne entered the throne room. She viewed the frescoes, before seating herself beside a porphyry basin. The water rippled overhead, wherein she saw the waves of the ocean, and the dwelling of Poseidon.

Before her own birth, the God of the Sea had sent forth a white bull, to prove her father”s right to rule. The bull was set to be slaughtered, but the king hoped to trick the god, by sacrificing another. As always, truth cannot be contained for long and, in his wrath, the god called on Aphrodite. The goddess of love bewitched his wife, and Ariadne”s mother, Pasiphaë, to fall in love with the white bull.

The room darkened, and Ariadne saw the meadow and the wooden bull. She saw the creature, half mane, half bull, that was born of their union. For, it had been with revulsion, King Minos had flung the child into a labyrinth, designed by Daedalus. Ariadne felt the passageways curve and turn beneath her, and there, in the darkness, the Minotaur awaited his sacrifice.

Leaving the throne room, she closed the doors, walked along the corridor, and into her chamber. Ariadne drifted to sleep, until the sun rose over the sea, and the bees left the hive. From the window, she watched two black-sailed ships skim the white waves.

Running out into the courtyard, she saw a vast crowd gathered, watching the ships dock in the harbour as, for the third time, seven young men, and seven virgin girls, from Athens, arrived on the island of Crete.

The sacrifices were led through the streets in chains, as libations of blood were poured onto the furrowed earth. Ariadne walked along the high path, her eyes upon them. From their midst, Theseus, son of the King of Athens, turned and met her gaze.

Turning away, Ariadne sought her friend, who told her who the man was. Walking away, she approached the stone tower of Daedalus. There she found the craftsman, pouring over plans and calculations. It was because of his keen mind that King Minos had locked him away from the world.

“How do you and Icarus keep good counsel when you are alone?” She asked, and he smiled at her.

“Through my mind, I walk across the heavens, where Cygnus extends his silver wings, and the stars scatter themselves. There, in the darkness, in the mind of the cosmos, waves ripple outwards, and are folded back in. It is a moment forever ripening. For, I may be enclosed in these stone walls, but my mind extends beyond. It is part of everything that moves, feels, and thinks and, one day…” He trailed off, knowing well the mind of her father, the King, but she replied:

“…I think of one day too.” She smiled at him, before continuing. “Do you still possess plans of the labyrinth?” He gave her a look. “I am resolved to help Theseus of Athens.”

“Ah, I understand…” He paused to view her, the sunlight gilding the dark waves of her hair. Smiling, he smoothed out a piece of parchment. “Even I see the walls shift, a single ling ever returning to the point of its departure. No doubt changed, yet still the same…” He spoke hypnotically, as he drew the course of the labyrinth.

“You must prepare a threefold way for his escape.” He said, as he placed the parchment in her hand.

Ariadne walked away, along the rocky shore, the waves scattering red coral, as it washed her feet. Picking up a piece, she saw in its branching, a thread. A clue of red string, that would lead Theseus back from the labyrinth.

Returning to her room, she wrapped the parchment, a sword, and the clue, of red thread, in silk, and then left for where the Athenians were being kept. Ariadne spoke with the guards, who led Theseus into a cramped room, lit by a single opening in the ceiling. He watched the evening star rise over the mountains, as Ariadne entered, and he lowered his gaze to her.

“I will help you slay the Minotaur, and secure your return from the labyrinth.”

“Why would you help me kill your mother”s son, and bring shame upon your homeland?”

“Enough blood has been shed. Better for him to know peace. The labyrinth holds power…” She trailed off.

“What is your price?” He said sharply.

“That you would take me away from here…” He read in her face her intention, and he lowered his eyes away. She was an echo of a dim and ancient past, of the goddess Aphrodite herself, whom he had petitioned to help him. All these things moved through her and, although he could not understand them, for the preservation of his life, he consented.

The stars sank into the sea, as the sun rose, its light rippling over the red-ochre columns of the palace. Ariadne stepped out of their shade, to watch clouds of frayed gold drift over the mountains. Stood next to her father, as they watched the gathered crowd part, to allow the fourteen Athenians to approach the gates. Resolute, Theseus did not look up, but straight ahead, as two guards unlocked the gates. Theseus entered, and the ground trembled. Obscured by the others, he tied the end of the thread to a hook in the wall, and ventured into the labyrinth.

All across the island, oil lamps were lit, as Ariadne moved solemnly over the dancing ground, tracing the curves of the labyrinth, beneath her feet.

As night fell, cries erupted from the earth. The ground jolted, and she fell to her knees. The souls of the dead sank into the underworld as, for a brief moment, all was silent and still, until a star tumbled from the sky and, at the sound of one final growl, Ariadne knew that Theseus had slain the Minotaur.

In the moments that followed, oil lamps were lit all over the palace, and a procession, led by her father, appeared on the walkway. The sea surged and smashed against the shore, as they approached. Theseus was the first to emerge. Soaked in blood, he raised the severed head of the Minotaur.

“No more will you threaten war with Athens. We are now free from your tyranny!” He shouted, thrusting the head, which splattered blood over the king, as it hit the earth. Minos withdrew his sword, and advanced on him. Pushing Theseus”s head to one side he spat in his ear:

“I don”t know how you did it, but leave my island, and never return. If you do, I will slice your arrogant head from your shoulders.” He pushed him to the ground, before turning away.

Theseus wasted no time, returning to the harbour, where Ariadne waited for him. With a small crew, they took one of the sailing ships moored nearby, the waves rolling on towards the north.

Turning, for one last glimpse of her homeland, Ariadne knew that, whatever was coming, a part of her would linger on, beneath that ridge of starlit mountains.

The waves rushed, and she raised her eyes to Theseus. Withdrawing a small statue of Aphrodite, she placed it in his hands, before turning her eyes to the horizon.

To the east, another ship sailed the sea. Its crew of Tyrrhenian pirates, had sighted a man, walking along the shore. Convinced he was a prince, whom they could ransom or sell into slavery, they offered him passage. He accepted and, once on board, the pirates tried to bind him with rope. However, as soon as they touched his skin, they fell away, like a cascade of leaves. The helmsman tried to petition his fellow men, but they did not listen. Chains were brought up from below, and fastened around the man. Yet, as before, they could not bind him, and the links fragmented. Filled with anger, they advanced on him, as vines slithered from the hold. Coiling and lashing, they overran the ship, as wine washed over the deck.

The pirates watched it swirl around their feet, as the man shifted his shape. First, into a serpent, and then a leopard. They flung themselves into the sea, there to dwell forever, as dolphins. All save one, the helmsman, who sank to his knees, hands clasped.

The leopard became a golden-maned lion, and the trembling man flung his hands over his eyes. Still he remained, as cautiously, he peered through his fingers. A man stood before him, robed in scarlet silk, and with a leopard skin around his shoulders.

“I am twice born Dionysus, son of Zeus and Cadmus”s daughter, Semele. Take courage, you held fast for me, and you have found favour in my heart.”At his words, the helmsman gave praise, and the ship sailed on towards Naxos.

Dionysus came ashore, on the southern side, within the headland, that burned white in the sun. Lowering his eyes, he noticed that the earth was scattered with ashes. Further on, he discovered folds of blue and white cotton, rippling over the body of a young woman.

In that moment, the god knew that she was the one whom Eros had told him about, years previously, when he had lost the hand of the nymph, Beroe, to Poseidon. Dionysus exhaled, and pale, pink roses flowered all around her, as, eyes wet with tears, she raised her head to view him.

“Why are you crying?” Dionysus asked, as he knelt down beside her. Ariadne looked beyond him to the sea, and told her tale.

Overcome with her bravery and sacrifice, Dionysus offered her his hand. She paused for a moment, before accepting, petals trailing away over the sea, and on towards the island of Delos.

It was there that Theseus, and the surviving Athenians, had dedicated a temple to Aphrodite. Together, in memory of their passage through the labyrinth, they twisted and turned, around an altar of horns, before setting sail for Athens. Whether through grief or forgetfulness, Theseus forgot to raise the white sails which, in victory, he had promised to do. Believing his son to be dead, the King threw himself from the cliffs.

The wedding of Ariadne and Dionysus was celebrated in the open air. The graces sang honeyed melodies, with the spring ripening, beneath the trees of cypress, oak and plane. Women from the east, who hailed him liberator and protector, brought platters of figs, dates, and pomegranates, while dryads and satyrs came down from the hills. Dionysus struck the earth with his thrysus, and fountains of crystal-clear water, and rivers of wine, flowed all around them.

From the flower meadow, Ariadne walked towards him. Syrian incense perfumed the air, as Zephyr tenderly sprinkled blossoms over her. A swing was tied to a bough of a chestnut tree, and entwined with garlands of flowers and vines. Dionysus, crowned with clusters of ivy and roses, sat next to his wife, their feet skimming the glittering water below.

As the celebrations faded, night veiled the slumbering land. Dionysus and Ariadne watched the full moon pattern the sea with silver light. The waves shimmered, and rose up, offering Dionysus a diadem, set with nine, dazzling, Indian gems. Accepting Hephaestus”s gift, he set it upon Ariadne”s forehead.

As the years passed, Dionysus and Ariadne spread his cult through northern lands, before ascending to the heights of Mt Olympus. It was there, in that high place of the gods that, the now immortal Dionysus and Ariadne, watched the earth slumber below.

Arrows of moonlight fell on the cresting sea, as Dionysus lifted the diadem from her forehead, and threw it up into the heavens. Favourable winds caught it, and set it in the sky. Nine gems smouldered in the night, as the Corona Borealis, an eternal symbol of their enduring love.

One-Handed Girl

- Based on a traditional African Folktale -

"…Now, just like a wheel

That spins so evenly it measures time

By space, the deepest wish that I could feel

And all my will, were turning with the love

That moves the sun and all the stars above."

Dante

The gold embroidered trim of the tent flickered in the breeze, as a young woman crawled out into the desert. A”isha lay back, on the ochre sand, still warm beneath her. All around, the wind snaked its way over the earth, carving flowing grooves into the sand. The dunes rose and fell, like a silent ocean, washed in silver moonlight.

In her hands, she clasped her mother”s bracelets, wrought of Arabian silver, and ornamented with tiny bells. With light steps, she stood and began to dance, turning and circling, and the bells tinkled out into the night. With delight she moved, tracing patterns in the sand, the rock and coil of the ocean, moving through her hips.

Unseen to her, her mother had also slipped out of the tent, her eyes glittering, as they danced together, until the wind began to whip up the sand, and her mother wrapped a woollen shawl around her. A”isha smiled, and rested her head on her mother”s shoulder, copper and ebony curls brushing her cheeks, a headdress of turquoise on her brow. Raising her finger to the sky, her mother traced the patterns of the stars, showing ancient, tribal symbols tattooed upon her skin.

“The celestial bull, and there the golden-maned lion.” Her mother whispered softly. “The starlit snake winds its way through the heavens, just as the rivers flow away into the oceans.” A”isha watched, as her mother withdrew a silver chain, with a talisman of turquoise.

“I wish for you to have this. Your father gave it to me when you were born.”

“Thank you.” She wrapped her arms around her mother, as a cascade of stars, like bronze tipped arrows, shimmered, and descended into the sea.

The morning star rose over the mountain peaks, and sun bleached deserts, as A”isha awoke. She found herself lying beside the fireplace, the talisman clasped against her chest. The dreams of her mother were all she had left and, sadly, she raised herself.

“Get up!” Her brother shouted, kicking sand into her face. “Here.” He said, thrusting an earthenware pot at her feet.

“Is this all you would give me to remember them by?” She replied, angrily.

“You live in their tent, what more do you wish for?” She lowered her eyes and pocketed the talisman.

“What is that, in your hand, show me!” He demanded and, without a word, she opened her empty hands. He looked at her, and scowled, before walking off towards the tents, gathered on the edge of the desert.

In the days that passed, she shared her pot with the other women who, in return, offered her food. This went on for a year, until her brother returned from southern lands. When he saw her sharing food and leavened bread with the other women, he wrenched the pot from her hands, and smashed it on the ground. She chased him, but he pushed her from him.

A”isha tried not to despair, and went for a walk, towards an oasis. As dusk fell, she removed her veil, deftly climbed one of the palms, and gathered the dates. She returned, day after day until, a year later, her brother tracked her steps.

“What are you doing?” He called to her. “So selfish, that you would not share?”

“I share them with the women of the tribe but you, you have so much. You always take more than your portion!” She retorted, and angrily he drew his scimitar.

“If you touch the palms, you will have to take my hand, Dalil!” She cried out, her hands upon the ragged bark.

“Fine.” He said, catching sight of the turquoise talisman around her neck.

With one swift blow, he severed her hand. A”isha slumped against the bark, crying out in pain.

Sickness washed though her, as she clutched the bloodied stump to her chest. Dalil hacked away at the palms, until their splintered bark lay all around her. He stood over her, sweat dripping from his forehead, as he placed the blade on her throat.

She stared up at him defiantly, as he snapped the chain, and pocketed the talisman. Watching him walk away, in to the dusk, she withdrew into the forested slopes of the mountains, wrapping leaves around her wrist, she walked on. For months, it seemed, she wandered; neither cutting her hair, nor wiping the tears from her cheeks. At nightn she would hide herself awayn in the upper branches of a tree, from where she would watch the white clouds swirl around the mountain peaks.

One day, when the whole earth was bathed in the golden light of the sun, she heard tinkling bells and horses” hoofs. The whole forest echoed with the sound, the branches of the trees knocking against each other, as a cry erupted from the base of the tree.

“There”s a woman up there!” A voice called out as, to her horror, a man began climbing up through the foliage.

“Why are you crying?” he asked, as he saw her, and A”isha looked down, a pair of emerald-green eyes meeting hers.

“I have many things to weep about. More than you could know.” She said, concealing her missing hand behind her back.

“Then, perhaps, if you would come with me, I could help you?”

“Why are you here?” She asked him, and he replied;

“Every month I come into the forest, to shoot birds with my friends but, today, I wished to be alone, and asked them to leave. And you, why are you here?” A”isha turned away from him. “Please come down.”

“I do not wish for you to see me as I am.” She said, resolutely and, with that, the man descended down to the ground and bade his slave fetch his curtained litter. Not long after, the slave returned, and set it down, near the bushes.

“If you could bring my attendants to me, I shall retire to my quarters, when we return.” The slave nodded, and disappeared into the forest.

Carefully, the man helped A”isha down, and did not withdraw when he saw her wrist. Instead, he unwrapped the linen from his head, peeled off the leaves, and bandaged it for her. She smiled at him, through the tears, as he pulled back the silk brocade, to reveal a velvet couch. Climbing in, she was concealed from the outside world, as his attendants came rushing back through the forest.

On the move, the silk curtains swished in the breeze, affording A”isha brief glimpses of the forest, and the steep path, that led down to the city. In the distance, she could see a sprawling mass of towers and, beyond, the sea, shimmering like molten copper. The dust of the desert swirled in their footsteps, as they processed through the streets. A”isha glanced at the man, and smiled, as they passed through a set of gates. Coming to a halt, the man peeled back the silk curtains, and bade his attendants to leave. Once alone, he climbed out, and offered her his hand.

The sound of birdsong wove with the sweet scent of blossom, sunlight flooding over her, as she withdrew from the enclosure. An enchanting garden surrounded her, with groves of fruit trees: of fig, orange and mango; aromatic shrubs, and herbs, and slender, marble columns, all overrun with damask roses. A”isha thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, as she was led on, through doors studded with silver stars.

Beyond, was a beautiful room, ornamented with golden arabesques, and silk cushions.

“The stars on your doors…” She trailed off, and he gave her an intrigued look.

“Do you know their secret names? She nodded, and he beckoned her to follow him towards the clay wall, where a secret door was revealed to her. He offered A”isha his hand, and they entered a passageway, that had been carved into the mountainside, silver lamps illuminating their way. After a while, a circular room was revealed to her, all engraved with Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chaldean symbols. Extinguishing the lamps, the stars became visible, through an aperture in the ceiling.

“The golden-maned lion…” She whispered, her fingertips upon her lips. “…and the silver serpent…” A”isha turned to him, her eyes glittering. “Mama taught me the language of the stars. Whenever I see them, I see her. I see her necklace of silver coins…” She trailed off, as he began to speak:

“I know of what you speak. For me, I see the pearls my mama used to weave in her hair, and the diamonds in her ears. I always thought they were fallen stars, because she used to bring me here. She had this room built so that she could study the constellations, under the tutelage of Al Rahid, an Egyptian priest. He taught her the language of the birds, and the subtle arts.” He grew silent.

“Where is she now?”

“She died when I was eight. I was named Tarek, after the morning star.” He mustered a smile. “I longed for her to teach me, but all that remains is the casket containing her astrolabe and rolls of star charts.” Tarek lowered his head, and she placed her hand tentatively on his arm.

“I could show you…if you like? We could map the stars together?” He smiled at her, as she took his hand in his, and traced the celestial patterns overhead.

Hours passed this way, until the sun began to creep, with slithers of apricot and gold, over the eastern horizon. Sitting upon the craggy peak, they watched the canvas-sailed ships drift over the honeyed sea, and a dove, descending through the stillness of the airy heights, and on to wash its wings, in the marble fountains of the palace gardens.

“We should follow the dove.” He said, smiling, as they descended from the watchtowers, and back down into the palace.

As is often the way of things, the two fell in love, and Tarek went to seek his father”s blessing.

Ascending the marble stairs, he entered the throne room. Raising his eyes to the marble columns, crowned with golden pomegranates, before dropping to one knee before the sultan.

“You are restored to health?”

“Yes…well…I”ve met the girl I wish to marry.”

The sultan cut across him. “It is not your choice! Where did you meet this girl?”

“In the forest.”

Enraged, the sultan replied: “Do you mean to stand before your sultan and insult him? You, who will rule in my place! You, my only son, who wishes to marry a soothsayer!”

“She is not a soothsayer! Your heart is hardened towards me…for all the riches you bestow upon me, I am lonely.”

At his words, the sultan crumpled back onto his throne, his silk garments wrinkling around his hollow face. A long silence fell between them until, at last, he leant forward and placed a hand on his son”s cheek. “Treat her well. Love without fear. May you enjoy each moment, for none of us knows how long we have with those we love…” His voice grew silent. “Leave me.”

On the day of their wedding, blossom like clusters of pearls robed the orange trees. Sunlight sparkled over the fountains, and the golden fish. Scarlet petals of the pomegranate flowered amidst the fragrant jasmine. Entwining their hands, A”isha and Tarek slipped out of the celebrations, and ascended to the cave on the mountainside. They lay down on the warm earth, as night spun its starlit threads overhead.

As the spring flowers faded, caravans, laden with Arabian Frankincense and Indian spices, trundled through the desert. Inside the palace walls, the trees grew heavy with dates and figs, and a child was born to them. It was a boy, with bright green eyes, and copper-brown hair, whom they named Aalam, meaning universe.

However, these fair days did not last. At the end of the third month, the prince was summoned away to war. Sadly, he kissed them goodbye, A”isha carried their son up to the mountainside, where they watched him ride away. The golden leather and tiny bells of his horse’s bridle glittered in the sunlight. He was surroounded by his men, with helmets of red gold, and fluttering pennants, and she heard the blasting of their horns.

It was about this time that A”isha”s brother, Dalil, had come to the city, in hope of finding a merchant to deal with, for his own venture had withered in his hands. As he walked through the streets, he came upon a group of men drinking tea, and conversing in hushed tones.

“We never see anything of the princess, or the baby for that matter, strange affairs.”

“I was told she has only one hand…”

“…then she is a thief?” At the man”s words, Dalil turned to them, and said:

“Are you talking about the Sultan”s daughter?” The men greeted him with silence. “I have been out of town for two years.”

“Then, no, it is the wife of his son, the prince.”

“Do you know where they met?”

“No, one day she just appeared. It is almost as if a jinn brought her in from the desert.” The man gave a toothless grin, as Dalil turned away, towards the palace.

The sun climbed overhead, as he entered the throne room. Staring about, at the glazed tiles of turquoise and blue, the sultan viewed him, from his marble throne. Approaching, Dalil bowed very low, and spoke: “I have information regarding Prince Tarek”s wife.” The sultan leaned in. “She is not who she says she is. She is a thief. That is why she is missing her hand.”

“No. I was told that her brother cut it off.” The sultan replied, but Dalil shook his head.

“It is a lie. She is a soothsayer, and a thief from the desert, land of the Jinns, and dwelling place of Eblis, the evil one. I have come here to try to stop her, but your highness...”

“Enough!” The sultan went to dismiss him, but he paused. “Then, tell me, what should I do?”

“Kill her.”

“No. My son, it would destroy him.”

“If you don”t she will destroy him, and all you have laboured so hard for.”

“Still…no… I will send her and the boy away. I will tell him that they died.”

“Very well.” The brother said and, from that moment, A”isha was banished from the palace and the city. she was threatened with death, if she ever returned.

With the baby, fastened in cloth around her, and a cooking pot under her arm, she walked away from the city, along the sea coast, and up into the mountains.

Anger and grief washed through her, but her greatest fear was that the King had hoped to seek a more worthy hand for Tarek, than her own. Someone who was beautiful and whole; all that she felt she wasn”t. With tears glistening on her cheeks, she seated herself at the foot of a tree.

For a while, she sat there, the sun beating down through the branches. Her body was fatigued. Through flickering eyelids, she thought she saw something slither towards her but, when she looked again, there was nothing. Suddenly, a hissing seared through the air, as a green-scaled cobra hauled itself up, and over a boulder.

“Surely, I about to die.” She cried, scrabbling to her feet, and clutching her baby to her, as the cobra spoke.

“If you will hide me from the sun, I will hide you from the rain.” A”isha nodded as, with trembling hand, she removed the lid of the cooking pot, and lowered it. Hastily, the snake slithered in, and coiled itself up, until it was hidden from view. As she turned, a grey-scaled snake moved sinuously over the forest floor, towards her.

“Did a cobra pass this way?” It hissed, and spat.

“Yes, it was moving very fast, in that direction.” She pointed to the east, as the snake thanked her, and followed the invisible trail.

“Thank you.” She heard a hissing from the pot.

“Wait a moment, he has only just passed.” A”isha whispered, walking on a little way, before kneeling, and lowering the pot to the ground.

“Thank you.” The snake said, as she removed the lid, and it withdrew, coiling its tail around, as it rose up to meet her eyes.

The shepherds came down from the hillsides, and the sun sank into the rising crests of the desert, as a man, gaunt and bowed by illness, ascended the marble steps of the palace. He entered the throne room, his eyes falling on the sultan, his attendants, and a stranger.

“Who are you? Speak.”

“Baba, am I so changed that you no longer recognise your own son?” At his words, the sultan moved towards him.

“Tarek? What happened?”

“The army was routed and killed. I was taken ill, on the border of the kingdom. The villagers there took me in and cared for me…” The sultan went to speak, but the prince cut across him. “…Where are my wife and child?” The sultan retreated back to his throne, as he spoke.

“They are dead.”

“Dead?” Tarek stepped forward, gripping the old man”s shoulder. “If they are dead, show me their graves!” He demanded.

Had theSultan not prepared a tomb, he might have worried but, unashamed, he walked with his son into the gardens where, beneath a pomegranate tree, stood a white marble tomb.

“Leave me.” He cried out, as he fell to the earth. The sultan left and, for seven days and nights, Tarek remained beside the grave, neither sleeping nor washing the tears from his face. The stars and constellations flowed through his mind, as he grieved for them.

When the sun rose, on the eighth day, he washed, dressed, and went hunting in the forest, but still he spoke to no one. He remained in the stillness, watching a nightingale fly away into the west, beyond the wadi and the forests, where the purple-feathered birds nest. Still onwards, he went, to the forested slopes of the mountain, where A”isha, and his son were following the snake.

“You must be tired, let us rest beside this lake, and you may wash your baby.” The snake said, as it curled itself upon a rock. A”isha waded through the olive-green water, gently dipping Aalam, who gurgled with delight. Splashing the water, she smiled until, to her horror, he slipped from her hand.

“Aalam!” She screamed, searching the lake. “Help!”

“Keep searching the rocks and the reeds, at the edge.” The snake replied.

“He”s not there!”

“Then use both of your arms.”

“I can”t!”

“Just try.”

Plunging both of her arms into the lake, she suddenly found her baby in the reeds.

“Have you found him this time?” The snake asked, the baby smiling brightly and quite unharmed.

“Yes, and!” She cried out in joy, as she saw that her left hand had grown back.

“Now, then, let us go to my family, and repay you for your kindness.”

“You have shown me enough kindness, it is I who should repay you!”

“Quickly, before the sun sets.” The snake brushed aside her words, as they descended from the deep and narrow gorges. Away from the craggy ledges, they trailed, and on to where the trees thinned, and reached out, with crooked branches, towards the desert. As they drew closer, a heady scent reached her, and she breathed in deeply.

Slithers of white mist were coiling around a cluster of frankincense trees where, draped over a particularly gnarled one, rested two Cobras. They bared their fangs, as she approached, but the cobra, which she had journeyed with, slithered ahead, and up into the tree, until it disappeared beneath the mass of green leaves.

“Come.” It hissed, as she slowly approached the tree.

The cobra told his family her story, and gladly they welcomed her. For many months she stayed, until she knew in her heart that she must travel on.

“If you must leave, then they will offer you many beautiful things. Politely decline. Ask only for my father”s ring and my mother”s casket.”

“You have already shown me much kindness, I do not feel comfortable accepting any,more.”

“Please, trust me.” It said, as the two cobras slithered towards her.

“You are leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Then, for your journey…” They led her towards a hole in the trunk of the tree, where all manner of beautiful things glittered. Emeralds and sapphires, alongside bracelets of coral and gold, but A”isha shook her head.

“I would ask for only your ring and your casket.”

“Why would you ask for those things?”

“It is just my fancy.”

“No, if it were...” The mother cobra shook her head. “So it must be.” The father dragging forth a casket of mother of pearl, and a gold ring, set with a ruby carbuncle. “If you are in need of a place to stay, of clothes, or food, tell the ring, and it will find it for you. If you are in danger, or unhappy, tell the casket, and it will help you.”

A”isha thanked them, and left. Through the forest, along the coast, and on, towards the city, she carried Aalam. Pausing, beneath the lilac sky, she watched the evening star rise over the mountains.

On the edges of the city, she sheltered beneath a palm tree.

“I am so tired, I would like somewhere to rest.”

“It is ready.” A voice whispered from the ring and, before her, stood a beautiful house, of white marble, acacia and aloe wood.

“Thank you.” She whispered, to the ruby, as she entered.

A”isha set Aalam down on a pile of velvet cushions, as she explored. The whole place was illuminated by lamps of golden filigree. Luxuriant carpets, embroidered with silver thread, covered the floors, and the walls with sea green tiles. By the door, platters of dates, mulberries, and grapes had been laid out on a table. Gladly, she ate, cradling her son as he drifted to sleep. A”isha watched the moonlight ripple over his hair, before slipping out of the house. Concealed beneath the palms, she watched the stars.

Despite the growing sadness, she delighted to watch Aalam grow in curiosity and playfulness. How he loved to clamber up onto the window seat, and watch the donkeys pass, beneath the camphor tree, the camels chewing the soft leaves, within its shade. For a while, he remained contented, until a gathering of warriors rode out of the palace gates, the Sultan and Prince Tarek at the front. A”isha ran to the window, and cuddled Aalam to her, as she saw that they were dismounting outside their home. The beating of drums and sounding of horns grew silent, as a knock came at the door.

“Your highness, send your finest warriors in first, it will not be a woman and her child, as the townspeople have said, but a band of conspirators!”

A”isha heard her brother”s voice, from beyond the window, and hurriedly she veiled her face with golden silk.

“Please enter. Eat, and drink.” She said, as she opened the door and beckoned to the table, heavy with platters of dried fruits, and sweets of cardamom, saffron and lime. Hungrily, they ate and drank, as she seated herself upon a velvet cushion, pulled the child onto her lap, and began to speak.

“I was born in the desert. I would dance with my mother, and she would tell me the names of the undying stars in heaven, but then my parents died. At first, I loaned my cooking pot to the women of the tribe and, for a while, we were all happy. Save my brother, who smashed my pot and, when he found me at the date palms, cut off my hand, and destroyed the fruits.” At her words, her brother began to shift uncomfortably, where he stood, but a soldier held him fast. Undeterred, her eyes upon the ground, she continued, “It was at this time, that I fled into the forest, to stay there, upon the branch of a tree, that was until…”

Prince Tarek cut across her. “A”isha! Aalam!” He cried out, and she removed her veil. Overjoyed, he lifted her off her feet, and clasped her to him.

“They lied to me, they told me you were both dead…” He said kissing her.

“Please, let me finish my story, and you will understand.” She paused. “That man there.” She pointed at her brother. “Your attendant and confident is my brother. Thankfully, the Sultan did not kill me, but turned me out into the wilderness.” Tarek flared with anger towards him, but A”isha said: “If it had not happened, I would not have regained my hand. Please, let these years of anguish fall away, and let us now be happy.”

“Then, what shall be done about your brother?”

“Do you have the talisman?” She asked, as from an inside pocket of his tunic, he withdrew the silver chain and turquoise stone.

“That”s all I want.” She said, as he dropped it into her outstretched hand, turned and left the city.

Later that evening, Tarek, A”isha, and Aalam walked up the mountain slopes, to gaze at the moon. Below, the desert rose trailed its petals over the ivory sand, and the song of the nightingale was scattered far out over the sea.

The Serpent and the Labyrinth

“Know the male, keep the female,

Be humble toward the world

Be humble toward the world

And eternal power never leaves.”

Tao Te Ching

There is a myth, from across the seas, from the Melanesian island of Malekula, that: “describes the dangers of the way to the Land of the Dead. It is told that, when the soul has been carried on a wind, across the waters of death, and is approaching the entrance of the underworld, it perceives a female guardian, sitting before the entrance, drawing a labyrinth design across the path, of which she erases half, as the soul approaches. The voyager must restore the design perfectly, if he is to pass through it, to the Land of the Dead. Those who fail, the threshold guardian eats.”

The labyrinth has long been equated with transformation, and with the journey of life, and the inner process of regeneration and integration. It is a symbol of the torturous path of life, where there is but one way in, and one way out.

This is the place where Theseus is: “spun into darkness, by Ariadne”s ball of silver thread, in the way that skeins of light unwind from the ball of the moon, until it”s all gone.”

The labyrinth is also the Spiral Castle, “where the sacred sun king goes after death and, from which, if lucky, he returns.” It is also where we find our centre of self. Where we meet our own death and return, reborn.

One of the most beautiful examples, linking death, rebirth and spirals, is found at Newgrange in Ireland. The trispiral, or triskelion carvings, on the entrance kerb stone, are over five thousand years old. They echo the spirals found throughout nature, in galaxies, weather patterns, vine tendrils, and fossils of ammonites.

The spiral is also a universal symbol of growth and expansion, used by our ancestors, from petroglyphs in Arizona, Australia, and Europe, to the Armenian eternity symbol, the ever spiralling Koru tattoos, and carved art of the Maoris.

In Australia, the creation myth of the aboriginals recalls the cosmic egg, as the origin of the spiral. “It was the era of the serpent!” the songs of the natives of Arnhem tell us. “The serpent which was man, the serpent which flies in the skies…” Serpents are associated with chaos and cosmos, bringers of order ,much like the labyrinth.

In Ancient Egypt, the god, Atum, was depicted as a serpent. he was a solar deity, and bringer of light, who upheld the cosmic order, and balance, which is Ma”at.

Bronze Age Crete is depicted as a place where man and nature lived in harmony. One thing we know for sure, is that it was one of the last refuges of nature worship in Europe. Much of their art was informed by myths, and the land which surrounded them. It is from this time, that archaeologists have found a proliferation of art, using double-bladed axes, which are said to symbolise the moon, the outline of the never ending road, and the horns of the bull, also known as the “horns of consecration.”

The people of Minoan Crete also crafted jewellery, using Egyptian faience beads, along with amethyst, lapis, and yellow jasper. While, as a nation, they traded yellow saffron, ceramics, tin, and copper.

As the Indo-Europeans arrived from the East, bringing with them their patriarchal mythology of storm gods, they drove the mother goddess into the earth. As Baring and Cashford write in their book *The myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image:* “One way of understanding the long historical process of replacing the myth of the goddess by the myth of the god, is to view it as a gradual withdrawal of humanity”s participation with nature.”

As a daughter of Crete, Ariadne is an echo of the palace goddess, who swore to protect the heroes,, and a goddess of fate with the clue of red thread.

In the myth of the Minotaur, Theseus represents the hero, the warrior prince, whose road leads to the throne. This hero archetype is beyond limitation. It is comparable to a mood that seizes us, and enables us to achieve heroic deeds. However, the warrior force and instinct are an integral part of being human. It is vital for men to have “certain feelings of freedom, self-esteem and honour.” With this in mind, we can see how it is Dionysus, and not Theseus who has directed and transformed this force.

This is also seen in the tales of King Arthur and, in particular, the knight Sir Gawain. In chivalry, what made him a great knight, was not just his strength and courage in battle, but his open-heartedness, and the sovereignty he gave back to his wife, Lady Ragnell. Here, we see the masculine and feminine united, ending the: “ancient struggle, between the solar hero, and the queen of the night.” Sir Gawain is a compassionate warrior. He carries a shield, emblazoned with a symbol of perfection. As above, so below, it is the fivepointed star, designed by King Solomon, which represents the meeting and mingling of the masculine and feminine, of heaven and earth. Along with this, Gawain wears a green sash, which he received when his honour was tested by Lady Bertilak. This sign of fault helps him temper his pride with humility. “For now, he understands the danger of hiding his sin. Kept in darkness, it would fester, and destroy him from within.”

Lady Bertilak may be viewed in terms of life and illusion. For example, an eastern mystic would say: “certainly, if you go into life, if you love a woman, then you embrace an illusion, and every illusion will show itself as Maya, as the great illusion of the world, the end of which is death.” Theseus abandons Ariadne, perhaps, because he cannot risk losing his illusions? For, he seems the one who says his girlfriend is perfect, ’but’. There”s always a but, that stops him from fully committing.

In my opinion, it takes an awful lot of strength to love, and allow someone else to love us. Joseph Campbell wrote that: “marriage is not a love affair, it”s an ordeal. It is a religious exercise, a sacrament, the grace of participating in another life.”

As we have seen, the threshold times of life require a sacrifice, a symbolic death, so that new life may be born. At the end of the hero”s tale, he ’dies’, and is transformed into a god. “The ’death’ of the Hero is ’death’ of boyhood, of boy psychology. It is the birth of manhood, and Man psychology. The ’death’ of the Hero, in the life of a boy, or a man, really means that he has finally encountered his limitations. He has met the enemy, and the enemy is himself. He has met his own dark side, his very *unheroic* side. He has fought the dragon, and been burnt by it; he has fought the revolution, and drunk the dregs of his own inhumanity…the ’death’ of the hero signals the body”s or man”s encounter with true humility. It is the end of his heroic consciousness…True humility, we believe, consists of two things. The first is knowing our limitations, and the second is getting the help we need.”

With Theseus, however, this was not meant to be. He was the Son of Aethra, and sired by both the god Poseidon and Aegeus, King of Athens. In order to claim his birth right, Theseus accomplished six tasks, also known as the six labours, along the coastline which led to Athens. A little while later, after capturing and slaughtering the Marathonian bull, Theseus arrived in Crete. After abandoning Ariadne, he kidnapped the young Helen of Troy, only to have the twins, Castor and Pollux, rescue her, while he was away. Shortly after this, he accompanied his friend Pirithous to Hades, because Pirithous longed to have Persephone as his wife. Arrogant or delusional, with a sense of confidence in his task, he sat down on a rock in Tartarus. Theseus joined him, and soon realised they were stuck fast. Dragged by the furies into eternal punishment, he spent long years mourning his friend, and the turn his life had taken. It was not until Heracles, who had descended to the underworld for his twelfth task, petitioned Persephone to forgive and release him., that Theseus was restored to life, but Pirithous had to remain for all eternity. In a grim echo of his father”s death, Theseus died, after being thrown off a cliff on the island of Skyros, by Lycomedes.

Beneath the waves, in the lonely darkness of the labyrinth, once lived the Minotaur. Time has forgotten his name, *Asterion*, meaning *ruler of the stars*, or *starry one*. I think it is fitting that one of Dionysus”s titles was *Nyktelios*, meaning *night light*, or *embodiment of the stars*. One of Dionysus”s most famous epithets was The *Bull Horned God of Death and Rebirth.* He is the ’archaic earth lord’, his spirit is pure imagination that is used, not to escape life, but to understand, and create it. Dionysus was also worshipped, as a dying and rising god, like Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, Mithra and, Jesus.

Lewis Hyde wrote in his book, *The Gift,* that: “In Greek there are two terms for life, Bios and Zöe. Bios is limited life, characterised life, life that dies. Zöe is the life that endures; it is the thread that runs through Bios-life and is not broken when the particular perishes…Dionysus is a god of Zöe life.” This is seen in his ritual worship, which was the Greeks called *orgazein*, but this does not mean sexual orgy, but celebration. Zein is a form of the word Zöe… His worship was the worship of instinct, intuition, and necessity – of life, death and life again.” Interestingly, more often than not, sex rites were originally women”s rites.

In classical mythology, Dionysus was, sometimes, described as androgynous, much like the Hindu god Shiva. In fact, many parallels have been drawn between the two deities. Their temples were usually found beyond the boundaries of the city, in places where their followers would discover, through the communion with nature and ecstatic dance, the ’sensation of the divine’.

Both Shiva and Dionysus protected the downtrodden, the voiceless, and vulnerable. “With one foot in the world of potential, and the other in the world of the physical, these gods traversed the states of spirit and matter. Neither earthbound, nor heaven bound, they lie somewhere in between.”

They bridge the widening gap between man and nature, because they are not bound by convention but, instead, offer liberation from rigid dogma,and from the damage done by those who say “there is no god but mine.”

Indeed, “Shivaism, Dionysism, and Sufism, and many [other] mystic sects in general, [are] founded on the love of nature and the pursuit of ecstasy.” Joseph Campbell wrote that: “Under the magic of the Dionysian force, not only does the bond between man and man again close together, but alienated, hostile, or suppressed Nature, celebrates her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, man.”

This fertility, and mingling of the sexes, is symbolised by Shiva, and his consort Parvati, especially when they are joined together, to create Ardhanarishvara, “the lord who is half woman.” Their dance is “gentle and natural, like a true play of the sexes.” Together, in divine embrace, Shiva is the: “Great Spirit, the mystery, that is beyond our understanding, and Parvati, the exquisite Body, manifesting that Mystery – together always in divine embrace. To think this way is to abolish theological wrangling over the gender of god.” Here the Great Spirit, the energy, that is beyond duality, is neither he or she.

They may also be seen as Yin and Yang. The Yang which is the creative power of the masculine, which: “moves ahead with steadfast perseverance toward a goal, until it becomes too strong, begins to break – [it is then that] the Yin, the receptive feminine, enters from below and gradually moves toward the top.” Together, they exist beyond duality, where all is harmony and unity. Our life may often feel like a continual attempt to balance these two forces.

The psychologist, Robert Johnson, saw the Greek god of love, Eros, as “a woman”s animus who is being strengthened, healed, brought out of his boyish, trickster characteristics, and made into a mature man, worthy of being her mate. This is all done by her labours, and his cooperation. He, in turn, redeems her.” It is this work that so many do not wish to undertake for, as Rilke said: “For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but the preparation.”

Love, death, and madness have long fascinated us. The Greek playwright, Euripides, wrote in his play *The* *Bacchae:* that “knowledge is not wisdom. Cleverness is not, not without awareness of our death, not without recalling just how brief our flare is. He who overreaches will, in his overreaching, loses what he possesses, betrays what he has now. That which is beyond us, which is greater than the human, the unattainably great, is for the mad, or for those who listen to the mad, and then believe them.”

Often viewed as mad, it is in the “Bacchantes’ intoxication of love and ecstasy that true wisdom lies.” Their religion is for everyone, with no need for a gilded temple, or a hierarchy of priests. There was no need for fear or subjugation, as all were offered a way personally to experience transcendence.

Unlike the Mithraic rites, from which women were excluded, women were “essential to the Orphic-Dionysian, as inciters of the mystic rapture, and vehicles of the revelation.”

Throughout history, this “mystical and (or), ecological approach, to the liberation of man, and his happiness, is opposed to the exploiters and destroyers of the natural world.” This illustrates the devaluation of nature, and the feminine. I also believe that there has been a devaluation of the masculine. I do not feel that men are well represented at all. In the 1970s, Robert Bly addressed this, in his book *Iron John* and, sadly, I don”t think enough has changed.

The gulf between men and women seems to be getting wider. The anger, resentment, pain, and poison on all sides is growing. Many blame the patriarchy, but their shots are missing the mark and, instead, we are all getting caught in the crossfire. It is my belief that the patriarchal principle does not represent all men. It is: “*not* the expression of deep and rooted masculinity, for truly deep and rooted masculinity is *not* abusive. Patriarchy is the expression of the *immature* masculine…it is an attack on the *masculine,* in its fullness, as well as the feminine in its fullness…Patriarchy is based on fear.” I would like to add that I do not think that a Matriarchy would be a good idea either. Extremes are unbalanced, and what we desperately need is balance.

For centuries men, just like women, have put aside personal joys and satisfaction, in order to work, and provide for the family. In the UK at this time, suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of forty five. Women are more likely to suffer from a mental health disorder, but men are more likely to die from it. This may be because there is no framework for men to talk about their worries and depression. For generations, men have been told: “Don”t feel...Don”t talk. Don”t grieve. Don”t get angry. Don”t rock the boat. Don”t trust other men. Don”t put passion before bill paying. Follow the crowd, not your bliss.”

If conditions are put on life, if any free time we have, is eaten away by worry and work, then the desire and excitement for life wanes. Depression enters, and the life force is blunted. This is what a shaman would call the loss of one”s soul. For “traditional people, soul-loss was, without doubt, the most dangerous condition a human being could face.”

When we are weighed down by depression, all of life looks dead. Yet, it is here that a: “sense of value, worth, safety, joy, contentment, belongingness, and happiness” - all things which are feminine in nature, must be recognised as integral for everyone.

Despite this, just saying: “why don”t you talk about it” often doesn”t help. As many men have said, what they really need is to spend time with other men. This would, indeed, be a great opportunity to reclaim the true meaning of friendship. For, in our world: “men cannot claim their identity via the culture, because they are obliged to find other un-initiated males as their role models, or succumb to the empty values of a materialistic society…there is a deep hunger for a father figure.”

Carl Jung wrote about this, that how: “the afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own, and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life”s morning. The significance of the morning undoubtedly lies in the development of the individual, our entrenchment in the outer world…[but] whoever carries over into the afternoon the law of the morning, or the natural aim, must pay for it with damage to his soul, just as surely as a growing youth who tries to carry over his childish egoism into adult life must pay for this mistake with social failure.” I also feel that each half of life has two sides to it. The first half is spent learning about things, with the second bringing realisation and enjoyment of ones labours.

This is relevant for everyone, and it pervades most of life and culture. Those who retire, find that they are no longer honoured as elders in society, but are made to feel useless, because they no longer work. This is, of course, not true, however, because so many sacrifice their time and health in the pursuit of money, or indeed as it is becoming now, the daily strain to keep a roof over one”s head, that people are exhausted, when they finally retire.

At this time, or sometime before, couples may look at each other, and feel a sense of loneliness, of being misunderstood and isolated. We must know that, when we set aside our joys and interests, when we utter one of the beginning of the most dangerous of sentences the “when I” enter objective here: money, fame, a certain weight, a new house, this only brings misery, because life is being put on hold, until a certain, unspecified time, that may never come. I know this first hand. The only time to live is now.

This is what we should recognise in each other. No one wants to get old so, therefore, we should help each other. In a relationship, both individuals come together, to create something beautiful: the realisation of their potential and fullness, as individuals, yet as one. You may wish to view this as a sculpture, a piece of art, that requires daily work. Mistakes, refinement, all things are present in the exercise.

If you can find joy in the little things, in the process, rather than just the finished product, then this will help. Alan Watts provides a wonderful example of this: “we enter school, where everything is graded, and the “thing” is coming. So you go through school, perhaps you go to university, you get a job, [and still you think it”s coming, it”s coming, that great thing. That success.] But then, in the middle of your life, you think “I”ve arrived, I”m there, [but] you don”t feel very different from what you”ve always felt.” You feel as if you have been cheated because we: “thought of life by analogy with a journey, a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end…But we missed the whole point along the way. It was a musical thing, and you were supposed to sing or dance while the music was being played.”

So what can be done? An island paradise fits the bill, but it”s unrealistic. However, this is something you can do, set aside some time for yourself. 10 minutes, or an hour. You can also find a calm space, either inside or outside, that you can go to. Think of it like an invisible golden circle, drawn inside the chaos of life. Here you can relax, and think of something that makes you happy, or do something that brings you joy. If you are unable to have the time alone, involve your children, or those around you. Explain to them why this certain thing makes you happy. Communication, as always, is the key.

Change is not always a bad thing. I am sure, deep down, we know that things cannot go on as they are. There needs to be change, however, as we move forward, I feel it would be a mistake for any gender to imitate, and in so doing, repeat, the mistakes of the past. To do that would be a vote for fear, a vote for isolation, and a vote for segregation.

Here, the Dionysian archetype calls us to ask questions, to break away from conventions, and bring balance to life. These being the questions we try to avoid, of: “why do you want the things you want in your life? Do your friends like you for who you are? Do you know who you are?” Life is hard and short. Very short. Don”t spend it making someone else rich. Don”t allow companies to prey on your insecurities. Don”t live your life for someone else”s expectations. The boundaries have already been trampled over, fashion is cyclical, and so, now, it is more revolutionary to be modest in your appearance, and to be kind! So keep asking questions, and think for yourself. Always.

In the ancient world, many people travelled to Delphi in Greece, to seek answers from the oracle. In the dark months of winter, the sanctuary was given over to Dionysus, while the sun god, Apollo, was away in the land of the Hyperboreans. Before the later gods Poseidon, Apollo, and Dionysus were worshipped at Delphi, the site was already sacred to Gaia, the earth goddess.

The myth tells us that Zeus sent out two eagles, to circle the earth, and meet at its centre. This point was Delphi, and it was marked with a stone, the omphalos, meaning navel. The name *delphus* is an Ancient Greek word for womb.

Gaia”s oracle was also guarded by Python, a snake or dragon. When Apollo came to Delphi, he slew the snake and, in the sanctuary of the Pythian Apollo, the high priestess was named Pythia, in its honour. Yet, the priests and priestesses never forgot Gaia, and would invoke her before their rituals:

“I give first place of honour in my prayer to her

who of the gods first prophesied, the Earth.”

Oracles and serpents, serpents and wisdom, are ancient beliefs. In Greek mythology, we are told that a wise serpent, Ladon, guards the golden apples in the garden of Hesperides. The myth of Cassandra has numerous variants. One tells of how after, she fell asleep in a temple, a snake came and whispered in, or licked, her ears, so that she could hear the future. Another tells of how, in an attempt to seduce her, Apollo offered her the gift of prophesy, but she denied him. In reaction, Apollo spat in her mouth, tainting the gift, so that no one would believe her prophesies.

The Greeks also believed that oracular serpents nested in willow trees. This is similar to the Celtic belief that the sun and moon were hatched from two crimson snake-eggs, hidden in a willow tree.

Serpent worship and mythology is, perhaps, the most widespread mythology known to humankind. It is primordial, representing, the energy of life and, like the fish, the ancestral soul. Examples are the cosmic serpent, the rainbow snake, and the feathered serpent, found in Africa, Australia and Aztec mythology, respectively. The feathered serpent here combines the bird and the serpent, the two polarities of human nature, of earth and sky.

Parallels have been drawn, between the phases of the moon, as it “flakes,” and the snake, which sheds its skin. Its fluid shape and movement came to symbolise, in many mythologies, the creative source itself.

In Egypt, the winged serpent symbolises: “the union between heaven, and earth, and spirit, and matter.” In India, it is written: “that *serpent kings* guard both the waters of immortality, and the treasures of the earth.”

For the Bavenda tribe, of South Africa, “Fertility, through cosmic harmony is achieved by the dance in which the young virgins of the tribe identify with the serpent force. After the rains, during these ceremonial days, the old women conduct the ceremony, and act as the pivot around which the dancers spiral in the rhythmic and sinuous coils of the python, collapsing and reviving, they rest like the forces of nature in the seasonal round of death and rebirth.”

In the near east, the symbol of the serpent was one of the most widely used to adorn, or represent, the goddess. Joseph Campbell wrote that the Judeo-Christian God, Yahweh, originated as a serpent consort of the Jewish earth-mother goddess, Asherah.

The primeval Sumerian goddess of the abyss, Nammu, who gave birth to heaven and earth, was depicted with the head of a snake. It is interesting to note that Sumerian mythology shares a lot of parallels with the Old Testament, most notably: the tree of life in the garden, the serpent, the deluge, and mankind fashioned from clay.

As with most goddesses, Nammu was forgotten when Enki or *Ushumgal*, meaning “snake-dragon”, took her place. Here we also find Ningishzida, a double-headed serpent-god, coiled into a double helix. This, of course, makes me think of the Caduceus of Mercury, and the structure of dna. Perhaps it is no secret that Francis Crick used small doses of LSD, and felt that it had helped him to unravel the structure of dna. A discovery which won him the Nobel Prize in 1962, along with James Watson, and Maurice Wilkins.

The pursuit of meaning and immortality is seen in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. After many trials, Gilgamesh recovers the plant of immortality, from the bottom of the sea. Lying on the shore, after his return he falls asleep and, while he sleeps, a snake slithers by, and eats the plant. Gilgamesh returns to Ur, facing death, while the snake achieved immortality.

It is interesting to see, in other myths, how the snake was an obstacle for the hero, who sought immortality and, for others, like the *One-Handed Girl*, it is symbolises instinct and wisdom.

Fairy tales and folk-tales are curious things. Their roots may be thousands of years old, and stretch across many countries, and even continents. The *One-Handed Girl* is an African tale, but finds its relatives in Russia, where it is known as the *Handless Maiden*, and, in Germany, as the tale of the *Maiden with the Silver Hands*,as collected by the Grimm brothers.

Without pulling the story apart, we could look at the snake as representing a return to, and acceptance of, the earthly foundation of life, as well as wisdom and intuition, after time spent alone. Here, again, we see the male and female characters being separated, so that individual work can take place.

It is during this second period of time, alone in the forest, that A”isha meets the snake and, later on, her hand grows back. She can now be, symbolically, fully integrated with herself, and her relationship with her husband and child. Being internally whole is reflected in her hand, which reminds of Kahlil Gibran”s beautiful words, that: “when a man”s hand touches the hand of a woman, they both touch the heart of eternity.”

At some point, we have all felt that we are missing something, that there is a barrier between us and those we love. Society has become over-sexualised in the last century, and people have become afraid to touch and, through this fear of being misunderstood, or misrepresented, we are lonelier than ever. I would say that this goes for men, more than women, but we all need touch, each and every one of us.

Touch, in the form of hugs, helps reduce stress, lowers blood pressure, elevates mood, and may enhance immune function. Senior citizens receive the least touch of any age group. To hold someone”s hand, to gently place a hand on their back, or give them a hug, brings reassurance. It is physical care and kindness.

For babies and children, touch is critical for their growth. As the earliest form of parent-child communication, it is wonderful at establishing bonds. I don”t think it matters how old we are, deep down, we all want to be accepted for who we are, to be comforted and loved.

When my granny was dying, I would hold both of her hands, while I spoke to her. She was preparing to move on, and could not communicate with me and my mum but, by holding her hands, we could show her love and comfort.

This is natural life, and natural expression, that helps teach us love and compassion. it reminds us of the possibility of life. One of my favourite writers, Franz Kafka, wrote that: “life”s splendour forever lies in wait, about each one of us, in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it, by the right word, by its right name, it will come.”

Part VI

Death

"Hold on to what is good,

Even if it”s a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe,

Even if it”s a tree that stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do,

Even if it”s a long way from here.

Hold on to your life,

Even if it”s easier to let go.

Hold on to my hand,

Even if someday I”ll be gone far away from you."

Pueblo Indian Prayer

Godmother Death -

- German Fairy Tale by the Brothers Grimm -

“I will be born again, flowers,

Tree and grass, I will be born again…”

Herman Hesse

Night veiled the forested plateau of the Hörselberg. In the east, fields of wheat rippled like a moonlit sea, surging around a tumbledown stone cottage, where lived a poor farmer and his wife. Through the cracked roof tiles, they watched the evening star glint overhead. Eyes fixed on it, the young woman writhed on the straw mattress, screaming into the darkness until, after many hours, a baby boy was born to them. His mother wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and held him to her. Huddled together, the small family offered prayers to the sun, that was rising over the mountains.

Many weeks passed but, still, they could not find a single woman to be his godmother. Sadly, Berend, the farmer, kissed his wife and child, and set out for the nearest town.

Away through the fields, and into the forest, he walked, pausing by a cluster of oaks, that twisted away, to reveal a sparkling river.

Ambling along its bank, he remembered, as a child, fishing for trout, and the way the churning waters gleamed silver in the sunlight. Downstream, he saw the walled town, its turrets, and half-timbered buildings, of ochre and slate. A bell tolled out into the overcast sky, and a pair of snow-white doves ascended into the air.

Under the gate, and over the cobbles, Berend walked, towards a fountain, where children were playing, and bushels of corn were being unloaded from a cart. Dried herbs hung from the painted windows, while food scraps, and excrement, rotted on the ground. Berend pulled a rag from his pocket and held it to his nose. Lowering his eyes, he heard the wounding laughter of the townsfolk, as they saw his threadbare coat, and crumpled hat.

Turning aside, he ascended the stone steps of the church. Alone, in there, sunlight filtered through the stained glass windows, the air heavy with incense. All around, the pews lay empty, the flowers wilted, and the candles, unlit. Berend sat down, bowed his head, and offered prayers for his son.

Leaving the church, he was lost once more to the sea of down-turned faces. Struggling through, he seated himself beside a fountain.

Pulling a little bread from his pocket, he tore off a piece, and offered it to a duckling, which swam over to him. Berend watched it, until the water stilled itself. He gazed at his reflection. Hair flecked with silver, and the skin around his blue eyes, wrinkled, he hardly recognised himself. “Like the autumn leaves, how golden my hair once was. I feel as if I have been weathered like the rocky crags of the mountains…” He whispered to the water.

“Your face shows a lifetime of happiness, strife and toil. A map of your days, that none can read, save yourself, and the one whom you have given your heart to.” He heard a woman”s voice, and turned.

Overhead, the sky was swollen with rain-clouds, and the streets were empty, save for the woman, who stood beside him. Her hair rippled, from spun gold, to snow white, and back again, as he greeted her.

“Good afternoon.”

“You are looking for someone?” she asked, seating herself beside him.

“I am looking for a godmother for my son, but it seems that the whole world has closed its door in my face.”

“I will be your son”s godmother.” She said softly.

“Then may I ask who you are?”

“I am Death.”

“Is it my time?”

“No, not yet.” She paused. “If you consent, I will take good care of him. I will teach him of all things. For, I am the one who stands in the darkness, where the moon dies into its birth. The one who weaves flowers of the wreath, where there is no beginning or end. For, I am as old as the world itself, and I know every man, woman, and child by name. Though they do not speak mine. I greet them all. I make no distinction between rich or poor.” She whispered mournfully, as Berend looked at her.

“Very well.” He consented, the wind surged through the streets and, as in a flurry of leaves, she was gone.

Night fell over the land, as Berend passed beneath the gate, and went on, down the hillside, towards the river. He trod the silver path of the moon, along its banks, where a whispering voices rose from the water. Berend turned away, towards a meagre hut, on the wayside, the plaintive strain of a violin hanging upon the crisp night air.

Like a memory pocketed as a child, he remembered the walks through the forest with his mother, a gipsy, who had passed through, from eastern lands until, beside the forest, she had met his father, and had stayed with him, until the end of her days. Berend grew sad at the thought of her, and wondered when, he too, would embark on the final journey.

Fifteen harvests came and went until, as autumn died into winter, once more, the clouds ruptured and washed away his toil. Berend embraced his wife, and called their son, Ekhart, to them. Overhead, an opaque light broke through the clouds, and a veiled figure approached them.

Beneath the ashen veil, Berend saw her watery eyes, and knew it was their time. Embracing his son, he asked:

“You will take care of him?” Death nodded, her eyes lingering on Ekhart, as his parents were spirited away from the world.

“I am your godmother.” She said, viewing his olive green eyes, his tattered coat, and crumpled hat. “If you listen, and follow closely, to what I say, you will no longer live in poverty, but enjoy a rich and full life.”

Ekhart nodded, and followed her away, turning back, for just a moment, to view the cottage, its roof all overrun with ivy and vines. Ekhart was about to ask who she was when, to his surprise, yellow flowers erupted from the earth.

“What are the flowers?” He asked, as she passed her hand over a small patch, which started withering at her touch, and she placed them into a small pouch.

“Here.” She said, handing it to him. “I will teach you the lore of the plants, the flowers, and the wild herbs, and you will heal the sick of this land.”

Walking on beside a river, they saw a young woman running towards them.

“Please!” She fell at Ekhart”s feet. “My baby is dying!”

Ekhart looked at his godmother, who nodded, and said: “I shall be with you. If I stand at the head of the bed place, with the dried flowers in their mouth, then they shall live but, if I am standing at their feet, then they must come with me. You shall tell them that there is nothing you, nor anyone else, could do. Only, remember, that you are the only one who can see me.”

Ekhart followed her instructions, watching life bloom and fade, as he travelled through the land. Nine winters passed this way, until he found himself beside a lake. The mountains were at his back, and he watched a man ride towards him.

“Are you Ekhart, the Physician?” He nodded in reply, and stood, as the man leaned out of his saddle, to clasp his hand. “The King is dying...” He paused, trying to read his face. “…If you cure him, you will have wealth beyond measure.”

Ekhart looked at the man and, truthfully, he longed for it. For, although the years had clothed his back with fine silks, and shod his feet with costly leather, he was weary of the constant motion of his life.

“Gladly, I will come.” He replied, following the man towards the palace.

Ascending the marble stairs, he surveyed the walls, hung with rich tapestries, smelled the scent of tulips on the air. Hundreds of wax tapers illuminated the darkness, as Ekhart turned the handle of the king”s chamber. Opening the door just a fraction, he saw Death standing at the foot of the bed. Turning away, he gathered the advisers and said:

“When you enter the room, turn the King around, so that his head is at the foot of the bed.” They opened their mouths to object, but he raised his hand. “No questions. Please, just carry out my instruction.” He said, and they shrugged their shoulders.

“How is he?” Ekhart heard a voice, and turned to meet a girl, with amber eyes, and copper hair, crowned with golden leaves. “I”m sorry.” She said, lowering her head to him. “The King is my father…”

“I will do all that I can. I promise.” He said, bowing to her, and turning aside, into the room, lowering his eyes from Death, who remained at the foot of the bed. He placed the dried flowers into the King”s mouth, and said: “Let him live, let him be restored.” At his words, the King”s eyes flickered open.

“Thank you!” The princess rushed to his side, kissing him on the cheek.

“I shall see you are well rewarded.” The King said, shaking his hand, with a beaming smile. Ekhart returned it, until he saw the princess stumble, and collapse onto the floor.

“Helena!” But she did not stir, at her father”s call. “Quickly!” He cried, gathering her up in his arms, as a trembling Ekhart followed closely behind. Peering into the chamber, he saw Death standing at the foot of the bed.

“You are my godson, and you stole the life of the King from me. I will spare you this once, but not again.” She said, her features set beneath the veil.

“Please, do something, anything! I will give you my daughter”s hand. Anything, if you can cure her!”

“I will try.” Ekhart replied, fumbling in the pouch for the final sprinklings. “Let this flower cure her, let her live. Let her be restored.”

The princess gave a rasping cry, and Death took a step forward.

“No!” Ekhart cried out.

“I warned you.” Death said, wrapping her veil over the princess. It swirled around her, wherein he saw all the birds of the air, the flowers of the fields, and the beasts of the forest. The lingering imprint of every soul, dwelling within its folds. Each fleck like a star in the sky as, with a shift and churn, the floor opened beneath his feet.

The marble crumbled away, to reveal a set of stairs, which descended into the earth. Hastily, Ekhart followed Death and the princess, down the stairs, and into a vast cavern. All around him, on every ledge, burned millions of candles, like a galaxy of stars, trapped in the underworld.

“Please, I will do anything. She”s all I have ever wanted!” He cried, the flames surrounding him, spluttering and quivering.

“I thought all you wanted was wealth? Was that not why you saved the King”s life? Why else did you care if he lived or died? You knew nothing of him. You only sought to line your own pockets. We have travelled a long road together. I have shown you the hidden mysteries. I have been with you through all your days yet, still, you hoped to trick me.”

“No!” Ekhart shouted.

“I am the great receiver, and giver of wealth. All these things you know, but you have forgotten. Your eyes have been closed to me.” Death turned on him. Her veil disintegrated, her eyes blackened, and her bones protruded through her waxy skin. She passed her withered hand over a candle next to her, extinguishing the flame, as the princess vanished.

“Where is she?” He asked, but Death did not answer. Instead, she approached a small stump of a candle, flickering with a feeble flame. Ekhart rounded on her. “Whose candle is that?” He asked, though in truth he knew it was his own. “Please, for your godson, could you not light another candle? A longer one?”

“I cannot light another, until the first is extinguished.”

“Then do so!” He commanded her, maddened by his desire.

“How do you think you came to the cottage beside the wood?” She asked, passing her over the flame. The room drifted away from him, as he fell into a dazzling blackness. A thin curling of smoke coiling upwards, as Death lit another candle, before turning away. Climbing the stairs, she walked out, under the moon, and through the wheat fields, the gnarled forest, and on, towards a town, nestled on the east bank of a glittering river. It was there that Death paused, to watch the evening star glint overhead, a new born baby drawing its first breath.

The Flood

- Haida Mythology -

“Only on me, the lonely one,

The unending stars of night shine.”

Herman Hesse

Over the watery abyss, flew Raven, black-winged, beneath the storm, illuminated by silver lightning. Alone, he flew on, into the west, chasing the last, few strands of golden sunlight. Raven soared into the sky, the light dwindling, and dying, with a frail light. Despairingly, he circled the earth but, everywhere, was submerged with water.

Seven days had passed, since the rains had come. for seven days, since the sea had overwhelmed the land, Raven had been flying over the kingdom of a thousand lakes. His feathers skimmed the surface, as he swooped low. He watched the watery moon sink into the shimmering depths and, for a moment, he felt as though the stars had descended from the heavens.

Darkness fell over the mountains. The rivers became swollen, and burst their banks, washing away trees and fields of corn. The wild birds shrieked in their nests, and the animals sought shelter in their hollows.

Slowly, at first, the sea rose and fell, each wave more terrible than the last, as they gushed over the marshes and the lowlands. Thrones of vast empires were sunk beneath the waves. All souls were lost to the tides. Swollen clouds and storms broke upon the mountains. Flower meadows and groves of oak and ash were submerged, as the sun, moon, and stars were drowned, in the nocturnal fields of the sea.

Raven wheeled above the devastation, and a great hush stole over the earth. Alone, he felt the rain in his eyes, and the white-foamed waves gush down his throat. Climbing higher, his wings grew frail, and he fell from the sky.

From that high place, he fell through endless shades of darkness. Plummeting towards the great body of water. The wind tore at his ragged feathers, and clawed at his watery eyes. Inside, he felt himself fragment as, tenderly, he wrapped his wings around his chest. With one last glance, he looked beneath him and, to his surprise, he saw a remote mountain peak, rising up out of the vast ocean.

Exhausted, Raven descended, and crumpled onto that trace of earth. Peeling away his feathers, he lifted his eyes to the moonless heaven. Above the desolation, a single star flickered in eternal space. He thought of his mother, who lived in the dark river, and his father, whom he had never known.

Raven turned away, and mourned for the wild roses, and the rivers of the earth, which had run golden in the sunlight. He thought of the slow and shifting rivers of ice, the forests of ten thousand trees, and the plaintive song of the children, that were all no more. Alone, in the silence, he heard the grieving winds rush over his head. He felt the waters tremble, and saw once more that distant star. Raven fixed his eyes on that single speck of light, for what seemed like days, weeks and months. Until, at last, the waters began to recede. The clouds broke apart like frayed wool, and sunlight fell upon his naked body.

Hauling himself up, he looked down over the misty valleys. Watching the sea retreat, and the land recover itself. Hopeful, Raven resumed his shape, and soared down from the high peak. He encircled the earth, but none alive could he find. Alone, he settled beside the sea, the sun rising over the mountains, in a flush of amber and lilac. Loneliness stole into his heart and, sadly, he married a cockle from the shore. When darkness fell, over the land, he wrapped the shell beneath his wing, and dreamed his dreams.

One morning, when the stars still lingered over the forest, Raven heard a small cry coming from the shell. Carefully, he opened it, and found a small baby nestled within. Tenderly, he lifted her up and cared for her beside the sea.

The years unfolded, and the earth renewed itself, until she stood before him, a young woman, with auburn hair and grey-green eyes. Raven removed his cloak of feathers and, together, they walked beneath the mountains. For many years, he would weave wild flowers in her hair. On the day of their wedding, the first birds returned from over the sea, apples ripened on the trees, and wild roses bloomed, in a thousand shades of dusky pink.

A Time of Ashes

“I am Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, and I have the power to be born a second time.”

Egyptian Book of the Dead.

Every mythology has its creation tale, flood tale and, as the circle closes, its Ragnarok, or apocalypse. The Hindu texts tell us that: “the few who survive, at the end of the Age of Kali, shall be in a piteous state. In their despair, they will begin to reflect. It is then that a new golden age shall suddenly appear, and the survivors will be the seed of a new humanity.” Something similar is written in the Poetic Edda: Voluspo:

“The sun turns black, earth sinks into the sea,

The hot stars down from heaven are whirled;

Fierce flows the stream and the life-feeding flame,

Till fire leaps high about heaven itself.

But then, behold!

Now do I see the earth anew

Rise all green from the waves again…”

The word ‘apocalypse’ comes from the Latin *apocalypsis* meaning ’revelation,’ and from the Greek *apokalyptein* meaning to, ’uncover, disclose, reveal.’ In Middle English, it meant ’insight’ or ’vision’. This idea that we hold of it, as the end of the world, is a recent interpretation. It is, as Joseph Campbell wrote, “apocalypse is our ignorance and complacency coming to an end.”

This ignorance is fuelled by our addiction to transcendence and progress. We are consumed by the idea that life must always be on an upward trajectory.

Revelation and apocalypse then can be seen in terms of waking up and experiencing the true reality of things. “The kingdom of the father is spread upon the earth and men do not see it.”, concealed as it is, by Maya, the formative power of illusion. This is the signal then for the end of *our* world as we know it.

Maya, or illusion, veils the truth. It is the rippling pond, the: “fractured, sparkling image of reality that is no reality, but only its broken surface.” Much of what we know, or what we think we know, is fragmented, preoccupied, as we are, by trivial things.

It is written in the *Lament of Hermes*, that: “…in that day men will be weary of life, and they will cease to think the universe worthy of reverent wonder and worship. They will no longer love this world around us…darkness will be preferred to light, and death will be more profitable than life, no one will raise his eyes to heaven…[and] as for the soul, and the belief that it is immortal by nature…they will mock, and even persuade themselves that it is false.” This text is from the 2,500 year old Hermetica. Written about Ancient Egypt, I think it is just as relevant today.

To face things as they are, requires courage. To try to understand the true nature of things is no easy task, especially with social media and the barrage of news. It can leave us numb and passive. William Boyd perfectly encapsulates the need and hardship of this task, when he wrote that: “when you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away. Your destiny is bound with the destinies of others. You must either learn to carry the Universe, or be crushed by it. You must grow strong enough to love the world, yet empty enough to sit down at the same table with its worst horrors." It is no easy task. It is one you fail at continually.

In Oslo, in the late nineteenth century, the painter, Edvard Munch, recorded that, while: “walking along a path with two friends – the sun was setting – [and] suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire about the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.” It was, of course, this experience that inspired his painting *The Scream.*

In light of this, I feel it would be wrong not to acknowledge the anxiety which most of us feel. it is something that I see as a natural reaction to our modern world. It is a reaction to being detached from the natural world too. Manly P Hall advises us, in our moments of stress, to see it as a challenge, as: “every moment something new happens; and we must meet all things, all change from within ourselves.” He explains further that: “in the past, men feared the future, but took consolation in the slow motion of human endeavour. It was quite unlikely that the average person in middle life would live long enough to be under the impact of radical change. It would require a hundred, two hundred, five hundred years for certain patterns to develop…[and] this slower motion gave greater opportunity for adjustment, and the individual did not feel the emergence of the situations around him. Thus everyone is a little more tired due to anxiety; everyone is a little less able to face his own problems optimistically, simply because he is gaining little if any strength from the collective.”

One of the main problems is th,at often, unhealthy, and morally corrupt behaviours, and beliefs become *normal,* simply because the majority of people share the same mental pathology.

It takes courage to go against the tide, to let old beliefs die, and to stand up for what you believe in. This world is full of both false prophets, and false warriors. Being shunned, even being murdered, for your beliefs, are still seen and experienced today.

Since 2002, one thousand activists, like indigenous activist Berta Cáceres, have been murdered. In America, anyone who damages the property, or profit line, of an animal business, can be convicted of terrorism. Animal agriculture has a detrimental effect on our climate;fFrom: greenhouse gas emissions, water usage, and the depletion of our oceans, to - deforestation, in which, one to two acres of the Amazon are being cleared every minute, to grow soya, that will be fed to cattle, destined for hamburgers. This is also seen in other third-world countries, where one quarter of all grain is now given to livestock, while eight hundred and fifteen million people, worldwide, are starving.

We live as if we have another world to go to, a backup earth, but we don”t. The idea of living on Mars is a dream for the rich, at present, much like the past idea of buying your way into heaven. Nietzsche despised religion, mainly Christianity, in so far that: “it encouraged people to value an imaginary afterlife over this one and, in doing so, neglect the world around them.” New beliefs replace old ones. As James Hillman wryly noted: “The only God left that is truly universal, omnipresent, omnipotent, observed faithfully in thought and action, joining all human kind in daily acts of devotion: The Economy. That”s the God we nourish with actual human blood.” Again, the need for compassion, and for the understanding of the effects of one’s actions arises.

The Haida people, of the Northwest Pacific, tell a story about a strange woman, wrapped in a fur cape, who came to a village by the sea. She passed through a group of boys, one of whom tore at her cape. It fell away, to reveal her spine, that had protuberances of weeds and plants growing out of it, like seaweed on the shore. The children laughed at her, although their parents warned them not to. The woman sat down on the seashore, and wept, the waves swirling around her feet. It was then, that she stood, and walked away, the sea following her up, over the lowlands, the forests and on, towards the mountains. Frightened, the people of the island built rafts, and sailed away.

From Mesoamerica and Siberia, to the Vikings, Assyrians and Egyptians, there are six hundred, some say two thousand, recorded tales and myths of a great flood. Most tell of the refugees who escaped the deluge in a boat, raft, or canoe, or who climbed trees, and sought refuge in mountaintop caves.

Flood myths, which include Raven, have been found, from the story of Noah in the Old Testament, to the stories of the Algonquin and Cree of North America. One of the oldest examples is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where Utnapihter is warned by Ea (the Sumerian God Enki), to build a boat of specific dimensions. When it is completed, he takes onboard his family, provisions, and every animal that he had. Utnapihter watched, as the rains came, and the waters rose. Over the flooded land, they drifted until, after seven days, the rain ceased, and he sent out a dove, and then a swallow, but both returned, and then, he sent out a raven, who found land.

These flood myths are elemental. They tell of wrath, and overwhelming fear; of an ending, and a new beginning. For long years, flood myths have been linked with sin, the waters symbolising purging and cleansing. The fragment of the Egyptian flood myth tells us that Atum saw how the people had become rebellious. Because of this, he was resolved to destroy and reduce the earth, to the primordial water, which was its original state, where only Atum and Osiris would remain in the form of serpents.

This, for me, is the beauty of myths. They are simple and complex. They work on all levels and, are more than anything, timeless. However, sometimes, as with these flood myths, especially Yu”s flood myth from Bronze Age China, and stories about flaming stars which fell from heaven, there is more than a kernel of truth. So much so, that the embryonic science of geomythology is investigating old stories of floods, earthquakes, and comets, of the great serpent, who laments of the star that fell, and caused the earth to go up in flames.

Alongside this, we have the research conducted in Greenland. Ice-core samples there, show that some 10,890 BC, something happened, which caused the ice sheets to melt rapidly. Between 12,800 and 11,500 BC, there was a rapid cooling event. The temperature dropped by 2°C, and as much as 5°C, in Northern Europe. As the sea level rose, vast swathes of coastline were submerged.

There is an old Chinese curse that says “may you live in interesting times.” I think many would agree that these are ’interesting’ times. So much of what we thought we knew has been disproved but, still, we are no closer to answering some of the greatest of life”s questions. However, I think we should be excited. With archaeological finds like Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, which is 6,000 years older than Stonehenge, we can see that our ancestors were not the savages we have been led to believe. Our ancestors were accomplished in a wide variety of areas. They were great craftsman, architects, and astronomers. Life on the earth is cyclical. Our lives are cyclical. We may move forward, but we always have to re-visit old themes, old moments from our life, as we move through.

Recently, we have experienced a relatively calm period in the earth”s history, but it will not last. Scientists have observed how our existence itself is a marvel. For example, the earth”s distance from the sun is ’just right.’ A little closer, and it would be too hot for life and, a little further away, and it would be too cold. Because of this, it has been called the Goldilocks’ Paradox. “If the strong nuclear force, which glues atomic nuclei together, were only a few per cent. stronger than it is, stars like the sun would exhaust their hydrogen fuel, in less than a second. Our sun would have exploded long ago, and there would be no life on Earth. If the weak nuclear force were a few per cent weaker, the heavy elements, that make up most of our world, wouldn”t be here, and neither would you…Such instances of the fine-tuning, of the laws of physics, seem to abound…A whisker, either way, and we would not be here. It is as if the universe was made for us.”

At present, scientists only comprehend about 4 per cent. of the universe. It is said to have no centre, and no edge. The native American mystic, Black Elk, said that the Great Spirit dwells at the centre of the universe, that centre being everywhere, and within each of us. This reflects the ancient axiom that: “God is an infinite sphere, whose centre is everywhere, and circumference is nowhere.”

From the scientist to the artist, we are all susceptible to a little mystery, a little beauty, which revives the wonder of life. Many of our ancestors held the belief that life was a gift. An experience of soul into matter, or consciousness into matter.

The Ainu people of Japan, believed the earth to be so beautiful that the gods and goddesses would visit it, in the form of birds, animals, and fish. This stands at odds with our ’gods’; the rich and famous, who represent such a small cross section of society, but must surely have the highest rates of drug-abuse, divorce, and suicide? Their stories should be treated more like modern fables, as tales from a fake reality, that speak of self-destruction; of a people who, seemingly, have everything, but are still, by and large, unhappy. Money can bring experiences, and money can help people. This area is, of course, not black and white, but it does seem that the desire for possessions causes one to feel empty. For, no golden tower can stop death.

Death is the unseen aspect of life. it is the great leveller, which does not distinguish between age, gender, or social status. We are all the same, in the eyes of death, and no one can pass through life, without being touched by it. Within the shadow of inevitable death, ambitions, the craving for power, fame, and possessions tend to fade in significance and, what the authentic you needs, becomes more important.

In the nineteenth century, during the Sand Creek Massacre in America, White Antelope, one of eleven chiefs killed that day, stood his ground, his arms crossed and, with the death song upon his lips, he sang: “Nothing lives long. Only the earth and the mountains.”

The books of the dead, found in many cultures around the world, and the rites of passage, known to our ancestors, all taught about death. Even today, they inform us not only about death, but about an alternative approach to life, mediated by the prospect of the experience of death. I think this is critical, because people are not dying well. In fact, many of us are not living well, either.

We all make mistakes, this is unavoidable if we are to live but, it is how we move forward, that matters. If we acknowledge the effects of our actions, then this will allow us to go back, and put things right. To learn what we can, in the light of the fact that, one day, we will all die. Whether you believe in an afterlife, or not, doesn”t really matter, when it comes to your life. We have a choice, daily, with our actions towards ourselves, and others.

Despite what consumerism would have us believe, to spend years chasing the dragon of youth, of physical beauty, is a waste of time. I am sure there is a surge in this realisation, when we become faced with our mortality, faced with the questions we have tried to run from. However, the regrets of the dying show us that these regrets never go away. Palliative-care nurse, Bonnie Ware, recorded the top five as:

1. I wish I”d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn”t worked so hard.
3. I wish I”d had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Life is short, and we are: “weather patterns, flitting in and out of existence…[and], because of this, we forget to: “marvel, at least every now and then, at the scandalous beauty of existence, what Robert Jeffers called the ’trans-human magnificence’ of the world.”

It is all too often that we notice how beautiful the world is, when we are faced with a prospective illness, or have survived a near-death experience. This shock, like grief, can cause our old, safe ways and beliefs to come crashing down. This is one of the hardest aspects of life, brought on by a trauma, which can leave an imprint, both mental and physical, on us. I feel it is important to remember that: “we survive these grief-filled situations, even transcend them, but we are never the same again.” It is this sorrow which: “makes us children again…[that] destroys all differences of intellect. [Where] The wisest know nothing.”

It is hard to adapt, but it is what we must endeavour to do. It is difficult, though, when grieving is almost taboo; when we have lost rituals and understanding, surrounding grief. Today, when someone dies, it is dealt with quickly. Just move on we are told, don”t grieve for too long. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *The Wasteland:*

“Go, go, go said the bird: human kind

cannot bear very much reality.

Time past and time future

what might have been and what has been

point to one end, which is always present.”

The trouble is that grief controls the time it takes, and it will take as long as it takes. You cannot fix a grieving person. Grief, itself, is something that is alive and wild, it opens you up but, as Francis Weller writes, in his fantastic book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*: “we have forgotten the language of grief and, as a consequence, the terrain of sorrow has become unfamiliar and estranged, leaving us confused, frightened and lost, when grief comes near...when our grief cannot be spoken, it falls into shadow and re-arises in us as symptoms.”

As always, but even more so, you will need to take care of yourself. In times of grief, you will need to cry, maybe, five times a day, but you have to do it. Try to write everything down. Express the anger, the hurt, and the loss. Cook healthy food and eat it, even if you”re not hungry. Every day, do something that brings you joy. Be honest, but also take care not to slip into permanent self-pity - as easy as this is - and it is so easy! It can deepen into depression and disease.

Taking time for yourself, will help you realise that there is new life waiting for you. It will also help you to love again, if that is what you want and, if the opportunity presents itself. If it doesn”t, it won”t matter, because you know that you can take care of yourself.

Grief derives from the Latin *gravis*, meaning, ’to bear’, this is also where our word ’gravity’ comes from. We are bound to grief, just as the tides of the sea are bound to the moon. For our ancestors, the moon was the mythical abode of the dead, and the morning dew was believed to be its tears or pearls. For the Persians, pearls were synonymous with sorrow and tears. There is also an older belief, which tells us how the tears, of those who grieve, help the deceased person on their final journey to the other shore. It is vital that grief is expressed for, without it, the dead person fails to cross, and lingers on in this world.

Whatever your belief, everyone is faced with grief, in some form or another, and it must be expressed, even the anger. When I think of Raven, collapsed on that last trace of earth, I think of Alfred Lord Tennyson”s poem *Maud*, where he wrote:

“Always I long to creep

Into some still cavern deep

There to weep, and weep, and weep

My whole soul out to thee.”

The cavern here may symbolise the cave where the sun goes, during the winter, or the place where grief seems to take us; a place where the world still turns, even though your world has fallen apart. The cave was also seen as the womb, the matrix of the universe, the physical place of rebirth. Death and rebirth are the most common motifs in all initiation rites. Indeed, Joseph Campbell wrote that: “*rites* …together with the mythologies that support them, constitute the second womb…mythology being the womb of mankind”s initiation in to life and death.” Sadly, though, may of us have been denied, or have forgotten, our myths, and our ancestors” rituals surrounding death and grief.

Every culture, from the Vikings to the Sri Lankan”s, venerated their dead, and marked out that sorrowful ground. It is believed that sky burials have taken place in Tibet for as many as eleven thousand years, where, in a high place, the dead person is cut into pieces, and left for the vultures. Owing to their belief in reincarnation, the vultures were seen to take the body away to the heavens, where the person would remain, until their next reincarnation.

In other cultures, wine was poured over the body, while words of enchantment and protection were spoken. The Vikings laid their dead in boats, waggons, or beside horses, with grave goods, of amber and furs, before they were set on fire. Similarly, in Egypt, the deceased person was laid to rest, with everything the Egyptians believed they would need in the afterlife. Joseph Campbell recorded that: “for the planting folk of the fertile steeps and tropical jungles, death is a natural phase of life, comparable to the moment of the planting of the seed, for rebirth.”

In *Shamanic Voices*, Joan Halifax recounts an Aua Eskimo Shaman who said: “When, at the end of life, we draw our last breath, that is not the end. We wake to consciousness again, we come to life again, and all this is effected through the medium of the soul. Therefore, it is that we regard the soul as the greatest and most incomprehensible of all.”

The Zoroastrians believe that: “at death, the soul hovers over the body for the three nights. On the first night, the soul contemplates the words of its past life. On the second, it contemplates its thoughts and, on the third, it contemplates its deeds.” In Tibetan Buddhism, when the consciousness of an individual passes through the Bardo, the visions encountered there are a reflection of both one”s own personality and karma. It is also written that: “at the exact moment of death, the soul first experiences the colourless light of emptiness, which bathes it. If one merges with this light, at this opportunity, one is saved. Most people, however, first fall unconscious, and then are shocked back into consciousness, by the terror of recognition that they are dead.” They want to hold on to their personality and, because of this, it is said that the soul is returned, once more, to the round of rebirth.

This light also appears in an account of a near-death experience: “I felt myself being separated: my soul drawing apart from my physical being…and drawn upward… where it reached a greater Spirit, with whom there was a communion, producing a remarkable, new relaxation, and deep security….I could see a light – like a silver-white light… it was just massive darkness, and then massive light. I felt myself, just my being, move toward that light…” This reminded me of the divine, white light, which stunned and killed Dionysus”s mother, Semele.

Joseph Campbell explains the ancient Egyptian belief that: “when a person dies, he becomes identified with Osiris. This is very important theme. The dead person is called Osiris He goes to the underworld journey, to unite with Osiris. Osiris is going to Osiris. I, and the father, are one, that motif: “I am yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I have the power to be born a second time. I am that source from which the gods arise.” This is a great realization. This is what must be realised – properly, before you die but, if not, then on the way to the underworld.”

The central themes of the art and architecture of Ancient Egypt are reincarnation, resurrection, and the journey of the soul in the underworld. In the Judgement Hall of Osiris, the soul is asked 42 questions, also known as the forty two negative confessions. A few examples of which are: “I haven”t slain men or women. I haven”t committed sin. I haven”t stolen. I haven”t shut my ears to the words of truth…” After this, the heart was weighed against the feather of Ma”at, which symbolises truth, balance, and order. This “right order” is similar to Tao and Dharma. If the heart was heavy with sin, then it would be devoured by Ammut, the crocodile-headed devourer of hearts. This second death meant that there would be no chance of rebirth. The deceased person”s life was at a permanent end, and the attainment of finally becoming a star, would never be realised.

The Ancient Egyptians also believed that the Ka, the spiritual essence which made the difference between a living and a dead person: “entered eternity before its human host, having served its function, by walking at the human”s side, to urge kindness, quietude, honour, and compassion. Throughout the life of the human, the Ka was the conscience, the guardian, the guide. After death, however, the Ka became supreme…”

These ancient beliefs show us that all things reappear, that nothing stays hidden for ever. With the vision of a mystic, Ralph Waldo Emerson told us that: “it is the secret of the world that all things subsist and do not die, but retire a little from sight, and afterwards return again.” His words seem to echo the Eskimo shaman Igjugarjuk, who said: “life is endless, only we do not know in what form we shall reappear.” Pythagoras said that:“all things are changing, nothing dies. The spirit wanders, comes now here, now there, and occupies whatever frame it pleases. From beasts, it passes into human bodies and, from our bodies, into beasts, but never perishes.”

Today, opinion is divided about the afterlife, but more stories and research are being gathered. In October 2017, Dr Sam Parnia, conducted research on patients who had clinically died, meaning their heart had stopped beating, but were then revived. Some of those studied said that they had awareness of seeing things, and hearing conversations going on around them, even after they had been pronounced dead. These accounts were verified by the medical staff, and so the findings suggest that consciousness appears to continue to work after the body has stopped showing signs of life. This may be seen, in a comparison Graham Hancock drew, of the brain with a television set, and consciousness with the television signal. Even if the television breaks, is ’dead’, the signal continues. This may also be seen in terms of electricity and light bulbs. The light bulb is merely the vehicle for the light.

Accounts of people who have survived near-fatal accidents, or clinical death, all seem to have a certain mythological flavour to them. Paradise has been described as being full of: “luminescent clouds and rainbows. Nature is presented by the best it has to offer: fertile soils, fields of ripening grain, beautiful oases or parks, luscious gardens, or flourishing meadows…the roads are paved with gold, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and other precious stones…” this is very reminiscent of the visions of paradise we glimpsed earlier in the “Arcana of Nature.”

The experiences of death and rebirth have been reported by people who have taken psychedelics and, of course, shamans from all over the world. As we have seen, this is also what the rites of passage sought to teach. To give the initiatiates transformative experiences, that would provide a framework for a new stage of life. For us, we may fast on a vision quest, or undertake a retreat in silence for two weeks which, although I believe that they are immensely helpful, we just don”t know what will happen after death. We can only do what we can now, as Rumi reminds us:

“No dead person grieves his own death, he or she,

Mourns only what he didn”t do, “why did I wait?

Why did I not? Why did I neglect to…?”

Love, while you can. Embrace, while you can. Sort out your differences, while you can and then, when they have passed, keep their remembrance with you. Remembrance is one of the most powerful things we have. It is not about being morbid, but a gentle uplifting of the past. This, I believe, is what it means to lead a devoted life, to walk with an understanding of your place in the world, to live with death in mind for, as against this, as we are, it is true that “human beings live and die; thoughts come and go; empires rise and fall; but love is eternal.

Part VII

Rebirth

“It is the narrow, hidden tracks that lead back to our lost homeland, what contains the solution to the last mysteries is not the ugly scar that life”s rasp leaves on us, but the fine, almost invisible writing that is engraved on our body.”

The Golem, Gustave Meyrink

The Sun Maiden

- Lithuanian Mythology -

Lovers find secret places

inside this violent world

where they make transactions

with beauty."

Rumi

A seabird trailed its song over the silent sea. Glaciers crackled in the stillness, and forests creaked under winter”s snow. The sun rose out of the east, over the ice fields and frozen lakes. Strands of copper crept over the earth, as the stars faded overhead.

For the people of this northern land, the Sun Maiden was the source of all light. They called her Saule, for she had been born a daughter of the earth. Only a few years before the God Perkunas had arrived from the east, Saule had fled into the forest, as he drove Velnius, Lord of the Dead, into the underworld, and Peikuolis, God of Spring, into the wild places. Wreathed in lightning, Perkunas had proclaimed himself Lord of Heaven.

Alone, Saule watched the flowers fade and wither, before turning away, and climbing up through the branches of an oak tree. Above the canopy, she raised her hands to the stars, a prayer on her lips. The storm raged for three days, but still she remained. Until, on the third night, the haunting song of the sea washed through her, and her body dissolved in the air.

Above the taiga, Saule, the Sun Maiden, awoke in the heavens, clad in cloth of gold, with bracelets of amber, and shimmering jewels. She peered down, to watch the clouds swirl and pattern the earth.

Many years passed this way until, one afternoon when she was combing her long, golden hair, a fire opal fell out of her diadem. She watched it hurtle through the clouds, a shooting-star of scarlet, green, and gold. Hurriedly, she descended, the glaciers were melting, with white water cascading down the mountains. With each step, the lakes burned fire bright, as a white tailed eagle soared upwards. In warning, it tried to approach her, but its feathers singed and charred. Drawing its final breath, she saw it plunge into the sea and, sadly, she returned to the heavens.

Alone, in that high place, she slipped off a layer of silk, a bracelet and a ring until, naked, she shifted her shape into a swan, and descended.

Through the dusk she flew, over the southern fells, and down towards the sea. On the soft sand, she resumed her shape, and drew down a slither of sky, robing herself, with the stars scattered over the birch forests, and she turned away.

Beside lakes and rivers she walked, until a grove of oak trees appeared before her. A nightingale sang, as she entered the ancient sanctuary. Stars hung in the branches, and roses bloomed around a man, asleep on the damp earth. Carefully, she stepped towards him. Ice glittered like a wreath of stars in his dark hair, and over the silver rings on his fingers. It was there, that she noticed a feint, golden light, spilling through his clenched hand. Resolved to return, she ascended to the heavens, veils of copper and gold, falling over the slumbering land.

On the second night, she wore her amber necklace, and descended, once more. Concealed in the night, she approached the grove. As before, wild roses bloomed, stars glinted in the branches, and the young man lay asleep on the earth. The Sun Maiden peeled back her cloak, golden light illuminating him. Pale anemones flowered all around. Hastily, she retreated into the shadows, as his eyes opened, and he sat up, staring about him. Smiling, he stood, and approached near to where she was hidden. She held her breath, not daring to move until, finally, he turned away, towards the edge of the grove. Gazing out into the night, he unclenched his right hand. Threads of scarlet, green, and gold fell over the snow, as the Sun Maiden disappeared into the night.

The next day, sunlight flickered over the earth, as she wandered restlessly through the sky. When night came, she robed herself in golden silk, bracelets of amber, and rings of topaz before, once more, she descended, concealed herself, and approached the grove. For the third time, the flowers bloomed, the stars hung in the branches, and she found him asleep, beneath the oak, with the opal clasped to his chest. Crouching down beside him, her hand hovered over his, before peeling his fingers apart. Lifting her eyes for a moment, she viewed his hair, crowned with flecks of ice, and his grey-green eyes. She gasped, as he grabbed hold of her wrist.

“What are you doing?” He said, pulling her down, as he sat up.

“The opal you have, it”s mine!”

“How do I know you”re telling the truth? Do you think I would give away something so precious to me, just because you say so?”

“How can it be precious to you, when you have only just found it?”

“How do you know?” He questioned her, as she pushed him away, her golden curls tumbling out from inside her hood. Sunlight flooded the grove, and he covered his eyes, as he stepped back.

“Who are you?” He asked, as she hurriedly tugged the hood over her head.

“It does not matter. Give me the opal!” She commanded him, but he turned and ran away, towards the sea. “Come back! Give it to me!” She shouted, as she ran after him.

“Only if you tell me who you are?” He replied, holding the opal aloft.

Beside the long swell of the sea, she watched him. The tang of salt was on her lips. Raising her hand towards him, she watched threads of gold weave around his face, veils of emerald-green flickering over the sea.

“I am...” She paused as, from the east, flew raven, black-winged, beneath the aurora, he swooped down, snatched the opal, and flew away, over the sea.

“Return to the forest. Don”t look back!” He stared at her. “Go now!” She commanded, before turning, and running over the sea. The waves burned gold, her cloak ragged around her body, as she moved.

Raven flew on, as the Sun Maiden leapt into the sky, and clasped his claw. Sunlight flooded the earth, and Raven felt his feathers singe. Dropping the opal, he flew away, towards the high fells, splintering the air with a cry. The Sun Maiden caught it, as she fell into the sea, the surging waves dragging her under.

From the shore, the man launched a boat. Against the churning sea he rowed until, at last, he reached her. Closing his eyes, he jumped into the boiling waters, feeling his skin burn, as he lifted her from the sea.

“I am Saule.” She whispered, as he threw his cloak over her, to quench the light. “Who are you?”

“My name is Menulis. I was born in the land of a thousand lakes. My mother bore me in secrecy, placed me in a basket of reeds, and set me in the river. The waters carried me out into the sea, whose waves bore me here. I have lived in the grove, where you found me, for most of my days, watching the procession of the stars, and tending to the flowers, and the seeds…” He paused, silence falling over the earth, as the waves blackened, and tore themselves apart.

Holding his body over her in protection, Menulis stared into the abyss, as they began to descend. Seawater gushed and thundered on his back, filling his mouth and ears before, slowly, it subsided, and he raised his head.

Peeling back his cloak, feint sunlight illuminated a subterranean river, flowing through a vast cavern. Nocturnal birds flew overhead, as the Sun Maiden”s skin paled, and her freckles faded.

“You have to wake up.” He whispered, lifting her hand, and placing it against her chest. Faintly, the opal glowed, before it melted, and trickled through her fingertips. Indeed, all of her golden jewellery melted, and flowed away, into the river, marbling the rushing water, that carried them out of the cavern, and into a wild land.

Overhead, the stars withdrew, as the river carved its way through a forest where, beyond, rose a ridge of mountains. Menulis took her in his arms, the swell of the distant sea reaching his ears. Steering the boat towards the right, the river emptied itself into a lake.

“Saule.” He whispered, leaning over the rail of the boat, as he guided it towards the shore.

Beneath the ragged sky, he lifted her up, and carried her over the damp earth. The ground was trembling, as they reached the edge of a forest.

Menulis saw her eyes flicker, as lightning flashed silver on the lake and, from the direction of the mountain, a black-scaled serpent, wearing a crown of bone, slithered over the earth. Trees burned, smoke coiling upwards, as thousands of black cranes flew through the air.

Menulis watched the serpent slither down to the lake, where, on reaching the shore, it reared up, its skin cascading, from the back of a one-eyed, old man. His beard was black and shot through with tufts of white. Horns protruded from his scaled forehead. Moss and brambles sprouted from cuts and gashes in his skin. He passed a hand, carved with archaic symbols, over the rail of the boat, before retrieving a silver ring. Menulis glanced down, and saw it was his own. The old man turned it over in his palm, before lifting his eyes to where they were crouched. Mist rolled down the mountain, and on over the lake, as the old man of the forest shifted his shape into a bear, and turned away, towards the east. With ragged breath, Menulis, the Sun Maiden in his arms, scrambled away, through the forest.

On reaching higher ground, he looked down, over the thrice nine kingdoms of the dead. The bear was grunting into the darkness, as it roamed over the marshes. Menulis retreated into a cave, kindled a fire, and made a bed of moss for the Sun Maiden. For a moment, she stirred, lifting her eyes to his.

They remained in the cave for many weeks, the waves of the distant sea rising and falling, the Sun Maiden remaining lost in the realm of the dead until, one night, Menulis heard a bear growl in the darkness. Crawling over to the mouth of the cave, a dagger in hand, he peered out. All down through the valley, mist drifted lit every now and then, by lightning. Menulis felt the damp moss, beneath his fingers, as the ground trembled. For a moment all was silent, and he placed the dagger on the ground. Lowering his eyes, he did not see a tail, scales glistening with mud and rain, coil around him. Menulis turned and clawed at the earth, as the serpent dragged him away.

Up ahead, a vast oak tree rose out of the earth, its topmost branches disappearing into the sky. Menulis glanced down, as the serpent flung him against the tree, and pinned him there with his tail. Blood dripped down his neck, and he saw the one eyed serpent rise up and, in that moment, he knew that it was Velnias, old man of the forest, and primordial god of the underworld.

Lightning stuck the ground, and he hissed, his fangs glistening with spittle. Menulis felt the roots of the tree coil around his ankles, and drag him down. He clawed at the bark, leaving gashes of silver on the tree, before crying out, as lightning struck the ground, once more. Velnias lashed his tail, as a feint, golden glow crept over the earth. Tasting soil on his lips, Menulis watched it too, as the Sun Maiden appeared, dagger in hand.

The serpent turned, coiled, and shifted its shape into a young man, with glittering, black, eyes. He walked towards her, but she remained resolute, the blade flashing silver. Velnias leaned in, and she pressed the tip of the blade against his chest. He laughed, bearing his foul teeth, as he raised his left hand, and summoned a whirlwind, that tore through the underworld.

Shades of the dead rose on the air, as the Sun Maiden turned, and thrust the blade into the heart of the storm. Incantations spilled from his tongue, but the air shattered, and fell as rain over the land. Lightning tore apart the sky once more, and Velnias scowled, before assuming the form of a raven, and flying away.

Rushing to Menulis, she laid a hand on the roots, that instantly raised him out of the mire. He viewed her tattered clothes, and the ancient runes that glinted, like pale gold, over her hands. He offered her his hand, and she accepted as, at that moment, her hair spun gold down her back, and gilded branches wove across her forehead. Menulis gazed at the fire opal, as the ground trembled, and a single bolt of lightning fell from the sky. It tore through the air and struck him, shattering his body into fourteen pieces. The Sun Maiden sank to her knees, as Perkunas, who had longed for her himself, withdrew into the upper world. Removing the cloth from her body, she wrapped up Menulis”s dismembered form, shifted her shape into a swan, and flew away.

The stars spun overhead, in a thousand glittering shades, as she cried out into the night. The earth echoed her lament, as she flew low over the ocean, and resumed her form, on the soft sand. Her tears became fragments of amber in the sea, as she walked away, to gather clover, heartsease, and violets.

Crouching over his broken form, she placed him back together, and crushed the flowers onto his chest. From her grief, golden threads flowed over him, and his body renewed itself.

He raised his eyes to her as, slowly, he stood, watching the sea flow on, towards the horizon. Clasping hands, they shifted into a pair of swans, and flew away, far over the sea, and on, up into the heavens, golden light rippling over the forests of oak and ash.

Along the starlit path they flew until, at last, they resumed their forms. The Sun Maiden kissed his cheek, and was gone. Alone in the darkness, Menulis watched her leave, with a fragment of amber in his hand, and a deep gash across his face.

As the tides ebbed and flowed, to his waxing and waning so, in winter, he would rise a little earlier, a pale wraith in the blue sky, as he watched her descend, in a shimmer of gold, into the sea. For, she was bound to go to the ends of the earth, where the silver apples grow, and descend with the dead, into the underworld, before rising anew each day.

The seasons unfolded this way for, despite the wrath of Perkunas, they loved each other, in secret. Thousands of years may pass, but still they will meet, for a few moments, each year, a golden halo, glimmering in the darkness, all the stars visible over the sea.

Orpheus

- Greek Mythology -

“He who lives in harmony with himself

lives in harmony with the universe.”

Marcus Aurelius

Orpheus entered the rock-hewn sanctuary. The air was heavy with incense. Maenads, standing either side of a stone altar, poured libations of wine. He offered storax bark to Dionysus, before they pushed him to his knees, tore at his clothes, and smeared his skin with white gypsum. Orpheus crawled out, onto the wooded hillside where, above on the mountain peak, torches burned.

Up, through the moonless night he climbed, snow crunching beneath his feet. Against the wind, he clutched at his ragged clothes. Chanting reached his ears, flames were sparking and figures dancing, amid the guttural beating of drums. As he approached, hands clawed at him, and crowned him with ivy.

On that lonely peak, those gathered there, danced and crushed grapes, beneath their feet. Manic cries erupted, as they slammed their hands onto the earth. Turning away from them, Orpheus raised his eyes to the stars.

At dawn he descended shivering, as he passed back into the forest. He hung a talisman on one of the branches, sacrificial tokens of bone, clinking in the silence. Walking on, beside a river that rolled through the woods, he inhaled the scent of the pine trees. Up ahead, the river plunged golden, in the light of the rising sun.

Exhausted, Orpheus clambered over the rocks, and down into a pool. Submerging himself and rising up, he thought he saw a woman, wearing a circlet of oak leaves, standing at the edge of the forest. He watched her for a moment, before the wind stirred on the high peaks, and she was gone.

Turning southward, Orpheus set sail for Kemet, the black land of Egypt. On the voyage, he heard the story of how Alexander had travelled through the western desert, to the oasis, where the shrine of Ammon stood. Orpheus thought of the oracle he had consulted, of the words of prophecy, that shifted beneath his feet. The city where he found himself was Alexandria, where cassia and saffron were traded, and thought and theory freely mingled. Orpheus wandered through the streets, perhaps drank the blue lily of the Nile, and sat before great sages in the temples.

In time, he returned home, offering Afghan lapis, to the temple of Apollo, before mounting his horse, and riding away, beneath the snowy peaks. As he passed through a laurel forest, the leaves flickered. Notes of harmony and beauty flowed around him. Orpheus dismounted from his horse, and cautiously approached the centre of the wood. Up ahead, the leaves shimmered around a lyre, hanging in one of the trees. It was gold-fretted, with six strings, and a quill of ivory. Orpheus raised his hands, and lifted it down, with no resistance. He turned, and climbed with the sun, out of the east.

From the high peak, he saw the distant ridges rise and fall, in shifting shades of blue. He knelt upon the ragged grass, the lyre of Apollo in his hands. Lightly, he struck the first string, and the sea surged. He struck the second string as, glancing down into the valley, primroses erupted, and blossom filled the trees.

Orpheus plucked each string in turn, the sun arching and descending, as the stars rose. Below, where the moonlit river plunged into a pool, he thought he saw that young woman, crowned with silver leaves. On a mountain peak, with moss beneath his head, and stars above, he dreamt about her.

The wind trembled over the strings of the lyre, singing faintly into the dying night, and charming the birds from their nests. At dawn, Orpheus rose, following a stream that fed a great river, which meandered its way southwards. In the distance, he heard the songs of the migrating birds, as he turned away, descending through gorges carved by ancient glaciers, and on, into a meadow. The conifer forests swayed in the breeze, as a palace of white marble came into view. Beside the silver lake, sat his mother, the clear-voiced muse, Calliope. Orpheus draped an arm around a slender column, and leant towards her, plucking the second string of the lyre.

“Orpheus.” She turned, lifting her violet eyes to him. “He meant for you to have it.” She smiled, and kissed him on the forehead.

“Will you teach me the sacred songs, before you leave?”

“Maybe, tomorrow, but for now…” She trailed off, her eyes leading his towards the lake, where a white swan had descended. Orpheus began to play, willow trees shimmering, as the swan circled seven times, before raising its slender neck.

“Mousêgetês.” Orpheus whispered Apollo”s sacred name, and felt an invisible presence guide his fingers over the strings.

For seven days, he remained by the lake, before walking away, through the moonlit woods, a song on his lips. From the starlit branches, he thought he heard a delicate voice echo his own. Pausing, he placed his hand on the trunk of a tree. Stepping away, he saw, for a fleeting moment, the silhouette of a woman. Orpheus exhaled, and she sank back into the bark. Beneath the tree, he settled, composing songs to her, until he drifted off to sleep.

The seasons turned, and still he played, pausing only to watch the swans leave for the north. Alone, beside the lake, Orpheus watched them take the starlit way, a lament rising from his lyre. The trees shed their leaves, and snow fell on the mountains, as the people of Thrace invoked Dionysus, from the springs and the vine.

It was at this time that Jason, son of Aeson of Thessaly, set sail in the Argo. Orpheus travelled with them, to the ancient kingdom of Colchis, a remote land, washed by the Black Sea, and rich in gold and honey. It was here, that Jason slew the serpent guardian of the Golden Fleece, and Medea murdered her half-brother. As they set sail once more, she dismembered his body, and offered his blood to the sea. Orpheus did look back, but quelled the waves, and eclipsed the song of the sirens with his lyre.

On the shore of Thrace, he bid them farewell, and climbed up, through the moonlit valley. Rivers gushed from their springs, and the nocturnal birds took to the air. The wild beasts lay down, and the flowers bloomed, as he passed by.

On a green hill, he played, and the trees began to move. Holm oak, poplar, cypress, and alder, all gathering, and creating a shaded grove. Orpheus played a love lilt, and the scent of roses perfumed the air. He thought he saw the bark of the oak tree soften, as he played the highest note. It was the luminous note of the moon. The note of his love.

Setting the lyre down, violets bloomed, as Orpheus placed his hand on the tree. It melted away at his touch. Bark became flesh, and sap became blood, as the tree parted its branches to reveal a young woman. He gazed at her, Eurydice, with oak leaves and wild roses in her hair. He lifted her down, and offered her his hand, as they walked through the meadow, and on towards the sea.

Eurydice collected seashells, while Orpheus sang songs of praise, and hymns of beauty. Summer was blossoming, as the waves pattered the shore. In the distance, birdsong rose from the forest, and the wind sighed, in perfect harmony.

At night, they walked beside the lake, admiring the stars, before they reached her lodgings, and Orpheus slipped bracelets of amethyst from his wrists, and gave them to her. Her lips brushed his cheek, before he turned, and disappeared into the night. Often, he would sleep beneath her window but, without fail, he would climb the heights of Pangseus, to greet the dawn.

Autumn arrived, in a shimmer of copper, as Orpheus walked to the grove, on their wedding day. Eurydice approached from the meadow, wearing a veil of saffron, and a crown of golden leaves. Orpheus smiled at her, and a hush fell over the earth, as Hymenaios came into view. The young god held his spluttering torch aloft, his voice trembling, as he married them.

“I will return to you soon. I promise.” Orpheus said, the lyre strung over his shoulder, as he turned away. His song surrounded her, her veil billowing in the wind. Poppies swirled, as she slipped off her sandals, and danced.

From the east, a serpent slithered towards Euridice. Circling, it crushed its fangs into her skin, and poured its poison into her veins. Eurydice cried out, and Orpheus”s lyre fell silent. He ran to her, but the wings of Thanatos had closed over her, and she was no more. Falling to the earth, he slammed his hands, and clawed up clumps of grass and soil. That night, he slept there, tracing the imprint of her body with his finger.

In the morning, the sun rose, full of blood, but he did not greet it. Instead, he turned, and strung a seventh string to the lyre. This was to be his note now, a guttural and sonorous cry. The first time he struck it, the wind wailed over the mountains, and the sea lashed at the shore.

Orpheus followed the sound of the waves, and lay down on the sand. The sea swirled around him, and carried his song to Thetis and Poseidon. Aimless, and alone, he slept in a cave, overlooking the sea. Weeks passed this way, until he left, and climbed the highest peak, to petition the gods. His lips pale, and his fingers raw, he played on, but still he heard nothing. Returning to the grove, he sank to his knees, an anguished cry escaping him, as the stars rained down.

Dawn broke all along the eastern shore, and Orpheus set out, on the path to the high gates of Dis. He descended, through a wooded valley, passed streams, that dashed through narrow gorges, and on, until he came to the River Styx. Torches burned, and the eyes of the ferryman, Charon, glinted in the dark.

Orpheus took up his lyre, passed the red thread through his fingers, and plucked the second string. The shades of the dead cried out, their arms outstretched, as he began to sing. For a while, Charon remained unmoved but his resolve soon failed, and he ferried Orpheus to the other side.

Seams of copper and gold flashed around him, as he ran, the ground trembling. Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld, howled into the darkness, its triple-headed shadow falling across his path. Playing on, Orpheus lulled it to sleep, before slipping through the bronze gates, past Minos, and into the Asphodel fields.

Entering the hall, he heard the feint warble of a bird, pale light washing the marble floor. Beyond the arched windows, lay the meadow and, further away, the plain of Lethe. Orpheus lingered behind one of the ebony columns, quill in hand. Persephone was watching him, as he brushed the first string. It thrummed, as he wove a luminous song of his love. Violets burst from the ground, and the cypress trees flickered silver. The scent of pine filled the air, as life pulsed and flowed around them. Persephone stepped down from her throne, in a shimmer of moonstones, circling him, as he charmed slender lilies from the floor.

In the roses and the linden meadows, Hades saw the world of his wife. As, fingers bleeding, Orpheus summoned the wild waves, and the stars from the heavens above. Grief and praise upon his lips he paused, the lingering vibration of the strings echoing out. Persephone looked at her husband, as the mirage disappeared. Hades stepped down from the throne and said:

“You may take her but, remember, Eurydice is a daughter of the earth, and her fate is set.”

Orpheus thanked them, and walked into the meadows. Up ahead Eurydice, limping slightly, from her wound, turned to him. Veiled and still wearing her bridal wreath, she clasped his hand, and followed him, away from the Stygian realm.

Ascending, he listened for her footsteps, but he could not hear them. Anger flared inside of him, and he went to turn his head, but a raven caught his eye, above. Onwards, Orpheus walked, until the feint rays of the sun warmed his face. At the edge of the forest, he turned to Eurydice, who was flesh once more.

They walked along the shore, collecting shells, as the sea washed their feet. Eurydice led him down into the waves, and took him into her arms. The sun sank, in a blaze of copper, as Orpheus lit a fire, Eurydice raising her sweet voice to the night.

At dawn, they walked through the wild flower meadow, and on, to the grove. Eurydice dressed her husband”s hair with cedar wood oil, and lay down next to him on the earth. They watched the sky, through the trees, as Orpheus heard the wind pass over the strings of the lyre. He sat up. Something glinted gold, behind one of the trees. It was the caduceus of Hermes. The messenger god looked beyond, to Eurydice, pale gold upon her eyes and lips, like those of the Thracian dead. Orpheus huddled over her body, as Hermes stepped forward, and she disappeared, in a flurry of blossom, that spilled through his arms, and away over the mountains.

Alone in the grove, Orpheus stood, and ran back through the chaotic realm, to the river Styx. He pleaded, and flung golden coins into Charon”s skiff but, each time, the ferryman denied him. Orpheus raised his lyre. He tried to sing, he tried to play, but everything felt disjointed.

Orpheus sank to his knees, beside the river of sorrow. Lingering on the brink, for seven days and seven nights, his golden sandals tarnished from his wanderings, his robes frayed. Only the song of the nightingale broke his longing for death.

Returning to the lake, he raised a marble tomb, and left wild flowers to Euridice’s memory. Before the seasons turned, he departed from Thrace. A lone figure, his lyre slung over his shoulder, he wandered through foreign lands. He communed with no one as, life for Orpheus, had lost all meaning. Beside the sea, he removed the amulets from his neck, and offered them to the waves. He lay down inert, his lyre clutched to him, as the sea ebbed, and his song left him.

Under the moonless night, he writhed, longing to dissolve into sea-foam, and be released from his suffering. The waves crashed on his body, bruising his flesh, as the wind evoked strange music from his lyre. When day broke, he turned and left for his ancestral lands. Treading the path that led towards the high mountains, he returned to the grove, and curled up on the earth. Overhead, the leaves flickered, and his fingers lightly brushed the lyre’s strings. His lips parted, and his voice trembled until, at long last, he began to sing, once more. However, he did not sing of the flowering earth, but of the realm of Hades, and the sorrow of his own heart.

Pausing for a moment, Orpheus watched a young man climb up through the valley, towards him. He knelt before Orpheus, and offered flax bread, and wild strawberries. Orpheus thanked him, and gladly shared with the youth, who glanced at him; at his tender smile, cheeks hollowed by grief, and his eyes, brown with the faintest trace of amber.

As the days passed more men gathered on the hillside, from the young, to the battle weary. Breaking bread together, they shared in song, and listened to Orpheus. Through his music and his teachings, the sacred mysteries of life, and of their own hearts, became known to them.

After three years, Orpheus took his leave from them. He wandered down, through the pines and hornbeams of the western slopes where, beside a river, he removed his lyre and laid it down. He watched the clouds drift overhead, ivy creeping towards him. He saw the sky flush crimson, as a scream tore through the air. Orpheus opened his eyes, to see a group of women, huddled over him. Wild-eyed, they descended on him, ripping his clothes, and tearing at his flesh. He held his lyre against his chest, but they flung it aside, and into the river. Orpheus tried to fight them off, but there were too many of them. With the strength of a thousand wild animals, they tore his body to shreds, and discarded his severed head into the river.

The muses withdrew from the mountain springs, and rushed to Calliope, who was standing on the blood-soaked soil. Violets bloomed, as she gathered his fragmented form, wrapping him in silk, and clutching him to her chest, as she turned away.

Winter descended over the land, as the river flowed into the sea, and his head and lyre washed ashore on the island of Lemnos. The wind plucked the strings, and a young woman, who was collecting shells, ran over to it. The head of Orpheus still dripped with fresh blood and, without decay, his lips sang.

The lyre was placed in the temple of Apollo, and his head Calliope laid in the temple of Dionysus. There, a serpent coiled itself around his neck, and turned to stone. From then on, Orpheus began to utter prophecies until, after a few years, Apollo himself came to silence him. It was at this time that Zeus set the lyre in the heavens, as the constellation Lyra, and his mother buried his bones within the grove. The nightingales sang sweetly, before flying away over the sea.

The waves and winds mingled, in echo of Orpheus”s song. For, as his shade passed into Hades, to be once more united with Eurydice, so the beauty he had invoked, lingered on. In the roses, the wild flowers, and the starlit forests, he would be remembered, and live again.

Life. Death. Life. Truth. Dionysus. Orphics.

Ouroboros

Strive to discover the mystery before life is taken from you. If while living you fail to find yourself, to know yourself, how will you be able to understand the secret of your existence when you die?

Attar

The symbol of eternity is ouroboros, the snake devouring its own tail. It echoes the cycles of life, of the arching and descending of the sun, and the phases of the moon. It is the eternal cycle of renewal, of rebirth from death, and the continual nature of the universe.

One of the oldest mystical symbols in the world, ouroboros, is the symbol of the alchemical work, of the self, the sun, and the circle that represents the attainment of completion and perfection.

Two entwined serpents symbolise the union of opposites. To the alchemists, this union, or mystical marriage, was seen in the sun and moon, the red and white rose, and the man of heart, and the woman of wisdom.

The Hermeticists, who emerged in late antiquity, viewed men and women, as having always been androgynous, androgyny here, symbolising perfection and wholeness. This is seen in Plato”s Symposium, where it is written that, originally there were three kinds of human beings. Men were descended from the sun, women from the earth, and a third was androgynous, with both male and female elements, who were descended from the moon. He told of how powerful they were and, because of this, how Zeus had sliced them in half. “After [this] division, the two parts , each desiring the other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one. Each of us, when separated, is always looking for the other half… And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love.”

Here we might think of romantic love which, since the decline of spirituality, has become almost, our only arena for seeking meaning, wholeness and transcendence. This is a lot of pressure, and it will not be the right thing for everyone.

When we fall in love, we are filled with excitement, and then…disillusionment. Disappointment, because they are not who we thought they were, and because we are not who they thought we were, so, often, we split, when what needed to be done was to relate to the other person as a human being, as they are, without all of our hopes, dreams and expectations projected onto them. This only suffocates. This only causes one relationship, after another, to fail until, we realise that, all along, we just need to open up; that we needed to do the hard work, to see that idealistic, romantic love give way, to enduring love, and companionship. It may not be as exciting, but is a whole lot more rich and fulfilling. Until we realise the importance of transmuting passion into compassion, we will be like the sun, who smears the face of her damned lover, the moon, with ashes.

The dark side of nature has long been associated with the moon. it is a symbol of eternity and enlightenment, as well as an analogy for life. Because of this, it has been worshipped all over the world, and its lunar cycles recorded by our ancestors. An example of this can be found in the fifteen thousand year old paintings in the Lascaux cave, in France.

To the Inuits, the moon is the abode of the dead, where their shamans go, to learn about death and life from “the other side.” Certain European mythologies echo this, with the moon, not only as the place where the dead go, but as the dwelling place of the moon king, and the ancestral spirits.

As a moon god, Menulis, is one, in a long line of forgotten masculine moon deities, found in many countries; from Africa, Germanic, Maori, Japanese, and so on. A few of these deities, Dionysus, Osiris, and Orpheus, also suffered death by dismemberment. This is reminiscent of the phases of the moon, and the shamanic initiation.

Just as the moon is dismembered and renews, so the gods die, and are reborn as symbols of the immortality of the soul. A sign of hope, that even the most tattered soul, or life, can be healed, and brought back to its fullness.

Osiris suffered death, at the hands of his brother Set (Seth), who cut up his body into fourteen pieces, which is also the number of the nights of the waning moon. He then scattered and buried the pieces all over Egypt. Because of this, Egypt became known as the land of the moon.

Osiris”s consort, Isis, gathered all the pieces, and embalmed him. One of the coffin texts is thought to indicate that Isis is impregnated with their son Horus, by a flash of lightning. Soon after this, however, Osiris passed into the Duat, and became God of the Underworld.

Lightning has long been associated with fertility, initiation and, for Buddhists, the death of illusion, and the birth of enlightenment. The old tales tell us that Orpheus, like Menulis, was struck by lightning, a bolt, that was thrown by Zeus, in punishment for revealing the mysteries.

We are told that Orpheus had tried to reform the Dionysian mysteries, because they had lost their way, and become debauched. This is not uncommon. For: “indescribable practices, such as Bacchanalia, were introduced, and perversion ruled supreme; for no institution can be any better than the members of which it is composed.” This often happens, when secret traditions, and core meanings, become lost, or when money and power are involved.

As a Thracian Prince and a shaman, Orpheus brought harmony and balance. What happened after his death, is symbolic of this. The lyre was placed in the Temple of Apollo, while his head rested a while in the sanctuary of Dionysus. This may be seen as a shamanic motif, as the skulls of deceased Yukagir shamans, in Eastern Siberia, used to be enshrined and employed, for divination.

Another shamanic thread is seen in the Siberian shamans, who were said to be able, by their music, to summon birds and beasts to listen to them. Orpheus”s journey to the underworld may also be viewed in shamanic terms, as a journey to recover a lost or stolen soul.

Even in death, Orpheus stands between, and unites, Apollo and Dionysus. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, in the *Birth of Tragedy*, that: “now in art, in our living, we can accent the light that we lose touch with, the dark energy and dynamism of the time factor, within us, and then we become stilted, dry, dead. In contrast to the vitality of transformation. The problem of art, and life, is to balance these two.”

If we see Dionysus as representing the: “thrust of time, that destroys all things, and brings forth all things”, we may see Orpheus as a metaphor for what happens when we become unbalanced. Life stagnates. All things die but, if everything is energy, then nothing dies, instead it is transformed.

From a spiritual point of view, the immortality of the soul, and/or renewal of nature, is symbolised by the world saviour, who dies, and is reborn. Orpheus may be viewed this way for, as Rilke wrote:

“Erect no gravestone for him. Only this:   
let the rose blossom each year for his sake.  
For it is the god. His metamorphosis  
in this and that. We do not need to look.”

To be balanced means to be in harmony with oneself and all things. Joseph Campbell wrote that the: “the Fall in the garden [of Eden], became the fall into Maya, into the realm of illusory pairs of opposites.” For Campbell, the “goal of meditation and mystery journeys is to go between the pairs of opposites – [for] the transcendent transcends the pairs of opposites.”

To be able to hold two opposing views, enables us to be more compassionate. When we are stressed, it is very difficult to see things as they really are. The newspapers often tell us that people are divided into two camps, good or evil. This is not true. People commit evil acts, of this there is no question. Just look at how, throughout our history, we have desensitised ourselves to terrible atrocities, but this is not a natural way of living. I believe that we all possess a good heart, but we harden ourselves to others, and to ourselves. Unable to empathise, because of a lifetimes hurt, vile acts, or even numbed by drugs and convenience culture. How many of us have inflicted old wounds on to others, or made the same mistakes our parents did?

One of the main problems is that, as a society, we tend to give up on people very easily. In his book *Human Aggressiveness*, Antony Storr writes of how: “those who have received more recognition, and who consequently have incorporated a greater sense of their own worth, will be able to interact with others in a less hostile fashion. But everyone, however fortunate their childhood experience, continues to need self-affirmation. We all require recognition as individuals possessing separate identities.”

There is aggression, and then there is assertiveness. We need this, to enable us to keep good boundaries, and tackle our problems with confidence. Research has shown that: “those suffering from severe depression, feel both helpless and hopeless; and we regularly find that such feelings are the consequence of repressing aggression.”

For the young, as we have seen, there is no initiation. No elders. This is a great part of our history, which has been neglected. The: “primitive rites of initiation…were intended to solve the problem of getting growing persons over the first great threshold of their development. From childhood dependency to adult responsibility. These rites, commonly included scarification, and certain minor surgeries. Such rites were carried out so that the persons could realise they no longer had the same body they had as children. They could look at themselves afterwards, and see that they were different, that they were no longer children. This socially-ordered cutting, branding, and cropping was to incorporate them, mind and body into a larger, more enduring, cultural body, whose explanatory mythology became their own.”

Without this understanding, we are at risk of living our lives dependent on others. If we allow ourselves to be judged by our job title, and believe that we are solely the contents of our thoughts and minds, we will struggle, because this is not true.

In the 1970”s, Terrence McKenna, wrote about what has, perhaps, become more of a problem recently. “We have to create culture, don”t watch TV, don”t read magazines… Create your own roadshow… If you”re worrying about Michael Jackson or Bill Clinton or somebody else, then you are disempowered, you”re giving it all away to icons, icons which are maintained by an electronic media, so that you want to dress like X, or have lips like Y. This is shit-brained, this kind of thinking. That is all cultural diversion, and what is real is you, and your friends, and your associations, your highs, your orgasms, your hopes, your plans, your fears. And we are told “no”, we”re unimportant, we”re peripheral. “Get a degree, get a job, get a this, get a that.” And then you”re a player, you don”t want to even play in that game. You want to reclaim your mind and get it out of the hands of the cultural engineers, who want to turn you into a half-baked moron, consuming all this trash that”s being manufactured out of the bones of a dying world.”

It is often said that the brighter the flame, the larger the shadow. Italo Calvino explains this best: that “the more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze with ghosts. Dreams of progress and reason are haunted by nightmares…At the height of the enlightenment, Sade and the Gothic novel appeared.” This also true of most countries. They appear abundant, and prosperous, but their success casts a shadow over the devastation being done to the environment, to their people, and to animals.

The Sufi poet, Rumi, wrote that: “you must ask for what you really want. Don”t go back to sleep.” five hundred years later, the American poet William Stafford, echoed this call:

“For it is important that awake people be awake,

or a breaking line may discourage them back to

sleep;

the signals we give – yes or no, or maybe –

should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.”

The darkness around us is deep. Every day, we wake up, and try to make it through another twenty four hours. We try to grasp life, to contain it, and control it, but it cannot be done. At some point in our lives, our best-laid plans fail us. The bottom falls out of our world, because we lose a loved one, find a lump, or get made redundant, and so on. We realise then, that we have become strangers to ourselves, that we have been living lives of ’quiet desperation.’ In passive subjugation, we have clung to rigid beliefs, and thought patterns, because they are all we have ever known.

We haven”t contemplated the true nature of things. We”ve given over our lives and, any time spare, to ’twittering screens.’, watching electronic reproductions of life, which are distracting, depressing and violent. As Alan Watts noted, in the 1970s: “One can only draw the conclusion that the assumption, underlying this, is that expressions of physical love are far more dangerous, than expressions of physical hatred. And it seems to me that a culture, that has that sort of assumption, is basically crazy and devoted – unintentionally, indeed, but nevertheless in fact devoted, not to survival, but to the actual destruction of life.”

We must break away from this monotonous existence, and find balance; we must find out what is waiting for us, on the other side of fear; on the other side of everything, we thought we knew. As we have seen, that which is rigid must break. For, natural life is against stagnation. Life always finds a way, because: “life supports only what supports life.”

We may feel that life has become unnatural; the earth a wasteland, that place where: “people live inauthentic lives, blindly following the norms of their society, without the conviction that comes from deeper understanding.” We suffer, and many of us live without hope. I think we are at crisis point. The earth is at crisis point. Our health is at crisis point.

Despite all of this, I do not think that the situation is hopeless. So, what can be done? Well, change begins with you, by your taking responsibility for your life. Begin by implementing small changes; trust intuition and instinct once more. It is, also, vitally important that we use our bullshit-detectors, to question everything. Remember, doctors in the 1950s, used to endorse tobacco. It”s all profits before people. Educate yourself.

You might also be surprised at what one person can do. What can one person do? For example, those who eat a plant-based diet will, on average, over a year, save four hundred and one thousand five hundred gallons of water; Fourteen thousand six hundred pounds of grain which, instead of going to the animals, can go to those who are starving. 7,300 lbs of Co2. 10,950 sq. feet of forest, and 198 animals, which are not be bred into existence. All in one year. Any change is better than no change. It must always be sustainable.

Therefore,, you can make a difference. Everything you do, each day, has an effect in the wider world, because you matter, your life matters. You are not defined by what car you drive, or the size of your pay packet. You are defined by your actions. You cannot advocate moral responsibility to cultural norms, because you have power. Every pound you spend has an effect. It is all about supply and demand. This is the law of cause and effect, in action. We are all creators. Every thought and action shapes, and creates, reality for ourselves, those around us, and the wider world.

As we have seen, the things we were bullied about, the wounds we carry, affect our daily lives. It takes strength to look at ourselves: “it is much easier to deny, blame others, project elsewhere, or bury it, and just keep rolling. It is, at these moments of human frailty, when we are most dangerous to ourselves, our families, and our society.”

The ancient texts of the Hermetica tells us that: “Negativity attracts more negativity…Hate attracts more hate…if you do not reconsider, and reverse your path, your negativity will increase.” Every action has a reaction. To care or to neglect, that is our choice. Thinking about life opens us up to new ways of thinking. It is this awareness that brings compassion.

Alongside this, I think it is vital to remember that we all contain shades of light and dark. There is no creation, without destruction, no enlightenment, without disillusionment. We can all be selfish, egotistical, manipulative, and vain. No one is perfect but, what matters is the awareness of these feelings, and whether we decide to act on them or not. We often oscillate between life”s extremes but, as long as we strive for balance, align our acts with our beliefs then, with hope, we will avoid being a slave to the pendulum effect, and swinging between extremes.

Among the stories of the Grail, is the tale of Parsifal. Interpreted through the French as *per-ce-val*, we see that his name means: ’through the middle.’ This where the pair of opposites have withdrawn, where the Grail, as the source of eternal refreshment, and inspiration, is revealed. This path may be seen as the ’golden mean’ or ’middle way’, which is the path between two extremes.

These two extremes are often seen as black and white. For J.J Bachoften, these colours are the colours of the ghost world, of the Beyond. Throughout world cultures, like that of the Spartans, who wore white mourning clothes, these two shades are interchangeable, when it comes to death and mourning.

When the shadow of death falls across our path, we are reminded how short our life is. It gives us perspective. It asks us: what are our regrets? What relationships need healing? What fears, what group of people, what beliefs, are holding us back from growing up, and realising our full potential?

Choices bring grief. Decisions bring grief. The grief is for all the things left behind, for the things we didn”t do. Everything is a trade-off, if you can focus on what you are gaining. Fernando Pessoa wrote that: “we all have two lives: The true, the one we dreamed of in childhood and go on dreaming of as adults, in a substratum of mist; and the false, the one we love when we live with others, the practical, the useful, the one we end up by being put in a coffin.”

As we have seen, points of crisis in life should be viewed as a call to examine one”s life. Dante wrote, at the beginning of *Inferno:* “in the middle of the journey of life, I found myself in a dark wood.” As we know, the woods are a place of change and initiation, in all fairy tales. It is the: “realm of death, the secrets of nature, or the spiritual world, which man must penetrate, to find the meaning.”

Many, however, do not find meaning. Upon reaching middle age, or the second maturation, many slip into depression, suffer a breakdown, have an affair, or hit the bottle. Why is this? I believe it is because, as a society, we don”t value age. We are obsessed with youth. We are obsessed with our looks and so on. Perhaps, part of this is linked to business because, people who are content, just aren”t good for profits. They feed on our insecurities. They tell you that you need this perfume, and that car. If you wear these jeans, drink this soda, you too will be instantly happy and beautiful, like all these paid models…but it doesn”t work. It”s marketing. We consume, feel unfulfilled, and consume some more. This is the cycle that breaks us, but makes businesses lots of money.

When we understand this, we may feel angry or hurt; when we realise that we are trying to self-medicate ourselves with alcohol; trying to manage our anxiety by washing our hands, over and over again; that our fear of loneliness keeps us in a bad relationship, or we leave for a relative stranger who, we believe, will change our lives for us. If we realise the truth, we may feel even lonelier, but we are in the process of becoming free.

Knowledge and action bring power. To live the second half of your life, as a rehash of your twenties, is a great mistake. I believe that the teenage years, along with the majority of the twenties are some of the toughest years. You are young, the world is your oyster, as they say, but you make the mistake of thinking that the world revolves around you; that the more friends, and money you have, the happier you”ll be. But it”s not true, because it”s a hard time. There”s no crossover, no initiation, and no help. All I can say is, be true to who you are, you will get through it. You will. No matter how black and bleak it is, you will get through it. Just the same as, when you are older, and you face a different stage of life, you just have to hold on, and try to find meaning in the depression, and the trials that you face.

You are not alone. Isolated maybe, but not alone. Change is always possible. You are never too young, or old, to take those tiny steps, to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I”m not saying it”s easy, it”s not: “the individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often and, sometimes, frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.”

We will all go through good days and bad days, it”s all part of it: “To receive, we must give. To be fed, we must feed. To live, we must die…To assimilate, we must transform.” In our lives, we can often feel that we are going backwards, not forwards, but: “growth is cyclical, not inflationary. The motion of the soul is circular, says Plotinus. Death, decay, and the filth of our lowest deeds and thoughts – all passed through, and so transformed.”

Every day, every moment thoughts and cells are dying, and being reborn. These two principles may be seen in Hindu mythology, with “Shakti, who always holds the universe together, so that the masculine can do: Shiva”s dance, without getting lost in space.” Shiva also uses his powers of destruction and recreation, to destroy the illusions and imperfections of this world, and create a new opportunity for beauty and change to unfold. He is the transformer, who brings about the death of the ego thus, making him a source of good or evil, depending on your point of view.

This is the old story of light being born of darkness. Orpheus”s name is derived from Phanes, meaning “I bring to light”. A figure of shining light, he is the ancient archetype of creation, of singing stars, and the father of Nyx (night). Worshiped by the Orphics, alongside Zagreus, Phanes was the elder Eros. He was the primordial god, and king of the universe, who emerged from the golden egg, when it separated, to form heaven and earth.

The golden egg is a symbol of perfection and creation, and corresponds to the golden ratio. A few examples of this divine proportion can be seen, in the design of the Great Pyramid at Giza, and the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. Here, as in Chartres Cathedral, harmony and proportions are employed, through sacred art and architecture. In Art, there are: Da Vinci”s *Mona Lisa* and Botticelli”s *Birth of Venus*,and, in nature:sunflowers, spiral galaxies and shells, and so on.

The golden ratio was of particular interest to Pythagoras, who showed how the human body is built with each part in a golden proportion to all other parts.

This harmony is also seen with numbers. For Pythagoras, the even numbers were feminine, and the odd numbers masculine. ‘One’ was neither male nor female. It was the monad, from which all things were born. This is also seen in the Tao Te Ching, where: “the one produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced all things.” This is the primordial voice, the great creative shout, the Hindu *Om* and, to modern minds, the Big Bang.

Pythagoras regarded Orpheus as a prophet, and he evolved his teachings on the musical scale and the sacredness of numbers. Iamblichus wrote that: “Pythagoras considered that music contributed greatly to health, if used in the right way…his followers would sing in unison certain chants…At other times his disciples employed music as medicine, with certain melodies composed, to cure the passions of the psyche...anger and aggression.”

This belief, that music could bring harmony to body and mind, as well as to heal, was held all over the world. In Egypt, with its expression of resonant vowel sounds in the magical tradition of Heka, to the indigenous elders of Australia, who have played the yidaki (digeridoo), near the sick, to help them heal, for at least forty thousand years. Even Ayahuasca is said to susceptible to sound, especially the human voice. Because of this, the shamans direct the medicine, by singing magical songs, or *Icaros,* that they say the plant-spirits and teachers gave them.

The mingling of music and healing is also seen with the sun god Apollo. Once, a wandering musician, some sources say that he was Orpheus”s father or, at least, that Orpheus was his priest. In her incredible book, *Orpheus: Song of Life*, Jan Wroe, writes of how Orpheus received his lyre from Apollo. It has “seven strings, you may see them as the seven spheres, which will lead the souls to heaven…they can be the rainbow’s seven colours, splitting out of white light…while, beyond the sixth note, lies the dissolution of all created things…it is Saturn”s note, perhaps a Thracian one, distant and strange…[yet] all revolves around the mese, the middle string, as creation, in Orpheus”s philosophy revolves around love.”

As one of the most enigmatic and enduring archetypes, Orpheus, the musician, reminds us of the eternal quality of music. A universal language, that helps express the joys and sorrows of life; helps express the love that: “sets up resonances, in the deepest abysses of our being…A lightning flash of the eternal, within the flow of time.”

Orpheus”s love for Eurydice was transcendent, a divine love, like that seen between Dante and Beatrice. Through his love, perhaps, some would say projection, she became the guide for his soul that led him through the three realms, through hell, or the: “path into darkness, [where] silence and suffering [are] the *via negative,* through which God becomes apparent. The one who could not be grasped, said Plotinus, until all images had been banished from the mind, all material things stripped away, even the self forgotten.”

This idea of surrendering, and dissolving, into the source of all things, is an ancient one. Menulis”s death is death in service to the virgin goddess, the god who dies, so that the goddess may live, and return from the underworld. There is also the motif of the goddess who descends to the underworld, to her consort and, in doing so, brings eternal life to both of them.

Sun worship is found all over the world. From the rites of the Druids, to the religions of Central America, and sun temples. There are also over a hundred feminine and masculine sun deities.

They are symbol of the light, which brings, and sustains, all life, symbols of eternity and wisdom. To our ancstors, the sun was believed to descend into the underworld, each night, before rising, once more, in the morning. It was also seen to be at full strength and vitality, around the time of the summer solstice, before it began to wane in strength, during the year. It was seen, during winter, to be in an enchanted sleep, or asleep in a cave. It was then seen to pass, through the constellation of Virgo (the virgin), and be reborn, around the time of the winter solstice (our December 21st.)

Sacrifice and self-mutilation were widely practised by the solar cults. The Maya and Aztec”s would pierce their ears and tongue, with cactus thorns. Sacrifice was believed to restore balance. For, our ancestors saw how, in nature, death feeds new life.

Their fear of eternal darkness, or of the wolf, who is foretold to swallow the sun, may not mean anything to us. We have certainly been lucky, however because, for our ancestors, there have been periods when this darkness, temporarily, came true. An example of this can be seen in 1816, also known as the year without a summer. This was the result of Mt Tambora in Indonesia, which erupted in 1815, causing devastation to crops and livestock, in the northern hemisphere.

We have an uneasy relationship with darkness. It is said that, when Nietzsche stared into the abyss, all he saw was the abyss, staring back at him. Without spiritual understanding, we, too, may feel that this world is empty, and meaningless; that we should plunge ourselves into that heart of darkness. However, the philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote of a darkness, within the darkness, being the gateway to all understanding. Indeed, Eastern religions aim to bring about in us: “an experience of our identity, with that void, which is no void.” That which is beyond all imagining and description.

For the Ishraquiyun, a mystic sect from the Middle East, they saw the luminous darkness, as the hidden face of God. While Dionysius the Areopagite, wrote of a “Ray of Darkness”, to describe the hidden things of God, and the Welsh poet, Henry Vaughn, wrote:

“There is in God (some say),   
A deep but dazzling darkness.”

To the mystics, the human longing for oblivion, for annihilation, was really the soul, longing to merge with the Great Spirit, the All, or God; an echo of the great struggle, between Thanatos, or Death (always longing for extinction), poised against Eros, as the life force.

Alongside the mysteries of life and death, our ancestors sought to teach the essence of spirituality, which was, for them, an integral part of life, just like spirituality, which finds its root in the Latin word *Spiritus*, from spiro, meaning “to breathe” .

This is seen in a prayer, by Chief Yellow Lark, of the Lakota tribe:

Oh, Great Spirit,   
whose voice I hear in the winds  
and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me.  
I am small and weak.  
I need your strength and wisdom.

Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes  
ever behold the red and purple sunset.  
Make my hands respect the things you have made  
and my ears sharp to hear your voice.  
Make me wise so that I may understand  
the things you have taught my people.  
Let me learn the lessons you have hidden  
in every leaf and rock.

I seek strength, not to be superior to my brother,   
but to fight my greatest enemy - myself.  
Make me always ready to come to you  
with clean hands and straight eyes,   
so when life fades, as the fading sunset,   
my spirit will come to you  
without shame.

The Great Spirit was believed to permeate all things. It is a thread which runs through all mystery traditions, and finds itself in the core-teachings, based around love and compassion. It may be seen as the energy of the universe, or pure consciousness. The thread on which all things are threaded. The snake whose coils symbolise the cycles of time.

Alan Watts wrote that: “every one of us is an aperture, through which the whole cosmos looks out. It”s as if you had a light, covered with a black ball and, in this ball, were pinholes, and each pinhole is an aperture, through which the light comes out. So, in that way, every one of us is actually a pinhole, through which the fundamental light, that is the existence, itself looks out. Only the game we are playing is not to know this…your skin doesn”t separate you from the world; it”s a bridge, from which the external world flows into you, and you flow into it…what you are basically, deep, deep down, far, far in, is simply the fabric and structure of existence itself.” Truth is universal, although it is presented in many forms. For this reason, I believe that it should be sought through many pathways, not just religion or atheism. We are all different, we have different life experiences, but we should all have the opportunity to explore our consciousness and what, if anything, lies beyond. I am not trying to convince you about anything, I just want you to keep an open mind. To ask questions, and think about things.

For our ancestors, the soul was immortal; a spark of consciousness, of divine matter, trapped within each of us. To the Orphics, Dionysus symbolised this divine spark. Because, as myth tells us, we are descended from the Titans who killed, dismembered, and ate the infant Dionysus.

This death, and rebirth, was symbolised in the crushing of grapes, to make wine, a drink symbolic of the life-blood, and sacred to Dionysus. Turning grapes into wine is also a Sufi metaphor, as Rumi wrote:

“In the end I shall be at an end.

Nothing but grief and love mixed

In a dark transparent wine

You down in one gulp.”

This was to be Orpheus”s fate, to lose Eurydice and, for his music, to die with her: to be paralysed, by despair and trauma which: “even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls, drop by drop, upon our heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom, by the awful grace of God.”

This is the trauma which can leave us broken by the pain. As with grief, it takes time to heal, but you just keep going, with patience, just as the moon dies, and grows, gradually each month.

This really is the essence of all the secret teachings, to die, and be reborn, into an honest, and authentic life. Into *your* life. When this happens, it is a: “weird, yet friendly feeling, that we have always been who we are, that we are nothing but the unveiling of things decided upon long ago.”

All the myths and stories, in this book, have followed the stages of one”s life, and the cycles of birth, death and rebirth, so prevalent in nature, and world mythology. As we have seen, love breaks curses. It is a balm, that softens the hard contours of life. While beauty, often something neglected, is also capable of doing this. Natural beauty is restorative. Time spent in nature, the scent of lavender and roses, or amber and pine, calm and freshen the senses.

Beauty is for everyone. It is not fake, but a natural part of life; the combination of wholeness, harmony and radiance. It brings meaning, as Goethe said: “it is the divine feminine, that draws us upwards, and on.”

Sadly, though, our society has some twisted ideas about beauty. We have our worth and beauty measured by industry standards. So much time is spent on appearance, on the exterior, that many remain empty on the inside. Without a foundation, either jealousy creeps in, or women turn away from it all. Feeling valid as a woman, as a human being, should be a birthright, but it”s not.

I have seen so many young women, trapped by their eating disorder, and afraid to attempt recovery, because of the likes, comments, and followers, they receive. When I was anorexic, I didn”t feel like a woman and, in recovery, I didn”t either, because of how pervasive the modelling industry is. It is rubbish, we should not applaud girls for being too thin, or overweight. At these polar extremes, both are unhealthy.

I believe that we need more tenderness, resilience, and beauty in this world. Gary Lachman, in his book, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*, asks: “If we are not living for beauty – what we perceive to be in accord with our own soul, then we are not living an authentic life and we will find this out, sooner or later. Knowledge of beauty is knowledge of soul. It is self-knowledge and, when we discover beauty, we are discovering a part of ourselves. We can learn of beauty only from beauty; no amount of theory can lead us to it. So what is our daily experience? Are we poisoning our own waters?” Again, we return to awareness. Cringe, cringe, cringe, I know, but it”s true.

The Ancient Egyptians saw, and treated life as, a gift. They knew that everyone makes mistakes. That our life was more like a sculpture that you keep working on, keep learning from. It may not feel like it, sometimes. We all have those moments when we hate it; whn we curse our parents, for bringing us into this world, but each, and every one, of us has a choice, over how we live our lives. We have a choice, in every minute, of every day - do we cause suffering and heartache? Or, do we try, as best as we can, to be kind and compassionate?

Charles Bukowski reminds us: “we”re all going to die, all of us, what a circus! That, alone, should make us love each other - but it doesn”t. We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities, we are eaten up by nothing.”

So what can be done? Know yourself. Find the fire in yourself. Strive for balance in life and, more than anything, remember the words of Alan Watts, that life: “was a musical thing, and you were supposed to sing, or to dance, while the music was being played.”