

A photograph of a dense forest with tall trees and a path leading through them. The trees are mostly deciduous with green leaves, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves and grass. The lighting is soft, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

ARRIVING HERE
The Journey Begins

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One evening, as my childhood was edging into adolescence, I sat on a swing, watching the sun set...and my perception of the universe changed forever.

Who knows how it happened...perhaps a rogue ray of sunlight dazzled my eyes into vision...perhaps the hypnotic creak of the chain in its hook lulled my mind into trance...perhaps years of intuitions finally, effortlessly merged...whatever the cause, my consciousness suddenly opened into a net of Light that enfolded all that existed.

Everything was alive and aware...not only humans and animals, but stones, trees, water, earth, stars, sun...not only the natural but the artificial as well, furniture, cars, houses, dolls, the swing on which I sat.

All was energy and awareness, and all the awarenesses mingled. The pain of one brought shadow to others; the joy of one brought light to others. There was no separation between the awarenesses, and together they formed a totality of Love that I identified as God.

I sat in the midst of this light-web of Awareness, enthralled by its intricate immensity, until the last ray of sunlight vanished.....

When I came racing into the house to tell my mother of the experience that had changed my perception of God and the cosmos, she responded – good and careful Catholic that she was – “We don’t believe that, dear, that’s pantheism, it’s heresy.” And in one moment my encounter with an all-encompassing, transcendent and immanent, loving Divine Awareness became just as sinful as it was undeniable.

My lifelong spiritual quest began at that moment: somehow to find a way, a place in which the essential Reality I had experienced could be recognized as true and valid. Somehow to find a way in which I was not alone in this most sacred and numinous experience...the most *right* experience I had ever had...which was inexplicably condemned with the Church’s most frightening word as *wrong*.

That was the first time I consciously encountered the Divine outside the walls of church...how did it happen for you? Can you remember? And what happened afterward? Did you share your experience with a parent, minister, or friend, and see it celebrated...or was it discounted as heresy or imagination? Did you hug it to yourself as a secret, comforting treasure? Did you give it a name and connect it with the Sacred as you experienced it in organized worship? Or was the experience buried in shock and disbelief, to be forgotten...perhaps until now?

This experience of Oneness with a conscious, interconnected, and loving Universal Awareness is our birthright as humans...the seed at the root of all our religions, wrote the Christian mystic Father Bede

Griffiths.¹ Paradoxically, it is also an experience that contradicts the core principles and values of our society, and thus drives passionate reactions ranging from lifelong avoidance to lifelong spiritual quests.

We bury the experience, dogmatize it, pathologize it, personalize it, hypothesize it, distract ourselves from it, and deny it outright. We pursue it in church and sweat lodge; in ashram and sangha; in Shabat and dhikr, Sabat and New Age workshop; we travel to remote jungles and deserts to encounter it through sacred hallucinogens.

Some, not finding a way to plug the experience into religious dogma and communal observance – or offended at its distance from organized religion, or the horrific wrongs committed by religious institutions, or the limited patriarchal idea of God as an old man in the sky – define ourselves as “spiritual but not religious,” “agnostic,” “pantheist,” or even “atheist.” Some immerse ourselves in leading-edge biology or quantum theories that affirm consciousness in organisms from plants to planets, atoms to whales. We journey inwardly with the help of high-tech headgear, or study the stars in wonderment at the sheer existence of such a vast, interconnected, interdependent, and self-organizing cosmos and our existence within it.

But the seed is the same: the experience of conscious connection, the “inter-being,” the inter-Awareness of all beings at all levels. And the question is – once you have experienced that cosmic interconnected Awareness, once the vastness of *All That Is* is a personal experience of absolute Essence and not a theory or dogma – what do you do about it? How do you navigate the human constructs of the mundane world? How does this experience, this knowing, affect your loves, your values, your life choices?

Even before the experience that changed my life, I had chafed for years against the cut-and-dried dogma of Catholic catechism class: *it doesn't have anything to do with anything real!* *Real* was the special energy that had always saturated every object and being in my world, the felt connections between things, the bone-deep knowing that the Source of that energy was more interested in the sun and moon and stars and earth and water, the trees and birds and fish and animals and people, than in the solemn injunctions given by the priest in the pulpit, or the lessons drilled into us in class. *Real* had nothing to do with sins and virtues numbered like items in an inventory, seven of this, ten of that, or memorized definitions in just-so wording, or Bible verses in X-and-only-X translation, words piled on words. *Real*, on the other hand, was ...something Big... that I felt, heard, sensed, rich as life on all sides, and as un-tie-down-able.

And yet *Real* seemed to be hidden not only from the church people but from non-churchgoers as well: a forest wasn't the magical home of untold numbers of beings, from worms and bugs and mushrooms to deer and foxes and trees, but something unwanted that stood in the way of new roads and buildings. And so it went, with the un-tie-down-able *Real* life being destroyed for the ugly constructed pseudo-reality.

Why? My mother wept over the razed forests and evicted wildlife; my father fed birds and squirrels from his fingers, told stories of his youth foraging for wild food for his Depression-era family...and laughed at her tears. What was good for business was good for America, he said; this was a big country with plenty of room for development *and* wildlife. And as a family we would go mushroom-picking – as my parents had gone as children with their parents, who had gone with theirs before them – and return home puzzling over the

¹ Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, (Springfield IL Templegate Publishers, 1977) 105: “In all these [religious] systems the danger is that the logical structure and rational doctrine will obscure the mystical vision, so inherent is the tendency of the rational mind to seek to dominate the truth which it should serve. This is the danger of all religion. It begins with a mystical experience, the experience of the seers of the Upanishads, of the Buddha under the bo tree, of the Hebrew prophets and the apostles at Pentecost, of Mahomet receiving the message of the Koran. But this experience has to be put into words; it has to descend into the outer world and take the forms of human speech. Already at this stage it is open to misinterpretation; the conflict between the letter and the spirit begins. Then the logical and rational mind comes and creates systems of thought: heresies and sects spring up, and the Truth is divided. This is due to the defect of the rational mind, imposing its narrow concepts and categories on the universal truth. “

disappearance of the smoky-flavored Sticky Gray Trich from the evergreen woods rimming the reservoir. Perhaps because we were so focused on our search for fairy rings of half-buried shrooms among the fallen needles, nobody ever commented on the spiky bare tops of the pine trees in those forests.

Those experiences (and many others) formed the beginning of this journey, with experiences of profound spiritual connection countered by a wound dividing soul from other souls, soul from self, and soul from the breathtaking interwoven inter-aware Divinity of the cosmos. So I became a spiritual seeker throughout my life, searching fruitlessly for the unmistakable *Real* in religion, but with no words to identify what I sought: spending my teen years exploring just about every denomination, from Catholic to Methodist to Charismatic to fundamentalist Christian to High Church Anglican to Baptist, even Messianic Jewish, and always finding the same constraints.

I could not verbalize the difference, but I knew the feeling: where the vision had opened my heart, mind and soul to ecstatic connection with every being in a Sacred creation, parochial Christian viewpoints of the Church or Jesus as the Only Way to God – however righteous and dogmatically correct – shut my soul down. Speaking to fellow Christians of the *Real* in creation, I met with a torrent of bible verses or catechism citations, a Procrustean bed severing any ideas that strayed outside prescribed doctrines.

Drawn to Quakerism by a childhood sweetheart and later by my husband-to-be, I found a glimmer of the primal Divine in silent meetings for worship. Through Quaker connections my husband and I came to a Lakota sweat lodge circle, and discovered that relatedness to all that exists - Mitakuye Oyasin, All My Relations – stood at the foundation of Native American spiritual practice.

We'd come home.

Our choice of spiritual community brought much dismay to my family and charismatic/fundamentalist friends, who saw it not only as non-christian but also anti-godly. My mother conferred with her pastor on stratagems to bring her lost daughter back to the fold, while one of my dearest childhood friends, now fundamentalist, claimed that wonder-working holy men like Chief Frank Fools Crow must surely have been demon-possessed.

Disgusted by such rigid ignorance, I fled Christianity and institutional religion altogether, supporting my husband's training and growing vocation as a Traditional sweatlodge-keeper and Sundancer. When a Traditional Intercessor welcomed us to his Sundance ceremonies on Rosebud Reservation, Dancers from the American Indian Movement challenged us as non-Natives, not confrontationally but sincerely: Who are *your* ancestors, where are *your* holy places, what are *your* sacred ceremonies for the People?

It was my first hint that yes, my far-foreparents in Italy and Lithuania – and all peoples - were Indigenous at one time, with Earth-honoring traditions just as essential and *Real* as the Lakota ceremonies in which we were graciously allowed to participate. And taking that hint into prayer and research, I ultimately discovered my dual heritage in the Baltic Pagan tradition of Romuva, and the ancient and ongoing festivals of Tarantella in the remote hills of Tuscany.

My husband Sundanced in the shadow of Death: newly diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, he was wringing every possible drop of purpose from his life. Over the next eight years he became a gifted healer and administrative leader in a men's community, as I staffed events and served on the Board of the sister organization. Through the decline of his last year, and his passing in 2006, we were both carried on the energy of prayers from both organizations and from his fellow Dancers.

Nevertheless, his death threw me into spiritual shock, compounded by the decline and passing of my mother 18 months later, and by the successive cancer deaths of two aunts and six cats over the next three years. With

my community connections evaporated, I enrolled in a Master's program to reinvent my life...and found myself spiritually guided to radical theologian/educator Matthew Fox and his book *Original Blessing*.

That was when the fire of the vision was rekindled. After nearly 40 years of seeking the *Real* as I'd experienced it on that watershed evening - after decades of seeing my spiritual experience and conscience at odds with Catholic/Christian dogma and practice - after being warned of damnation by friends and having my mother lie to me to save my soul - after experiencing the Divine in creation through the lens of Earth-based religions - I found my experience validated throughout the world's faith traditions as panentheism (i.e., God is in everything and everything is in God).

I still remember the morning on which I found that validation in *Original Blessing*. I was sitting in my sunny breakfast nook with the windows open to a warm spring day, sipping my coffee and stroking a cat as I read:

What is the solution to the killing of God and the loss of human soul? It is our moving from theism to panentheism. Now panentheism is not pantheism. Pantheism, which is a declared heresy because it robs God of transcendence, states that "everything is God and God is everything." Panentheism, on the other hand, is altogether orthodox and very fit for orthopraxis as well, for it slips in the little Greek word en and thus means, "God is in everything and everything is in God." This experience of the presence of God in our depth and of Dabbar [the creative energy of God] in all the blessings and the sufferings of life is a mystical understanding of God...²

Those words were like an electrical current through my body. My heart began to pound and I started laughing and crying in joy and astonishment, bouncing in my seat as I felt the sunlight through the windows, the startled cat under my hand, touching not just my body but my soul as well. Once again I was connected in my deepest being with the Divine awareness of everything that existed. The vision was *not* wrong, the connections that I'd experienced as I explored non-Christian faiths were *not* wrong, I was *not* a heretic - furthermore, there was a possibility that even Christianity, at its deepest root, shared in this experience of Divine connection.

Through later reading and conversations with friends of many traditions, I discovered that my experience of the *Real* in creation was indeed not only not singular but shared, even archetypal and universal. And, I learned, it is the truth at which leading-edge scientists are arriving.

But questions continued to haunt me: if this is the case, if our world faith traditions are indeed rooted in mystical connection with the Divine Awareness in creation - if this experience indeed goes back throughout human history - if advanced science is arriving at an awareness of consciousness in all beings and indeed in matter itself - then how did we lose the knowledge and arrive at our current crisis of social, environmental, and spiritual disconnection? How did we devolve from cultures that revered everything as sacred and sentient, to a society in which everything - human beings, the environment, and spiritual experience included - is an object up for sale? And is it possible for us to take what we knew, and what we know, and (as Joni Mitchell sang) get ourselves back to the Garden?

As I explore these questions, the world news is steadily growing darker: as I write today, the removal of damaged fuel rods from the deteriorating Unit 4 of the Fukushima nuclear plant threatens the entire hemisphere with a catastrophic explosion and release of radiation. We have reached a point at which the objectification of the physical world, the dogmatic scientific/religious assertion that all we see around us is dead matter and that we are the only beings with consciousness and soul -therefore having dominion over all - is leading us steadily to the end of life on this planet.

² Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983) 90.

And so I invite you to join me in considering questions like these:

- What if the mystical roots of all faiths go back to a time when humans recognized that we were not the sole intelligence on an otherwise insentient planet ?
- What if “Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Stone, Sister Tree” were not meant as sentimental figures of speech, but expressed a living experience of conscious connection in which we can share today?
- What if our commercial culture – our objectification of the environment, of living beings and people – is the result of a millennia-long *discognitive* process that we can learn to reverse?
- What if “psychic” connectedness to All That Is, is not a supernatural or occult “power” but your forgotten, co-opted birthright?

Why should you ask such questions, embark on such a journey? Because such a conscious connection, such an “I-Thou” relation to all beings, is possible - more than that, it is the key to joining with the Wisdom that can help us to stop our death spiral of willed destruction. In this Divine connection each person and each being is precious and irreplaceable, with a crucial job that is unique to his or her gifts.

I am not preaching a new religion or intending to convert you to any spiritual tradition. Instead, I invite you – urgently – to join the growing movement toward a new and valid perspective on the living experience of Spirit that lies beneath all faiths. No high-tech binaural or virtual-reality paraphernalia, no mind-altering drugs, are needed – just the time and commitment to explore a new way of relating to the cosmos and the planet that nurtures us.

This conscious connectedness is our birthright – and our responsibility – and our deep calling. As Arvol Looking Horse, Keeper of the original Sacred Pipe of the Lakota Nation, has said: *“Each of us is put here in this time and this place to personally decide the future of humankind. Did you think you were put here for something less?”*