

Reflective Journal: *There is a crack that opens...*

Introduction

Residential Module 5 of the MA Ecology and Spirituality is entitled: Western Esotericism. I had imagined a rather scholarly investigation of different esoteric traditions and their influences on western spirituality and ecological issues today. However what emerged during the month of May 2018 offered much more. It helped open unexplored territories of mind and spirit that I had hitherto avoided – mainly out of ignorance or fear. The notion of the “occult” and associated terminology, such as magic, divination or witchcraft, had been troubling to me, so I welcomed both the content and the container offered in this module. This enabled me to explore my misgivings and preconceptions and to relax into the fascinating openings that my venturing forth into such new territories brought.

During the module, story-teller and writer Angharad Wynn used the words “there is a crack that opens” to describe the phenomenon of catching a glimpse of something beyond the “normal” physical world that can open up new layers of understanding about life, and may be a transformative experience. This is a theme that has permeated all of the MA programme to date, and is particularly relevant as an entry point for exploring esoteric matters.



This stunning engraving by an unknown artist first appeared in one of French astronomer Camille Flammarion's books in 1888. It has stimulated much thought and debate since its appearance, and has been used to illustrate scientific, psychological, philosophical and spiritual reflections on diverse topics, including by C.J. Jung in his 1959 work *Flying Saucers: a Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. I have not yet read either the latter (now on my bucket list!) or Flammarion's work on astronomy, but the diversity of interpretation seems consistent with the notion that the sense or beauty of an artistic image lies in the eye of the beholder.

Personally, I find this image to be a remarkable illustration of the notion of peering through a crack to see what lies beyond: whether literally and physically through a keyhole, a crack in a wall, or a split tree trunk; or metaphorically and metaphysically, as a fleeting memory

of a dream, a waft of poetic inspiration or a picture of the imaginary limit of the fabric of the known cosmos “where heaven and earth meet.” There is something fascinating that engages curiosity and imagination - perhaps trepidation or fear - but always seems to stir interest and generate an impetus to discover what lies beyond.

One possible glimpse into this is offered by neuropsychologist and author Iain McGilchrist. He shares a quote from philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s work *Science and the Modern World* (1926): “Great art is the arrangement of the environment so as to provide for the soul vivid, but transient values.” And these values stimulate curiosity and enable the emergence of something new. McGilchrist goes on to observe: “Art therefore in its nature constantly impels us to reach out and onward to something beyond itself and beyond ourselves.” (2009, p. 308)

A glimpse into secret realms

I propose to pursue this reflection through the image of a crack opening to illustrate some examples and understandings that I drew from both formal lectures and experiential outdoor activities during the module.

It offered the opportunity to peer into a vast universe of ideas and connections under the umbrella concept of Western Esotericism. The challenge has been where to stop! Every book or article consulted made me want to read more about the origins, ideas, movements and rituals of esotericism through the centuries. Our programme has been limited to the study of such phenomena in the western world, but my interest in further exploring this had already taken root in encounters with some eastern spiritual traditions, notably Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, in particular the Shambhala Warrior lineage taught by Chögyam Trungpa.

This has helped draw parallels between esoteric aspects of different spiritual traditions, notably the role of teachings drawn from the past through the discovery of old manuscripts, and the importance of personal, individual exploration (e.g. through meditation). On the topic of “Discovering Magic” Trungpa advises: “... meditation practice brings out the supernatural, if I may use that word. You do not see ghosts or become telepathic, but your perceptions become super-natural, simply super-natural.” (2007 p.108)

The first week of the module addressed the topic of imagination from a Neo-Platonic perspective, and was complemented by an introduction to “sacred geometry”; the second week explored the historical developments and different aspects of magic in western societies; and the final week was an invitation to reconnect with land and ancestry, including through stories, intuition and poetic imagination. All in all, a fascinating trip into whatever cracks seemed to throw new light or enticing shadows onto this path of enquiry.

Platonic footprints

Amongst the topics covered in the class's consideration of Neo-Platonism, the notions of the power of symbols, rituals and mystical practices stimulated my curiosity and gave me a feeling of validation. I felt a deep sense of recognition as I noticed similarities with previous explorations of dreamwork, Jungian analysis complemented by astrological readings, meditation and contemplation, and intuition as a sacred spiritual channel for self-discovery and healing.

Through alchemy, magic, ritual and divinatory practices such as astrology, the Neo-Platonist thinkers of the 15th-16th centuries sought to reinstate what they saw as a former golden age. Indeed Renaissance astrologer Marsiliano Ficino despaired of his contemporary philosophers and priests of 15th century Italy as "the miserable lot of this iron age" in comparison with what he believed the teachings of the ancients – such as Plato, Plotinus and Iamblichus - could offer by reconnecting the human soul with divine source (Voss, 2006 p. 5). The legacy of theological scholasticism had become too heavy for thinkers like Ficino. And with the conjunction of Uranus and Neptune at the time when the Florentine Academy - of which it may be said he himself was one of the stars - was at its most dynamic and influential, Ficino was clearly destined to play a major role in the revival of Platonic ideas (Tarnas, 2006, pp.357-358). So the arrival of the *Corpus Hermeticum* on Ficino's desk in 1460 must literally have seemed like a godsend!

These were exciting and exuberant times that have left a legacy of esoteric ideas – like a platonic footprint – that seems to be revealing itself once again through the cracks in the dominant rational, anthropocentric worldviews.

As the classes proceeded, I welcomed the signs of a revival in the relevance of symbolism, astrological signs, alchemical formulations or magical incantations, and their interpretation, using the wisdom and practices of the old esoteric and natural magic traditions. My own encounter with Jungian depth psychology has given me direct experience of the transformational value of this kind of work. And this corresponds to the notion, according to Voss, of how Ficino sought to expand his power of connection as a "secret mutual connivance", a phrase borrowed from Jung that "depended on a particular kind of 'seeing', a 'seeing through' appearances or cause and effect relationships to a *significance*. This *metaphorical* approach to the apprehension of a meaning beyond the apparent is, in essence, the basis of the esoteric path to wisdom." (Voss, 2006, p. 8)

An unexpected opening

An invitation to explore some of these neoplatonic ideas and practices by undertaking an image work exercise led me to a remarkable hour or so of insights in a way I had not experienced before.

Drawn to an image of “Mediaeval Paving Tiles Made at Repton” in an illustrated history of pottery and porcelain works (Jewitt, 1878) I at first noticed the images of birds and hares, leaves and interconnected shapes, circles, flower petals, strands, dots; golden yellow through ochre red colours; and a sense of harmony and balance. Reminiscent of a stained glass window or a mandala, it gave me a curious sense that I was looking at a portal:



As I followed the activity instructions to “let the image hypnotize you”, I asked the question:
What do I learn of you?

I then experienced the impression of a sudden surge of light – bright yellow and fiercely intense coming through the image – and received the words:

The light of my presence is too strong for mortal beings to receive in full beam, for this would blind you and confuse you. This is why I must filter it in ways that attract and nourish you, that will make you wish to return again and again to assuage your thirst and hunger for the light. So I let creation open cracks and spaces to channel the light to ye who seek earnestly.

The artists and artisans are seeking beauty and truth in their creations, and so we enter a collaborative space where – unconsciously for most – I radiate my light through their work. As awareness and consciousness of my presence grows in them, in you, my light illuminates your work more and more.

This may be art, or dance or music or poetry... It may be impressive to others, a felt vibration or an emotional shiver, a deep resonance or a clarion cry; or it may be simply a warm sensation, a tiny glimpse or a fleeting whisper that remains elusive, but leaves a trace of curiosity.

The urge to return to Oneness must pass through many portals: for each one, this is part of the sense of life’s passage. Unlike time, this is not linear; so these glimpses and encounters cannot be “mapped out” until the journey is done, until another cycle draws nigh...

*Stay awake, stay aware
Find your milieu, and then dare
To seek lightness, through darkness
Ne’er forcing, ne’er fleeing
Just open to being
I’ll guide you in seeing
With new eyes and senses
No need for defences
That temper your longing
To return to belonging.
So welcome the light that opens insight
To true being and learning of life’s precious yearning.*

(Schumacher College, 16 May 2018)

Beyond imagination

As recounted in a previous reflective journal essay, I had already experienced the spontaneous emergence of poetry and new forms of connection with natural elements, and through my personal intuitive and analytical dream work, I have been accustomed for many years to receiving what I take to be “teaching from within and beyond”; however, this instance of learning through the contemplation of an image was new. While for many people, this would be beyond credibility, it does indeed appear to correspond to the Neo-Platonic notion of ‘higher imagination’ that is said to reveal and facilitate a bridge between sensual perception and divine wisdom.

It finds an echo in the earlier reference by Voss to Jung’s phrase “a secret mutual connivance” and also to Henry Corbin’s writing on *Mundus Imaginalis or The Imaginary and the Imaginal* (1972). Corbin explains that, in the face of contemporary usage of the term imaginary as being “unreal... something outside the framework of being and existing”, he had to “awaken (the contemporary Western reader) to another order of things.” He describes a dimension that is beyond the “empirical world and the world of abstract intellect...the *mundus imaginalis*: a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect” and which requires its own way of perceiving through “imaginative power”.

A magical power

The exploration of magic in week two of the programme was quite delightful – a romp into imaginative spaces that somehow indeed became magical, and in a totally embodied way, often outdoors with the presence of the elements of earth, fire, air and water, and a liberal sprinkling of magical intentions. Author Graham Harvey’s description of magic in *Listening People, Speaking Earth* resonated with me: “Magic is an alchemical and/or therapeutic process in which practitioners seek their true selves and then express them in relation to the cosmos as it is and as it will be when humanity re-aligns itself harmoniously.” (2007, p. 86)

Underpinning the entire week was the impression that, as described by Starhawk in *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery* (1987), magic is “the art of evoking power from within.” As a contemporary practitioner of magic as a witch, and an engaged social and political activist striving “to serve the poor, to work for justice, to share what people have,” she embodies her sense of magic as a power drawn from an earth-based spirituality that I will expand upon later.

Reconnecting to sacred space in the land

In the third week of the module, class lectures and storytelling sessions truly grounded the notion of staying connected to the land and places around wherever one is. A further dimension was the notion of the power of connection through story and myth, and finally an introduction to new awareness of connecting to ancestors of a place.

A field trip to Dartmoor, brought the opportunity to experiment with deep intuitive listening in to messages the ancestors of the place might have to share. Hunkered down in the rain in the midst of what at first resembled a pile of old moss-covered stones in the undergrowth of bracken that covers the moor, many of the group tuned in sensing a timeless connection with the inhabitants of what was in fact the remains of an ancient human settlement on Brent Moor. And to sum up the week, the words that emerged for me at the end represent a new layer of deep, subconscious learning:

*I am, through you
Empowered to be, seeking life anew*

*I have been lost, and found
And lost again
Through cycles of living and dying...
And when*

*I know I'm at One
With all and with thee
I open to not knowing
That's how I stay free*

*I sing of my longing
Here below and up high
I am but a whisper of life
Just a sigh...*

Dartmoor, June 2018

I later had another glimpse of what this means to me today in further reflections by Starhawk:

“We are never apart from the power of the mysterious cycles of life. Every breath we take encompasses the circle of birth, death and rebirth. The forces that push the blood cells through our veins are the same forces that spun the universe out of the primal ball of fire. We do not know what those forces are. We can invoke them, but we cannot control them, nor can we disconnect from them. They are our life, and when we die, decay and decompose, we remain still within their cycle.” (1987 p. 6)

Conclusion

At the close of this module, I can find no significant contradictions between my own experiences of spirituality and the esoteric teachings from the perspective of discovering hidden meanings through “natural magic”. My suspicion of the “occult” has been transformed into curiosity.

This leads me to conclude that, as succinctly put by Hanegraaff in his useful guide for the perplexed like myself, the value of esotericism today is that it demonstrates a key difference between religion and spirituality. Hanegraaff describes this as emerging from a “shift from theoretical or dogmatic reflection (inspired by a need of justification to the sceptics) to a pragmatic emphasis on practice.”

Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr, whose work often opens a crack in the curtains I had drawn many years ago on traditional Christian church-based religion, writes: “Western models of development usually focus on the rational mind which offers one way of known reality. In fact there are many other ways of perceiving and expressing human experience. We shouldn’t dismiss unfamiliar modalities as immature, superstitious or silly just because we haven’t exercised those sensory muscles.” (Rohr, 2018)

So thanks to this exploration of western esotericism, I have been able to exercise more than just my rational mind and have found delight and some whispers of wisdom through opening cracks and flexing my sensory muscles.

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