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The Great Initiation

By Richard Tarnas

We live in a mysterious world, a world that will not yield up its secrets either simply or by force. I'll begin, therefore, by asking for a willingness to be complex. I don't mean we should give up valuing simplicity, but recognize that one-sidedly simple critiques of the contemporary world situation are probably going to be inadequate—they will probably be psychologically driven, and intellectually insufficient to accomplish our task. In some sense, simple critiques represent an avoidance of the challenge of engaging fully the very mysterious character of the world we live in.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing us in these times is to sensitize our thinking—all our ways of knowing—to the subtle interplay of forces that have shaped our world today. This complexity reveals itself right away when we look at our historical situation, and examine the two metanarratives (major guiding stories) which seem to underlie many of the debates of our time. These are the myths we might call, on the one hand, "The Story of Progress," and, on the other, "The Story of the Fall."

Understanding the complex historical interweaving of these two stories can reveal something deep, and often hidden, about the Western psyche—and may even enlighten us about our species-wide psyche itself. Many of us who came of age in the world shaped by the psychological and cultural revolutions of the Sixties are likely to be familiar with the impulse to understand our personal histories—to make conscious what lies in the unconscious. We recognize the importance, and power, of intimate acquaintance with our personal histories.

On a larger scale, I'd like to suggest that for a civilization, history is the great unconscious—that our history is the repository, and the unfolding, of complex dynamics. We see only the results, the surface effects, of these deep forces as they shape our cultures and our lives. If we are to understand how our civilization—how the modern mind—has produced or contributed to the very complex and problematic situation our species and our planet find themselves in today, then we need to understand the historical sources, the trajectories that led to this point. By making conscious our history we can begin to participate consciously, as individuals and as collectives, in the movement of history itself. By doing so, we will begin to move further into the mysterious character of our world, and reveal and understand it a little more.

A Paradox of Brilliance and Crisis

I am going to focus my discussion here on the West, but not out of any naive conviction that the West is the best in some absolute or universal sense. I focus on it, first, because it is the matrix within which most of us have lived our lives; and second, because it has brought forth the intellectual and spiritual currents that have been most influential in constellating the contemporary world crises.

Now, a paradox confronts every sensitive observer about the West: We can recognize a certain dynamism, even nobility—a kind of brilliant heroic impulse—at work in Western civilization and in Western thought. We see examples in the symphonies of Beethoven, the plays of Shakespeare, Greek philosophy and tragedy, the Sistine Chapel, or something as unbelievably intellectually profound as the Copernican revolution, with all of the tremendous conceptual, cosmological, and metaphysical transformation that it has represented. In our own time, landing human beings on the moon, or even the extraordinary images of the vast cosmos coming from the Hubbell telescope, express this heroic impulse. And, of course, the great democratic revolutions of modernity, and the emancipatory movements of our own era, reflect this nobility and dynamism and brilliance of the West.

Yet at the same time we have to admit that this very same tradition has brought about a crisis that is profoundly multidimensional—ecological, political, social, economic, intellectual, psychological, spiritual. On every front we are in a crisis. For humankind and the planet, we face the possibility of great catastrophe. How can we make sense of this tremendous paradox?

I mentioned above two sorts of fundamental but often unspoken visions of history, visions of the evolution of human consciousness. Diametrically opposed, they underlie many of the major intellectual debates, the paradigm battles, of our time.

The Story of Progress and Heroic Advance

The first myth—and I use that term not to mean a mere fiction, but rather to signify a deep pattern of meaning in the psyche that informs our experience in specific ways—the first myth is familiar to us all from our education. It looks at the history of humankind as a gradual, progressive heroic advance from an earlier state of relative constriction, ignorance, and suffering, moving toward an ever-brighter modern future characterized by increasing human knowledge, freedom, and well-being. And this evolutionary development is seen as having been made possible above all by the systematic development of human reason, and particularly by the emergence of the modern mind, especially the modern scientific mind.

Often, this view is associated with a certain configuration of the human being, as "man": a kind of masculine, heroic entity, the archetypal masculine hero constantly moving forward and against, pressing beyond all previous structures, moving toward ever-greater new horizons of freedom and knowledge. The apex of this development is seen to coincide with the modern period, with the emergence of both modern science and individualistic democracy. It is a view of human history as a process of both empowerment and emancipation. It is a view that came into its own in the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, though its roots go back to ancient Greece.

The Story of The Fall and Tragic Separation

This onward and upward view of history is counterpoised by a very different perspective that has been around in one form or another all along. But it is really in our own generation that this quite opposite metanarrative, or historical perspective, has emerged in a robust way into our cultural discourse. In this view, the evolution of human consciousness and the history of the Western mind are seen not as a progressive advance toward modern enlightenment, but rather as a tragic story of a radical fall and separation from an original state of relative unity—from a sense of interconnectedness between humankind, nature, and the spiritual dimension of

existence. In this view, the influence of the Western mind, and particularly the modern mind, has brought about a deep schism between humankind and nature, and a deep desacralization of the world.

The opposite of a great truth is another great truth.

This development has coincided with an increasingly destructive human exploitation of the natural environment, a devastation of indigenous and traditional cultures, and an increasingly unhappy state of the human soul. The modern human soul experiences itself as being increasingly alienated, shallow, unfulfilled. The very things that were seen as having impelled a progressive advance are here seen as having produced just the opposite results: Humanity and nature are seen as having suffered grievously under a long patriarchal, increasingly dualistic, domination of thought and society; and the worst consequences of this development have been produced by the repressive hegemony of modern industrial society, empowered by modern science and technology.

The nadir of this fall is seen as being our own time of planetary ecological disaster—a direct consequence of the very nature, structure, and hubris of the modern Western self. I'm drawing these lines very sharply, almost caricaturing the two views, but you can see that they underlie many of the great debates of our time. For example, how are we to regard modern science and technology—liberator of humans or destroyer of natural systems? How are we to regard the future of humankind: Is it upward or downward—Enlightenment or Kali Yuga? Is it progress or is it tragedy?

In approaching such questions, I have found very helpful an insight from [John Stuart Mill](#) in an essay about social and political philosophy, but I think we can extend the insight more generally. He said that *both parties in intellectual debate tend to be correct in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny*. I think that this shrewd, even wise, assessment of the complexity and nature of human discourse and debate shines light on many things. Whether it is parents arguing with their children, or lovers disagreeing, or conservatives debating liberals, often something is being repressed in the service of making one's point. The wisdom in Mill's observation was later put another way by [Niels Bohr](#), drawing from his experience in quantum physics, that the opposite of a great truth is another great truth.

There is something about both of these deep historical perspectives, these myths—the Fall on the one hand, Progress on the other—that resonate with the reality of our situation. Each is correct in a certain way, but they are both only partial readings of a larger, deeper, and more complex story. Not only are they simultaneously true, I believe they actually *constitute* each other, they are embedded in each other's truth in the way that the gestalt image of two black faces in profile can also be seen as a white vase. You do a little gestalt switch with your mind and even though the data remain the same, the visual image goes through a radical shift according to your own perception. Yet I think our task is not just to move back and forth between the two images, the two historical perspectives, but to be able to sustain the dialectical unity of both—to see both images at once.

I'd like to suggest that in some sense our history can be seen as a long evolutionary dialectical development in which there has been a painstaking forging of an autonomous rational and moral self, differentiating it out of the whole, out of the matrix of being, but that this autonomy has come at a great cost. Gain and loss have been simultaneously working with each other until, in our own time, this dialectic has reached an almost climactic moment of transfiguration. Much rests on how we engage this moment.

Our time of crisis, I think, presents us with an opportunity: We may now be able to see that inherent in this bipolar movement is the possibility of a new synthesis, gradually emerging out of the dialectical tensions of our own time. Philosophically, [Hegel](#) and, psychologically, [Jung](#) have told us of the need for such synthesis and integration. [Marie-Louise von Franz](#) put it very well. She said if we can stay with this tension of opposites long

enough—sustain it, be true to it—we can sometimes become vessels within which the divine opposites come together and give birth to a new reality. I think in some ways the future is working its contradictions out through us. We are crucifixion points of these opposites, and that is one of the reasons our time is so intense, so fraught with contradiction. Transpersonal psychologist Christopher Bache has so beautifully articulated this: The intensity of suffering that many people engaged in inner work are experiencing now derives from the fact that we are not just doing our own personal work. At a certain level, we are all engaging the transpersonal, the collective consciousness. And not just at the species level—perhaps the whole planet is in some sense going through a very powerful transformative crisis, much as in [Paul's letter to the Romans](#) where he said that "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together."

The Subject-Object Divide

I'm now going to try to unpack our Western world view, to try to shed light on the core element driving the multiple crises we face.

If we were to isolate the particular characteristic of the modern world view, the one that distinguishes it from virtually all other premodern, non-Western, primal world views, I think we could say that the fundamental distinction or difference is this: The modern mind experiences the world in such a way as to draw a radical boundary between the human self as subject and the world as object. The subject-object divide, the sense of radical distinction between self and world, which we could call Cartesian for shorthand, is fundamental to the modern mind. The modern mind is constituted upon it.

Modern science, from [Bacon](#) and [Descartes](#) on, is completely founded on the conviction that if you are to know the world as it is in itself, then you need to cleanse your mind of all human projections, such as meaning and purpose, onto the world.

The primal world view sees a participatory relationship between human beings and nature both immanently divine.

By contrast, in the primal world view, soul or spirit is seen as permeating the entire world within which the self is embedded. The primal person walks through a world that is experienced as completely continuous between inner and outer. He or she sees spirits in the forest, sees meaning in the movement of eagles across the horizon, sees significance in the conjunction of two planets, sees and experiences a world in which the human soul is completely embedded in a larger being that is also ensouled. The human soul in some sense participates in a world soul, or *anima mundi*, and the language articulated within that *anima mundi* is the language of myth, the archetypal language of the human soul.

The modern world view considers this a naive epistemological error. If you see spiritual presences out in the world—as if the world is communicating with you in some conscious intelligent way, as if it is laden with meaning-rich symbols—then you are projecting human realities onto the nonhuman world. It's considered childish, immature, intellectually primitive, and needs to be outgrown.

In the modern world view, then, the human self is seen as the exclusive repository of conscious intelligence in the universe—all meaning in the universe comes from the human subject. This is basically the twentieth century existentialist assumption that the human project is to bring meaning to a universe which otherwise lacks all meaning.

The modern experience of a radical division in our culture between inner and outer—of a subjective personal and purposeful consciousness that is paradoxically embedded in and evolved from a world that is intrinsically

unconscious, impersonal, and purposeless—is represented historically in the great division between [Romanticism](#) and the [Enlightenment](#). In the Romantic tradition—represented, for example, by Goethe, Rousseau, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Beethoven, Emerson, all the way up to our post-Sixties counterculture—the modern soul found profound spiritual and psychological expression. The Enlightenment tradition—represented, for example, by Newton, Locke, Voltaire, and Hume, and more recently by Bertrand Russell and Stephen Hawking—is primarily informed by rational-empirical science. In a sense, the modern soul's allegiance is to Romanticism, while the modern mind's allegiance is to the Enlightenment. And science rules the outer cosmos and the objective world, while the Romantic aspirations of our poetry, our music, our spiritual yearnings rule the interior world of the modern soul. That's the schizophrenia all of us grew up with in the twentieth century. There is no easy congruence between those two radically different world views—yet, to use Faust's term, they are somehow forced to "cohabit within our breast."

In many ways, everything in Western intellectual and spiritual history has supported this long, bipolar movement. Two basic things have happened: The human self has been gradually differentiated out of the larger matrix of being; its autonomy, intellectual and moral, has been forged. It is self-determining, self-aware, self-revising; it even has an impulse toward self-transcendence. The autonomy of the rational mind is an extraordinary development, and it is precious to every one of us. We value our individual freedom to be able to stand up to a tradition, to our parents, to the town we came from, to the conventional society's values. We value being able to question, to go deeper, to go farther than the status quo. We value being able to see if some other reality is more profound than the one presented to us by the orthodoxy. This is precious to us. We all have an allegiance, often unspoken and unrecognized, to this autonomous self, forged over many centuries of cultural, psychological, and intellectual development.

At the same time, this autonomy has been purchased at a staggering price: the disenchantment of the universe. The high cost has been a gradual voiding of all intelligence, all soul, all spirit, all meaning, all purpose from the entire world—now exclusively relocated in the human self, through what from this point of view can be seen as an extraordinary act of cosmic hubris. This disenchantment has been discerned and lamented almost from the very start of the modern project—but what's not so readily acknowledged is that it is probably a further act of human hubris to think we were and are responsible for the disenchantment all by ourselves. There may be other, larger, forces at work.

So many things have pushed us in this direction. In many ways not just the West but the entire human project can be seen as pushing the differentiation between self and world, between humanity and nature, between autonomy and participation. As soon as our species used a tool, we began to move as a subject against an object, a human being vis-à-vis the world. As soon as we used linguistic and religious symbolization, we began to objectify our experience in such a way that the world acts on us and we can act on the world.

A memorable image in the movie [2001: A Space Odyssey](#) captures this: A protohuman primate has just discovered a tool; he has used a bone as a weapon to succeed in some life and death struggle. And in the ecstasy of discovery of the weapon, of a tool, he hits it over and over again on a big rock. Eventually it shatters and flies up into the air, and in slow motion metamorphoses into a spaceship in 2001. In that one image you see the whole Promethean trajectory, the alpha and the omega of the Promethean quest, which is to liberate the human being from the bonds of nature, and through human intelligence and will to differentiate and emancipate the human being, to gain control over nature.

This quest climaxes in modernity, in modern science, where the whole focus of knowledge is prediction and control over a universe seen as utterly unconscious, impersonal, and mechanistic. The universe—the world, nature, animals, plants, and so on—is seen as being utterly without soul, without interiority, without subjectivity. Alone, we humans possess interiority—all else is made up of objects "out there."

A Sequence of Paradigm Shifts

The "disenchantment" so characteristic of the modern Western project is historically the outcome of a sequence of paradigm shifts: We can trace so much of this to the Cartesian revolution which separated soul from body, human subject from objective world. But Descartes' philosophy grew out of a prior, even more dramatic and consequential, paradigm shift: the Copernican revolution. And it has been followed by others. Where [Copernicus](#) dislocated the Earth from the center of the universe, [Kant](#) followed with his own "Copernican" revolution by recognizing that the apparent order of the world is actually being constituted by the ordering structures of the human mind. Kant thereby created an impenetrable and insuperable epistemological barrier between the mind and the objects that it seeks to know—leaving us totally without knowledge of the world in itself.

Then Darwin introduced a "Copernican" revolution in biology: Where Copernicus left the Earth just another insignificant planet, [Darwin](#) left humans as just another species among the animals. And then [Freud](#) repeated the existential reduction at the level of the psyche: The rational ego was no longer master of its own house, but just an epiphenomenon emerging out of the primordial id. Now even reason, the last refuge of human distinctiveness and specialness, was itself governed by unseen, unknown and unknowable forces bubbling up out of the wild, instinctive, and emotionally dominated unconscious. The instrument of control over nature turned out to be itself at the mercy of much deeper psychological and biological forces.

Friedrich Nietzsche captured the pathos of the existential and spiritual crisis that would befall modern humanity in the aftermath of these revolutions that caused the destruction of the metaphysical world, the "death of God," and the disenchantment of the cosmos. Listen to the hyper-Copernican imagery of this famous passage:

What were we doing when we unchained this Earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually backwards, sidwards, forward in all directions, is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?

Here we enter the eye of the needle of the late modern self, of the alienated postmodern self.

'Do Not Be Afraid of the Universe'

What I'd now like to point out is that the highly critical situation we find ourselves in closely resembles a critical phase in an initiation process. I recall a lecture by [Joseph Campbell](#) in the late '60s. He was telling a story of North American shamanic initiation. Rasmussen, who was exploring the northern part of the North American continent, had conversations with a number of old shamans. One of them told the story of his own initiation as a young boy. He said that he was taken by an older shaman out on a sled over ice, and placed in a small igloo just big enough for him to sit in. He was crouched on a skin, he was left there for thirty days with just a little water and meat brought in occasionally during that period. He said, "I died a number of times during those thirty days, but I learned and found what can be found and learned only in the silence, away from the multitude, in the depths. I heard the voice of nature itself speak to me, and it spoke with the voice of a gentle motherly solicitude and affection. Or it sounded sometimes like children's voices, or sometimes like falling snow, and what it said was, 'Do not be afraid of the universe'." This discovery, Campbell goes on, became a point of internal, absolute security for the initiate, and made possible his return to his community with a wisdom and assurance that was unmatched by everyone there, so that he could help others from that inner place.

Factors such as hope, faith, and compassion play a major role in constellating reality.

That was the great death-rebirth initiation. We can recognize the lack of initiation in our own culture today. The dangerous, bold, risk-taking energy of youth can be courageous or violently destructive. These youthful energies are necessary for an initiatory process to take place, and all primal cultures know this. Ours doesn't. Primal societies use these energies to mediate that great transition of each generation from dependence to independence, from immaturity to maturity, from childhood to adulthood, for the sustaining of the community both materially and spiritually. This initiation consists of a profound, very frightening encounter with the darkest aspects of existence: with death, with utter aloneness, with suffering, with a crisis of meaning, with a sense of despair, a leaving of the community, a leaving of the parents. In a sense, it is a leaving not only of the safety of the mother's familial womb but the entire cosmic womb.

This encounter provides a rite of passage for youths who thus discover their deeper purpose, their meaning, because they are able in that great encounter with death and rebirth to engage and experience, directly in their bodies, in their souls, the powerful archetypal forces that permeate life and nature and every human being, and they thereby come into direct knowledge of the great mysteries of death and rebirth. From that place, they can re-engage life with a new knowledge; they can bring back to the community an enriched understanding.

Our culture does not provide such an initiation, a rite of passage for youth. But that's just the beginning of it. If all our youth are uninitiated, then all our adults are uninitiated too. When you turn on the television, just about everything you see is designed for the adolescent mind: Pow! Zap! Boom! explosions, aggression, superficial sex, incessant change, shiny surfaces. There's no sense of the deeper meanings, the profundity of life, no sense of the fact that decisions about the future need to be made not just from the point of view of what's going to show up on the bottom line of the next quarterly report, but what's going to affect the seventh generation from now. That's an awareness much bigger than what's available to someone who hasn't gone through an initiatory transformation.

The reason our culture does not provide such an initiation, however, is not just that it has somehow simply forgotten, or somehow foolishly abandoned, its traditional wisdom, and myopically asserted a mechanistic material world with no deeper spiritual purpose or significance. I think the reason that our culture does not provide such an initiation is that it is itself immersed in such an initiation, of the most epochal and profound kind.

The entire path of Western civilization has taken humankind and the planet on a trajectory of initiation, into the state of complete alienation, into an encounter with mortality on a global scale—first with the nuclear crisis, followed by the ecological crisis—an encounter with mortality that is no longer personal but rather transpersonal, collective, planetary; into a state of radical fragmentation, into the "wasteland," into that crisis of existential meaning and purpose that has informed so many of the most sensitive individuals of the twentieth century. It is a collective dark night of the soul, a deep separation from the community of being.

I believe the West—humankind—has entered into the most critical stages of the death-rebirth mystery. We are undergoing this rite of passage with virtually no guidance from wise elders because the wise elders are themselves caught up in this same crisis. This initiation is so epochal, so global, so unprecedented, and so all-encompassing, it is bigger than all of us. We are all entering into something new, and we cannot really know where it's headed.

But we can draw on the great sources of insight that come from the shamanic and mystical epiphanies and writings of those individuals who have gone through a death-rebirth initiation. We can draw from our own

psychospiritual journeys, which allow us to get a sense for that great truth that Goethe understood: "Until you know this deep secret, 'Die and be reborn,' you will be a stranger on this dark Earth." This is the dark Earth that the modern mind has in some sense constructed for itself. Yet in another sense, I believe that we find ourselves thrown into this dark estrangement because larger forces are at work.

A Period of Transition

I'd like to suggest that we seem to be moving toward the possibility of a new world view, as a result of going through a global death-rebirth initiation. I think we can now begin to recognize that this disenchanted universe we find ourselves in is a transition to a much deeper realization. It is a birth canal to a new heaven and a new Earth.

We seem to be moving toward a new vision of the universe, one reflected in the many scientific and philosophical impulses working today toward a participatory holistic paradigm. We seem to be coming to a place where the human self is both highly autonomous and differentiated, yet re-embedded in a participatory relationship to a meaning-laden universe. Something new is being forged; it's not a mere regression to a premodern state. The human self has been forged into an autonomous intellectual and moral self, and is now in a position to recognize itself as being a creative intelligent nexus embedded within the larger context of the *anima mundi*. It is in a position to freely choose to become a co-creator in the evolutionary project.

Epistemologically, we are not ultimately separated from the world, projecting our structures and meanings onto an otherwise meaningless world. Rather, we are an organ of the universe's self-revelation. We are beginning to see that we play a crucial role in the universe's unfolding by our own cognitive processes and choices, tied to our own psychological development. Our own inner work—our moral awareness and responsibility, our confrontation with our shadow, our integration of the masculine and feminine—plays a critical role in the universe that we can create.

There are many possible universes, many possible meanings, floating through us. We are not just empty vessels, as it were, on automatic, passively playing out the intentions of the world soul, the *anima mundi*. Rather, we are playing an autonomous, yet participatory, role in a co-evolutionary unfolding of reality. It's a complex process where both we and the universe are mutually creators and created. We seem to be moving to a world view that is a dialectical synthesis of world and self.

A Race Between Initiation and Catastrophe

Are we going to make it? We can't be completely sure that we will. It is not at all certain that we will get from here to there, that we will successfully pass through this eye of the needle, this planetary ego death. It's a dicey matter. We are engaged now in a kind of race—as I think H. G. Wells said—a race between education and catastrophe. I would describe it as a race between initiation and catastrophe.

I think that a birth is happening. It is true that not every birth is successful, or that it may happen in ways we cannot anticipate. Yet I think that nothing is ever lost in the universe: If something doesn't work out in this dimension, it may play its part in fulfilling a purpose in some other dimension that will unfold. But on this plane the stakes are clearly very high indeed. We have a kind of high drama for the foreseeable future, and we need to engage the problem now right on this plane.

How can we participate in a transformative unfolding that would lead toward a more integral world? One factor, I believe, is that we need to radically expand our ways of knowing, our epistemology. We need to move beyond the very narrow empiricism and rationalism that were characteristic of the Enlightenment and still dominate mainstream science today. We need to draw on—to use a single encompassing term—the wider

epistemologies of the heart. We need ways of knowing that integrate the imagination, the intuition, the aesthetic sensibility, the revelatory or epiphanic capacity, the capacity for kinesthetic knowing, the capacity for loving. We need a deeply developed sense of empathy if we are to overcome the subject-object barrier. We need to be able to enter into that which we seek to know, and not keep it ultimately distanced as an object. We need, to use [Barbara McClintock](#)'s phrase, *a feeling for the organism*. We are learning in some sense that our epistemology creates the world; and that epistemology is not just a matter of reason and empiricism. Factors such as hope and faith and compassion play a major role in constellating reality. And here I draw on a great observation by [Rudolf Steiner](#) when he identified the two words that sum up the whole human evolutionary project: freedom and love.

The moral dimension is crucial for this great transformation to take place.

We have attained a certain kind of freedom over these last many centuries, an incomplete freedom; and now it's time for an act of love, a freely conscious embracing of the matrix out of which we emerged, a movement out of an I-it relationship to the world, characteristic of modern scientific cognition, to an I-thou relationship. To get a sense of the importance of an "I-thou" relationship with the universe, try this thought experiment:

Imagine you are the universe, a deep, beautiful, ensouled universe, and you are being courted by a suitor. Would you open your deepest secrets to the suitor—that is, to the methodology, the epistemology—who would approach you as though you were unconscious, utterly lacking in intelligence or purpose, and inferior in being to him; who related to you as though you were ultimately there for his exploitation, development, and self-enhancement; and his motivation for knowing you is driven essentially by a desire for prediction and control for his own self-betterment? Or would you open your deepest secrets to that suitor—that epistemology, that methodology—who viewed you as being at least as intelligent and powerful and full of mystery as he is, and who sought to know you by uniting with you to create something new?

We know from our very best philosophy of science and postmodern thought the degree to which our often hidden presuppositions play a crucial role in constellating the reality we seek to know. It's very clear to me, if the universe is anything like the mystery I believe it is, that, under duress, it will always render to the mainstream sciences a highly partial and misleading vision of what it is. At the dawn of modern science, Francis Bacon starkly represented what is now the dominant form of epistemology in the West: He said for science to advance we need to torture the secrets out of nature, to put her on the rack. Compare this ruthlessly objectifying strategy with the esoteric, mystical form of engagement with nature, an entering into a participatory understanding of the universe, characterized by aesthetic delight, intellectual ecstasy, imaginative flourishing, and a kind of empathic unity.

One other thing I believe is crucial for this movement from here to there was expressed by the great Mexican poet [Octavio Paz](#). He said that "the examination of conscience, and the remorse that accompanies it, which is a legacy of Christianity, has been, and is, the single most powerful remedy against the ills of our civilization." I think that it will take a fundamental moment of remorse—and this is absolutely essential to the death-rebirth experience—a long moment of remorse, a sustained weeping and grief. It will be a grief of the masculine for the feminine; of men for women; of adults for what has happened to children; of the West for what has happened to every other part of the world; of Judeo-Christianity for pagans and indigenous peoples; of Christians for Jews; of whites for people of color; of the wealthy for the poor; of human beings for animals and all other forms of life. It will take a fundamental metanoia, a self-overcoming, a radical sacrifice to make this transition. Sometimes when we speak about the emergence of a new paradigm and a new world view, we focus on the intellectual dimensions of this shift; I am as interested in those as the next person. But I don't think we can minimize the crucial importance of the moral dimension for this great transformation to take place.

Not Without Grace

And in the end, it will also require grace. We can do everything we can do, engage the issues with our holistic scientific knowledge, with our jnana yoga, with our karma yoga, with our imagination, and our love—but the bottom line is that grace has to play a role in this.

Probably the most beautiful song by the [Grateful Dead](#) was "In the Attics of My Life." The song is like a polyphonic Renaissance chorale, from their album *American Beauty*. It's a gorgeous song, with Jerry Garcia's music and Robert Hunter's profound lyrics. The singers are addressing the divine: "When I had no wings to fly, You flew to me. . . . When I had no strings to play, You played for me." It's the recognition that when the self has been totally emptied in the moment of death, in the ego death, in the dark night of the soul, something else happens. That's when the divine can come through, and finally it's not Other. It's within, it's us. It's who we are.

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[Back to Top](#)

[Back to previous page](#)

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