

NEW OBSERVATIONS

The Extended Moment: The Photography and Writing of Ray Grasse





The Extended Moment: *The Photography and Writing of Ray Grasse*

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Ray Grasse - Self Portrait



Night Vision #30

ALMOST MARCH, 2021

“For me, night photography is a way of uncovering worlds hidden within this one. Through the use of extended time exposures, the lens becomes a tool for exposing realities normally hidden from our conventional time-sense, the result being imagery that resonates more in some ways to the language of nightly dreams than that of waking logic.”

Ray Grasse

It is with relief and good cheer that New Observations Magazine has turned the corner to now focus on the many talents of Ray Grasse. Educated at the Art Institute of Chicago, Grasse is a virtuoso musical talent, composing his own work and playing multiple instruments. His work as a photographer is striking and compelling, whether the image is a straight photograph or one manipulated to reflect the unseen energy the moves through and around us from the spiritual realm. His photos express the sophisticated color of a painter and are deeply moving as testaments of the natural world.

In his teens, Ray Grasse understood that his interior life motivated him and was central to his growth and development as a person. He began his course of study with spiritual teacher Kriyananda and modern mystic Shelly Trimmer at that time and established the philosophy and wisdom they shared as a foundation for his own exploration which has lasted for these many decades. His personal view of the world and beyond has benefited me personally along with the countless people he has counseled over the years through his in-depth knowledge of astrology. He is the author of numerous books and articles published in respected journals and magazines.

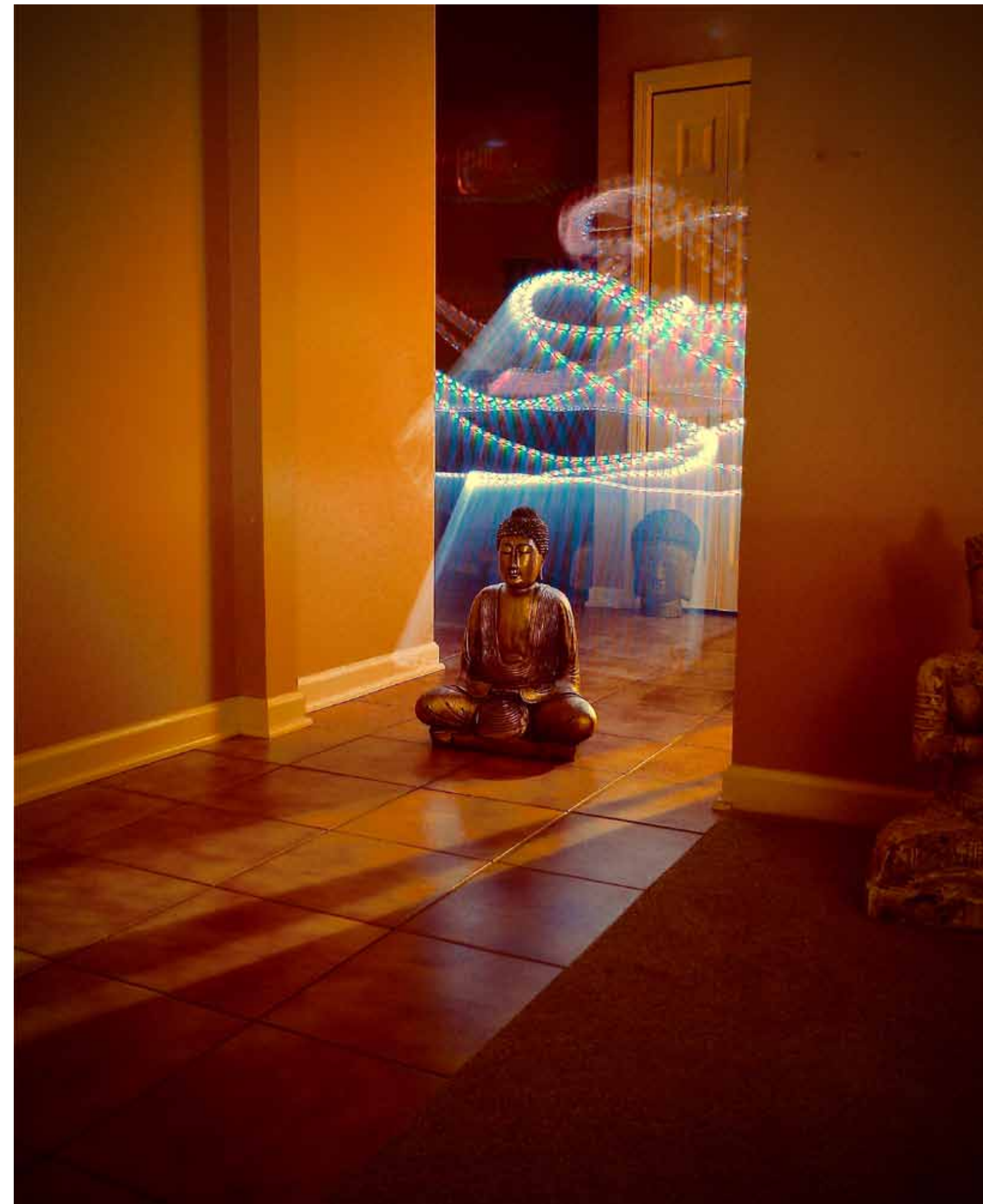
Grasse is a scholar who stands alongside the greats in the field of astrology such as Richard Tarnas and has lectured extensively at the Theosophical Society in Wheaton, Illinois, sharing his understanding of human nature and the nature of the repeating cycles of the planets in contemporary times.

Beauty and understanding converge in the combined expression of the life’s work of Ray Grasse. Issue #138 of New Observations is meant to provide you with a sampling of his creativity and knowledge. For more information, please explore his lectures on YouTube. His musical compositions can also be found there while his photography can be explored in greater depth at his website:

www.raygrassephotography.com

I would like to thank Ray for his contribution to my personal growth and development as well as the continued positive energy he shares with the world. The beauty he finds in the night sky as an astrologer and as a photographer provides a metaphor for consciousness as well as a road map for the intersections of our lives. Our free will and the photographic lens decide what our focus will be and the extended moments we hold in our hearts.

Mia Feroleto



Buddha



Threshold

**“I Invent Nothing. I Imagine Everything.”
– Brassäi**

As a modern-day Renaissance man, not only is Ray Grasse a published author and composer, musician and professional astrologer, but he is also a very accomplished photographer.

There are many hidden treasures to find in his impressive cinematic series, “Night Vision.” On first viewing the dramatic image ‘Threshold,’ we find ourselves entering into a hauntingly beautiful park alone at night, seemingly lit only by moonlight. There is an eerie, atmospheric stillness to this nocturnal scene; disturbingly real, we feel we are entering the scene bringing us right into the frame.

All of the photographs in this series capture another side to suburbia, an ethereal world of mysterious scenes difficult to interpret. But Grasse has also created in this rarefied atmosphere

The photographs in his Night Vision series are mysterious, nocturnal scenes difficult to interpret, but Grasse has created a rarefied atmosphere, with hidden treasures throughout combining the distant past into the present in a way that may all only be a dream—scenes that mix the distant past with the present in a way that seems too perfect for this world.

Elizabeth Avedon

Reflections on Music, Magic, and Astrology

By Ray Grasse

Some of my earliest memories are those of music—listening to my mother play the piano, hearing songs on the radio or the family record player, or memorizing theme songs from TV shows or movies. My mother noticed this early fascination and arranged for me to have weekly lessons with a very stern, strictly-by-the-book German piano teacher down the street from us.

I took those lessons for five years—and they felt like dog years. That’s because she taught music much the same way that many other instructors teach music, I’ve since learned: by focusing entirely on practice, memorization, and reading sheet music, with little or no emphasis on composing or improvising. Little or no emphasis on creating, in other words. I’ve likened the situation to a child finally being allowed to go out onto the playground only to be told he had to spend the entire time just doing calisthenics. That definitely wasn’t for me. When I finally told my mother I just couldn’t take it any longer, she was heartbroken.

It was three years later that I wandered back to the piano, shortly followed by the guitar. This time, though, I focused my energies mainly on improvising and composing, and it felt like an entirely different world. I came alive whenever I played music, making things up in the moment or composing rough little songs and instrumentals. I realized at that point that I didn’t want to simply memorize or perform other people’s music, like Timmy the trumpet player one block over, who eventually wound up performing with big symphony orchestras around the world. All power to Timmy, I thought, but I wanted to hear what was inside of me, however clumsy and imperfect that might prove to be.

I was a shy, seriously uptight kid and didn’t date at all through high school, and while I had a few good friends I always preferred to spend my time at home working on my creative projects, including music. I followed the popular music scene closely, which throughout the 1960s and early ‘70s offered up an extraordinary buffet of new and exciting recordings on a constant basis. Every week, it seemed as though some great new album would be released. One week, it might be something by the Beatles, the next week, Bob Dylan or the Rolling Stones, the Four Tops, Burt Bacharach, the Moody Blues, Jimi Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Stevie Wonder—and on and on it went, a virtual tsunami of sonic riches. In a different vein, I was also discovering the music of Debussy, whose compositions held a nearly transcendental power for me, like hearing music streaming in from other worlds or dimensions. It still feels that way to me sometimes.

But things started changing in my 20s, when I began turning my attention more to reading, writing, and thinking about philosophical matters. Up to that point, I’d practically shunned academic interests, believing (arrogantly) that the arts were far superior to mere intellectual pursuits. But the more I began looking into philosophy, literature, science, and history, the more I not only came to appreciate those fields, I also began to realize I didn’t seem to think in quite the same way as many others around me did, at least those more academically trained than myself.

For example, rather than follow lines of thought in relatively linear, logical ways, I tended to think about subjects laterally, focusing more on cross-associations and analogies, free-associating between disciplines and subjects in ways that didn’t always make sense in conventional contexts. (While I was ruminating to a friend about a curious synchronicity I noticed in the news one day, he remarked to me, “You have a strange way of thinking about things, Ray.” By his standards, I’m sure he was right.)

It was then that I began to wonder if all this might have something to do with music. I read an article discussing research that suggested musical education in childhood appeared to wire the brain differently than more conventional studies and learning, creating different kinds of neural pathways through the brain. That made sense to me. I’d always been fascinated by harmony in music, but I was now becoming fascinated by “harmonies” between events, phenomena, historical episodes, and subjects. I began to suspect that maybe my brain had been wired by music to search out those kinds of connections. Sometimes those connections were silly and meaningless, while at other times they seemed more substantial—like noticing similarities between ancient Rome and modern America, or noticing how certain themes seemed to pop up in different movies or books around the exact same time, despite there being no obvious connection between them. Things like that.

My eye for analogies and correspondences came in especially handy when I began delving into subjects like astrology and synchronicity, since those were based heavily on analogies and correspondences. How could a prominent Neptune in someone’s horoscope relate to their love for sailing, or even a propensity for alcohol? Or how could a strong activation of Uranus in the sky possibly explain a sudden rash of aviation accidents in the news? Those were the sorts of connections that made no sense at all to my literal-minded friends, but for anyone with a brain tuned to harmonies and correspondences, they seem quite natural.

My love of music stimulated my thinking in other ways as well. For instance, whenever I’ve had the good fortune



Dir en Grey

of attending a musical performance that moved me deeply, I’d be reminded of the close resonance between our English words for “music” and “magic.” Music is the close sister of magic, and there’s deep mystery in its ability to transform consciousness, with its proportions and ratios stirring chords in the depths of the soul. Both of those arts—music and magic—employ intricately arranged elements that act on the unconscious in ways the rational mind can’t truly fathom.

But how is it that patterns of sounds can affect our awareness and emotions so profoundly? It has nothing at all to do with logic, and instead operates deep down in subterranean caverns of the psyche, far below the brightly lit plateaus of consciousness and rationality. This is something we take for granted whenever we tap our foot or sing to some piece of music in the shower, but we really shouldn’t, because it’s truly profound and mysterious.

In turn, that led me to contemplate another aspect of music, what we call “beat.” There are many factors that go to make up any piece of music—melody, instrumentation, tonal scale, etc. But the framework of any composition is its rhythm, or beat. When you look at a musical score, there is generally a time signature indicated, such as 4/4, 3/4, or 2/4, which establishes the rhythm. Time signature is to music what a skeleton is to a body; it’s the structure on which the flesh and the muscles of music hang.

But this had me wondering whether a person’s life doesn’t also have a “time signature.” For instance, some of us live according to the rhythmic beat of hours (like a radio announcer who delivers the news at the top of each hour), while some of us live according to the rhythm of days and weeks (like your average five-day-a-week worker), and still others live more according to the seasons (like a farmer).

But astrology suggests it’s considerably more complex

than that, since each person's horoscope embodies a rich network of cycles and rhythms, from those of the Sun and Moon to those of all the planets. Each planetary orbit establishes a kind of "beat," not just in the way these bodies circle back around to their starting points but also in the ways they interact with one another to create a complex weave of celestial frequencies. Our personality and emotions are an expression of our own symphony of rhythms, notes, and harmonies, all unfolding through time.

There is one other way music influenced my way of thinking about astrology. I'm sometimes asked by students how much we are limited by our horoscopes, and whether we have any real free will to act differently from what our planetary patterns describe. My answer has always been that a horoscope is like a piece of sheet music in some ways, in that it presents certain boundaries and structures but allows for enormous leeway in how we interpret those notes.

For example, think of how differently a musical composition such as Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" would be played by a classical pianist, a rock-and-roller, a jazz musician, or even as programmed by a robot. Our horoscope is a bit like that, in that the patterns may appear to be set in concrete, yet the performance of them doesn't have to be. We might even choose to improvise wildly around those basic themes, if we wanted to. That may help to explain why two people born around the same time, like twins, can seem so different from one another.

But that difference in musical styles likely holds another secret of interest to astrologers, which I'd convey through a strange question: What style of music is most beautiful? Would it be soft, pastoral music? Complex baroque compositions? Sad orchestral works? Happy pop tunes? Rock music? Country? Gospel? Jazz?

As even a moment's reflection should reveal, it's a meaningless query, since "beauty" isn't so much a function of a particular style as it is of the quality of talent brought to it. Pick any particular musical style, and you'll likely find a wide range of quality in works composed in that style—some brilliant and beautiful, others badly written or even unlistenable.

Take the category of "sad orchestral" music, for instance. There are pieces of music that are sad but are also beautiful, like Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings," Mozart's "Requiem," or even Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." Or, consider music in a more discordant vein, like Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." While it shocked audiences at its premiere in 1913, it has a unique beauty all its own. Or take rock music. There are some truly awful pieces of rock, and then there are works like Neil Young's "Heart of Gold," the Beatles' "A Day in the Life," or Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine."

What am I getting at here? Just this: Some horoscopes have a more intrinsically "sad" quality or style (due, say, to a Saturn–Moon conjunction in the 1st house), while others display a rougher, more discordant" style (for example, lots of Aries or Scorpio, with a couple squares to Mars thrown in for good measure); while still others have a "happier" or more inspiring style (for instance, Jupiter–Venus in Leo trine the Moon in Sagittarius). In short, there are many different horoscopic moods or "styles."

A couple of years ago, I heard someone complain about their difficult horoscope, and how they wished they'd been born with a happier, more "positive" chart. Okay, I get that. But I also believe in playing the hand you're dealt, and toward that end any horoscope can give rise to great things, if played right. Helen Keller didn't have an easy horoscope, but she certainly made great "music" with it.

Which leaves us with the question: What "music" are you composing with your horoscope?



Serpent Vision



Alone



Night Beachgoers



Winged Visage



Florida Fever Dream



Between Worlds



The Apparition

Urban Mystic: Reminiscences of Goswami Kriyananda

By Ray Grasse

In the months leading up to my twentieth birthday, I wrestled mightily with the notion of linking up with a spiritual teacher. It became somewhat fashionable in those days to seek out a guru after the Beatles, Donovan, and the Beach Boys traveled to India and had done just that. More than a few writers at the time went so far as to assert that if you entertained any hope of finding “enlightenment,” you’d better align yourself with a spiritual teacher—or you might as well just forget about it.

But the thought of putting myself at the feet of a guru troubled me, for any number of reasons. One of those involved a certain fear of commitment, since I thought that discipleship meant aligning yourself with a teacher for eternity. What if you picked the wrong one? But I also worried about sacrificing my individuality, since I (mistakenly) feared that was part and parcel of the process. Besides, didn’t the Buddha attain enlightenment on his own?

Formal discipleship or not, I knew I wanted to acquire some of the knowledge offered by these teachers should the chance ever arise.

As it turned out, that chance did arise. During sophomore year in college, a fellow student told me about an American-born swami in the area who was supposedly knowledgeable in the ways of mysticism and meditation. He called his center the Temple of Kriya Yoga, and it was located then on the fifth floor of an office building on State Street in downtown Chicago. Despite my nervousness about entering this new environment—I was fairly agoraphobic at the time, so social gatherings were a source of anxiety for me—I finally attended one of his lectures to see for myself what this man had to offer.

I was nineteen at the time, and felt very out of place sitting there amongst those strangers, some of whose behaviors and appearances were very different from mine. I had no problem with the long hair or the flowing dresses, but I was a bit wary of the bearded men with beads around their necks who brandished inscrutable smiles. Did that look imply peace of mind, or rather a cultlike mindlessness?

Kriyananda—or as the others referred to him, Goswami Kriyananda—certainly looked the part of a guru, with his long beard and flowing hair.* He spoke that first night for a little over an hour, and his knowledge of mystical subjects

was impressive. So impressive, in fact, that before I knew it, I’d attended his classes and lectures for nearly fifteen years in all.

Over the course of those years I became marginally involved with the temple itself, volunteering my time to help design logos or advertisements, joining one or another committee to help plan events, and on a handful of occasions teaching classes. Yet unlike most of the others, I was never compelled to take the final plunge and become a formal disciple. That proved to be a double-edged sword, for

reasons that should become clearer as my story moves along.

It wasn’t long before I learned his original name was Melvin Higgins. He was born in 1928, and up to then had lived most of his life in Chicagoland. (As for why he never relocated elsewhere, he once remarked, “I believe one should bloom where one is planted.”) He graduated from college,

worked in the business world for a while, and acquired a following of students that expanded in size as his center changed locations around the city. He first taught out of his home in Hyde Park, on Chicago’s south side, after which he moved to several locations in the downtown Chicago area, finally relocating the temple in 1979 to the Logan Square neighborhood on the city’s north side.

Kriyananda was notably unpretentious, and drove an old car at a time when some other better-known teachers were flaunting their conspicuous wealth in the form of multiple Rolls-Royces and phalanxes of fawning attendants. He also made himself surprisingly accessible to students after lectures, which wasn’t a common practice among teachers of his caliber. It was relatively easy to walk into his office and approach him with pressing concerns; in fact, there was almost always a line of students outside his office, looking for answers to their questions or for emotional support.

Despite that ease of access, it took me almost a full year to build up the nerve to go in and speak with him one-on-one, because I was initially intimidated by his presence. When I finally did approach him, however, he couldn’t have been friendlier. Over those next few years we wound up carrying our conversations outside the temple, enjoying talks over lunch or dinner while running errands in the city together, or talking on the phone.

Indeed, the fact that I wasn’t a disciple seemed to make it easier for him to be relatively open with me, since he

wasn’t as obliged to play the formal role of teacher with me and maintain the disciplinary posture that often entails. He was always down-to-earth in our exchanges, never pious or ethereal, and it wasn’t unusual for him to spruce up our conversations with a well-chosen expletive now and then. He was definitely a Chicago-born teacher, no doubt about it—and that was all for the better, as far as I was concerned.

Every chance I had to speak with him over the years, I soaked up as much information as I could about subjects like karma, mythology, ancient history, astrology, meditation, comparative religion, or even politics. And he never held back, no matter how persistent or annoying I could be (and I could be pretty persistent and annoying). I was especially impressed by his openness about his own imperfections. It was obvious he didn’t want to appear better than anyone else. Like his own guru, Shelly Trimmer, he didn’t wear his spirituality on his sleeve.

But I also suspect that low-key style may have affected his popularity and fame as a teacher. That’s because some of the more well-known spiritual teachers making the rounds at the time projected a carefully cultivated air of “holiness” and solemn unapproachability that many interpreted as signs of spiritual merit—whether they actually possessed any or not. This wasn’t Kriyananda’s style at all. He could be self-effacing, often humorous, and very human. Yet underlying that humanness was a spiritual depth and core integrity that was obvious to me. On countless occasions, for example, I watched as he went out of his way to help others, sometimes at considerable expense or inconvenience to himself. At bottom, he struck me as a profoundly sensitive soul with a deep compassion for others.

I suspect some of that sensitivity may have come from experiencing a hard life while he was growing up. Before he was five, his father died, and his mother remarried a man who ushered several more children into an already large household, with young Melvin now having to shoulder much of the responsibility of helping to raise those younger siblings. He openly admitted to being so shy when younger that he could hardly speak in social settings, something which undoubtedly pained him greatly. I had the sense that his way of coping back then was escaping into books and learning as much as he could about spirituality, science, and history.

Over the years I interacted with him, Kriyananda displayed a work ethic that confounded me with its sheer energy. He gave formal lectures at least twice a week, on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings, in addition to continually offering courses which extended anywhere from six weeks to twelve months, along with rigorous programs specifically designed for disciples and aspiring swamis. All of that was on top of an astrological practice that had him seeing clients five or six days a week, while he also churned out a series of books and pamphlets. I never quite figured out how he managed to do it all, and suspected he must have gotten by

on just a few hours of sleep every night.

What kept him going? Though I knew he was passionate about teaching, I also knew the entire process wasn’t always a stroll in the park. In particular, keeping the temple afloat was an expensive endeavor and generated a mountain of bills—and he was the one mainly responsible for paying them. He once told how exciting it was when he first opened the temple, but then how challenging it became after a few years, not just financially but in overseeing the parade of personalities that streamed through it. When he mentioned this to his own guru, the elder teacher responded, “Kriyananda, it’s very easy to create something, whether that be a marriage, a business, or a temple. But it’s much harder to sustain that creation.” But sustain it he did, in the process affecting the lives of many thousands of men and women, both directly and indirectly.

The Teachings

Kriyananda lectured on a wide range of esoteric and spiritual topics, but had a particular genius when it came to astrology. He was a virtual encyclopedia of information on both Eastern and Western astrological systems, and often discussed interpretive techniques I’d never heard of before, and to this day I’m still unsure where he learned them. Just as impressive was his hands-on talent for reading horoscopes. Much of the time Kriyananda seemed to have nearly X-ray vision for deciphering birth charts and what they revealed about their owners. I know of instances where he said things to individuals that were accurate in detailed ways that continue to baffle me, since I could find nothing in those horoscopes which prompted those insights.

Yet the central core of his teachings revolved principally around Kriya Yoga, a holistic tradition known for consciousness-raising techniques and a comparatively “householder” approach toward spiritual practice. With the notable exception of Paramahansa Yogananda, famed author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, most of the teachers in this branch of the Kriya lineage were married and held regular jobs while teaching students. That was a definite plus as far as I was concerned, since I certainly wasn’t interested in celibacy.

Kriyananda—or Melvin, as he was known early in life—first encountered the teachings of Kriya Yoga up close and personal through a mysterious teacher in Minnesota named Shelly Trimmer, whom I’d eventually encounter myself (and whom I wrote about in my book *An Infinity of Gods*, excerpted in *Quest*, fall 2017).

With both his sun and moon in Taurus, there was a notable practicality to Kriyananda’s teachings that was somewhat less pronounced in Shelly’s sometimes more “cosmic” perspective. Kriyananda had a talent for distilling complex spiritual doctrines into simple terms, such as this gem: “Everyone is trying to find God when they haven’t even found their humanness yet.” In that respect he shared a close affinity with the here-and-now emphasis of Zen Buddhism

(he once even remarked that Paul Reps' book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* was "one of the greatest books ever written").

That subtle difference between his spiritual perspective and Shelly's was apparent in a comment he once made about something the older guru said to him. On one occasion Shelly remarked how he never felt entirely comfortable in his physical body. "Other people are trying to get out of their physical body, but I have trouble staying in mine," Shelly said laughingly. In contrast with that perspective, Kriyananda took a more Zenlike approach when he said, "That's one of the few areas where I respectfully disagree with my guru. I believe that we should be comfortable wherever we find ourselves, whether that be in a twenty-room mansion or a tiny shack."

There were a few other ways in which Kriyananda and Shelly differed in their approach toward teaching. For instance, Shelly had a pronounced trickster streak and was known to pull the wool over students' eyes—a teaching tactic of which Kriyananda found himself on the receiving end more than once. Directly as a result of those sometimes frustrating lessons, he consciously chose to go in a different direction with students, once saying to me, "Ask me a question, and I'll shoot straight from the hip; I'll give you a direct answer."

Another key difference between them concerned the matter of legacy. Shelly's modesty about his own contribution to the world was such that he felt no pressing desire to write books or preserve his ideas for posterity, other than teaching in that distinctly low-key, one-on-one fashion of his. Shelly genuinely seemed to believe that in the greater scheme of things, his words ultimately meant very little. "If I don't do it or say it, someone else undoubtedly will," he once remarked.

In contrast with that proverbial view from 30,000 feet, Kriyananda had a more practical, boots-on-the-ground attitude. Early on, he set about working to preserve his ideas not only in books but through creating a library of audio-tapes and videos that could be accessed online and would survive long after he had passed.

Which of those two perspectives is the right one, Kriyananda's or Shelly's? To my mind, both are. They were simply different approaches, each with its own validity and value. Kriyananda and Shelly viewed the world through different lenses, set to very different magnifying powers, and I drew enormous value from both of them.

Kriyananda the Mystic

Of the varied insights I gathered from Kriyananda over the years, I especially valued those of a more personal nature, when he related experiences he had as an early student or later on as a teacher. Indeed, of all the teachings I've heard delivered by various teachers over the years, the ones that stand out most vividly in my memory are those of a more personal nature, even more than their philosophical ru-

minations. That was true with Kriyananda too. As just one example, I recall a series of lectures Kriyananda delivered on Taoist philosophy sometime during the late 1970s, yet to this day the only thing I remember from that six-week course was a personal anecdote he shared in passing about a conversation he had with his own teacher, and which remains as vivid to me now as the day I heard it.

Most of these personal anecdotes were of a spiritual nature, describing some struggle or lesson he learned while growing up, or during some encounter with his guru. But a few of the more intriguing tales involved anecdotes of a psychic or paranormal nature. Why did those interest me? Because they suggested there was more going on with the man than meets the eye.

Kriyananda strongly discouraged students from becoming overly concerned with psychic abilities or magical powers. Indeed it was one reason he never recommended Yogananda's famed *Autobiography of a Yogi* to new students: he felt its emphasis on exotic powers and experiences misrepresented the spiritual path in certain respects. Yet he never denied that those abilities existed, and on rare occasions spoke about his own paranormal experiences. While it's impossible for me to judge the ultimate validity of these accounts, I never sensed the slightest hint of ego or dishonesty in their telling—and as I'll explain shortly, I had reasons of my own to believe they were more than just fabrications.

Many of those stories were brief and simple, and casually mentioned in the course of longer lectures or conversations. One simple example was the time he spoke about driving along the city's outer drive that morning and seeing a dead dog lying alongside the road. He described perceiving the spirit of the dog wandering around the accident scene, looking dazed and confused about what had happened to it. Feeling compassionate for the dog, he stopped his car along the shoulder of the busy road to tend to it, blessing it and sending it on its way.

Or the time he was drafted into the army during the Korean War, where he served as a medic and found himself situated near the battlefield. While huddling in the trench during one conflict, he described seeing a fellow soldier rise up and march towards enemy lines, only to be shot and instantly killed. But while the soldier's body dropped to the ground, Kriyananda said he saw the man's astral double keep marching forward, as though he hadn't realized he'd been shot.

Once he spoke of attending a Catholic service that was being conducted by a priest with whom he'd been friends. Normally, he explained, he would sit in the back of a church and see the energies of the parishioners during the service; whenever the priest would lift the chalice upwards at that point of communion, he'd see the spinal currents of everyone rise upwards as well, as if in sympathetic resonance with the ritual up on the altar.

But on this particular Sunday morning, the priest lifted

the chalice upwards—and nothing happened in the spines of the parishioners; no subtle energies were stirred. After the service, he spoke to his priest friend and inquired whether there was anything different about the ceremony this particular Sunday. It turned out the church had run out of wine, so the priest substituted grape juice instead that day. Kriyananda used this story to illustrate the importance of symbolic "purity" in rituals and the need to use the appropriate ingredients to embody one's intentions.

Then there was this. One afternoon in 1978 Kriyananda emerged from his office to deliver his usual Sunday afternoon talk, but he was looking noticeably disturbed about something. Sitting down before the podium, he shook his head back and forth gently a few times and muttered softly, "They're doing some crazy things down there"—with no further explanation. He continued on with his talk, leaving myself and the others in attendance perplexed about that opening comment. What did he mean by "down there"? Or by "crazy things"? I continued wondering about it, so after his talk I headed downstairs to the lower floors of the hotel lobby to see if he might have been referring to something taking place there, or even outside the building. But I found nothing unusual at all.

Later that evening, I turned on the TV to hear reporters talk about news trickling in from South America about a mass suicide down in Guyana. Over the next few days, reports revealed that over 900 residents of Jonestown had taken their lives under the direction of cult leader Jim Jones—and it had all started unfolding around the time of Kriyananda's talk. Was he psychically sensing the mass tragedy happening far away? There's no way to know for sure, but that was the only time I ever heard him make a public comment like that.

There were even some possible instances of prophecy. One of them involved a young woman named Karen Phillips, a disciple of his and a good friend of mine from the suburban town I was living in, Oak Park. While lecturing privately to his disciples one day (as related to me later that week by his disciple Bill Hunt), Kriyananda made this sobering remark: "In six weeks one of you will no longer be with us." Was he implying someone was going to move out of state? Or something more serious? Most of those in attendance that afternoon had no idea what to make of the statement, and probably just forgot about it after a few days. But I was intrigued enough on hearing about it that I carefully kept an eye on the calendar to see if any of his disciples might be departing the temple in six weeks.

Exactly six weeks later, I walked into the temple to attend a class when a phone call came in to the front desk. The receptionist picked it up, and on the other end of the line was someone saying that Karen Phillips had been brutally murdered the night before. As the receptionist broke the news to Kriyananda, he looked concerned but not surprised. Eventually, the case received worldwide media coverage be-

cause of one singularly odd element: the culprit was identified as a young Bible student living several doors down from Karen, who went to the police shortly afterwards to describe a dream in which he witnessed precise details of the murder. Because of how closely the dream matched the actual crime, he was arrested and convicted of the murder, spending several years in jail before his conviction was finally overturned on appeal.

It was the only time I heard Kriyananda ever make a prediction that dramatic, and I naturally wondered how he arrived at it. Years later, Kriyananda may have provided a clue when a local magazine interviewed him and asked how anyone could verify whether an astral projection experience was valid or just a fantasy. He answered by describing his own early experiences with astral projection, and what he learned from them:

"I (eventually) encountered disembodied souls who told me about their children and what was going to happen to them. Years later, these events manifested exactly the way the parents said they would. This evidence absolutely confirmed the afterlife's existence and its link to human earth life and earth life to the afterlife. It was those experiences that removed any remaining doubt that humans were able to see into the afterlife."

Interesting stories all, no doubt. But how could I be sure they weren't anything more than just coincidence, or fabrications? The answer is, I can't—not positively anyway. But in some instances the unusual phenomena I witnessed did involve me directly, in which case they took on an entirely different weight. Here are a couple of examples.

Consider the time I had a conversation with Kriyananda and posed a series of questions to him on a variety of subjects while I recorded his comments on the battery-powered tape recorder I'd placed on his desk, where it remained near to me and never within his reach. One of those questions I asked him concerned the existence of God, and he may well have given me a fascinating answer; but unfortunately I was so busy checking the next question on my sheet that I barely noticed what he was saying. When I finally looked up from my paper, there was a look on his face of mild exasperation, as though he could tell I wasn't really paying attention and was too caught up figuring out my next query. On top of that, he shook his head slightly and muttered something to the effect that, "I really shouldn't have said quite so much." I wasn't too worried, though, since I'd been recording the conversation and knew I could always listen to his answers once I'd returned home—right?

But before I left the building that day, Kriyananda did something odd. He came up to me and said, "Wait a second, Ray, can I see that tape?" "Sure," I said, as I pulled out the cassette and handed it over. Grasping it with one hand, he proceeded to quickly rub the cassette tape two or three times with his index and middle fingers, then handed it back to me with an almost mischievous look on his face. As he

turned and walked away from me, I could only wonder what that was all about.

That night at home, I excitedly sat down to listen to the tape, and was especially interested to hear that one section of the conversation where I asked him about God. But lo and behold, when I got to that part of the tape, it was blank. Exactly when I expected to hear him answer my question, there was no sound on the tape at all, only silence. Then, right at the point where I launched into my next question, the sound on the tape mysteriously started up again. That silent spot was the only blank patch on the entire recording.

I was baffled, and started to mentally retrace my steps from earlier in the day to see if there was any conceivable way he could have done something to the tape or the recorder to make that glitch occur. But the recorder was in my possession the entire time, and was running on batteries rather than via any power cord. He never once touched it. Still skeptical about what happened, the next time I walked into the Temple and saw him, I asked right off, “OK, now, how did you do that?” From the look on his face, it was obvious he knew exactly what I was referring to, but he just laughed and walked away.

Then there was this. Throughout much of that period I struggled with meditation, often feeling as though I was simply spinning my wheels in the backwaters of conventional mind. I saw others sitting quietly and motionless during their meditations, yet I usually felt frustrated by my own restlessness and inability to go very deep in my meditations. But for one short but unusually fruitful stretch of time, I seemed to strike gold with one Kriya technique known as the Hong Sau mantra. This is a silent, strictly internal mantra that is coupled with one’s breathing pattern. For that relatively brief span of time, things came together for me in a powerful way, to where I felt as though I had finally gotten what the technique was about—or at least one aspect of it (since a given technique doesn’t necessarily have a single intended outcome). Each time I engaged this technique, I experienced a heightening of awareness along with a welling up of blissful energy that was dramatic and deeply pleasurable.

During one of Kriyananda’s talks, I was sitting in the back of the dimly lit room and began practicing the Hong Sau technique. My eyes were closed, and I was completely silent, with nothing externally to indicate what I was doing internally. Then, shortly after I began feeling that surge of blissful energy in me, I heard Kriyananda stop lecturing in mid-sentence and go completely silent for about fifteen seconds. That wasn’t at all normal for him during a talk, so I opened my eyes to see what was going on—only to see him peering through the darkness directly at me, as everyone else in the room turned to see what he was looking at. Embarrassed by the sudden attention, with all eyes now directed at me, I stopped the technique, and Kriyananda resumed his lecture as if nothing had happened.

Exactly one week later, a friend of mine (who didn’t know I was using that technique) happened to walk into Kriyananda’s office to ask if he would teach him the Hong Sau mantra. Kriyananda replied, “Why don’t you ask Ray to teach it to you? He seems to be having some pretty good luck with it.” When my friend told me of that exchange, I was floored, not only because it indicated Kriyananda knew I was having a powerful meditation that afternoon, but even pinpointed the exact technique I was using. That was impressive, I thought.

Instances like those led me to accept the possibility he did possess unusual psychic abilities. During one conversation with him about my own inability to intuit people’s intentions, I lightheartedly said, “We can’t all be as psychic as you, Kriyananda!” To which he claimed he wasn’t born that way, and that while young, he was about as “unpsychic as anyone could be.” Being an earthy double Taurus, he added, he originally believed if one couldn’t touch, taste, or measure something, it just wasn’t real. He seemed to be implying that it was a result of extensive meditations over the years that his intuitive powers developed as far as they had.

Yet I also suspect those unusual potentials may well have been latent from birth, just waiting to be triggered. I say that for this reason. I took a course in palmistry from him at one point in the 1970s, and in one class he used his hand to make a point about the length and shape of the lines in the palm, and what these meant from a symbolic standpoint. It was then that I happened to notice something very unusual about the little finger on his right hand—the finger associated by astrologers and palmists with the mind and the planet Mercury. Instead of the usual three joints, his little finger had four. That was surprising, so I asked him whether that indicated unusual mental capacities. He laughed and humbly played it down, saying, “Yes, but remember, I’m left-handed, so the usual view that the left hand shows inborn potentials and the right hand shows what you’ve done with them is reversed in my case!” I frankly didn’t quite buy his humble revision of traditional palmistry theory, but revision or not, it was an anomalous anatomical feature I’d never seen on anyone’s hand before or since.

The Final Years

Unfortunately, despite a few peak moments here and there, my own attempts at meditation were unfolding at a snail’s pace, and more often than not I struggled with simply sitting still. The longer I studied at the temple, the more I realized how much work I still needed to do in that respect—which is when I began entertaining the possibility of taking part in a longer-term meditation retreat somewhere else. Thus in late 1986 I went off to live for several months at Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York, where I managed to learn a few more helpful things about meditation.

But I kept in touch with Kriyananda over the coming years, calling him on occasion or traveling into the city to meet him

in his office. For me, one of the main values of having access to a spiritual teacher is the chance to get honest feedback about one’s own spiritual or psychological progress—however painful that can be at times. Had he been my actual guru, I suspect he would have taken an even stricter stance with me and offered more explicit suggestions about how to enhance my practice; and had that happened, I have no doubt I would have grown much faster and farther than I did, spiritually. But simply being able to get any of his feedback on my life and mind from time to time was immensely valuable. So just as I had always done during the years I attended talks at the temple, I would ask, “Where do you think I most need to work on myself now?” Generally, he would calmly but compassionately respond with comments like, “You lack self-discipline” (which was true); or “You’re too much in your head, Ray” (also true), or “You need to meditate more” (very true, too)—and other pointed observations.

But on some occasions, he’d extend a touching compliment out of the blue, and those were meaningful in a different way. For instance, I came to know a student of his named Rebecca Romanoff, with whom I spent much time over the years as friends. We would get together for lunch or dinner sometimes, sit along the lakefront, or go to see a movie. Eventually, many years later, some time after his first wife died from cancer, Kriyananda and Rebecca got married, and they lived together until her death in 2013.

But in 1983, a couple of years prior to their marriage, she invited Kriyananda and me over to her apartment for dinner, where we spent the evening talking about a wide variety of subjects. At one point, I began reminiscing with Rebecca about some of the activities we enjoyed doing back in the old days, at which point she interjected, very self-critically, “Oh, you must have thought I was such a basket case back then.”

I was genuinely surprised to hear how hard she was on herself—especially considering I always regarded her as the one who had it together, and that I had been the neurotic one, not her. So I quickly responded, “Oh, Becky! I’ve never judged you like that!” At which point Kriyananda chimed in

unexpectedly, “You know, that’s something you and Shelly have in common; you’re the two individuals I know who aren’t at all judgmental towards others.” To be compared like that with his teacher—even in such a modest way—was deeply moving, especially coming at a time when I was dealing with a string of personal disappointments in my life.

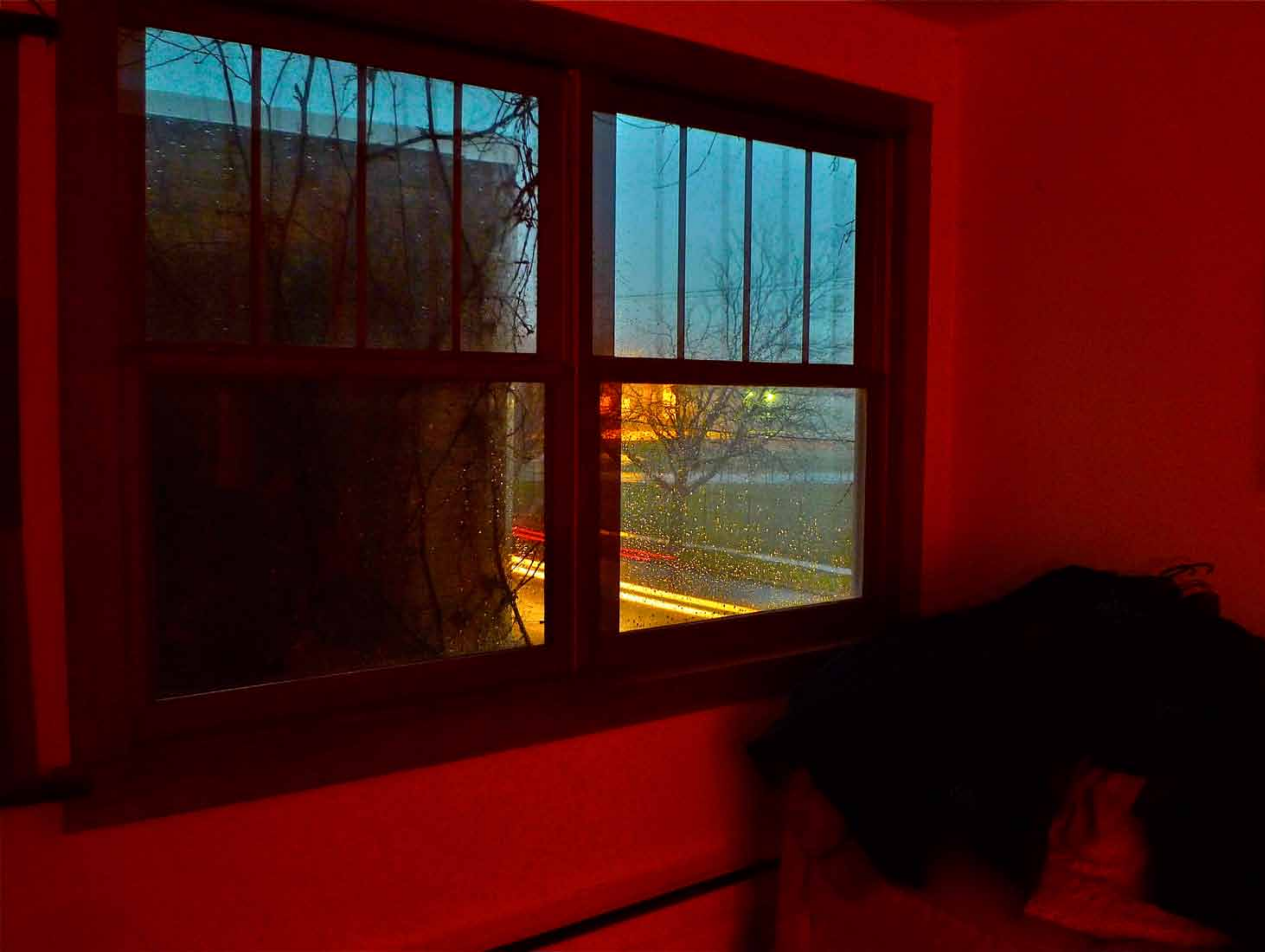
In the summer of 2013 I received the sad news that Rebecca had passed away. Around that time I decided to preserve what I could of the teachings I’d gathered from both Kriyananda and Shelly, as I began sorting through the records of my years studying with them. In Kriyananda’s case, that involved searching through several dozen notebooks I’d compiled from which I selected key passages and quotes which I felt distilled his teachings in more digestible form. As it so happened, on April 21, 2015, virtually the same day I finished that selection and posted those quotes online, I received word that Kriyananda himself passed away, having lived out his last days in France. I’d sent him a message just two weeks earlier to get his approval on what I had compiled, just to make sure I wasn’t misrepresenting his thoughts in any way. When I didn’t hear back from him, I was perplexed, since he normally responded fairly quickly. When I received word of his passing, though, I realized he probably hadn’t been in any condition to communicate with me at that point.

* There are several teachers in the yogic tradition named Kriyananda (notably the late Swami Kriyananda of California, aka J. Donald Walters, with whom the Chicago-born Kriyananda is sometimes confused). A simple way to distinguish the two teachers is through their titles: the Kriyananda I’m profiling in this article was known by the honorific Goswami, rather than Swami.

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The Divine Science

Reflections on a Life in Astrology

By Ray Grasse

Every man is more than just himself; he also represents the unique, the very special and always significant and remarkable point at which the world's phenomena intersect, only once in this way, and never again.

— Hermann Hesse, *Demian*

As I sat down on the floor across from the astrologer, I watched as she carefully studied the sheet of hieroglyphic-type symbols laid out before her. Her name was Debbie, and she was a classmate from college. When she mentioned one day that she did horoscopes on the side professionally, I was fascinated enough to check this out for myself. My only experience with astrologers up to this point had been a casual conversation with a novice practitioner one year earlier, but that didn't go well at all. This talk with Debbie would be my first formal reading from a real, working astrologer. I was neither a believer nor a disbeliever at this point, but I'd heard just enough to think that astrology might hold some real value.

I'm not sure when or where I first heard about this subject, since it was in the air throughout my childhood. Besides the ubiquitous newspaper columns on Sun-sign astrology, it wasn't unusual in those days to turn on the radio and hear songs with lyrics like "When the Moon is in the 7th house and Jupiter aligns with Mars," or hear celebrities on talk shows refer to their horoscopes. A more serious turning point for me came in my mid teens when a friend handed me a book titled *Astrology* by Joseph Goodavage. It offered a useful overview of the topic and piqued my curiosity about the possibility that there really could be something to this subject after all.

But actually having someone do your horoscope was a very different matter from simply reading books or hearing celebrities talk about it. This felt far more personal and held the promise of probing deeper into my life than any newspaper columns possibly could. I was only 19 at the time, very unsure of myself, and more than a bit nervous about what Debbie might uncover. After all, the books almost made it sound as though astrology gave one a kind of X-ray vision into a person's very soul.

The next hour or so that we spoke, she proceeded to tell me things about my personality and my life that were at once both astonishing and mysterious. Astonishing, because her reading was surprisingly accurate—like her comment about my likely having had abdominal surgery in early childhood, or the remark about a romantic disappointment I had experienced a few weeks earlier. Mysterious, because

I wondered how it was possible for someone who hardly knew me to look at bizarre markings on a piece of paper and say things about my life that she had no way of knowing, all extrapolated just from planetary positions in outer space. It was all unspeakably weird.

The Teachers

I went away from that session more curious than ever, but it was another two years before I began formal studies of the subject. My first instructor was Maura Cleary, a brilliant woman who had previously spent several years at the University of Chicago, teaching with such luminaries as Mircea Eliade, Eugene Gendlin, Paul Ricoeur, and James Hillman—all while still in her mid 20s. Specializing in the work of Carl Jung, she originally set out to disprove astrology, expecting this to be a relatively easy affair, with the intention of publishing her results in the popular new publication *Psychology Today*. But while studying under veteran Chicago astrologer Norman Ahrens (and, later, Pearl Marks), she soon discovered just how accurate—and profound—this discipline was, not to mention its deep relevance to the work of Carl Jung. I also found out that, prior to her stint at the university, she had spent time as a novice at a convent in Kentucky. In some ways, I was almost as interested in learning about her as I was in learning about astrology.

Her teachings opened my mind to a host of new ideas, including the concept that each of us is intimately connected to the workings of the universe. One day, she made this thought-provoking comment: "Because each person is an embodiment of the universe at the moment they're born, if you were to take everyone on the planet and line them up according to birth order, you'd have a living portrait of the universe itself." Astrology hints at powerful secrets, I could tell: Jupiter, the Sun, Mars, and the other planets aren't really outside of us; they're a part of us, and we are a part of them. In a sense, our true nature is as vast as the universe itself. I felt as though my mind were expanding by the day.

The late 1960s and early '70s were a magical and serendipitous time in many ways, when it seemed comparatively effortless to find exciting teachers or teachings of an esoteric bent. Another catalyzing figure for me in that respect was Goswami Kriyananda. A Chicago-born yogi and mystic (not to be confused with a California-based teacher of the same name), Kriyananda wasn't as overtly psychological in his approach to astrology as Maura, but his knowledge of the discipline was encyclopedic—and inspiring. During my nearly 15 years of study with him, he taught such diverse factors as methods of prediction, the intricacies of karma, esoteric astrology, the relation between the planets and the

chakras, and an assortment of other concepts associated with this celestial science.

But over the years, it became obvious to me that there was far more than simple book-learning behind Kriyananda's approach to this subject. Consider the time a friend came with me to his center to hear some lectures, and sat near Kriyananda's podium while he delivered a talk to a small group of students. At one point, Kriyananda casually turned to my friend and mentioned, in passing, some of the planetary energies my friend was experiencing at the time. What made that so unusual was the fact that my friend had never divulged his birth information to Kriyananda or anyone else at the center, other than me. So surprised was my friend by Kriyananda's comments that he decided to head into his office after the lecture to ask how he knew what was going on in his horoscope. "I could see it in your spine," Kriyananda replied. To him, the horoscope was a reflection of the deeper energies inside one, or what the yogis called the chakras. If one were psychic enough, it seems, one could look into any person's spinal currents and glean a sense of what was unfolding in their horoscope. Experiences like that ignited a curiosity in me for that horoscope/chakric connection that I would pursue (and write about) for many years afterward.

From there, it seemed a logical jump to study with Kriyananda's own teacher, Shelly Trimmer (1917–96), also a yogi in the Kriya tradition. Part Kabbalist, part ceremonial magician, and part mystic, this man had studied for several years during the early 1940s under the famed swami Paramahansa Yogananda, and brought to his astrology a vast body of mystical insight and esoteric knowledge unlike anything I had encountered before—or since, for that matter. Trimmer lived in Bradenton, Florida during the years we interacted, and taught primarily on a one-to-one basis, scrupulously shunning publicity in favor of a more personalized approach to instruction. When I once asked him why he had never written any books, he answered simply, "My students are my books."

Whether he was talking about astrology, time travel, or quantum physics, I sometimes had the eerie sensation that I was dealing with someone who had just arrived from some point in the future. Among other things, Trimmer regarded astrology as a key to the mysteries of consciousness itself. The symbols around us are a reflection of our state of consciousness, he said, and can tell us a great deal about who we are and our relative level of spiritual awareness. "If someone truly knows the laws of symbolism," he said, "you could set that person down anywhere in the universe, or on any plane of existence, and they'd be able to figure out exactly where they are in the scheme of things. If you understand symbols, you'll always have a way of orienting yourself."

Like Yogananda, Trimmer emphasized the importance of knowing your horoscope but not becoming too bound by

it. The horoscope is a map of karmic patterns and past-life memories, but he stressed that one's spiritual nature transcends the horoscope and its symbols. By learning to balance your energies in the center of the spine—the subtle channel that yogis refer to as *sushumna*—you can become free from the compelling forces of karma and transcend the influences of the horoscope. That doesn't mean that you no longer encounter problems in the outer world, simply that they don't exert the same influence on your awareness. He remarked:

When your awareness is "on the wheel" [i.e., focused within the subtle currents to the right and left side of the spine], you'll always be "crucified," you'll be controlled by the forces of fear and desire, and by your horoscope. But when you learn to balance your energies within the proverbial "straight and narrow" [*sushumna*], you are free. Then you're able to work with the energies of the horoscope in a more constructive and creative way. Rather than the horoscope controlling you, you now control the horoscope.

Building a Practice

I continued to read voraciously on the subject, my interest stirred by writers like Charles Carter, Dane Rudhyar, Stephen Arroyo, Rob Hand, and Alan Oken, among others, and I set about calculating the charts of everyone I knew. As a way to hone my skills, I started by offering free readings to people and, before long, began doing horoscope readings professionally. My clients eventually came to comprise a diverse group of individuals from all walks of life. Most were simply looking for guidance in matters of romance or career, but there were more unusual cases, too: rock musicians, writers and actors, a few New Age celebrities, a former lawyer for the Watergate trial, some politicians, stock market investors, and even a prostitute or two. Like I say, diverse.

I also spent a great deal of time studying the birth charts of the mega-famous, since their lives were open books and provided marvelous case histories for investigation. That led to some interesting encounters along the way, as I sought to track down exact birth times when they weren't publicly available. Occasionally, I'd find myself tongue-tied when actually crossing paths with these notable people, as happened with Aaron Copland, Frank Zappa, and Marshall McLuhan. But on other occasions, I mustered up the self-confidence to make contact, whether that was on the street, in an airport, or at some public event.

One of those celebrities was the author of the *Dune* books, Frank Herbert, with whom I spoke at length at a book-signing when no one else was around. During our conversation, he not only seemed sympathetic toward astrology, but also explained that his wife actually practiced astrology herself. On another occasion, I had the good fortune of speaking with futurist Buckminster Fuller, whose work and life I had long admired. I knew his birthday but not his moment of birth, and was eager to find that out. When I asked if he

knew his exact birth time, he paused a while—leading me to wonder whether my question might have seemed foolish or even impertinent. Instead, a look of wistfulness came over his face, as he gave an answer that any astrologer would find intriguing: “I’ve always regretted not asking my mother that ...”

Probably my most interesting encounter of all, though, was the time I called up science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in 1978. I knew he claimed to be skeptical about all things metaphysical (a smokescreen, I suspected, since he also professed to being deeply superstitious!), but I was fascinated by his books on science and his short stories like “Nightfall.” So, when I read in an interview that his Manhattan phone number was listed publicly, I called up Information in New York City and readily obtained it. Taking a deep breath, I dialed his number; it rang a few times, and—to my surprise—he answered it himself. That caught me off guard, since I expected he’d surely have a secretary or assistant answering his calls. After some hemming and hawing on my part, I told him I’d like to obtain his birth data for a project I was working on. (Coward that I was, I wasn’t quite ready to tip my hand as to my true reasons for calling.) He told me that not only was he uncertain of his birth time, he wasn’t even sure of his exact birth day, because he was born in Russia during an era when records were not well kept.

He didn’t seem annoyed about being intruded upon like this—not at first, anyway—so I took the liberty of bringing up astrology, to get his opinion of it. I mentioned that I was studying the subject and was curious to see how his horoscope coincided with his life and personality. He was open to this, but countered with an intriguing suggestion: “How about if I gave you the details of someone’s life, and you come up with their horoscope?” That was an idea I’d heard before from skeptics, and astrologers even have a term for this sort of thing: rectification. Unfortunately, I also knew that this was an especially difficult way to study astrology’s workings, because although a person’s horoscope is reflected in the circumstances of their life, the circumstances of their life could be the result of many different horoscopic combinations, not just one. I tried my best to explain that subtlety, but didn’t do a very good job of it, and he eventually grew silent as I continued talking. I got the feeling this was his way of politely letting me know that I’d overstayed my welcome, so I took the hint, thanked him for his time, and said goodbye.

It may just be a coincidence, but I learned shortly afterward that he decided to take his phone number out of the Manhattan phone book.

Intimations of a Divine Order

Early on, I realized what a powerful tool the astrological system could be, for good or ill. At its best, I saw that I could use astrology to help clients better understand their latent strengths and weaknesses, and help them to see their lives more clearly. When it came to predictive readings, I could

chart the ups and downs of the year ahead so they could best take advantage of those trends. I often used the analogy of someone going on a trip across the country: You might spontaneously decide to make your way along the roads and highways without any set itinerary, and that has its own obvious appeal. But if you at least had a map, it would probably make the trip run more smoothly. A map allows you to get your bearings within the larger journey. In much the same way, the horoscope gives you a “road map” through time, and helps you to better understand the landscape of the changes that lie ahead on your life’s journey.

At worst, I also saw how powerfully we astrologers can impact our clients’ lives in problematic ways by what we say to them and how we say it. That’s true for anyone working in a counseling profession, to be sure, but it seems to pose an even greater risk in the astrological trade because the client can view the information as coming from a quasi-Divine source—it is written in the stars. When I first began looking into astrology, I had my own unfortunate experiences with a few armchair astrologers, and knew full well how even a single negative comment could skewer someone’s perspective for months, possibly even years. While I’ve made a few mistakes like that myself, from time to time, those early experiences made me especially conscious of how critical it is to frame one’s information for clients in as constructive a fashion as possible.

The dimension of astrology that had the greatest impact on my way of thinking, however, was its philosophical implications. It’s nearly impossible to practice this discipline for any length of time and not have your worldview shaken up in significant ways when you’re confronted by instances so startling that you’re led to stand back and wonder, “What on Earth is going on here?” For example, I’d look at someone’s chart and see that Saturn had just crossed over their Ascendant, so I’d ask if they’d experienced any problems with their teeth lately (since Saturn rules the teeth)—only to be told that they had just undergone a root canal two days earlier. I’d wonder to myself: What does that Ringed Planet out there have to do with teeth? It was as though astrology hinted at a bizarre network of connections behind the scenes that made no sense from any ordinary standpoint and yet was borne out in reality time after time.

Once, I was studying a client’s horoscope and realized that Neptune was going to affect her horoscope soon in a way that could possibly be dangerous. While quietly telling her about the emotional challenges this might pose, I also mentioned a few practical tips as well. Knowing that she lived by the ocean, I suggested that she consider avoiding boats or swimming in the ocean for the time being, since these are areas traditionally ruled by Neptune. When the predicted time rolled around, my client studiously avoided boats and bodies of water, just as I prescribed—but apparently those things weren’t quite ready to avoid her. While she was driving down the highway one afternoon, an ac-



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cident occurred in the oncoming lane, involving a car with a small boat hitched behind. The collision sent the now-unhitched boat through the air at a high speed; it careened over her own car and missed her by just inches.

Here again, this begs the question: What possible connection could a planet way out there have to do with earth-bound objects like boats? It seemed absurd, yet I couldn’t deny the reality of such synchronicities. Examples like this suggested, among other things, that astrology is above all a language of symbols and that reality itself is written in the language of symbols. Our world isn’t simply a mass of dead matter, in other words, but is suffused with meaning. In that spirit, I came to see our universe as being more akin to a great mythic novel than a dry science textbook.

In cases like that of my Neptunian client, I also saw that astrology pointed toward something equally profound—namely, the presence of a transcendent intelligence choreographing all events down to the finest detail. How else could one explain the way different lives intertwined so perfectly in a situation like my client experienced with the boat? If

she had happened to arrive at that point in the highway just ten minutes earlier, she would have missed the accident altogether. So, what brought those different lives together so perfectly, right when the planets in her horoscope lined up in a symbolically complementary way, like interlocking parts of a cosmic Swiss watch? This wasn’t hard proof of the existence of a God, I realized, but it surely hinted at some regulating intelligence at work throughout the universe, whatever name one preferred to call it.

In a more modest but no less important way, astrology also expresses the incredible uniqueness of each individual’s life. Each of us is the center of our own universe, since there is no one else who shares our unique perspective. I often found myself reminded of that passage from Hermann Hesse I’d read years earlier (which opens this essay), suggesting that we are not “just ourselves,” but rather a remarkable and unique intersection of all the world’s phenomena, a singular expression of our universe. To this day, every person’s chart I look at offers me a reminder of that awe-inspiring fact.



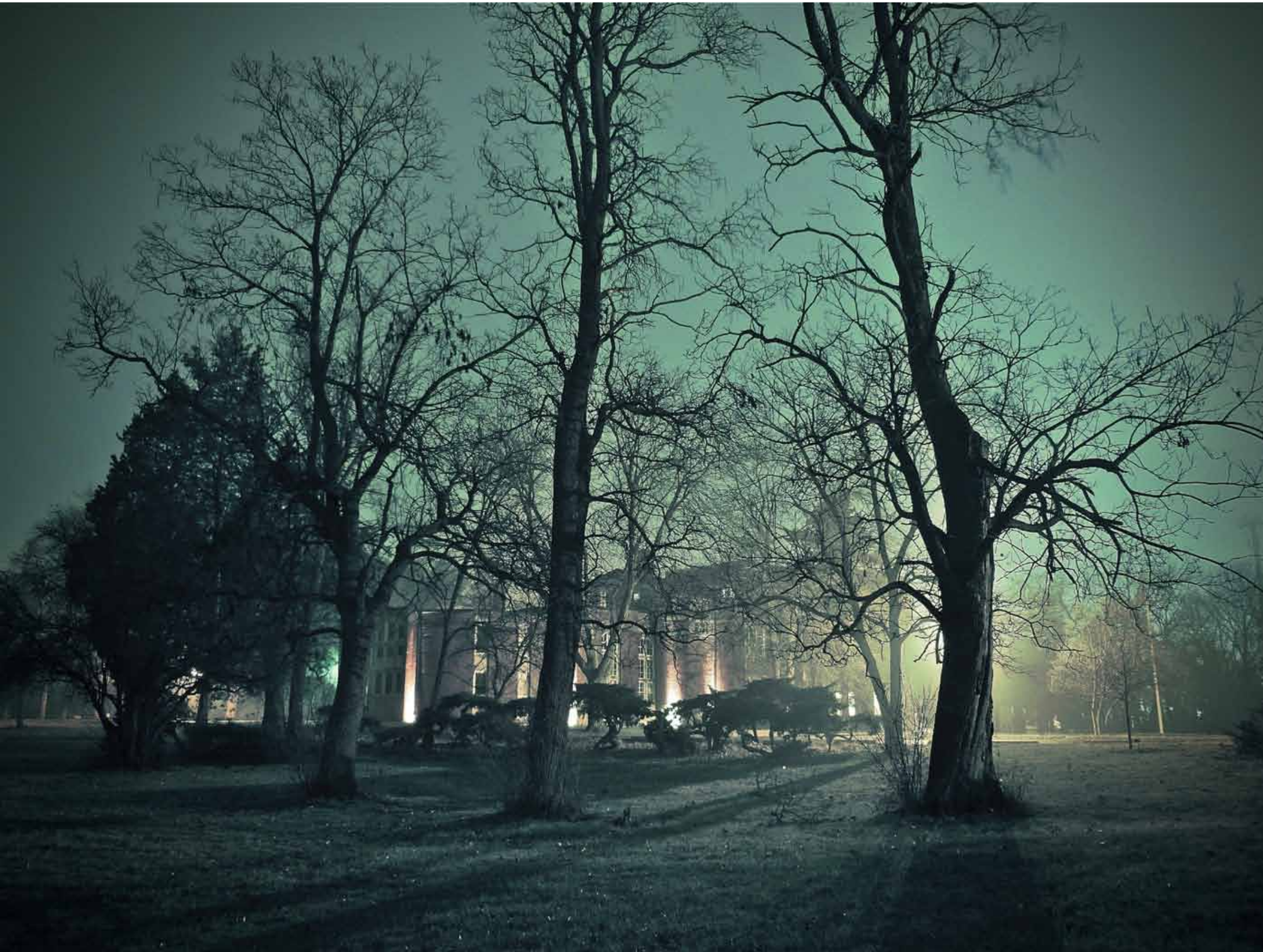
Strange Portal



Disappearing Path



Night Vision #9



Theosophical Society at Night



Sleepwalker



Snowdrifted



Winding Path



Inevitable



Under the Pier



Passage



Oleson Dreams



Darkness at Noon



Night Vision #68



Night Vision #9



Hermes

Synchronicity and the Mind of God: Unlocking the Mystery of Carl Jung's "Meaningful Coincidence"

By Ray Grasse



Night Vision #12

The following is excerpted from *Under A Sacred Sky: Essays on the Philosophy and Practice of Astrology*, recently published by The Wessex Astrologer.

"Those who believe that the world of being is governed by luck or chance and that it depends upon material causes are far removed from the divine and from the notion of the One."

—Plotinus, *Ennead VI.9*

While preparing for his role in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, actor Frank Morgan decided against using the costume offered him by the studio for his role as the traveling salesman Professor Marvel, opting instead to select his own wardrobe for the part. Searching through the racks of second-hand clothes assembled over the years by the MGM wardrobe department, he finally settled on an old frock coat that eventually served as his costume during the movie's filming. Passing the time one day, Morgan idly turned out

the inside of the coat's pocket only to discover the name "L. Frank Baum" sewn into the jacket's lining. As later investigation confirmed, the jacket had originally been designed for the creator of the Oz story, L. Frank Baum, and made its way through the years into the collection of clothing on the MGM backlot.

Most of us have, at some point or another, experienced certain unusual coincidences so startling they compel us to wonder about their possible significance or purpose. Do these strange occurrences hold some deeper meaning for our lives? Or are they simply chance events, explainable through ordinary laws of probability, as most scientists claim?

Among those who wrestled with these questions was the famed Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Having experienced many such uncanny events himself, he coined the term *synchronicity* to describe the phenomenon of "meaningful coincidence." Whereas some coincidences were indeed without significance, he wrote, every so often there occurred confluences of circumstance so improbable they hinted at a deeper purpose or design in their unfolding.¹

To explain such phenomena, he theorized the existence of a principle in nature very different from that normally described by conventional physics. Whereas most visible phenomena in the world seem to be related in a cause-and-effect manner, like billiard balls bouncing into one another, synchronistic events appear to be "acausally" related, as though linked by an underlying pattern rather than by direct, linear forces.

For instance, the presence of Baum's coat on the film wasn't caused by the making of the film, nor did the appearance of the coat somehow cause the making of the film; they simply were dual expressions of the same unfolding matrix of meaning. Jung went on to postulate two primary kinds of acausal relationships: between two or more outer events in one's life (as in the case of Frank Morgan), or between an outer event and an inner psychological state.

Since it was first published in 1952, Jung's concept has increasingly filtered into popular culture, having found its way into the plot lines of TV shows, works of pop-fiction like *The Celestine Prophecy*, and the lyrics of rock groups like The Police. In more scholarly quarters, there

have been attempts to shed light on this theory through classifying various types of coincidence, scrutinizing it in terms of statistical studies, or even explaining it through quantum physics.

The search continues. In a letter to the late Victor Mansfield, Jungian disciple Marie-Louise von Franz wrote towards the end of her life:

"The work which has now to be done is to work out the concept of synchronicity. I don't know the people who will continue it. They must exist, but I don't know where they are."²

So what, ultimately, is the message of synchronicity, and how shall we best unlock its significance?

What I'd like to suggest here is the possibility that understanding synchronicity may require nothing less than a radically different cosmology than we're accustomed to, one with roots in a very ancient way of thinking—and one in which Jung's "meaningful coincidence" actually plays only a small part. Let me explain.

Most of us are familiar with the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant. According to the story, a group of sightless men come across a great elephant, and each one tries to determine its nature from their own limited perspective. For the man grasping only its trunk, it seems to be a large snake, while for another, feeling only its leg, it's more like the trunk of a tree, and so on. Because of their partial and limited vantage points, none is able to grasp the true nature of the creature, since that can properly be understood only from a larger, more global perspective.

In much the same way, I'd suggest that by focusing our attention primarily on isolated coincidences we are only witnessing one small facet of a much larger reality, one with many different expressions and dimensions. Unlocking the true significance of Jung's theory thus requires that we step back and attempt to grasp the broader perspective of which synchronistic events are only a facet.

The Symbolist Worldview

What, then, is that "broader perspective"?

It's what I'll here call the symbolist worldview—a perennial perspective espoused through the centuries by such diverse figures as Plotinus, Pythagoras, Jacob Boehme, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Cornelius Agrippa, to name just a few. For

these and other figures, the world was seen as infused with meaning, as “saying” something. As the Swedish scientist and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg wrote in *Heaven and Hell*, “There is a correspondence of all things of heaven with all things of man.”³ The universe is a reflection of an underlying spiritual reality; all phenomena express the deeper ideas and principles of which they are a “signature,” and can therefore be deciphered for their subtler significance.

For the symbolist, all events and phenomena are seen as elements of a supremely ordered whole. Like the intricately arranged threads of a great novel or myth, the elements of daily experience are viewed as intimately interrelated, with no event out of place, no situation accidental. Consequently even a seemingly trivial occurrence can serve as an important key toward unlocking a greater pattern of meaning: the passage of a bird through the sky, the appearance of lightning at a critical moment, or the overhearing of a chance remark—such events are deemed significant because they’re perceived as interwoven within a greater tapestry of relationship.

Pervading the warp and weft of creation is a web of subtle connections sometimes known as correspondences. The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once said:

“Secret analogies tie together the remotest parts of Nature, as the atmosphere of a summer morning is filled with innumerable gossamer threads running in every direction, revealed by the beams of the rising sun.”⁴

Using more contemporary terms, these correspondences could well be described as “acausal” connections, since they’re not based on mechanistic forces of cause-and-effect, like our proverbial billiard balls on the pool table, but on principles of analogy, metaphor, and symbolism.

For example, whereas scientists view the Moon as a material body with certain measurable properties, such as size, mineral composition, and orbital motion, among others, for the esotericist the Moon may also be related to such things as water, women, the home, food, and emotions, since these all linked through an underlying “lunar” archetype, or what might be called the principle of receptivity. Understanding the language of correspondences thus provides the esotericist with a skeleton key toward unlocking the hidden connections which unite the outer and inner worlds of our experience.

Since the advent of scientific rationality in the 17th and 18th centuries, the concept of correspondences has been dismissed by scientists as nothing more than an outmoded metaphysical fiction, comparable to a child’s belief in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy. Yet as soon becomes obvious to anyone studying astrology for any length of time, such correspondences are actually quite real and not merely the stuff of overactive imaginations.

Consequently, when the Moon is stressfully activated in a person’s horoscope, they may experience a rash of problems in their dealings with women, say; or when Jupiter

crosses over their Venus, they might suddenly experience a run of good luck in matters involving romance or money—and so on. Ultimately, the horoscope provides a complex map of the symbolic correspondences that weave their way throughout a person’s life, in ways that are both testable and repeatable.

The Implications for Jung’s Synchronicity

So how does the symbolist perspective force us to rethink Jung’s synchronicity theory?

For one, in his formal writings on the subject Jung claimed that synchronicity was a “relatively rare” phenomenon.⁵ But for the symbolist, coincidence is just the tip of a far greater iceberg of meaning, the most visible feature of a pervasive framework of design and relationships that undergirds all experience. In a sense, the entire world is a vast matrix of “acausal connections” extending to every aspect of one’s experience, from one’s body and thoughts to every event and object in the environment. Said another way, everything is a “coincidence,” insofar as everything co-incides!

Jung regarded the synchronistic event as an important “eruption of meaning” in our lives. But as divinatory systems like astrology demonstrate (and as I explore more fully in *The Waking Dream*⁶), there are actually many eruptions of meaning in our lives besides the occasional and remarkable coincidence, many of them equally important—marriages, births, deaths, graduations, job changes, chance encounters, accidents, nightly dreams, and many others. All these and more are “synchronistic” insofar as they correspond in acausal and meaningful ways to other unfolding patterns in one’s life.⁷ To borrow a phrase from William Irwin Thompson, we are like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, unaware of the complex archetypal drama spread out before us; what the infrequent and dramatic coincidence does is pull back the curtain for us on one small portion of that vast tableau of meaning.

For that reason, uncovering the truth of synchronicity won’t be had through scientific methodologies or by carefully studying individual coincidences, but only through a broader philosophical inquiry into the symbolic nature of existence itself. As a result, unlocking Jung’s “meaningful coincidence” may ultimately require a “unified field” theory of meaning that incorporates such diverse disciplines as sacred geometry, astrology, the theory of correspondences, chakric psychology, number theory, and a multi-leveled cosmology, to name just a few. Only within the broad framework offered by just such a Sacred Science can we hope to truly grasp the “whole elephant” of synchronicity, and not simply one of its appendages, as exemplified by the rare and dramatic coincidence.

And it’s against this broader backdrop that we begin to glimpse some of the broader questions raised by synchronistic phenomena, such as: What could possibly organize the phenomena of our world in so profound and meaningful a way as this? In his book *A Sense of the Cosmos*, author

Jacob Needleman offers a possible clue to that question with this comment about the uncanny symmetry displayed throughout nature’s ecological web:

“Whenever we have looked to a part for the sake of understanding the whole, we have eventually found that the part is a living component of the whole. In a universe without a visible center, biology presents a reality in which the existence of a center is everywhere implied.”⁸

Needleman’s comments here could be read as a useful analogy for understanding synchronicity, too. In order for the diverse events of our lives to be interwoven as intricately and artfully as synchronicity implies, and as systems like astrology empirically demonstrate, there would seem to be a regulating intelligence underlying our world, a central principle that organizes all of its elements like notes in a grand symphony of meaning. One needn’t think of this as involving a bearded, anthropomorphic deity on a heavenly throne somewhere, of course. As we saw at the opening of this article, the Neoplatonist writer Plotinus referred to this transcendent principle as simply “the One,” while the Buddhists speak of “Big Mind,” and the mystic geometers of old described a circle whose “center was everywhere but whose circumference was nowhere.”

Whatever labels or terms one chooses, the phenomenon of synchronicity hints at a coordinating agency of unimaginable scope and subtlety whereby all the coincidences and correspondences of the world coalesce as if threads in a grand design, and within which our lives are holoscopically nested. Seen in this way, the synchronistic event can be seen as affording us a passing sideways glance, as if through a glass darkly, into the mind of God.

Notes

1. Jung, Carl. “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle,” in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Vol. 8, Collected Works. Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press.

2. Quoted by Richard Tarnas, in *Cosmos and Psyche*. New York, Penquin Group, 2006, pp. 50-60.

3. Swedenborg, Emmanuel. *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation Incorporated, 1935.

4. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Complete Writings, Vol. II*. New York: William H. Wise, 1929, p. 949.

5. The question as to the true frequency of synchronistic phenomena was a matter of debate even during Jung’s lifetime, and at one point became a bone of contention between Jung and his colleague, the Swiss analyst C.A. Meier. Meier pointed out that if synchronicity is indeed a phenomenon at “right angles” to causality, as Jung claimed, then by definition it must manifest as commonly in our lives as does causality, not simply as an occasional

feature. Conceding that point, Jung added a footnote in his book’s second edition to that effect—failing, however, to credit Meier for clarifying that point for him. On being angrily confronted by Meier for this oversight, Jung modified the footnote (number 70) to include Meier’s contribution, which in subsequent editions has read, “I must again stress the possibility that the relationship between body and soul may yet be understood as a synchronistic one. Should this conjecture ever be proved, my present view that synchronicity is a relatively rare phenomenon would have to be corrected.” (Italics mine – R.G.)

6. Grasse, Ray. *The Waking Dream: Unlocking the Symbolic Language of Our Lives*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1996.

7. The frequency of synchronistic phenomena is just one of several ways the symbolist perspective forces a revision of Jung’s theory, but there are others. For example, Jung regarded synchronicities as fundamentally personal phenomena, as arising out of the psycho-spiritual dynamics of a person’s relationship with their world; yet the sheer pervasiveness of correspondences in our world, as demonstrated by astrology, for example, implies that synchronicity extends to the collective and universal levels as well. For example, one finds meaningful correspondences operating through history on a socio-cultural level as well, involving situations which extend far beyond the personal sphere—and indeed, the universe itself seems founded on the principle of correspondences, upon acausal connections of many types.

Also, Jung emphasized the element of simultaneity as a distinguishing feature of synchronistic events—i.e., coincidences occurring within the same moment in time, such as getting a phone call from an old friend just as you stumble across an old photo of them in your attic. Yet as both the symbolist perspective and Jung’s predecessor in the study of coincidence, the Austrian biologist Paul Kammerer, argued, synchronistic phenomena can also involve sequential coincidences—e.g., such as coming across the same obscure literary reference several times over the course of a day. In short, synchronicity operates across all directions of time—forward, backward, and simultaneous.

Thirdly, Jung stated emphatically that synchronistic (and archetypal) events cannot be predicted beforehand. While that may be true in terms of their specific forms, astrology clearly shows it’s possible to predict archetypal patterns of meaning in more general ways, far in advance of their happening. For example, we might look at someone’s horoscope and see that Jupiter will soon be coming up to align with their Uranus, which strongly suggests they could experience lucky connections, coincidences, or opportunities at that point. While we can’t say precisely how those events will manifest, the underlying archetypal energy itself is foreseeable.

8. Needleman, Jacob. *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth*. E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975, p. 64.



In the Glen



Night Meadow

Life as Guru

The Synchronistic Teachings of Everyday Life

By Ray Grasse

There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.

—Shakespeare, Hamlet

In the years prior to his enlightenment, the would-be Buddha undertook a strenuous regimen of asceticism in hope of attaining his ultimate spiritual freedom. Growing weak and feeble from the prolonged disciplines he had been engaged in, he was sitting one day by the side of the a road, when along came a group of singers and dancers. One of them, a woman, sang these fateful words:

*Fair goes the dancing when the sitar's tuned;
Tune us the sitar neither low nor high,
And we will dance away the hearts of men.
The string o'er stretched breaks, and the music flies;
The string o'er slack is dumb, and music dies;
Tune us the sitar neither low nor high.¹*

Recognizing in these lyrics a timely message about the potential dangers and unhealthy extremism of his spiritual practice, the Buddha came to realize the necessity of exercising moderation in all things, even in pursuing enlightenment. This idea came to be known in Buddhism as the doctrine of the “middle path.”

In the mystical traditions of the East, great importance is ascribed to the philosophical notion of karma—the idea that our lives are influenced by the actions and thoughts of the past. Yet many esoteric traditions also describe the presence of another force shaping our lives, one oriented less toward the actions and influences of what preceded this life than toward the yet unfolding potentials of what is to come. As the Jewish mystic Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto remarked in *The Way of God*, “Things can happen to an individual both as an end in themselves and as a means toward something else.” That is, while the principle of karma works to bring all things to a point of equilibrium or homeostasis, our lives also reflect the influence of a principle whose functions appears to be drawing human consciousness into increasingly higher levels of being, as with the coincidental appearance of the singer on the road at a critical junction in the Buddha's life.

In ancient Greece, this principle found its supreme expression in the concept of *telos*—the tendency of things to progress toward an end goal. An acorn is an excellent illustration of the teleological principle: If we wish to understand the nature and function of an acorn in its most complete sense,

we have to study not only its chemical composition, appearance, and past history, but also its inherent purpose, its fully developed condition as an oak tree. In a sense, the condition of “oak tree-ness” could be thought of as the telos or end goal of the acorn, which pulls it forward in its evolution toward higher stages of development.

By the same token, the esotericist would claim that to understand the life of an individual human being, it is not enough to look simply at the past or current causal forces that have influenced the individual, but at the end results toward which the individual is heading. Like the acorn, human beings are not merely the sum of observable influences and conditions but are the essence of future possibilities as well. While it is important to understand the past, it is just as important to know where human beings, individually and collectively, are heading, in terms of their physical and spiritual evolution.

On a practical level, the principle of telos implies that each of us is subject to a spiritual evolutionary principle that is constantly working to bring us to a realization of our divinity. Towards this end, the evolutionary impetus employs all means at its disposal—including the symbols and circumstances of our waking and dream lives. To paraphrase the first-century Indian master Nargarjuna, the enlightened beings are everywhere, just waiting for sentient beings ripe for spiritual guidance. When an appropriate moment comes, they can manifest as animals, objects, lovers, thieves, spiritual masters, or whatever may be needed to push or pull beings towards a higher state of spiritual development.²

One finds expressions of this principle in all major religious traditions. In Buddhism, for instance, we have already seen the example of the Buddha and the passing singer; yet another famous instance of this principle from the Buddha's life occurs in the famous story of the “Four Passing Sights”:

Having been born the son of a princely house, the young Guatama's father wished to see his son grow up to become a great king. Intending to shield his son from the disillusionments of the outer world, he ordered that his son be kept from beholding any sign of life's sorrowful aspects. Growing increasingly restless with his sheltered existence, however, the future Buddha decided to venture out into the world beyond his father's walls, where during the course of his excursions, he beheld four sights that changed his life forever. First, he saw an old man; then, a person riddled with disease; then, a dead body; and finally, an ascetic sage who had renounced the world. Witnessing these signs in consecutive order served to awaken him to the transitory nature of life, while simultaneously quickening his desire for spiritual insight and liberation.



Night Vision #7

To the Buddhist, this succession of images was not accidental, but rather a meaningful expression of the all-pervading Genius of Life, which, as Indologist Henrich Zimmer put it, is “broadcasting all possible initiations, revelations, and messages all the time.”³

Life's teleological aspect assumes perhaps its most personalized form in the Christian notion of providence, the capacity of the divine to direct and provide for the welfare of all beings. Whereas the Greek philosophers described telos largely in relatively impersonal terms, Christian philosophers, including Aquinas, imbued providence with a decidedly personal, even paternal quality. For Christians, providence derived from a benevolent father in heaven whose concern extended even to the falling of sparrows and whose influence on creation and its creatures was a relatively creative affair, unfettered by the limitations of a universal fate or abstract laws, as so often had constrained the gods of antiquity. For the Christian believer, to say God

rules the world by his providence was to say that He orders all things in view of himself, by His knowledge and His love.

In the New Testament, the teleological perspective is glimpsed in various passages, such as the story of Christ healing the blind man. Having encountered a blind man one day, the disciples asked Jesus, “Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” To which Jesus replied, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” (John 9:3) In other words, the blind man's condition cannot simply be viewed as the result of past causes (karma), but as the working out of a greater, long-range design. As a result of being healed, the man experienced a life-changing conversion to Christ's teaching, with the healing simultaneously serving as a metaphor for others of Christ's purpose in the world. “I have come for the judgment of this world, so that those who cannot see may see,” Jesus said (John 9:30). Thus one man's state of health is shown to play a vital role in

the spiritual design of his life, as well as in the lives of those around him.

The Teachings of Ordinary Life

In our own lives, we can distinguish at least two levels on which the telos principle manifests: one immediate and short-term, the other more long-range in scope.

In its narrower form, the purposive principle of life can express itself through any event that serves the function of guiding us toward higher levels of learning and spiritual awakening. Who has not at one time or another encountered a situation or person who we realized later on had the effect of initiating us into some important new stage of spiritual growth? Such life-initiations can take many forms, even—as for the Buddha—a simple phrase heard in passing.

For instance, a woman who had been searching for spiritual direction in her life contemplated becoming involved with a group of Sufis (a mystical branch of Islam) in her home state of Tennessee. Reflecting on the choice facing her while waiting in the airport to catch a plane back to Nashville, she suddenly heard an announcement over the airport public address system calling to prayer anyone who might be interested in attending Islamic services being conducted in the airport chapel. Never having heard an announcement for Islamic worship in all her years of traveling, the woman thought the announcement might be a hint that she at least give this spiritual path a try. On arriving at her destination, she got together with the members of the Sufi group and experienced what proved to be one of the most extraordinary spiritual experiences of her life.

The teleological principle can also appear to us on rare occasions through seemingly miraculous events or chance circumstances. A man described to me the period in his younger years when he was, in his own words, “unencumbered” by feelings of compassion or sympathy for the underprivileged and less fortunate of the world, being more concerned with looking out for his own interests. One stormy night while driving through a wooded area, he was startled to see what appeared to be a globe of ball lightning floating across the road several hundred feet ahead of his car. He slowed down and watched as it continued its slow glide off the highway and onto an unmarked muddy side road, where it suddenly exploded in a noiseless flash. Surprised, but being of a scientific bent, the man decided to pull off and look more closely at this spot to see if there were any residual traces of this remarkable phenomenon.

As he drove down the side road, he noticed a car with two occupants, apparently stranded. Inside, he found a woman along with her mentally impaired son, who was seriously ill at the moment and in immediate need of medical attention. As a result of the light on the road, the man arrived at the most opportune moment for performing a humanitarian service. He drove the mother and her son to the nearest hospital, where the young man received life-saving treatment. The entire set of circumstances—especially having

saved a young man’s life—had a profound impact on this man’s attitudes and life-direction. It served as a catalyst for his learning to be more compassionate and eventually led to his becoming involved with volunteer work in his local community.

Far more commonly, however, the great initiations in our lives take a more modest or prosaic form, sometimes even as a compelling crisis or tragedy that serves to awaken important insights or dormant abilities. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “The purpose of life is to be defeated by greater and greater things.” For some, this might take the form of a failure in one’s professional life. Suppose a man has risen to a partnership in his law firm, all the while becoming increasingly filled with pride and self-interest. For such a person, a fall from grace, precipitated by a scandal, might bring about a much-needed collapse of the shallow values that had obscured his spiritual vision, paving the way for the birth of a more spiritual sensibility. As mystics have long realized, and as Carl Jung echoed in modern times, a victory of the spirit often takes the form of a defeat for the ego. Many of the greatest advances in the life of the soul arise in conjunction with developments that—by worldly standards—represent great tragedies or failures.

Illness can also be a teacher in the way it redirects people in ways more suitable to their spiritual destiny, or forces them to take a more reflective look at their inner life. Many of us have heard or possibly experience incidents of this sort, where men or women in high-stress positions are forced by a heart attack or other health crisis to reexamine their lifestyles.

In this same category we could include the illness or “wounding” of the shaman or traditional healer, as in African tribal communities or Native American cultures. Shamans are frequently initiated into their role by challenging situations, such as a life-threatening illness that serves to awaken dormant skills and spiritual perceptions. In his book *Native Healer*, Medicine Grizzlybear Lake describes in detail the crises he experienced early in life which prepared him for his calling as a healer. These included three near-death experiences: an illness, a car accident, and a near-drowning. These trials equipped him with new strengths and sensitivities and made him more aware of the unseen world. “The calling [to be a native healer] comes in the form of a dream, accident, sickness, injury, disease, near-death experience, or even actual death,” he writes. Such events comprise a school of shamanic wisdom:

*In this kind of school we learn about fear, anger, hate, confusion. We learn about other worlds and how to travel between both. We learn about our strengths and weaknesses, power, love, reality, healing and life itself. We learn that there are, indeed, two separate but interrelated worlds of existence, the physical and the spiritual.*⁴

Another medium through which life-as-teacher can reveal itself is the printed word. In our serendipitous encounters

with books, magazines, or correspondence, we may find ourselves stumbling onto key insights or lessons that we need to learn. The late poet and Zen writer Paul Reps was fond of relating how his introduction into Eastern mysticism occurred while sitting in the New York Public Library reading a book on Western philosophy. Unexpectedly, a stranger walked up to his table, placed a copy of the Hindu Upanishads in front of him, and walked away, never to be seen again. This singular event initiated Rep’s life-long involvement with Eastern philosophy and religion. Writer Arthur Koestler coined the term “library angel” to describe this common phenomenon, in which a book suddenly presents itself in our lives by falling off a shelf or by unexpectedly being given to us, exactly when we are most in need of the information it holds.

Some Christians seek the help of this particular “angel” by opening the Bible at random to get advice on a problem at hand. For instance, a woman I know set out on a trip to do a spiritual retreat in a cabin on private land in Utah, high on a butte adjacent to Zion National Park. On her way, she was stranded for more than two weeks in Oklahoma City waiting for an engine part to be shipped in from out of state. Exasperated and depressed, she opened the Bible in her hotel room one night; her finger alighted on Isaiah 2.2-3: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow into it. And many people shall go up to the house, and he will teach us the way, for out of Zion shall go forth the law.” Startled and encouraged by this message, she persevered in her efforts to reach her own mountain in Zion.

A similar but more historic example occurred in the life of the great Latin scholar Petrarch. In 1336, armed with a copy of Saint Augustine’s Confessions, Petrarch set off to ascend Mount Ventoux in Italy. Upon reaching the top, he opened the book at random to these startling words: “And men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tide of rivers, and compass of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by.” Stunned by this coincidence between this passage and his situation, Petrarch was catalyzed into a process of introspection and transformation that led to his influential writings, pointed to by some as a symbolic starting point for Renaissance thought, with its emphasis on the individual psyche and human interiority.⁵

Life as Guru: The Broader Perspective

Beyond its narrower form, however, the purposive qualities of life’s teaching also reveal their effects across the span of an entire life, possibly even several lives. At this level, we see the individual soul guided along in its development not simply by isolated events or symbols, but by means of the shaping influence of experiences transpiring over many years. The philosopher Schopenhauer described how in looking back over the course of one’s life, certain encoun-

ters and events which seemed purely accidental at the time begin revealing themselves as crucial structure features of an unintended life story; as a result of these broad changes, the potentialities of one’s character are fostered to fulfillment, almost as if the course of one’s own biography were a cleverly constructed novel.⁶ Of course, this sense of overall design is rarely visible to us as we are living the events and usually presents itself only from the retrospective standpoint of many decades.

Jungian psychologist Edward C. Whitmont has suggested a similar perspective on how we might look at traumatic events in childhood. If we allow the “destiny” concept into our interpretation of life stories, then what we have commonly viewed as traumas leading to an individual’s mental or emotional difficulties later on may instead be seen as vital stages within an emergent life-pattern. “Traumatic events of childhood which we associate with the genesis of neurosis or psychosis, and therefore regard as quasi-accidental or avoidable under ‘ideal’ circumstances, may perhaps be seen as essential landmarks in the actualization of a pattern of wholeness.”

He goes on to liken the unfoldment of life conditions to the stages of a Greek tragedy. In act one, the basic conditions which establish the foundation of the entire story are set. In act two, challenges or misfortunes are introduced into the setting, while in act three, the challenge is brought to a final resolution. Now, although the misfortunes of the second act can be viewed in terms of cause-and-effect dynamics arising out of act two, from the standpoint of the greater story line, they may also be seen as necessary stages in a pattern of growth not readily apparent until the final act of the play. Similarly, Whitmont suggests that the challenges which arise early in our lives may compel us toward modes of action whose purpose lies within a broader developmental design, provided we are capable of bringing emotional awareness and insight to the larger issues raised by those earlier stages.⁷

History provides us with many colorful examples which illustrate the influence of teleological principles in action. Recall, for example, the life of the ancient Greek orator Demosthenes, who early on experienced great difficulty communicating with others. As a result of struggling to overcome his own inherent limitations (involving such practices as shouting into the surf and learning to enunciate with mouthfuls of pebbles), he eventually succeeded in becoming one of history’s greatest elocutionists. In one sense, the process of having to struggle beyond his limitations became the very thing that made possible his later excellence as an orator. Then there is the case of Helen Keller, whose sensory limitations only served to temper the inherent greatness of the woman in a way that may not have been possible had she been a normally endowed child.

In the annals of spiritual storytelling, I now of no tale that expresses this sense of long-range purposiveness in life

more beautifully than in the Sufi tale of “Fatima, the Spinner and the Tent,” which is worth relating here at length: ⁸

Once upon a distant time there was a young woman named Fatima, who was the daughter of a prosperous spinner. One day her father asked her to accompany him on a long journey to an island across the sea where he was to do business; while there, he thought, perhaps she would find herself a husband. Along the way, however, a great storm blew up, dashing the ship against the rocks and killing the father. Fatima was washed up on the shore, unconscious and with little memory of her past. Destitute and suffering from exposure, she was found by a family of clothmakers who took pity on her and invited her into their home. There she lived for two years, learning the skills of their trade.

One day, a band of slave traders invaded the family's dwelling, and took Fatima and her new companions to Istanbul, where she was to be sold as a slave. Her world had collapsed for the second time. Among the buyers at the market was a man looking for slaves to work in his woodyard, where he made masts for ships. When he saw the dejection of the unfortunate Fatima, he decided to purchase her to be a serving maid for his wife, thinking he might be able to give her a slightly better life than if she were bought by someone else. On returning home, however, the mastmaker discovered that pirates had stolen all his money and valuables. Thus Fatima, the man, and his wife were left to run the business by themselves, and Fatima now learned the skill of making masts. She was grateful to the man, however, and worked hard. In return, he granted her freedom, and she became his trusted helper.

One day he told her, “I want you to go as my agent to Java and sell masts...” But while she was sailing off the China coast, a typhoon struck and, once again, she found herself washed up on shore, penniless and far from home. Feeling confused and despondent over such prolonged ill-fortune, she began walking inland. Now, it so happened, there had been a legend in China that someday a female stranger would come from a distant land and make a tent for the emperor. Because no one there knew how to make tents, everybody looked forward with excitement to this event. Through the years successive emperors had sent heralds throughout the land asking that any foreigners be sent to the imperial court.

When Fatima stumbled into a town, it was one such occasion. The people told her that she would have to go see the emperor. On reaching the court, the emperor asked Fatima if she knew how to make a tent. She replied, “I think so....” First, she asked for flax, and using the skill learned from her father, spun some

rope. Since there was no stout cloth in the region, she used the skill she had learned from the family of cothmakers to weave some. And needing tent poles, she recalled her time spent in Istanbul making masts to make these as well. Putting these elements all together, she was able to make a tent for the emperor.

Delighted, the emperor offered her the fulfillment of any wish she might have. She chose to live in China, where she eventually met and married a handsome prince. There she remained in happiness, surrounded by children until the end of her days.

In this tale we see how one individual's repeated encounters with apparent tragedy actually proved essential to the fulfillment of a greater destiny, with each skill or lesson learned along the way eventually serving this final end. Note the close similarity of the lead character's name with our word for “fate.” That a specifically royal marriage results from Fatima's misfortunes tips us to the fact we are dealing here with archetypal symbols. A royal marriage is one of the perennially employed images for enlightenment or spiritual fulfillment. In its broader meaning, this story speaks to the intricate evolutionary design underlying each of our lives as we move towards our own royal marriage, the union of opposites implicit within spiritual self-realization. Seen in a larger context, the twists and turns of fortune that impact each of us make sense only when seen against the backdrop of our long-range spiritual development.

To be sure, this philosophical viewpoint opens itself to obvious questions and concerns, recalling Voltaire's broadside against naïve providential thinking in *Candide*: “All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” After all, where is the design behind the child dying of starvation in Africa or the divine purpose in the story of a good person turned to a life of crime? And what providential energy would be responsible for the loving father murdered by a terrorist? It is just as obvious that the notion of design in an individual's life may not always mean a specifically spiritual design; for even though all lives are in some sense appropriate to the characters of those experiencing them, often these do not display any obvious sense of evolutionary, spiritual direction. The events in Hitler's early life, including his failure as an artist and numerous close calls with death, may be said to exhibit a certain fatedness in their unfoldment; yet one could hardly call this an evolutionary or spiritual pattern.

For the esotericist, however, such problems are perhaps best understood when seen in the framework of reincarnation. That is, while the spiritual dimension of life-purposiveness may not always be obvious within the context of a single lifetime, over the course of many lives, the seeming detours and cul-de-sacs of destiny take on far greater significance as integral stages in a much greater journey of evolution. As mystics have been careful to stress, the higher Self perceives with a very different sense of time than the



Night Vision #1

surface ego, and evolves in terms of spiritual growth over eons of time rather than the seventy or eighty years of a single human lifetime. As one example of this, the famed authority on death and dying Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells the story of a conversation she claims to have had with a non-physical being she describes as one of her guides. The guide told her, “When I’m born again to a human body, I want to die of starvation as a child.” Never one to believe in the ennobling effects of suffering, Kubler-Ross responded with brutal frankness: “You choose to be born to die of starvation!? What kind of idiot are you?” To which her guide remarked, with great love: “Elisabeth, it would enhance my compassion.”⁹

Invoking the Teaching of Life

Among the more intriguing aspects of the teleological principle is that it can be invoked at will. Recall the well-known spiritual axiom, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear;” so through the cultivation of a properly receptive and reverent attitude, we can accelerate the teaching process as it presents itself not only through living teachers, but through events, dreams, and symbols of many types. In *Out of Africa*, writer Isak Dinesen expressed a similar sentiment in these words:

“Many people think it an unreasonable thing, to be looking for a sign. This is because of the fact that it takes a particular state of mind to be able to do so, and not many people have found themselves in such a state. If, in this mood, you ask for a sign, the answer cannot fail you; it follows as the natural consequence of the demand.”

The process of asking for spiritual signs and teachings can be facilitated through fervent prayer, fasting, and meditation, all of which can help to align one more fully with the hidden intelligence guiding our lives. A dramatic example of this idea can be seen in the Native American “vision quest,” where a participant leaves ordinary life behind and lives for a time in an isolated condition in nature, in hope of receiving a specific vision or life-teaching. Though it is commonly believed the sought revelation must take the form of an actual vision of some sort, it can just as easily take the form of a dramatic natural event or synchronistic happening involving an animal, object, or process of nature. And although it is preferable to do so, one does not necessarily need to go out into the wilderness to undertake a vision quest. Cultivating a spirit of receptivity will produce results in almost any environment, often in an unexpected or unconventional way. Even a city dweller can undertake their own vision quest by engaging in several days of mild fasting, periods of daily meditation, and an extra attentiveness to dreams and other symbolic events. During this period, every telephone message, remembered dream, encounter with a stranger, invitation—even advertisements on the sides of buses—might carry potent messages about one’s life direction or spiritual choices.

The evolutionary principle that propels us toward spiri-

tual unfoldment draws not only on the qualities of the present moment, but on the influences of both past and future as well. If we liken our life drama to a type of script, ours is a story comprised of karmic factors from an earlier time along with the purposive influences of future potentialities. Like the acorn, which is both a product of past influences (genetic, environmental, and chemical conditions) and future influences or coded biological potentialities, our own lives and circumstances represent a meshing of both past and future influences, visible in the symbols of ordinary experience. These interact in a dialectic process to reweave the legacies of past karma with the possibilities of future imperatives, drawing us ever closer to the enlightened realization of Self.

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Notes:

1. Sir Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia* (New York: Dodd, Mead & co., 1926), 110.
2. Cited by Glenn Mullin, “Personal Glimpses,” *The Quest*, Winter 1993, 96.
3. Paraphrased from Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 159.
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5. Cited by James Hillman in *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 195-96.
6. Arthur Schopenhauer, translated by Joseph Campbell in *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 193-94.
7. Edward Whitmont, “The Destiny Concept in Psychotherapy” Spring, James Hillman, Ed. (Analytical Psychology Club of New York, 1969), 73-92.
8. Paraphrased and condensed from Idries Shah, *Tales of the Dervishes* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1969), 72-74.
9. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, interviewed by William Elliot, *Tying Rocks to Clouds* (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1995), 39.

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Anticipation of the Night



Invocations



Invocations



Night Bridge



Riverwalk

The Voice of Divination: Omens, Oracles, and the Symbolist Worldview

By Ray Grasse

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“Things here are signs,” the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus once declared. With these words, he gave expression to a worldview that has, in one form or another, influenced human thought since the earliest stirrings of civilization. Sometimes referred to as symbolist, this perspective regards the world as a kind of sacred text, written in the language of symbols, and holds that all phenomena harbor a deeper meaning beyond their obvious appearances. If one applies the proper key, these meanings can be decoded, and everyday life unveiled for its deeper truths.

While the symbolist worldview encompassed a wide range of symbolic patterns, one of these in particular—the omen—came to hold special importance for traditional societies. “Coming events cast their shadow before them,” an ancient proverb proclaims. Through the study of omens, men and women sought to glimpse future possibilities and shifts of fortune and thus prepare themselves for the challenges and opportunities awaiting them.

As with all aspects of symbolist thought, the concept of the omen has expressed itself at widely varying levels of sophistication. At their subtlest, omens exist in a world where the boundaries between past, present, and future are permeable. Influences of past conditions or events still echo within the present, while from the other direction, what is to come sends ripples into the now, like the bow waves preceding an advancing boat. Hence the phenomenal play of each moment represents the complex blending of symbolic influences from all three dimensions of time, with those from the future designated as omens.

When classifying omens, it can be useful to distinguish between literal and symbolic forms. Literal omens require little translation. For instance, the South American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez once recalled the time he answered his doorbell to find a stranger saying, “You must change the electric iron’s cord—it is faulty!” Then, realizing he had come to the wrong house, the stranger promptly apologized and left. A half-hour later, Marquez’s iron burst into flames—the result of a faulty cord. Here, the apparent omen foreshadowed the later event in a straightforward way.

Far more common, however, are those instances when an omen takes on a metaphoric dimension, appearing in ways

that, like dreams, require greater skill and intuition to interpret. In the British television production of Robert Graves’s *I Claudius*, the death of a central character (Herod) is foreshadowed by an owl landing on his chair during a public ceremony. The owl hoots several times, with the number of hoots corresponding to the number of days before his death. The relationship between the omen and what is signified by it was entirely symbolic and involved several levels of meaning. To make sense of such an image, we must perceive it with a discerning eye. As creatures of flight, birds are metaphorically associated with the soul’s flight at death. Moreover, the owl is specifically a night bird, emphasizing even more dramatically the idea of otherness, the negative (or passive) half of the day/night polarity, and, by analogy, the opposing side of the life/death polarity. The number of hoots emitted by the bird represents a proportional reference to the number of days until the individual’s death. In this way, a single and seemingly simple event encodes several dimensions of information and meaning at once.

In ancient times, birds represented one of many different types of omens. Other notable areas of study included the behavior of snakes, randomly situated pieces of wood along the road, patterns on bodies of water, omens derived from celestial phenomena of any sort, and even moles on the human body.

Identifying Omens

Is there any way to determine whether an event is an omen? Although such events don’t lend themselves to easy classification, there are some useful guidelines we can hold in mind.

The first of these is the quality of unusualness characterizing an event. For ancient cultures, events that were out of the ordinary were seen as holding special import concerning future trends. Great attention was paid to the appearance of bizarre weather conditions, unusual dreams, the birth of malformed children or animals, or major accidents, all in the belief that the extraordinary quality of such events portended changes for the individual or the collective. This preoccupation with anomalies, in part, led ancient cultures like the Babylonian and the Mayan to chart the movements of heavenly bodies as precisely as possible in order to determine which movements or phenomena were out of the ordinary and thus of consequence to society. The more irregular an astronomical occurrence, the greater its significance as a portent of social change. For the Chinese astrologers of

antiquity, such unusual sights as the daytime appearance of Venus would be regarded as highly significant omens, pointing to an imbalance of forces within the kingdom at large.

A more systematic method for identifying omens employed by traditional cultures to foretell the future was to carefully observe the symbols occurring around the beginning of any major development, whether a personal relationship, a public works project, or even an idea. This belief might be referred to as the “law of conception.” Understood esoterically, the context surrounding a phenomenon’s birth holds the seeds of its unfoldment and eventual outcome, provided one knows how to interpret their symbolic language.

In many cultures, great attention was paid to events on the first day of the new year (or, in some cultures, the day of the winter solstice or spring equinox). A similar notion is echoed in our observance of the twelve days of Christmas, each of which was traditionally seen as foreshadowing the weather to be expected in the corresponding month of the new year. The events seen on a person’s birthday likewise assume significance as possible omens of the person’s upcoming year. Regarding this general principle, the Renaissance mystic Cornelius Agrippa remarked: “All the auspicia [omens] which first happen in the beginning of any enterprise are to be taken notice of...if going forth thou shalt stumble at the threshold, or in the way thou shalt dash thy foot against anything, forbear thy journey.” With this in mind, it is worth recalling what happened to Darwin’s great contemporary Alfred Wallace as he was about to begin a sea voyage home to England after an exploratory trip through South America and the Pacific. Just as the ship was about to set sail, his pet toucan plunged into the ocean and drowned, a fact Wallace dejectedly noted in his journal. Within weeks, the ship was destroyed by fire at sea, resulting in the loss of almost all his research. Again, the timing of this event at the start of the trip was the key element conferring on it omenological importance.

Applied to the arena of personal relationships, this principle can sometimes yield intriguing if comical results. A friend once related to me the problems she was encountering in a current relationship. “He used to seem like such a nice guy,” she sighed. “But this last year he’s been a real monster.” I asked her if she recalled their first meeting or their first time out together. Yes, she said, they went to a movie. Could she recall the name of the movie? “Let me

think,” she strained to remember, “Oh, yes, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde!”

It was with this belief that traditional cultures carefully noted the symbols arising around any person’s birth. We are perhaps most familiar with this practice in the context of astrology, which looks at the positions and relationships of the celestial bodies at the moment of birth. Yet anything in the environment during these critical moments may serve as a symbolic clue to unlock an individual’s destiny. In many Native American tribes, for instance, it was common to look for unusual events or symbols in the immediate environment at the moment a child was born, to seek indications of his or her future character and to suggest the child’s name. A deer seen running by might suggest the name Running Deer, indicating that the child might be particularly swift or graceful. Native American lore likewise tells us of the dramatic omens accompanying the births of powerful leaders, such as the great shooting star seen at the birth of Tecumseh or the winds, lightning, and hail said to coincide with the birth of Pontiac.

A third source of potential omens is dreams. Reflecting the widespread esoteric notion that dreams precipitate from a higher realm of reality, the study of dreams has sometimes been felt to yield glimpses into the underlying symbolic patterns of daily life before they crystallize into manifestation. Dream symbols are generally regarded as occurring prior to physical, waking reality. The question of how much time must pass between a dream experience and its manifestation in waking reality is often debated. For some esotericists, dream symbols find expression in waking reality almost immediately, with dreams foreshadowing events to occur on the following day. For others, however, the period varies considerably; in the Kriya Yoga tradition, for example, this process is commonly said to take around seventy-two hours.

However long it takes, dreams tend to foreshadow physical events in largely symbolic rather than strictly literal terms. For instance, a dream of falling down the stairs may herald not an actual accident but rather an emotional fall from grace, as might accompany a romantic rejection; similarly, a dream of death might symbolize the closing off or transformation of some outworn habit pattern, such as quitting smoking, rather than actual death.

Divination

The problem with omens, however, is that one can never

be entirely sure when they will occur. One can't very well wait for a comet to blaze through the sky or an animal to appear at one's window before one makes an important decision. As a result, humans developed a wide assortment of methods to induce omenological messages on demand. Given the order and harmony underlying all events, it was believed, the inherent meaningfulness of the universe could be tapped at will to obtain answers to specific questions.

Thus arose in classical times the distinction between natural omens (in Latin, *omina oblativa*) and artificial omens (*omina impetrativa*), or those that naturally present themselves and those humanly provoked. This latter category is conventionally known as divination. Technically speaking, divination may be used to uncover information concerning any situation, past, present, or future; conventionally, however, we associate it almost entirely with foretelling future trends.

As in the case of natural omens, the ancients developed an astonishing array of methods to ascertain the future, including watching the shape of smoke rising from specially tended fires, examining animal or human entrails, opening scriptures or other books at random, gazing into crystals, and studying the pattern of tea leaves.

In the category of divination, we may also place seeking prophetic advice from an oracle, a man or woman thought to have the ability to speak of past, present, or future events while in a trance state. Such human "mediums" are still around today, though we call them "channelers." From the ambiguous pronouncements uttered in poetic meter by the famed oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece to the inspired prophecies of indigenous shamans in trance, societies across the world have drawn on the psychic capacities of the human mind for insights into the future as an alternative to (or in conjunction with) the purely external sources we've been considering thus far.

Subjective or Objective?

When discussing the underlying mechanism of omens and divinatory techniques generally, it is sometimes asked whether the prophetic aspects of such processes are the result of the events themselves or simply a reflection of the intuitive capacities brought to bear on those events. According to the latter view, the event or technique is nothing more than a neutral screen onto which the unconscious projects its own insights about coming events, which the conscious mind then interprets as deriving from an outside source.

While no doubt true in many cases, the projection theory doesn't fully explain the range of examples that characterize the classical understanding of omens. For instance, a meteorite plunging into one's neighborhood would, to the traditional mentality, be viewed as deeply meaningful omen, yet one could hardly classify this as just another event onto which one has projected omenological significance. It is, by any standard, a genuinely unusual occurrence.

For this reason, it is more helpful to speak of a spectrum of omenological systems, ranging from those involving little intuition to those requiring a great deal. At the far end of the spectrum are "low data/high subjectivity" systems such as crystal gazing or tea-leaf reading, where the mind has minimal information to work from; at the other end are "high data/low subjectivity" systems like astrology or even the tarot, which provide relatively high levels of information that the individual can draw upon. Even with such data-rich systems as astrology, however, it must be stressed that personal intuition always remains important, since the essentially symbolic nature of the information lends itself to interpretation on many levels.

The Symbology of Endings

Traditional cultures in general placed great emphasis on all important endings and conclusions. As with births and marriages, for instance, deaths have long been viewed as accompanied by symbols that reflect this greatest of threshold crossings—what might be called the "law of completion." As one example, it is said that at the moment of Carl Jung's death, a bolt of lightning hit the tree he frequently sat beneath. In *Grace and Grit*, transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber described the unusually intense windstorm that blew through Boulder, Colorado, where they lived, at the precise moment his wife, Treya died. Checking the newspapers the next day, Wilber was intrigued to learn that this meteorological quirk did not seem to extend beyond that specific locale. Among the more common phenomena associated with death is the stopping of clocks at the moment of their owner's demise—an explicit metaphor, one may presume, for "time running out." History informs us such a timely malfunction occurred at the passing of Frederick the Great.

Because of their high visibility, the lives of celebrities provide an unending source of symbolically provocative anecdotes involving death-related synchronicities. For instance, in 1928 humorist Will Rogers died in an airplane crash along with aviator Wiley Post; amid the wreckage was Rogers's typewriter, showing that the last word he had typed was death. Film director John Huston's last completed directorial effort was prophetically titled *The Dead*. When actress Natalie Wood died during the early 1980s, she had been working on a film titled *Brainstorm* in which death was a prominent theme. Before her death in 1985, actress Anne Baxter played her final role in an episode of the TV series *Hotel*, in which her last on-screen line was "Shall we have one last waltz?" At the time of his death, *Star Trek* producer Gene Roddenberry was at work on his last film, subtitled *The Undiscovered Country*, a Shakespearean allusion to death. When Francis Ford Coppola's son died in a tragic boating accident, the famed director was directing the film *Gardens of Stone*, which concerned a cemetery. And when martial artist Bruce Lee's son Brandon died during the filming of the fantasy drama *The Crow*, many viewers were later startled

to see how explicitly the film centered around death; indeed, Lee's resurrection from the grave in the opening shots was viewed by more than one critic as uncannily analogous to the renewed popularity the actor experienced during the posthumous release of this film.

A similar pattern is visible in the uncanny significance of song titles or lyrics surrounding the deaths of many famous singers. When he died, Hank Williams's most popular recording was "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive." At the time of his death in 1960, rock and roll singer Eddie Cochran was beginning to enjoy the popularity of "Three Steps to Heaven" Pop music legend Buddy Holly died in a plane crash in 1959; at the time, his song "It Doesn't Matter Anymore" was experiencing wide popularity. When ex-Beatle John Lennon was murdered in 1980, he was witnessing his first top-ten single in many years, with the appropriate title "Starting Over." At the time of his death, rhythm and blues singer Chuck Willis had two songs on the charts, titled "Hang Up My Rock and Roll Shoes" and "What Am I Living For?" Otis Redding's hit single "Dock of the Bay" was ascending the charts at the time of his death, including among its lyrics the plaintive lines "I have nothing to live for; looks like nothing's gonna come my way." Singer Marvin Gaye's music experienced a posthumous resurgence of popularity with the rerelease of his song "I Heard It through the Grapevine" as part of the soundtrack to the movie *The Big Chill*, which went into nationwide release a day after his death; his song played over the film's opening funeral sequence.

This awareness of the symbols surrounding death is important in the mythologies of virtually all religions. In the New Testament account of the Crucifixion, we learn of the natural wonders, including earthquakes and the darkening of the sky, that took place at the moment of Christ's death. At the death of Krishna, we are told, a black circle surrounded the moon, the sky rained fire and ashes, and spirits were seen everywhere. At the moment the Buddha determined that he too would die, a major earthquake shook the land; three months later he was dead. In a similar vein, many Buddhists contend that the deaths or cremations of all great spiritual figures are accompanied by natural phenomena like unusual cloud formations or rainbows.

A more controversial contention held by some is that the actual mode of death contains clues to the life or karma of an individual. Just as the opening moments of a life in some way preview what is to follow, so the specific circumstances of a person's death summarize key lessons or aspects of his or her life story. At first glance, this theory seems questionable in cases where peaceful individuals died exceptionally violent deaths (such as Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by a political extremist) or criminals died under serene circumstances (such as Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele dying of natural causes). It may be, however, that it isn't the actual cause of death that contains the relevant clues so much as the subtler levels of symbolism.

For example, only hours before he died by electrocution while sitting in the bathtub, famed Trappist monk Thomas Merton proclaimed to an important meeting of world religious leaders that the times ahead were "electrifying." Clearly, it would seem we should look not to the manifestly violent nature of his death so much as the deeper symbolism (a subtle reference, perhaps, to the radical or electrifying nature of his efforts to harmonize Eastern and Western spirituality). Similarly, for many esotericists, drowning in the ocean has been viewed as one of the most auspicious deaths possible, due to the mystical connotations traditionally associated with the ocean, a symbol for the divine immensity.

Looked at deeply, every death has some significance symbolically. Say a man on his way to church is broadsided by a truck and dies. Here again, the significance of the death may reside less in its violence than in the fact that the accident occurred on the way to church. When we examine the patterns in the man's life, we may find he had continually been "broadsided" by circumstances seemingly beyond his control in pursuit of his spiritual goals. Perhaps he wanted to be a priest but had to drop out of the seminary to get a job when his father died; perhaps a long-anticipated pilgrimage to Rome many years later was canceled because of a fire in his home. As a person becomes more sensitive to the fine shadings of symbol and archetype rather than being limited by simplistic judgments of good and bad, even seemingly negative events can reveal deeper (and potentially spiritual) significance.

Conclusion

What, then, of divination? In the end, it is perhaps best understood as but one element within a far more extensive web of ideas concerning the symbolic dimensions of life. Through the divinatory act, we are able to "divine" the hidden messages encoded in the seemingly mundane phenomena of ordinary experience; yet as the examples here suggest (and as I explore more extensively in my book *The Waking Dream*), those selfsame messages permeate our experience in a wide range of ways—if only we could recognize them. "The whole world is an omen and a sign," the American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote. "Why look so wistfully in a corner? The voice of divination resounds everywhere and runs to waste unheard, unregarded, as the mountains echo with the bleatings of cattle."

Ray Grasse worked on the staffs of Quest Books and The Quest magazine for ten years. His most recent book is *Signs of the Times* (Hampton Roads, 2002), an in-depth study of the unfolding Aquarian age. This article has been adapted from his book *The Waking Dream: Unlocking the Symbolic Language of Our Lives* (Quest Books, 1996). He maintains an active astrological practice in the Chicagoland area and can be reached at jupiter.enteract@rcn.com.



Monk's Path



Night Vision #77



Night Murmurs



7:10 Arrival

THE OMENS OF CINEMA: INSIGHTS FROM AN ENTIRELY NEW ART FORM

On December 28, 1895, in the basement of the Grand Cafe in Paris, Auguste and Louis Lumiere premiered a series of short films before an audience of several dozen curious spectators. It was a historic moment, in that this was the first time that motion pictures had been projected before a paying audience. The show lasted just 20 minutes, but the effect was electrifying. Soon people began lining up outside the cafe to see the Lumieres' amazing black-and-white movies of ordinary scenes, and within twelve months, the Lumieres' cinematographe device had been exhibited in numerous countries, even Australia.

Strangely, the Lumieres regarded their device as having little future. But not everyone shared that sentiment. When the Lumieres toured Moscow in 1896, the famed Russian novelist Maxim Gorky wrote of the strange, even disturbing impact this device had on the imagination, and he hinted at the far-reaching implications this medium might someday hold for the communication arts.

Of course, Gorky was right, and the Lumieres were wrong. In the blink of an eye, historically speaking, this invention was transformed from a novelty seen by a curious few to a major cultural force that affected the world. By the 1950s, movie studios had been erected in every major nation, films were employed for everything from public education to military training. By 1995, one hundred years after that

first screening in Paris, an estimated one billion people were watching the televised Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles, an event celebrating the art, technology, and business of filmmaking. In a sense, novelist Gore Vidal put his finger on the mark when he said that Hollywood had become the cultural capital of our world.

There have been many remarkable inventions in recent history, but what explains the astonishing emotional appeal this medium has held for so many across the world, propelling it to the forefront of popular culture? Clearly, something deep was at work here which connected the Hollywood mythos to



Basement Stairwell, Chicago Theater

fundamental levels of the human psyche, but what was it? What relevance does this technology have for the Aquarian Age? To answer these questions, we need to first step back and understand cinema's (and television's) historical context.

The Medium Is the Message

Since time immemorial, humans have expressed an abiding hunger for the fantastic—the world of imagination and make-believe that is the stuff of our dreams. To paraphrase poet Robinson Jeffers, we yearn for visions that will fool us

out of our limits and transport us beyond the constraints of ordinary space and time. It could simply be escapism, or it could be a reflection of a longing for transcendence and meaning in life. Whatever the explanation, it mirrors a hunger of the soul that we ignore only at great peril. Like oxygen for a deep-sea diver, our craving for the fantastic and the ecstatic seems directly related to the maintenance of our psychic well-being, both as individuals and as a society.

Toward this end, men and women have turned to any number of methods and forms through the centuries, from ingesting mind-altering substances to performing elaborate rituals and religious rites. It was this need that inspired our earliest cave gatherings in which participants undertook their initiatory ceremonies; it was this need that provided the impetus for the sacred dramas of the Greeks, dedicated to the god Dionysus; and this need was the driving force behind the storytelling and myth-making traditions of every culture around the world, allowing listeners to be transported into realms that existed “once upon a time.”

As the influence of organized religion began to decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, men and women found themselves searching for new or different vehicles through which to satisfy this need in the way religion once had. Throughout much of Europe, this search gave birth to a powerful thirst for the numinous and awe-inspiring image, something forcefully denied to people by the iconoclastic Protestant reformation. For instance, precisely as European society was becoming more scientific and rational, there arose that most extravagant and imaginative art form, opera. This strange new creation offered a heady fusion of imagery, music, action, and words that prefigured today's modern musicals, even rock videos. With its multi-sensory richness, opera's rise to popularity in the eighteenth century provided a counterbalance to the dry rationalism of the Enlightenment, with its exclusive emphasis upon the word.

Despite the popularity of opera and other art forms, the gnawing hunger persisted. For instance, while opera would be transformed into a brilliant art form by geniuses like Mozart and Wagner, it wasn't to everyone's tastes, nor was it widely accessible. Much the same could be said about theater, which frequently had the disadvantage of lacking musical accompaniment. The development of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries engaged the interior lives of readers, yet lacked the dynamism of sound and image. All the while, science was continuing to strip away what few mysteries remained concerning our world, as religion continued losing ground as an acceptable means of ecstatic release. By the late nineteenth century, the mood could be described as one of quiet desperation.

It was into this vacuum that cinema arose. Film drew

upon the other art forms which had preceded it, including literature, theater, poetry, music, and painting. Its birth coincided closely with the powerful planetary configurations of the early 1890s, celestial patterns which had the effect of piercing through the membrane of our collective psyche and allowing an entirely new art form to enter into the world. Cinema proved to be like a spigot into the collective unconscious, through which flowed a rush of images that gave expression to the highest and lowest aspects of the imagination. In no time at all, movie theaters evolved from the nickelodeons to the grand palaces of the silent era, with an opulence and mystique recalling the old cathedrals. Like the church, here was a new place where people could congregate in large, cavernous rooms replete with pipe organs, to solemnly partake in ritual communion with the revealed mysteries upon an elevated altar (stage).

Cinema was not merely the first new art form to appear in recorded history; it was destined to become the quintessential Aquarian Age art form. Why? For one, it was the first art in history to be dependent completely on electricity; one can dance, paint, sing, or write books without electrical power, but one cannot create cinema. Its Aquarian features were also visible in its democratic nature, by offering affordable entertainment for all classes of society. For example, in New York City around 1900, newly arrived immigrants unable to afford the concert hall or theater could see the newest films for pennies.

The cinema also revealed its Aquarian characteristics in the way that it soon became the first fully “corporatized” art form in history, created on assembly lines not unlike cars churning out of a factory for purposes of profit.¹ Like any other manufactured item, every print of a film was identical in every respect to every other copy, down to the single frame. Unlike traditional religious rituals, in which every performance might differ in subtle ways from every other performance (depending on the time or the place of its enactment), one could always be assured that a film viewed in Spokane would be identical to the same film viewed in Schenectady. What it all meant was this: the psychic well-spring that had nourished society for millennia suddenly found itself a new medium through which to express its urges, transformed by the context of a technological society.

Notes

1. My thanks to Keith Cunningham for this insight concerning the nature of modern film as corporate product.

(Excerpted from *Signs of the Times: Unlocking the Symbolic Language of World Events*, by Ray Grasse, Hampton Roads Publishing, 2002.)



Night Vision #81

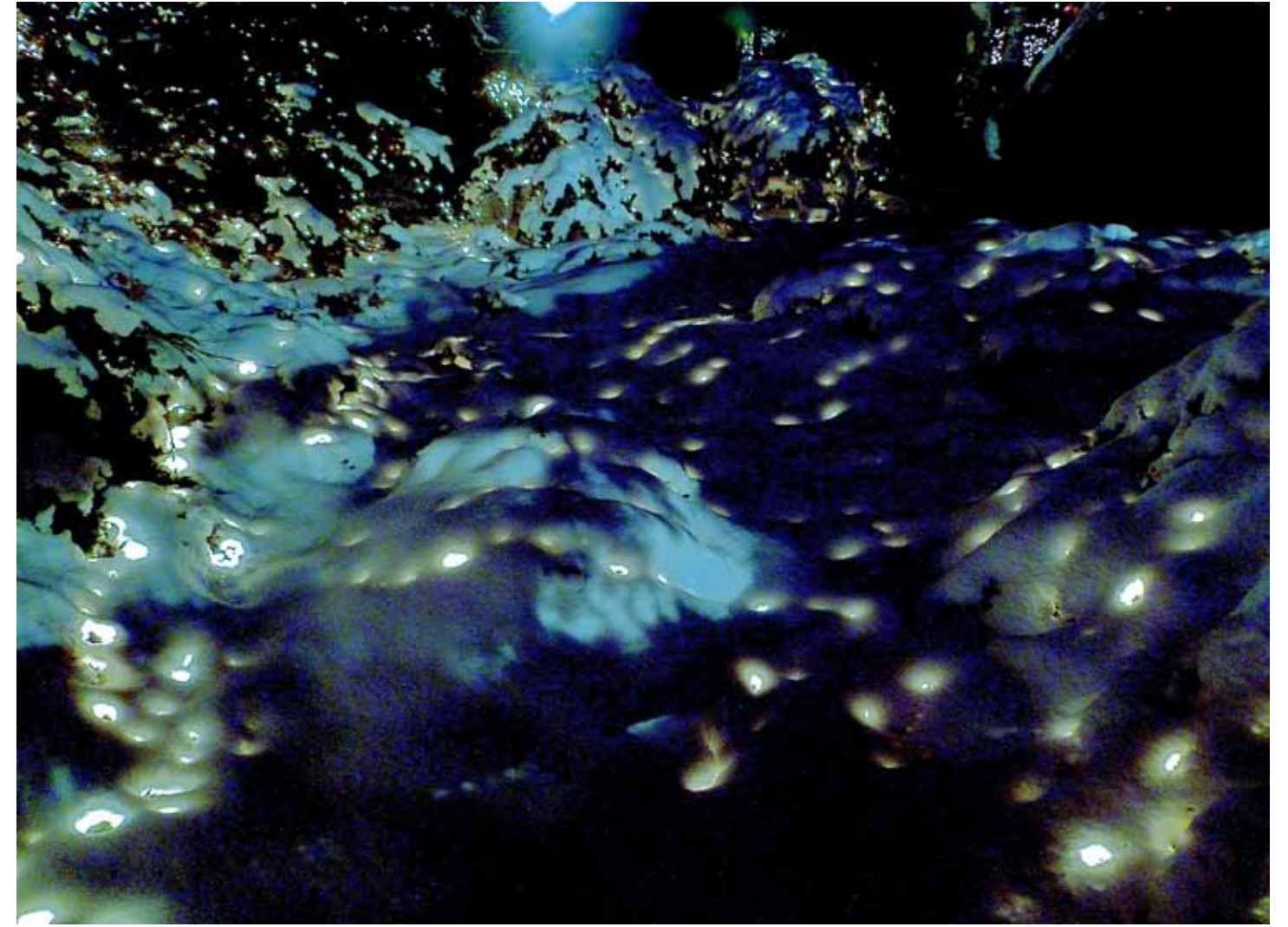


Catigny





Marian Shrine, Theosophical Society



Night Vision #5



Full Moon Through Trees



Night Vision #25





Firelight



Green Billows





The Extended Moment

A Selection of Books, Music, and Lectures by Ray Grasse

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The Waking Dream: Unlocking the Symbolic Language of Our Lives

StarGates: Essays on Astrology, Symbolism, and the Synchronistic Universe

MUSIC

The Deep Sea, by Ray Grasse
<https://vimeo.com/45701847>

Quarantine Blues, by Ray Grasse
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=quarantine+blues+ray+grasse

It's All in the Way You Move, by Ray Grasse
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGtVHrikOZ8>

On My Way Back Now, by Ray Grasse
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGCjjG4op_Y

LECTURES

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILg64u9PjnM>

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