

# Comfort For The Bereaved

2ND EDITION  
Stone Riley

Help for fear and sorrow from  
an artist's experience of creativity.

It's very hard to say goodbye.  
We feel deserted. We feel afraid.

The world is changing and has changed,  
or perhaps the world we love is ending.

So what will we do now?

Here an artist offers encouraging  
ideas, inspirations, reflections on  
death and grief, all drawn from  
the experience of creativity.

Book published and designed  
by the painter / writer.

FREE DOWNLOAD IS ON-LINE

I'VE TRIED TO SHAPE THESE PARAGRAPHS LIKE AN OLD CHINESE BRONZE CAULDRON IN A BOSTON MUSEUM.

# Comfort For The Bereaved 2nd Edition

Paintings & Philosophy About Death & Sorrow Stone Riley  
 Help for fear and sorrow from an artist's experience of creativity. It's very hard to say goodbye. We feel deserted and afraid. The world has changed.

Paintings

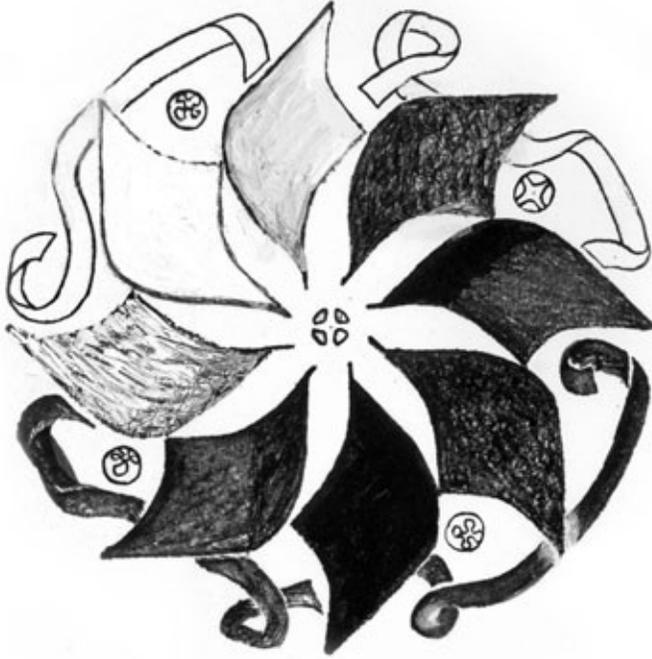


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**Comfort  
For The Bereaved  
2nd Edition**

**Help for fear and sorrow  
from an artist's experience of creativity**

**Stone Riley (C) 2019**

**Work In Progress 03/19/2019 a**

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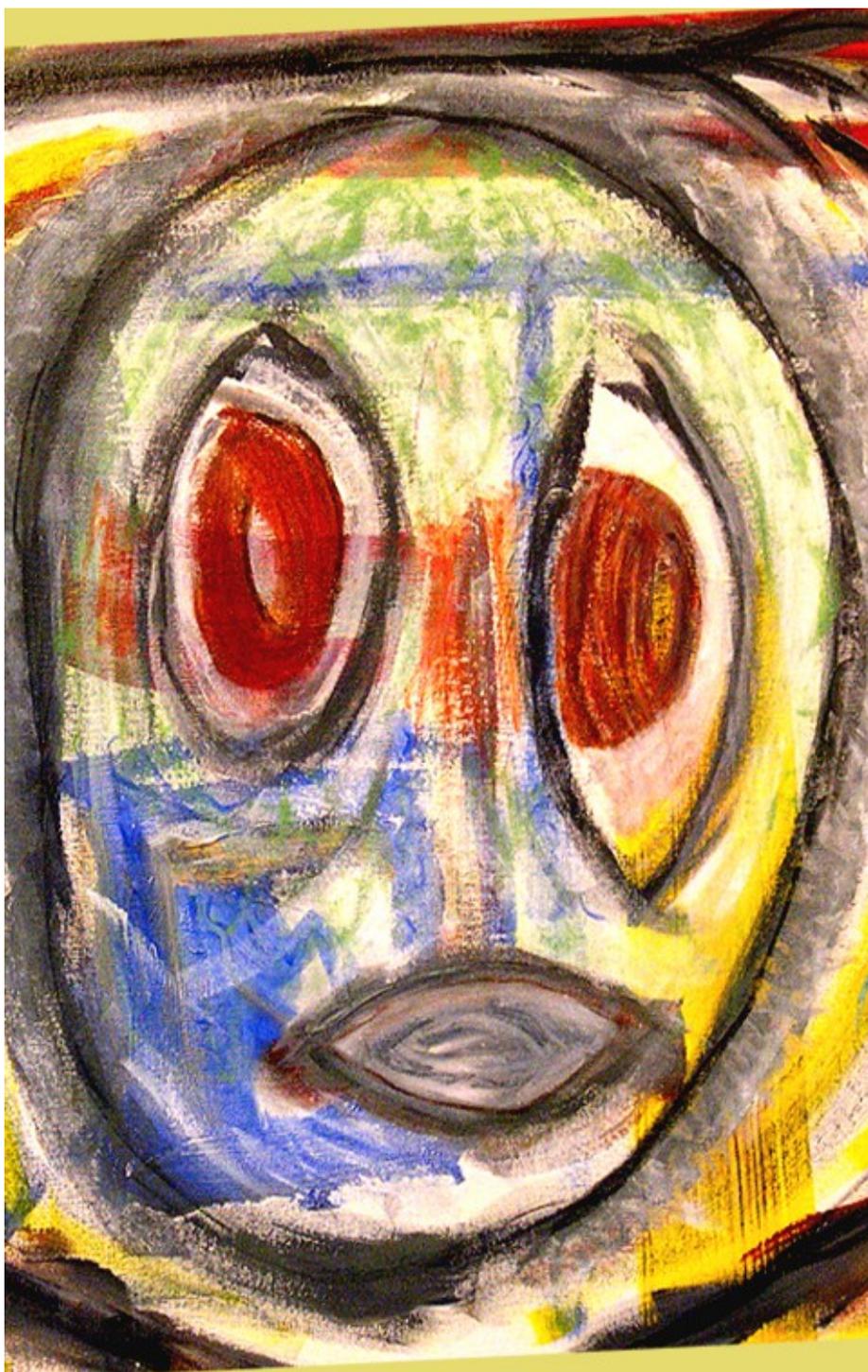
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☐ Hello ☐

American Pagans sometimes say their movement was “founded” (using that word) in a ten-year period beginning with some “event” (pick your favorite but they will often hurry to suggest music concerts with astrological ceremonies) during the latter half of the 1960's, by four thousand people.

Are we to believe this? It paints a false picture obviously. Was it some astonishing entertainment that occurred probably only in the Outer Aether, perhaps, as you might likely humorously guess? As some tellers of the tale would actually have you believe.

And although American Pagan metaphysics can be stretched that far (to say their movement was founded at an astonishing entertainment occurring only in the Outer Aether, and four thousand people etc.) but you cannot stretch that far comfortably. So rule that out.

However, if you look at it as a joke riddle not a miracle, for Heaven's sake, separate the terms to appreciate the actual words, well then...

The American Pagan movement was founded in a ten-year period beginning with an (unspecifiable) event in the latter half of the 1960's, by 4000 people, and compared to known history, each term is surely about correct. And of those 4000 I am one.

Surely, remarkable things might happen at the very setting-out-upon-its-way of any new religion if the folks (often several folklores or peoples are involved) if the folks are conscious and curious and strongly determined on having some honest play.

So how about an extremely brief glance at my own metaphysics, as a random sample for you, in case you found things I've said surprising?

Very well, I believe myself a Religious Sethian, and the fact that is thought contradictory in terms merits more curiosity than I give it here. Suffice to say Seth Material is a vast prophesy by a heroic lady sci-fi writer, in the homeland of American Religious Spiritualism, restating Hellenistic Alchemy in sci-fi terms.

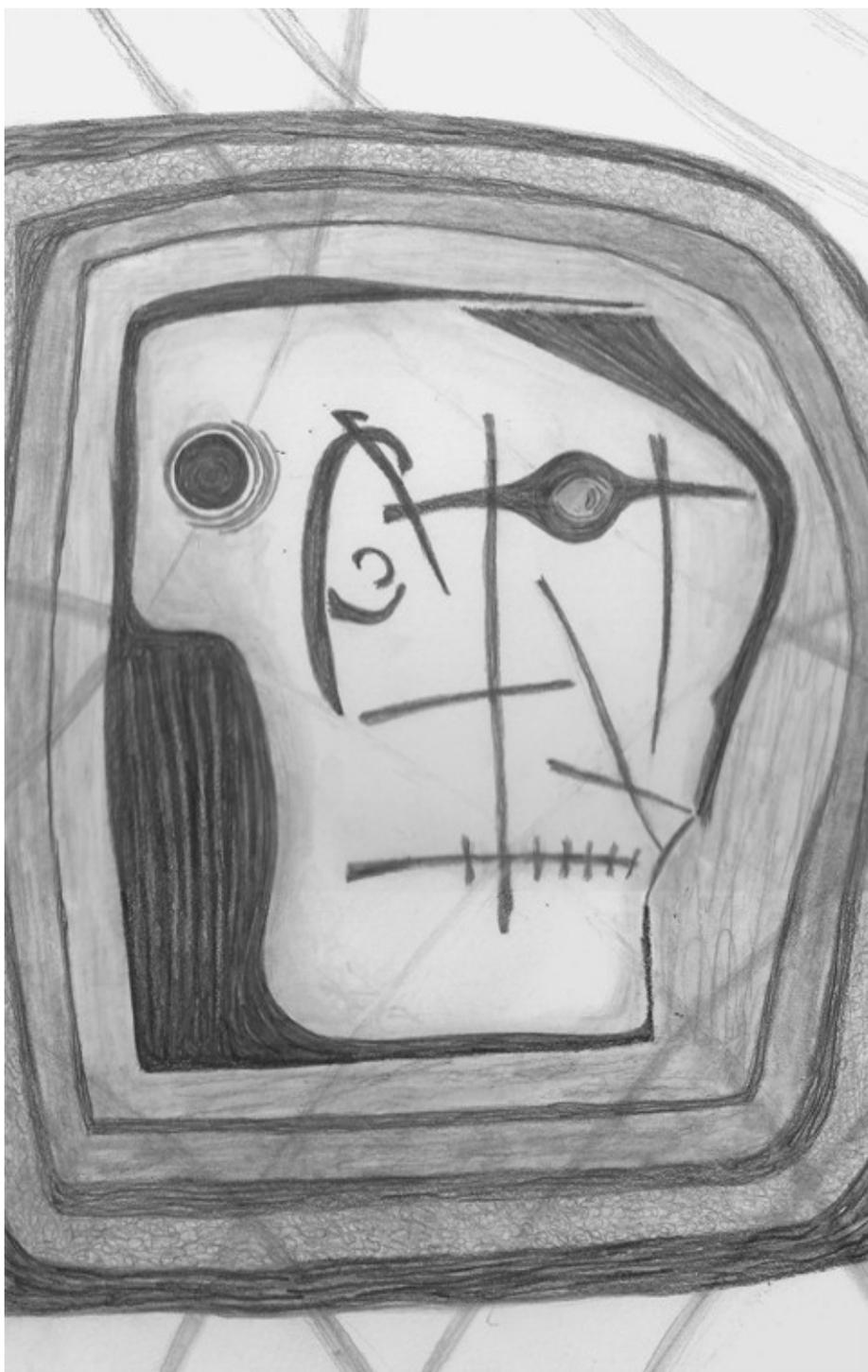
But I now say to you, with my speaking already laid all bare of ruse already, but with cleverness and always still with honesty for you, and sincere curiosity toward you, dear reader, and still with some seasoning of play, I shall say to you this...

...and this is what knowledgeable Pagans call a question of the Shining Grail...

Welcome friend.

What ails you?

Why do you weep?



□ Preface □

It's very hard to say goodbye. That's part of it. There is an aching empty loneliness where someone else has been. And then there may be thoughts of waste and pointless cruelty. What good deeds might the missing one have done, what joys might they have known, if they had lived a longer life? So what better purpose could conceivably be served in their passing? Indeed, what worthy reason can there ever be for the suffering of innocents? And then there may be thoughts of blame. Perhaps we blame ourselves, perhaps some other, and perhaps we even blame the one who went away. We feel deserted, we are afraid, and blame is heartlessly empty. So what will we do now? The world has changed.

But we are not alone in this dilemma. Not in the least. Our fellow human beings all through history and all across the world have known this agony and carried on. All the great philosophies have spoken useful truths about it. All fine artists - be they painters, poets or musicians or any other sort - have pointed toward some great reality which encompasses our grief and fear yet also stands beyond this place of pain. So there are things to say. There are visions to be seen. There have been teachers everywhere who have assured us most sincerely that there is even wisdom to be learned.

In this little book I really only hope to share, through words and pictures, some thoughts which crossed my path from time to time in creative work.

My reasons may come clearer as we go but I think it's mainly so I'll find some comfort by joining you in conversation, bringing something useful to our chat.

Isn't that a worthy goal? To speak together of these things, can't that ease at least a little of the loneliness? Isn't that at least a reasonable hope?

Can't bringing out the fear and anger to look at them, hauling them out into this careful courteous way of communication, reduce the size and shape of the shadows they cast across our thoughts?

Can't we see the fear and anger somehow more realistically?

And is it really far too much to hope that we can find larger lovely undying truth?

If there is that kind of truth, isn't this a likely way to seek it, by thinking on the things you and I have experienced?

Truly Yours, Stone Riley



## □ The Beauty Of Nature □

There are many tales, of course, of Lao Tzu who, according to the legends, wrote The Watercourse Way, a little book of nature poetry upon which other thinkers then built up the lean, beautiful and tough spiritual philosophy of Taoism. Here's one of them.

The story flies us to the early morning of a day when our hero was a bright but sorrowful young man. He was a bureaucratic junior clerk in the palace of a rich and brutal warlord prince. The sparkling morning and the budding springtime garden grounds through which he trod to work belied the torment in the young man's soul. This day's duty was to be an awful deed which no one with an open heart could ever wish.

The garden path led on across a footbridge on a lovely brook and, setting foot onto the rising boards, his paces further slacked. His gaze was beckoned to the sparkling water. On the arch's highest little height the now unconscious footsteps stopped and - mind, heart and soul - he found himself drawn out into the clear deep rippling stream.

This was the moment when a human asks of "there" and "here". As another poet wrote, do I dream the butterfly or does the butterfly dream me? Gazing deep into the world I see only countless things which

mirror me, so what are "you" and "I" and what am "I" to do?

But in this young man's mind no riddle of that sort found any weight. The doubtless fundamental knowledge that this clarity exists would henceforth lure and guide his thoughts and steps. The beauty of reality had ravished Lao Tzu and he was struck with lifelong love.

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□ Questions For God □

There are things that we will never know, questions that will not be answered. We may accept that pain is part of life but still we ask for justice. We yearn for some belief or revelation that would make proper sense of hard experience. We find it not.

Have those who suffer earned their suffering? Or chosen it? Or does their suffering gain for them some greater joy in some legendary place? Or is this all insane? What kind of cruel and vain hypocritical Creator would make a world like this? Or has God simply gone away?

Or else are we unworthy to address the infinite? Must we simply push our protest to one side and say we are too stupid for the enormous truth, and guilty of a lack of faith? Should we submit to being ignorant? No, we do seem to be made for more than that.

It is our nature to ask questions. We live by making sense of things. So why not really work at it? Why not really listen for whatever answers there may come? Might not understanding come in answers to questions that we have not thought to ask? So shall we dedicate our minds and hearts to patient conversation?

Go where you feel the presence of the infinite, be that walking in the forest or the desert or by the sea or gazing deep into the great surrounding cornucopia of

stars or sitting at the beside of a sleeping child or simply standing robed in human power, such as it is, in some recess of your mind. Announce your presence and your readiness to listen.

Commune with what is there with all your thoughts held up most vividly into the light of singing darkness. Go forth from there then come again.

Surrender not your wish for understanding but instead your wish to blame for that may be the thing which stops your ears.

Become a worthy witness, human as you are. Become one of the ones who stand before the greatest mysteries with an open heart.

This is in fact, as I understand it, the very thing wise King Solomon suggests for us in the Book of Job.

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## □ Penetrating Mystery □

I seek to know I am a part and function of the infinite mysterious divine. As an artist I have learned that what I seek is gained by penetrating mysteries, by turning the power of contemplation toward some symbol which seems powerful itself, for I have often and only gained it thus.

And yet a paradox is that "I" cannot know the knowledge that I seek. The "I" who soars forward into living mythic symbols is not the "I" who then thereby stands immersed in presence of infinity.

Arts - and most especially the art of life - are done in some other space if we do them truly. They occur beyond a sort of close horizon which bounds our realm of superficialities. Crossing that nearby coastline, one's self-consciousness is shed like some encumbering garment let to fall. In that larger space there is no "one" but only One and "self" has different meaning.

But then of course returning back out from that place - if we may speak in such sequential words of things which are timeless - self-consciousness is donned again so that the open wisdom of true nakedness becomes unthinkable again.

So is it thus impossible for us to say truths about our life? If we are mindful of the infinite mysterious divine, is it therefore impossible for us here to speak

about the purpose of our life and judge if we are living properly? To live this life, must we surrender hopes of mystic understanding?

The nun who kneels before an icon and opens all her tightly focused self to presence with the other consciousness which shimmers in the painted surface, and thus in human terms is carried off to Heaven: Can she tell us anything about our life?

I think that kind of journey changes us. At first our motivation may be just the apprentice shaman's thrill of journeying between the many worlds of vast reality, the lure of someplace else, and yet we learn from it that infinite mysterious divinity is real. That information is a treasure and we become one of its sharers.

The simple knowledge that in human terms divinity exists and it is beautiful, even as it vastly stands beyond our human modes of understanding, can be held here in our thoughts to guide our eyes in true directions. That bit of knowledge in itself can clarify or even answer many questions.

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□ Acceptance Of Peace □

There is a very beautiful idea in some philosophies that the universe cooperates actively in our search for understanding. Reality wishes to make itself known. I think we can depend on this. Speaking personally, there has been much evidence for this idea in my own experience.

Of course you must search honestly, earnestly, courageously, all of that, to clarify your vision and your hopes, to unveil yourself, but once that is done we reach a state of willingness to know the truth and so the truth hurries to reveal itself.

Our search for understanding, in this line of reasoning, is called The Great Work and the pleasure of emerging from delusion is sublime medicine for our pain. Erotic metaphors are often used for this in the classic writings. As you can see, it is a healing process. It is perhaps the deepest ground for peace.

This painting is inspired by the tea ceremony from Japan. Do you know it? It has a wonderful aesthetic, an hour practiced as an art. If not, perhaps here's just a warm fragrant cup enjoyed in some pleasant spot in a quarter hour of contemplation.

Reading the painting from lower to upper: First, although we gaze into the golden liquid our troubles are still standing outside beyond this quiet place. Then

finally a moment comes when we have tired of worrying and simply given up that mental struggle. We simply breathe and simply are a naked undefended being. In that moment we become simply ourselves.

And so then suddenly we know the joyful beauty of the world.

Life is a search for understanding. We buy the ticket and we travel far. Or we sit at home with coffee cups and open hearts, sharing secrets. We touch. We kiss. We offer questions to the universe - with microscopes and telescopes, with mathematics and philosophy, with paint and dance and song and earnest prayer - and anxiously await the answers back.

Now and then when we have reached the end of struggle, real comprehension opens, new realization of how we are the world and how the world is us and all is one. So then we look around ourselves and in ourselves with greater love, greater wisdom and compassion.

And we travel on.

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## □ Opening To Compassion □

I recommend compassion. What is the meaning of this peculiar word com-passion? It is a feeling with- and not about- our fellows.

It is a feeling that there is no blame because, beneath all combinations of outward circumstances, there is simply innocence.

The deepest stirrings in our soul, if we gaze clearly in our souls, are the same forces felt in all our fellow beings. So forgiveness is a wiser choice, a choice with more truth in it, a choice with more understanding of ourselves in it, than blame. If in clear judgment we must act for other's rights, speak truth to haughty power for the future's sake, or call injustice by its name so cruelty will stand unmasked before the world, we will do all that indeed with all our strength, but for love and not for hate.

There is a strange transformation in the sense of beauty too, in our instinctive judgments in those moments while we hold compassion. Perhaps it is because beauty and ugliness seem so microscopically distributed throughout everything that their tension becomes a source of infinite wonder. We may, like Van Gogh, weep at the haunted drama of a worn out pair of shoes or, like Dr. King, preach sincere respect for the

humanity of evil-doing men. It is a sublime conviction that I am there.

And this is natural for human beings. This is a state of mind to which our human race is bred, not only one for saints and geniuses. It has great value for us because it helps us make peace with one another by reconciling with the vast reality which always stands outside our selves.

How often has a human caught the glittering eyes of fox or mouse or deer or bear or lion in the teeming forest or the grassy plain and - with a shudder or in sudden awesome ecstasy - they have felt everything outside themselves look into their being?

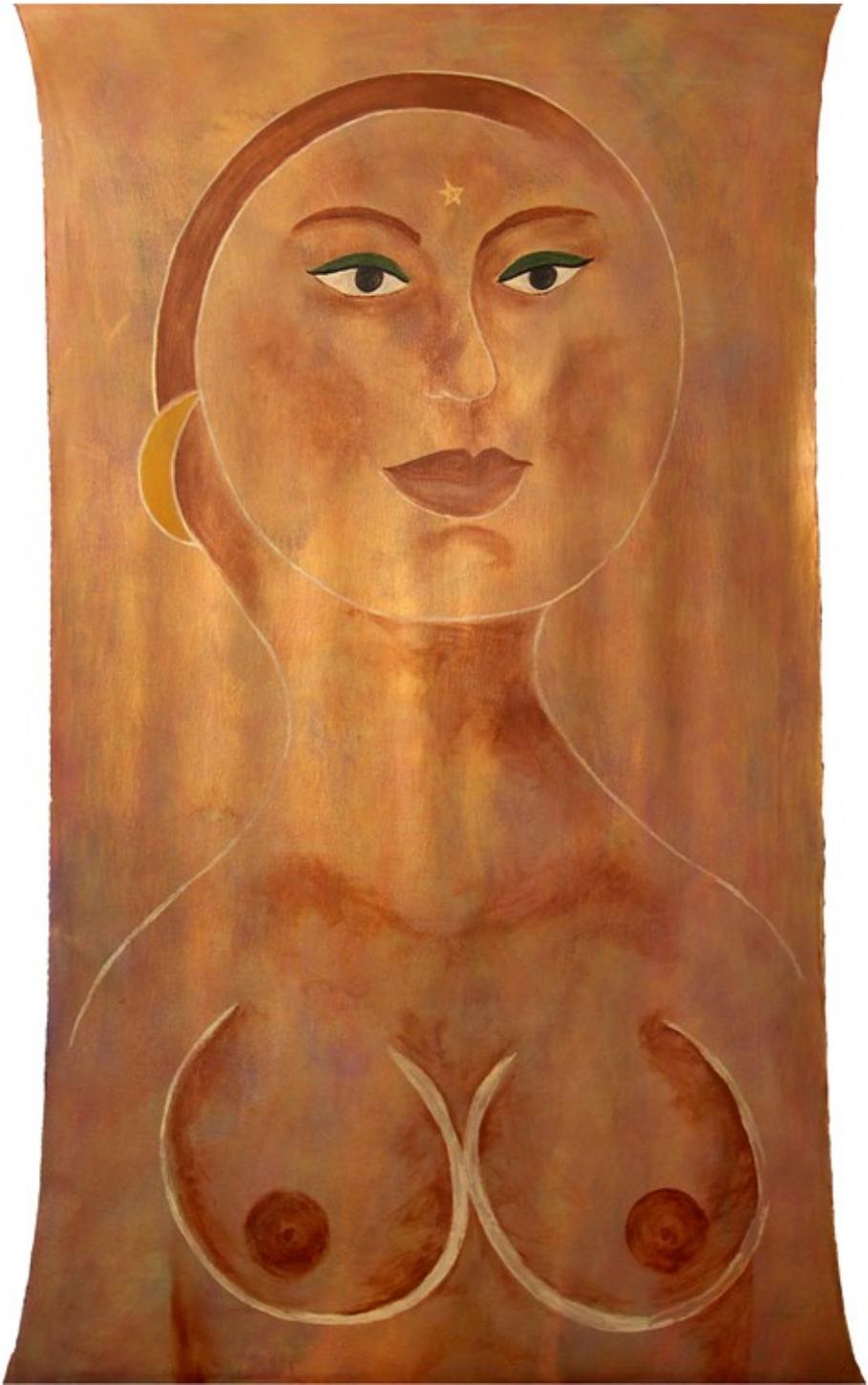
How often have the voices of the wind told someone that the spirits of the land are watching?

How often has the twinkling light of stars stabbed deep into a human soul?

How often has that penetration opened darkened places to the light of understanding so wisdom could begin, or broken through the hardened layers of a wounded heart so it might love again?

That is compassion.

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## □ We Are Holy Myth □

There is what many thinkers call "shamanic vision". Joseph Campbell, James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Carl Kerényi speak of this, great storytellers all. According to their observation, and my own experience, there is a state of mind which is not rare at all but pretty common for those of us who reach the age of fifty years or so, and earlier for some, and open to us all if we are led there by a skillful guide. So too, perhaps, if our accustomed way of seeing things is broken by the shock of change. Things in this world are suddenly shadowed by a kind of outline of their deeper more abiding shapes.

This comes as quite a revelation. Characters and incidents around you - and in you too - seem in your consciousness to be obviously expressions of some eternal order. We should not expect to fully understand that essential and eternal order, but to visually see it working. In the mind's eye now you virtually see the moving soul of life.

Within whatever situations where you find yourself, you now pick up whatever mythic symbols your society provides and shape them to be like the pictures in your eyes, reaching toward an understanding of eternal truths. Thus you seek to solve the riddles and perform the duties that you have on hand.

And I must note as well that the eternal soul of life is apprehended by our other senses too: the worldwide experience of hearing it express itself in melody and song, the worldwide experience of feeling it express itself in ritual and dance, the voice of prophecy, and more.

So here is the source of all fine art. Here is the soul-deep pool from which our great eternal visions spring. Here is a true tale of life the way we humans are made to live it. From here comes the echoing glowing power of our mythic symbols. From here comes our deepest intuition of ourselves.

All this is only human, true perhaps, but it equips us very well to be ourselves the way we really are, and recognize each other too, and thus behold all of the world with clearer eyes. This is maturity, a stronger way of thinking.

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## □ The Wholeness Of Things □

The old Greeks had a Mystery At Eleusis. It was a huge boisterous pilgrimage from Athens to a magic hill. At regular frequent intervals for several hundred generations, in the cooling time when summer's barley crop was in and the rich fields awaited autumn's second sowing, then the whole folk of the city would rise up with song and dance and shouts and entertainments and tramp out a day of dusty miles, their brightly painted statues tugged along among the throng on a cart hung with bountiful floral decorations, out to the mystic hill where temples had been built and where, in fire-filled night, Our Mother would appear.

A tall young priestess always led the way, a tall covered basket burdening her head, her hand held by a boy of tender years. Each time there was a crop of new initiates. These several dozen folk would walk and dance in sacred garb known as the "beggar's shirt". This was required for them to gain admittance to the final in-most sanctum of the flames. And on the way there was a stop where these several dozen aspirants were to be tested by an oath.

At an old stone farmhouse along the way, inside the high-walled quiet private courtyard, beneath a shady tree on a wooden altar, that large wicker basket lay with all its contents carefully spilled out on folds of linen dyed a blood red crimson.

One by one each aspirant was brought, a drapery lifted by to suddenly reveal this work of art right there within hand's reach. And yes indeed, as prelude to the simple oath each person then must touch and lift and carefully replace each little bit of sacred this and that which spills out from Our Mother's womb.

However much we live by choice and will or else by faith in guidance on the labyrinthine passage through our years, however physical or insubstantial each of us may feel here in this world, however well we know we are a soul or almost deny it, however sharp and hard and alien the countless things may feel which touch us here or else how poignantly we hear the harper's song of meadow flowers and snow and hills and sea and sky and fellow-souls and reach forth our fingertips to touch the billowing and glistening spider's web of liquid jewels which this world is; however much we know that we are God; yet still all of us humans yearn to somehow see the place - perhaps a single point somewhere in infinite space and time or else some all-pervading all-creating mind - from which all this has always come.

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## □ The Distant Sunset □

After my father's first period of cancer, after the treatments had succeeded and he was strong again, when it seemed clear that good years lay ahead before it truly came to get him, my wife and I took my stepmother and him out to a summer fair.

It was a Renaissance Festival all very gaudy in its celebration of the world and perhaps a rather strenuous recreation. His wife sat down to rest and mine stayed with her so he and I were loose about the place. I was unspeakably glad to have his company.

And then - amazing chance - my father came upon a friend he hadn't seen or heard from in many many years.

"Al?" spoke some fellow in the busy milling crowd.

My father stopped and stared then answered, "What? Is that you Jack?"

They were astounded. They laughed together one loud laugh of sheer astonishment. Alike, they cautiously approached eyeing one another's bodies for whatever news might be written there before seizing hands and grinning in each other's face. It looked for sure like this fellow must have lately come through some dangerous passage too.

It is a shocking thing to realize that we will certainly die. When it comes, that knowledge makes a mark. Perhaps an illness of your own or perhaps the passing of another forced this fact into awareness. However it has come, the shock reveals how deeply we resist this knowledge. Indeed, if we are in grief we may well ask how much of our grief is powered by a secret fear of our mortality.

I like to fancy him a sailor. He did work briefly as a merchant seaman as a youth but really this is just a pretty metaphor as though I were a child of Sinbad or Odysseus. But still, it struck me strongly there that morning beneath the shady trees. That was a moment when I felt us humans - all of us - sailing closer to the sunset than I ever had before.

We may react inwardly as if it is a shameful secret we must keep from ourselves, keep from our awareness, but truthfully death is a fact we all share.

If we acknowledge death, we may come to see the heroism that we share by living. We may choose to do our best to live courageously, properly and well.

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## □ Rebirth Of Courage □

We have been struck by tragedy but here we stand. The mighty forces of this world with their astonishing demands have left us struggling for breath and for a solid place to put our feet and meanwhile time rolls on around us.

But we are here among the living where work is waiting to be done so "screw your courage to the sticking place" as Shakespeare said.

Once more into the breach dear friends; let a smile be your umbrella; let the sun shine in and damn the damn torpedoes, full speed ahead. There is a bluebird twerping merrily somewhere beyond the freaking blue horizon. As Lincoln said when everything seemed lost, "put the bottom back into the bucket" and go on.

One time a little boy I know was taken to his grandpa's wake. It was a weekend afternoon, a funeral parlor, open casket, floral wreaths. More family and friends were gathered than the child had ever seen. Lifted in his father's hands, he gazed on Grampy's calm unmoving face and studied carefully. Coming back along the aisle the child for a moment threw his arms around my neck and gently wept.

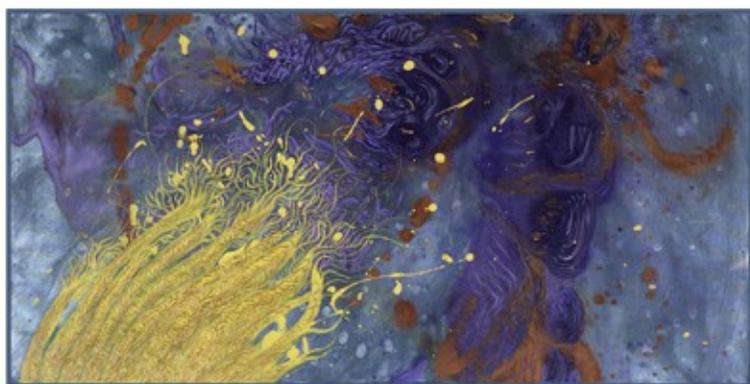
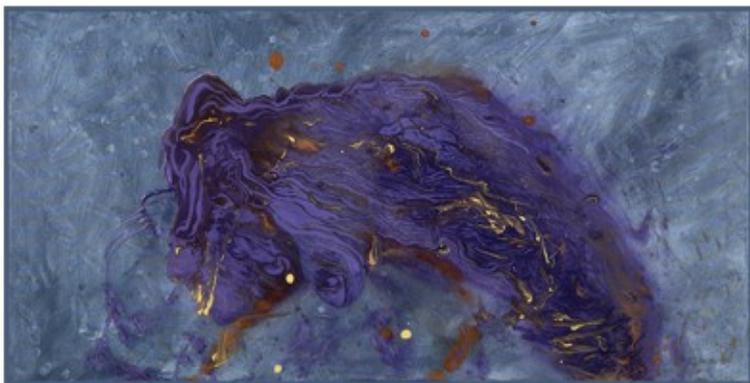
Ten minutes more, the little boy was at his proper work, very quiet at the toys provided in a corner in the back, making the trucks go in deep contemplation.

Don't we have work to do? Aren't there worthy tasks waiting for our minds and hearts?

We may say that life is horrid. We may say that we are helpless in the hands of bad luck or cruel fate. We may choose to think that nothing we can take into our mortal hands will turn out well or be of any use. We may choose to see ourselves, in the final analysis, as little bugs with pointless lives. I say that is a load of rubbish.

I say life is magnificent. I stand in constant awe. I say our lives show endless courage in the face of fascinating mystery and that is who we are.

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## □ Renewal Of Purpose □

Here's a strange thing:

When I'm writing, it seems that writing lets my voice ring out as if I had a trumpet and so forth. I seem to have guitars and violins at my disposal etc. It feels tremendous.

But of course that all recedes into the pale fantasy from which it came when I stand with an audience to do storytelling, which I do a few times each year. Now the audience and I are plunged together into the real undying stuff of human life, playing with immortal stuff and feeling it play through us because we are in fact its orchestra. That is so real.

But then when I stand before the easel, with some idea appearing in my eyes so palpably that it is itching at my fingertips, then I suddenly realize there simply is no other means of full expression. Each stroke of the brush becomes a chance to craft an actor's gesture to perfection. Every curving line or modulated surface becomes a chance to catch a harmony or dissonance which lies behind thought in its essential form. Now I can see.

But then when I'm writing once again, I remember that these paragraphs which spill out across the computer screen, then onto paper, can be crafted into

architecture as though I built a little city of my thoughts.

It seems then again as though I have no need to paint and have forgotten how. I look at pictures I have done with some surprise and suffer stage fright at the prospect of storytelling.

And of course there is a darker aspect of this phenomenon. As with anyone, there are times when I indulge in fear, anger, loneliness or despair, and feel right in doing so because I am thinking in some chain of circular reasoning that seems to be a world unto itself.

There have in fact been days and months when I felt trapped and hope seemed very far away. Thankfully, I am not prone to depression. But I have certainly found myself in situations that I responded to with fears I didn't want to admit and therefore also with useless anger. All that led into paralysis. No choices were visible. No exit was visible. And that seemed to me at that time to be the only possible world.

It seems to me the lesson from all this is plain. We can devote our minds and hearts and hands to creativity with the same level of energy that we can use for pain. And we can do this through our choice for courage.

The liberation of your soul to do work in this world may be frightening. Your soul may seem safer if it stays

tucked away in private. But there are things which should be done which you can do as well as any other, if you volunteer to take the risk.

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## □ Creativity From Within □

We step out in new directions. We turn our minds and hands to new tasks that we choose for ourselves and we choose work that is hard. Now suddenly this is another way to seek the truth for this is work that blossoms from our inner selves and shows us to our selves yet also presses out against the boundaries of what is real to tell us truth about the world.

May I describe a piece of video? I saw it once. A short documentary, very rare, an anthropology field research recording really, about twenty minutes long, observing two spirit doctors in Central America. Very interesting. This is true.

The soundtrack and color are poor. Occasionally we hear some English from a local translator who is on-screen now and then, or from the anthropologist who is managing the camera and therefore invisible to us, a sort of ghostly presence.

We find ourselves in a tiny village, very old, been there for ages, quite traditional, in a thickly wooded valley. As we quickly learn, there is a branch of medical care that's still done here by normal human practice. Everyone is going to act like everything we're going to see is very normal and commonplace. Nothing is surprising except perhaps a few things near the end.

Spirit doctor #1, with a patient, inside a dark but spacious hut. A tiny fire is thinly veiling the wide dark

room with smoke. The patient, female, is lying on a blanket on the earthen floor, attentive but silent and as profoundly calm as if this were a Reiki session.

The practitioner, a shaman, in this case an active wiry man in middle age, devotes himself to dancing round the patient, shuffling really, making music with a rattle and his voice. He has a slow rhythmic insistent repetitious song. It's obviously a powerful tool for deep hypnosis and he behaves as though in ecstasy.

Outdoors now. Time has passed. Arrives now doctor #2, actually at this time a young man seeking the vocation, a stranger from a distant place, walked for miles on forest tracks to introduce himself quite cautiously to #1 who is frankly skeptical and amused. He's not a doctor yet but has come here in hopes to get himself changed into one. They talk.

In the forest: #1 and a couple of merry sidekicks, maybe sons or nephews, have got #2 tied up to a tree. His elbows are pulled around behind and he's asking if this really is all necessary. The old gent assures him that it is, oh yes oh yes oh yes, so the butterflies will come during the night and teach him his song.

The fellow seems a little reassured but then apparently there's a kind of giant ant in those parts and at the old guy's demonstration these two laughing sidekicks start picking up these big insects off the ground and pinching them very carefully in fingertips so their jaws will open and they're hanging these

venomous little poison clamps on the fellow's tender flesh.

The old guy does one nipple and soon we see they've got these things hanging off his nipples, lips, ears and eyelids even. There's about a dozen of them. It's apparently a psychoactive drug but the lack of any quick intoxication leads me to guess that the effect actually depends on the subject's ability to self-induce a trance.

The fellow's squirming now with gritted teeth so the old gent takes a serious approach and assures him very seriously, oh yes oh yes oh yes, now the butterflies will come during the night and teach him his song. Watch for the butterflies, he says in parting.

Cut to morning. Young #2 seems quite refreshed. The sidekicks are taking off his rope and he limbers up. The old gent asks a little fearfully if the butterflies came.

The fellow frankly seems a trifle bitter at the question; No, he says, it was the toucan birds. Toucan birds? the old guy asks in some surprise. The fellow only grunts in answer. I looked it up and toucan birds are said to croak like frogs.

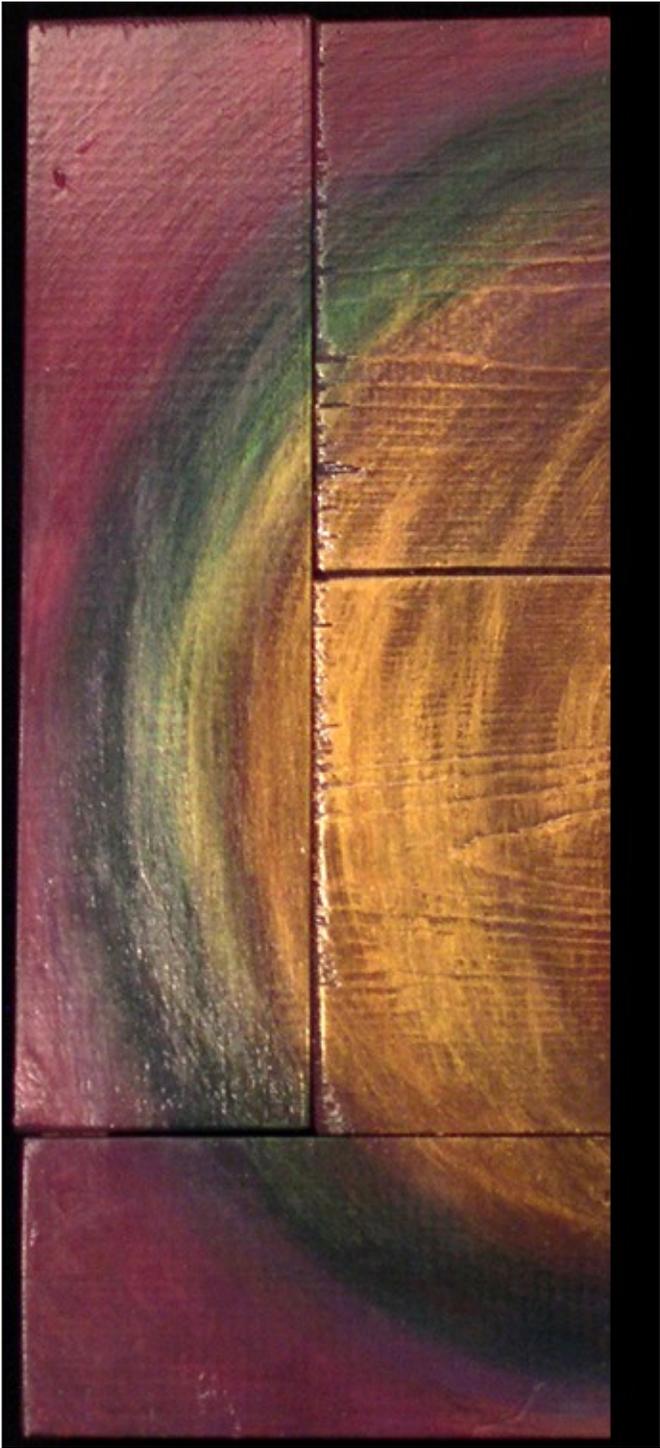
Back in the treatment room. Wide dark space again thinly veiled with smoke. Again the total calm except that now there is an energy and pride in the old

man's steps we did not see before as he dances chanting round his patient.

There is another patient on the earthen floor, over there, and there the new shaman takes his rattle from a leather bag and now begins his version of the usual routine, in utter easy confidence, with a different song.

That is creativity from within.

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## □ The Lure Of Adventure □

One time there was this bright young girl, quite enthusiastic, who took the summer off to hitchhike all around the country looking for the meaning of life. Right off she started hearing people talk about some guy named "Cousin Howard".

The first time was a mini-van covered with day-glo peace signs and flowers. They pulled up where she was standing and she looked them over and there was a big Egyptian hieroglyph decal on the window so she climbed in and they were all jabbering in their freaky stoned out way about Cousin Howard. Apparently a rock musician. That guy had cosmic vibes, they said. They had just come from a concert or something of his in Seattle and were going home now back to Frisco but were headed east and almost to Des Moines. Hearing this, she climbed over a naked woman to a window, opened it for air, declined the pipe when it was passed and got out at the next motel. But all night she couldn't get the slowly throbbing tune out of her head that the freaks had been trying to hum.

Next day or so there was the pair of Mormon missionaries, young guys in a white convertible, top down, screaming to the radio they turned up blasting but white shirts buttoned up with neckties pinned down neat like they were let loose on the world and didn't know what to do with it. Stacks of Bible tracts were

fluttering and flying off into the wind. She was fascinated by their energy. She leaned up from the back seat and asked where they were going. Why, to see Cousin Howard in Albuquerque, they shouted. To ask him about God. They swerved to narrowly avoid an on-coming bus and she parted company with them at a waffle house.

But by then her curiosity was piqued. To tell the truth, she had begun to seriously ponder what she would ask someone who knew about God. And that tune kept playing in her head.

Next morning she caught her first bad ride. She'd slept out at a campground, bed roll under the starry sky, and frankly looked a mess and therefore felt relieved to have this very respectable seeming man her father's age, black but her father's age and the kind of business suit he wore, in a family kind of station wagon with Michigan plates, pick her up.

But he began to talk about his family and very soon began to weep. His wife had recently passed on. The man was inconsolable, no matter what she said. She felt so young and ignorant. "Don't worry about me though," he said through his tears, "I'm going to talk it all out with Cousin Howard in L.A." She frankly couldn't stand it anymore, weeping with him, mile after mile of relentless grief stabbing her heart, and kissed his cheek goodbye at a truck stop.

But she was questioning herself: What should she have told him? Could someone teach her that, someone who knew about God? And the tune took on a soft mournful wail.

Then there was the rusty old chugging school bus full of migrant Mexicanos - men, women, children, boxes tied down on the roof - going to a rally in Salinas where Cousin Howard was scheduled to announce next year's labor union plan. They made her share their scanty meals.

They broke down where the road rose steep into the mountains and she was sitting among the skinny listless children, wondering at the struggles of the passing generations of the human race and wondering at the inevitability of grief and wondering what she would ask someone who knew about God, listening as the tune took on a kind of mariachi beat, looking out as the mountain shadows lengthened across the breathtaking land, her eyes full of tears from some emotion which did not seem to have a name, until a couple brothers from the bus coaxed her to go on ahead in a car full of contemplative nuns who happened by.

Now, these nuns somehow took a notion that she was a wandering prostitute. Therefore they insisted - absolutely insisted - that she must spend a day or two at a lovely retreat their order had just up the road. Chance to clean up and think a bit and maybe pray and

everything was free. They'd soon be by again in case she wanted to go hear Cousin Howard preach about divine light in Butte. Divine light? Was that what she needed?

She lay there in the simple room on the simple cot, moonlight and scent of pines on a gentle breeze through the open window, exhausted but unable to sleep for the empty ache of ignorance she felt. All these miles and all she had was questions. What thing, what kind of thing, was she seeking?

She went to gaze out, saw a tiny fire twinkling among the trees down by the lake and thought perhaps the sisters there wouldn't mind company. Hot dogs and marshmallows maybe. Wrapped in the blanket, sandals on her feet, she found her way.

But it was a man, alone, sitting gazing in the flames. His hair was caught back in Indian braids and a single dark feather graced his tattered hat. His face was old and creased in the flickering light. As she approached he gestured toward a place across the fire. She was welcome.

Was she dreaming? She took the invitation. But immediately when she sat, she said "Cousin Howard?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Who else?"

"I have so much to ask!" she blurted.

"Shhh" he whispered, a finger pressing on his lips, and smiled and seemed to sort of wink.

She tried to hush herself, to hear the breeze, to gaze into the flames, to relax into this dream which seemed so distressingly real, but her heart was demanding answers.

She tried to think what were the questions but nothing came.

She opened her mouth and one word "Why?" sighed into the air.

Instantly his finger pointed somewhere and he cried, "Look!"

She looked out through her veil of wonder. There was the rippling moonlight and the glowing water. There were the singing shadows of the trees. There was the boundless circle of awareness that filled her soul.

There were no other questions.

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### □ Seeking Companionship □

Have we no shame? We hope for someone to take the missing person's place. Where is our loyalty?

When good old Henri Matisse, long a widower, lay lingering in his final illness, weaker month by month, he and his fond assistant devised a new technique for art.

The good lady painted sheets of paper whatever colors that he wished and he would sit back on his pillows with a scissors cutting out the shapes which she would paste up per his instructions on a large canvas on an easel by the bed. These works are very fresh and full of story, music, joy and light. I fancy you can see them laughing with each other.

Or, the Bible tells the story of Naomi and Ruth, two women joined in happy times by Ruth's marriage to Naomi's younger son. They are left bereaved, one after one, of all their men. The old lady must set out now for the country from which she came, but urges both her daughters-in-law to stay behind here in their native land.

Ruth answers: "Whither thou goest I will go and where thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God. Where thou diest I will die and there will I be buried."

Or there is the holy trinity of the old Greeks' great mystery at Eleusis. These were the mother Demeter,

Persephone the daughter and a boy of theirs named Triptolemos. For the Greeks whose men so often went away to sea and war, this fatherless family stood through many centuries as a sublime and mighty emblem of divine love.

What I mean to say with all of this, of course, is that there is a great variety of powerful tender love. Although one kind of love is lost - really never in this life to be replaced - some other might be found.

And too, we ought to say that with each different love we ourselves become somewhat a different person. To speak quite frankly, perhaps a loss becomes an opportunity to grow.

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## □ Going Home □

It's often said that we cannot go home again because it isn't there. There is an ancient aphorism saying we can never step into the same river twice because it's constantly a different river. There is a famous poem "Death Of The Hired Man" in which the poet offers cold comfort by only saying home is where they have to take you in.

But on the other hand, it's also said that at the end of the longest journey we come home to ourselves. I do believe it. I do believe for all of us there is a place of calm and rest deep in our soul waiting somewhere at the end of struggle.

In the tales of Jesus there is a moment very near his death when he cries to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" In all of Christian lore, this is certainly the moment which I find most difficult to reconcile with my vision of that faith's central comfort.

To me Christianity seems a path of hard-won joy, not surrender to despair. And I know joy is possible in this world, not only in a paradise elsewhere. The story well depicts the very furthest point of struggle but I feel disappointed that the writer did not paint a picture of the peace one little step beyond. That passage of the scripture only says Christ sighed and gave up his soul.

But in that sigh, as in a drop of water, we may find a hidden universe.

King Solomon's two deepest books use two different storytelling modes to explicate the meaning of that sigh. Ecclesiastes finally shows an elder speaking from a place of wisdom to the generations of the world. But in Job the end is like a childish fairy tale in which all that was lost is magically restored. So perhaps from that it's fair to humbly guess this picture of a rainbow's end may do.

There is a striving in the human heart toward home. We struggle so but only long to hear a murmured lullaby of peace, of rest, whispering that our failings are forgot.

Here is the heart's desire, the end of suffering, the place where all that's gone before is reconciled in mythic understanding, dissolving in the glow of light and mist.

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## □ Speaking With The Dead □

All across the world and through all of history, people in every human culture have had the experience, as real as anything, of speaking with loved ones who have passed away. What should we make of this? Should we seek this for ourselves?

Well, for one thing, I can offer concrete experience as to its reality that I find utterly convincing. In my experience acting as a spirit medium, which I find very easy and do whenever asked, it happens almost always that the person who has gone beyond the veil starts right in immediately by giving you something to say purely for recognition.

Like, one day a friend brought a lady by the house who was earnestly yearning to talk with her dear brother. He'd been killed in an auto wreck without the chance to say goodbye. Well, the very first thing this fellow said for me to say was a rather joking insult of the lady's boyfriend.

I was surprised to say the least but it turned out - my friend informed me - that he had always humorously insulted all his sister's boyfriends. It was a loving intimacy between them, a remarkable sort of virtuous and chaste filial eroticism.

She burst into tears of joy. There ensued a farewell conversation of such tenderness as one feels privileged to witness in a lifetime.

Now, that is not the usual way of things in our society. Most of us are too afraid of death to seek out that experience. What happens much more often nowadays is that someone who has passed away in peace will come to visit in the evening at the bedside of a child they love. They bid farewell and give a blessing. This is an act of great compassion and of beauty.

Or we may visit at the grave to speak and listen, for there the poignancy can break through skepticism. Or some little thing may bring a memory glowing fully into consciousness and in that glowing moment we may hear a voice and feel a presence and know that it is real.

What have I learned from this? Beyond all reasonable doubt I have to say that death is not the end of life. And all this gives me hope that love is mightier than any force which separates us, so those who love will surely meet again.

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## □ Blessings □

There was a final bit of conversation a few days before my father's passing, as I stood and turned to go, leaving his hospital room to return to New England, only he and I there at the moment.

There was something I had worked out early as a young boy and then confirmed through the observation of years: my father was a good man to learn from. I had never told him this opinion.

I said: "I learned a lot about how to live by watching you." Half way to the door, hat in hand, feeling like a thief for leaving early.

Staring off into his memories as he was often wont to do, searching them, he whispered "Oh?"

This was surprise. He was surprised. He knew his failings. He knew the disagreement which had separated us a while through his mistake. He knew the other son had been his favorite. He had groped through life as we all do. And I admired him all the more now for this culminating honesty.

I answered firmly "Yes!"

Shall we think a bit about the universal human custom of giving blessings?

It may be the simple gesture of a hand laid on a child's head or the ornate ritual of a minister with a

congregation. It may be a whispered word. You may be a saint who stands between the human realm and the divine or you may be a worldly sinner. Whoever you may be and wherever, if love is in your heart it is believed you have the power of blessing.

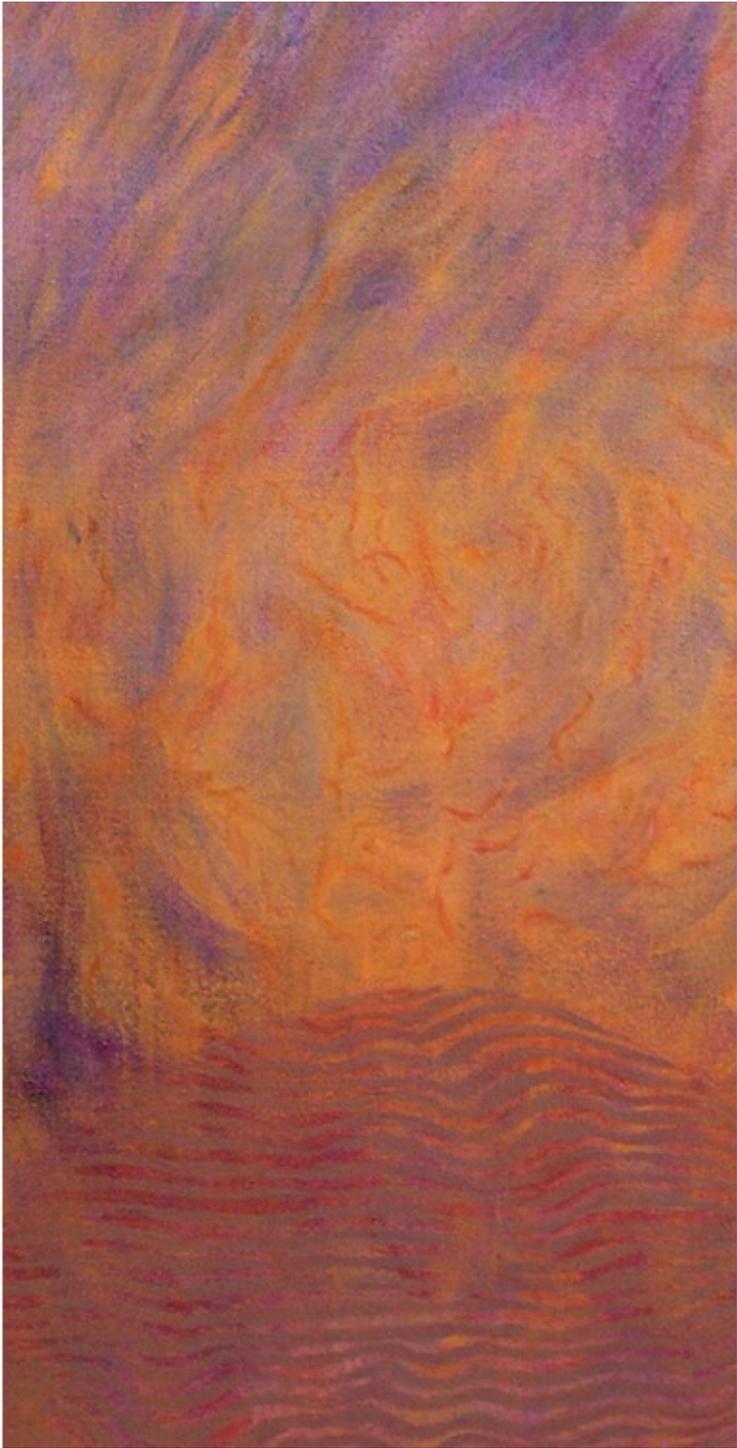
And to receive this power, it seems that no more is required than that we open our defenses.

Perhaps we have a spiritual sensation that love flows like precious oil or sacred water. Perhaps we have a feeling of participating in the infinite divine, of flowing in the universal river of which myth and poetry have often spoken so beautifully, when love overflows our being into a word or gesture freely given. And perhaps this is all very real.

Shall we believe this is the very substance of existence, this giving and receiving blessings? Shall we believe indeed that we are made to love each other because we are made of love?

If this is so, then there is never any dying.

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### □ Approach Of The Divine □

There was a place, a medical clinic where, at age of four or five, I nearly died by an experimental injection, done in a successful effort to save my leg from a disastrous infection which it had sustained in play. It was the doctor's private clinic. The clean white-clad woman nurse with a white bird-like cap poised on her head picked up the loaded needle from a spotlessly clean white porcelain tray that had straight sides with edges with a certain graceful curve, a tray over there where medicines and instruments had been set out on a spotlessly clean hard-surfaced table, with all of the edges of the things meeting by similar pretty curves, and held it up to check its level in the window light and finally thumped it gently with a nail. A truly honest reassuring smile.

Still vertical, the needle passed into the doctor's hands, my father's friend so that, the family knew, we always had special treatment there. These hands, I understood, had sometimes caught the ball out of my father's hands when they had played together for a mucky rural high school team, at a time when football was done for education. These hands then also held the dart-like needle up into the brilliant inflowing light of the clean sealed glass window to double-check its level, and then that disconcerting amber drop emerging from the microscopic nozzle of the point, insuring that

the nozzle too was loaded. I began to die at once. The spotless seamless white floor seemed to open underneath the table where I sat wrapped securely in my father's arms and I began to sink as though aboard some ancient vessel of the night.

Even then, before the poison needle slid into the flesh, the merest sight of that precisely calculated poison substance in itself, in its naked self, a single drop of it, had seemed to lower me, the already feverish little boy, into some lower octave. I seemed to fade out of my father's hands which now seemed like some other kind of flesh than mine. So please behold there then the portal of Queen Inanna's Great Below, entered by an innocent, descending from a chamber drenched in sunlight, cradled in his tender father's arms and with his elder brother and a woman present, and she in ceremonial garb. Behold there then inside the blinking innocent's eyes the countless white porcelain trays of varying sizes neatly stacked and ready to any needing hand on papered shelves behind gleaming glass doors of tall rectangular cabinets. Behold a place designed and made for utmost humane care and for the practice of a science. He carried me out to the car.

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## □ Talking With Birds □

If you live somewhere with song birds, I mean the two-winged beings who communicate with tweets and screeches, hrees, chirps, cheeps, peeps, pipes, criks or creeks, clever little bits of tune that catch your ear, all of them, all of those from whom Early Humans quite obviously learned to sing by imitating, and those who mainly hoot also although a different bunch somewhat, if you live where some of them live, you can probably talk with them.

I mean have little brief discussions, although very brief and to the point.

I'll tell you how. The main trick is of course you have to say things they care about obviously. And you must absolutely never be dangerous.

But that interest requirement is not hard for a brief little chat. There is definitely one thing, one thing the birds really care about and you do too... You.

The bird over in that rose bush looking at you, or up on that limb of that tree, they want to know who the heck you are, they certainly do, and you also want to know that too.

So sing yourself to them, sing who you are, make up a name for yourself and sing it.

Although of course your tune must be brief, and you must do your very best to sing with chirps or cheeps, peeps, pipes, caws, or catchy little bits of tune, like they do. So they know you're talking to them and you're not trying to sneak up on them.

And if you make this a habit, harmlessly announce yourself to song birds that way, a place you live or frequent, singing who you are, your true name to them best you can, as you are at that moment, make that a habit and you might get excellent results.

Sooner or later you may see or hear one or more of them respond to you, with a chirp or cheep of their own, or some with a little flurry of their feathers, responding to your little tune. Provided they detect that you are not dangerous at all and you are of interest.

If you are not interesting, a person of no interest, taking no interest in yourself, then this exercise of singing to the birds may help you find something in yourself of interest.

Or even more, if you live where they live and you do this a while, they might tell you their news.

There's cardinal birds frequent the rose bushes here, big tangled thorny heaps of wild rose piled up in the forest verge, large real thickets some of them. Safe shelter for the cardinal birds who just dart about inside

among the thicket canes and thorns. They find lots of food in there too I'm sure.

There is here a family of cardinal birds frequent my yard, several yearly generations I have seen. Early spring after the summer I invented my bird-name and begun singing it to them, something happened...

Part of our backyard is a little religious chapel yard, and that spring morning, right across our little chapel yard from me, where I was sitting on our kitchen stoop, me very happy for the spring sun, doing my morning healing smoke, and Our Lady's small trimmed-back small rose bush is right over there.

This trimmed-back rose bush, with Our Lady's statue at it's foot, is a little wedge of Town Forest verge within the our boundary. And there's blueberry bushes crowded it behind it, representatives from the big berry thicket further on where tall trees grow thick. So to me this sacred corner of the chapel seems to me like a delegation from the woody substance of a forest.

So it has my Rose Lady statue at it's foot, and above Our Lady's head happened to be that spring a shadowy opening in the leaves, because inside of that shadowy opening was a small cavity among the thorns and canes.

And a mere flick of red, brilliant deep red, and Papa cardinal bird has flicked into existence in that

open spot, the woody cavern mouth above Our Lady, in his all his reddest red Papa feathers

He's posing there with head thrust out about to sing the loudest that he can, but Papa hesitates. Surely because there is a human so close.

So me, from habit, me only with a feeling of being social and harmless, I quietly sing my name to reassure him, not loud.

“yeah-yeah-yeah-HELLOO” I sing to Papa cardinal over there.

And he opened his mind in my direction, to me felt like checking whether or not I psychically seem like the harmless neighbor uses that name.

::: zzzz add a little here

So if you are mute, if have no voice or cannot stand to use it anymore, this exercise might open mental telepathy for you.

::: zzz Wrap this up now. =====



☐ Sorrow For Dying Earth ☐

“Nature's Mother” instead of “Mother Nature”?

Perhaps we must think beyond Mother Nature now, think deeper, think toward another Great Goddess who seems more distant from us but is also alive in our natural human soul.

Think of All Existence as divine and Mother?

All Existence as a living figure of Holy Mother? One who dwells deeper in our inborn evolved conceptions, and openly stands in these strange horrors we face, standing clearly in this tide of utter wreckage. A figure obviously still full of fiery power.

All Existence, all of everything, Nature's Mother in my wording, another Great Goddess known to our human nature, can we find a good faith and trust in All Existence, to keep us from despair? Is this an image with power in which we might still bless and curse and swear our sacred duties?

Our dear Mother Nature, our Living Earth, She is collapsing, dying quickly of this horror, quickly falling in this utter wreckage, even while our labors in Her service will continue for awhile.

:: zzzzz More more more.

:: zzzz More more more.

:: zzzz More more more.

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### About The Paintings

These are actual paintings. I do some digital artwork too but these are photographs of actual paintings. Two were done on ordinary wooden board, the rest on canvas from local art supply stores. These were all done in acrylic paint. I love acrylic. I much prefer an inexpensive brand that many students use because it has more "life" than the professional grade. The pigments are less finely ground and the medium is looser so a single brushstroke carries variations that look dynamic to the eye. I photograph them with a good digital camera and process the images on a large home computer.

This is Modern Art. I am utterly committed to a movement now underway where you strive to comprehend and use the whole visual language that was developed by the Modern masters between the 1890's and the 1960's. Their work was divided by competing schools - abstract expressionism, symbolism, minimalism and the rest - but now the idea is that each important school developed a powerful dialect for speaking to the viewer. Enough time has passed that these dialects can be unified into one language with enormous powers of communication. This type of work is distinguished from the prevailing Contemporary movement and is currently considered underground.

I did some painting early on, in 1980 and 1981. Some of the work was good but I quickly realized I did

not know enough to take it forward. Painting is the great art of Western culture, like jazz music is in a smaller circle. Like jazz, painting is supposed to show us to ourselves as we really are in the present time, in consciousness of other times, in consciousness of our essential nature. The best painters, like the great jazz musicians, are therefore those who approach the subject whole and remake as large a section of the art as may be needed.

I laid my brushes by until a later time. I made a living as a software engineer. I took to writing and performing stories. I became a minister in a small unorthodox religion and did pastoral counseling. Then at the age of fifty-four I breathed in deep and took it up again.

A listing of the paintings follows.

Pg 7. The Beauty Of Nature

Awaking In A Dream

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 inches, 2001

Pg 9. Questions For God

View From Hubble

Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches, 2002

Pg 12. Penetrating Mystery

Seagull Turning

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, 2001

Pg 15. Acceptance Of Peace

The Way Of Tea

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, 2002

Pg 18. Opening To Compassion

The God At Noon

Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches, 2003

Pg 21. We Are Holy Myth

Lady Of The Witches

Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 44 inches, 2004

Pg 24. The Wholeness Of Things

The World

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 in. (portion shown), 2002

Pg 27. The Distant Sunset

U.S.A. #2

Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches, 2005

Pg 30. Rebirth Of Courage

Portrait Of Gauguin

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, 2004

Pg 32. Renewal Of Purpose

San Diego Bay

Acrylic on canvas, three panels 24 x 48 in. each, 2003

Pg 35. Creativity From Within

New Hope

Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches, 2003

Pg 39. The Lure Of Adventure

Chop Wood, Carry Water

Acrylic on pine, 14 x 14 inches, 2001

Pg 45. Seeking Companionship

The Lightness Of Being

Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches, 2002

Pg 47. Going Home

Temperance

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 in. (portion shown), 2002

Pg 50. Speaking With The Dead

Shrine Of Ishtar Beneath Jerusalem's City Wall

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, 2002

Pg 53. Blessings

The Moon Throne

Acrylic on pine, 36 x 24 inches, 2002

Pg 56. Approach Of The Divine

Portrait Of Beven

Acrylic on canvas, 99 x 99 inches, 9999

Pg 59. Talking With Birds

Four Art Projects

Acrylic on canvas, 99 x 99 inches, 9999

Pg 63. Sorrow For Dying Earth

Forsythia

Acrylic on canvas, 99 x 99 inches, 9999

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