

# Bright Jewels

Beautiful moments  
in a strange life.

An illustrated memoir by  
Stone Riley



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Compact PDF Version

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These stories are true to the best of my recollection. Names have been omitted to protect the guilty and the innocent, and because people's names have never seemed important to me. (Stephen Crane's novel *Red Badge Of Courage* was a childhood revelation to me in this regard.) But actually, re-reading that first sentence of this paragraph, I ought to say instead that here and there my memories have been glossed a little bit to tell the inner truth of things better than a listing of the factual details could. Or at least to make a better story.

The author's website is [www.stoneriley.com](http://www.stoneriley.com). You can buy a paperback copy of this book. You can also view or download an e-book copy or PDF copy of it for free. The author is a multidisciplinary artist active in the Pagan movement and living west of Boston, U.S.A. His politics: Peace through justice.

Book and cover design by Stone Riley.

To my Goddesses and Gods,  
in love, respect, thanks and praise

And to the innocent

this work is hereby dedicated.

Let's each one send unto his wife.

*William Shakespeare  
The Taming Of the Shrew  
Act 5 Scene 2*

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## Blessings

Digital photo of a polymer clay sculpture  
by Stone Riley

## **Blessings**

### **(Episode 1)**

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!"

And his eyes turned to mine at last.

• • •

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.



## Troubles

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **Troubles**

### **(Episode 2)**

Reality hurries to make itself known. That is why it is so often possible to foretell the future.

One time a friend of mine behested me to help a friend of hers who had a bit of trouble. This other person did a marginally profitable small business organizing public divination events in shopping malls. My friend had promised to work at one of these events on a certain Saturday but had to cancel and naturally felt very obligated to find a replacement: me. And incidentally, I myself come from that economic class of small trade so I understand that kind of obligation as a moral issue. My friend assured me it was scrupulously honest and well motivated and would in fact be a challenge as it was outside my usual line of free pastoral counseling. I agreed and showed up on the appointed morning at the appointed pre-opening time at the shut glass doors of the specified shopping mall with a folding card table and three folding chairs and a canvas bag containing lunch, beverage, the First Edition of The Simple Tarot and other small equipment.

It was a challenge. It was a shopping mall. The customers paid twenty bucks for twenty minutes and money back if not completely satisfied. Actually they would browse a bit around outside our red plush rope corral there in front of a department store,

perusing the services on offer, our eight neatly set tables with our little signs and our various card decks and gazing crystals available for patronage, then pay the proprietor at a table at the entrance to our red plush rope corral, then with their pink paper ticket just like at a movie show in hand they would either proceed to the desired table or else take a turn at the electronic palm-reading aura-photograph machine. I'm proud to say my customers were satisfied.

It was a challenge. Retail is not easy. First it was a rather busy morning and noon, maybe four or five of the usual sort of bewilderments and emotional dislocations that life ordinarily bestows on us all, and all pretty much successfully reaching agreement about the facts of the case and choices that might be helpful. So, still early afternoon and I was feeling refreshed by an egg salad sandwich and low-fat milk and a brisk quick walk around the place. I was feeling exercised and limbered up.

Two women entered, very young and somewhat older. A daughter and mother, relying closely on each other's tender love according to their body language, both quite tastefully dressed and groomed, serious reserved decorum. I was not occupied and they came directly to my table. I realized this was an honor. They had bought one ticket which the older lady presented as I rose, saying with a tense but gentle smile that the reading was a gift to her daughter.

The young lady's calm clean pretty face in my mind's eye resembled certain Picasso portraits where the face is dramatically split by a vertical line with a different shading scheme on either half. Actually the

dividing line was tilted slightly toward my left as I was looking at her. It crossed the face's center line a little higher than the eyes. I examined this remarkable effect in the mind's eye, as you may imagine, with considerable surprise and extreme care. I discovered this was merely a generalized approximate depiction of something deeper which had an effect of splitting her, for when I palpated around that intersection spot in the mind's eye with imaginary fingertips, there was released a powerful emotional scent of dire foreboding. So I conjured up into my eyes whatever vague image I had on hand of the shape and functioning of the human brain, fitted that into the picture, focused into that as finely as possible, saw something wrong beyond my power to recognize, it being represented merely as resembling cascading water, and I became convinced that her brain was malfunctioning. The disorder was radiating from a small region near the upper center, slightly to the left as I was looking at her. Would that I could reach in that easily and set things right.

I invited them to please be seated, we three around three sides of the table, the sick girl directly to my right and the mother to her right. That seemed the best arrangement at the square card table. I played one of my standard opening moves, asking if they had a specific question or else desired a general reading. They chose a general reading. Considering the girl's condition – that she was probably in no condition to participate fully – I decided to play the cards entirely myself, ignoring the general reading request and instead dealing a small pattern of a few cards, asking only for a view of the most important

and solid aspects of the future. That's what I wanted to see immediately in order to guide my opening of the verbal conversation. I don't recall which cards they were – that's usually not the kind of thing your memory records – but the cards chose to show me one single thing. There was a major event scheduled for the very near future from which these ladies were dearly hoping to get good results. There was a strong sense of their hopes and that the event would certainly take place but the spread of cards was too small to represent any degree of detail or the results. And I said that, pointing out my reasoning on the pictures and the printed words.

Now, this next bit – where a client suddenly decides to open up because they suddenly decide you can be trusted – this doesn't often happen with such a sudden rush in Tarot reading. This is more typical of methods where you work without graphic aids, like spirit mediumship for example, because there you don't have things the client can look at for themselves in order to check your veracity, at least to some degree, and also to maintain their feeling of self-reliance. In methods without graphic aids, a self-respecting client needs to see you pass some kind of serious test before they can take you seriously so this phenomenon like a sudden threshold of trust is much more common there.

For example, in spirit mediumship the dead person will almost always start right in immediately by giving you something to say purely for recognition. Like, one day a different friend brought a lady round the house who was earnestly yearning to talk with her dear brother because 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. It turns out that he had always humorously insulted all his sister's boyfriends as a loving intimacy between them, a quite remarkable sort of chaste virtuous filial eroticism. She burst into tears of joy. There ensued a fare-well conversation of such tenderness as one feels privileged to witness in a lifetime. But as I say, this is not the usual way of things in Tarot reading.

And on that afternoon there were no tears nor any flood of words. My two ladies were too composed for that. There was instead a psychic exhalation of immense relief. Nor was I the entity they suddenly trusted. Instead it's almost right to say they suddenly trusted God, or something like it. On seeing that small demonstration of reality's willingness to be known, written there for them to see right on those pictures and the printed words, that clear prediction of something which they knew was in the offing, there was released in them some knotty fear, I thought perhaps a fear that perhaps unintelligible chaos rules the world. Visibly to me the chakra in their bosoms lightened. Both together breathed a sigh which in its visible depiction in my eyes filled our little space there in that worldly place with lightened color. Prayer can arise from many aspects of a human being, not only from our Buddha consciousness, to use a common phrase, but also from the consciousness we focus on this world or from our skin and blood and bones. That nearly silent sigh arose from deep within their bodies. It held some

vaguely audible echo of some formula of words. It reached into the ground and opened toward the sky.

So then the mother trusted me with information. She informed me in a minimum of calmly spoken sentences that – as the cards had said – that Monday morning they would go to see a doctor, a new one, who might finally diagnose her daughter's illness. Given that, perhaps a useful treatment could be found. They were wondering if this reading could predict the outcome. This was Saturday; they had two days in which to hope and worry.

I didn't bother with my standard suggestion that you should rephrase that kind of question, that usually you should ask for some advice on what to do instead of a prediction of the future. I simply rephrased it myself and set about it. What could they do to maximize the chances of success? What should I tell them on that score? The High Priest, the psychopomp, the masculine teacher, then came up – I remember that – and some other card which seemed to represent a female student. A few more verified my understanding so I began at last to speak directly to the girl: "Mental illness is a very difficult life." She blinked in some surprise, for no one had mentioned mental illness, but then nodded definite agreement. "It is a very difficult life," I repeated, "but it is a life that you can learn from."

There was, in fact, not much I knew. Were there useful drugs available for this condition? I did not know. Could brain scan machines pinpoint the source of trouble? Yes or no, that wasn't indicated in these cards and I certainly had insufficient confidence in the psychic scan I'd done to venture that opinion.

Or was it even actually a physical disorder? For all I knew, that microscopic cascade in her head might symbolize some ghastly memory or self-deceit and she might need a psychiatric talking cure. But a proper boatman rows the boat he has, however small, so tend the business that you have on hand. I had asked the cards what I should say and they displayed this relationship of a soul-guide teacher and a student. They said there was to be a manifestation of all those old Zen and Tao stories on the subject, some manifestation like my own experiences as student and teacher, some tale like some teacher of mine had told about their teacher, and such as that. So I drew up all I knew about that kind of relationship, the basic common human facts of how to make that relationship work for best results, and spoke on that.

I advised the girl to exercise her judgment on this doctor. Judge this doctor on the score of whether this could be her teacher. If a therapeutic regimen was found or not, a long road lay ahead, a lifetime as a human being lay ahead, and techniques must be learned to manage. Techniques must be found to nurture her humanity. And a teacher must be found who teaches what the student needs to learn. That was the gist of it as I recall. Of course, in that state of mind the words tumble forth too quickly to be weighed and measured into memory, so other things perhaps were said as well. In any case, her clear pretty bright-eyed attentive face is etched in memory as vividly as anything I've ever seen. While this twenty-dollar prophet spoke, she weighed and measured every word of it exactly with the same brave careful prudence I was dearly hoping she would

find within herself that Monday morning. There were some little smiles and nods.

When I was finished talking, finding nothing more along that line, her mother spoke. Thank you very much, she said in frank sincerity. Was it twenty minutes? I looked at the clock I'd set out on the table there for clients to see and yes it was. Well, but I felt nearly like a cheat. They had paid me with their confidence and good company far more than twenty minutes worth. I would never see these people again; was there at least some necessary parting thought? No, not even that came to mind. So we made a little ceremony of taking leave, shaking hands, my customary thanks for their trust, and best wishes for the future. With the same air of dignity and calm in which they'd come, they left.

It was only then I realized the girl had scarcely spoken. Perhaps her illness interfered with speech, I guessed, but she had been so open and so honestly herself that words from her had truly not been needed.

So, you see, that is the largest personal experience from which I speak on this subject of envisioning the future. That story does seem to illustrate what I really hoped to say. When we are forced by incomprehensible causes to live in situations that are unfit for human life – whether by an illness mysteriously opening beneath our feet, or through enormous circumstances like the billions of us who must live in poverty, or if we find ourselves the helpless prey of those who choose to feed their inner demons on our pain, or in whatever way we find ourselves in desperate frustration of human hope

without a visible exit – in those times we yearn for evidence that there is sense beneath the chaos and this yearning becomes focused on the future. Some of us can be satisfied with nonsense promises of heaven in another world or nonsense schemes for purifying society here by means of brutal politics and war. (While I sit writing this today, an astonishing brutally insane regime controls my country.) Some retreat to an attitude of denial and self-defense. Some seek oblivion in drunkenness. There is always suicide. But there are also always those who seek to understand by thinking. For those there is always available the epiphany of Lao Tzu and Rumi, the epiphany of reality hurrying to make itself known. This can be the thinking person's reconciliation with the Universe.



Do The Hard Work

Digital image by Stone Riley  
Based on a drawing in hard wax crayon  
by Devon Keelin

## **Do The Hard Work (Episode 3)**

Shouldn't there be snow? It's February in the outlying reaches of the Alps in southern Germany. We are out on the porch of a tavern that clings to a steep valley's green grassy wall, nursing mugs of beer in the rising twilight.

We are the tavern's only customers. We scarcely speak and scarcely make a sound for we are keeping secrets, each their own.

I go lean on a rail to watch the darkness move. It's coming toward me, rising from the valley's shadows far below. The air is still and clear and it's not even really cold.

We are five men. Our little truck is parked up by the road. It's 1971 and we are U.S. Army soldiers, stationed in this country on a Cold War stalemate line instead of being sent to fight in Viet Nam.

The old sergeant, commander of our little journey for this evening, he who kindly halted here and even bought the beer, comes to lean against the railing beside me. The young corporal who is driving also comes and sits down on a bench beside and slowly takes a sip.

The old sergeant, this professional soldier, to show he's talking to me, looks out there where I am

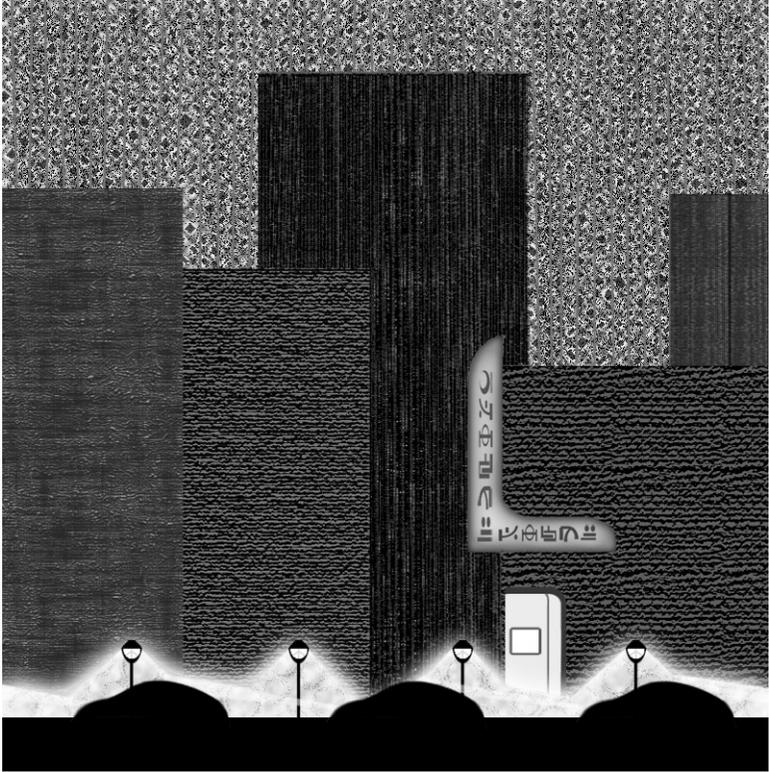
looking. And he breaks the silence: "I admire what you're doing."

I've just done thirty days in army jail for doing war resistance work. He and his corporal are transporting me and two other malefactors also just released back to our regular duties. He has now given me military information about morale.

He has spoken very softly.

Surprised, I look into his face then look away. I whisper thanks. But then I wonder what this means that I should do.

And then, down there below, laboring to rise out of the rising night, low to the grassy ground and laboring up this hillside, I see a crow at wing.



## Picture Story

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Picture Story**

### **(Episode 4)**

It was Boston long ago, back when that was a home front of the war in Viet Nam. I was a young ex-soldier, poor, doing some political action work, not yet doing art.

One day I chanced to see a photograph exhibit, all one artist, all black and white but quite an opposite to Mathew Bradey, small exquisite stuff, in a very sunny space at the Boston Public Library, and one of those pictures really struck me.

I called her up. Why not? Her phone number was put out there for the public to see, which included me, and it was local. Her female housemate or friend or lover answered and I politely asked for her. That picture clearly showed, at least to me, one of the ideals I was clinging to.

She came on and I politely asked if it was possible to buy a print of that specific one. She hesitated but then – quite reluctantly and largely out of curiosity, to judge her voice – gave the address and said to come over. It was a subway ride across the river.

The apartment was about like mine, as you might imagine. Old sofa, old chairs in a dingy old Victorian parlor. And it was an awkward

conversation. How to ask me who on Earth I was? She soon got to it though, explained her situation briefly, politely let me understand that she ordinarily sold professionally to publications.

I responded quite sincerely with the simple truth: I'd seen the show and that one had struck me and the reason why it had. And besides, I was putting up some pictures (in my old dingy apartment with old furniture and with my friend or housemate or lover) and that one was a picture I would like my home to have.

She thought about it. She tried to think of something more to say or ask. She finally nodded, still rather dubious, doubtlessly for several nonspecific reasons, and disappeared into the cellar stairway door. Her friend or lover or housemate poured some tea but not some conversation.

She came back up, switching off the stairway light bulb by its string. waving the new print in the air to finish drying it, slipped it in an inexpensive paper mat and charged me less than the cost of materials.

And that was my admission to the art world.



## Treasure

Digital photo of a polymer clay sculpture  
by Stone Riley

## **Treasure**

### **(Episode 5)**

I live in New England where the land is full of very hard rocks. There is a big controversy here whether the ancient people, who were here before my people, did much work on these rocks or not. If you just look around, which I guess some people do not do, it becomes totally obvious that the ancient people moved the rocks around a lot, and piled them up, along with dirt, to build structures which are still here. That becomes obvious if you just walk in the woods.

But still, the rocks are very hard indeed, for they were once inside the hearts of mountains that are now mostly erased, and the ancient people did not sculpt them. You don't find any fully formed sculptures in the soil here and even stones that have markings carved on them are very rare indeed. There are some rocks with markings pecked into the hard surface in tiny dots to indicate the lines of drawings but even those are very rare.

Except one time I found a large stone simply covered with an astonishing drawing of dotted lines someplace thousands of people go and do not see, at a busy pullover rest stop on a hill on a busy superhighway, right beside a parking space where you get out of your automobile and maybe sit down on this fairly large rounded gray rock that is half buried

in the earth on this hill top and is, in fact, covered with an invisible ancient drawing pecked out in dots.

I saw it because there was a thin coat of moisture on the surface, a light mist in the air that disbursed the sunlight partly into a kind of universal glow, and the sun glowing low in the west under overhanging clouds, and me crouching down on the eastern side of the rock leaning on it because I was very lonely and weary from life's confusing problems.

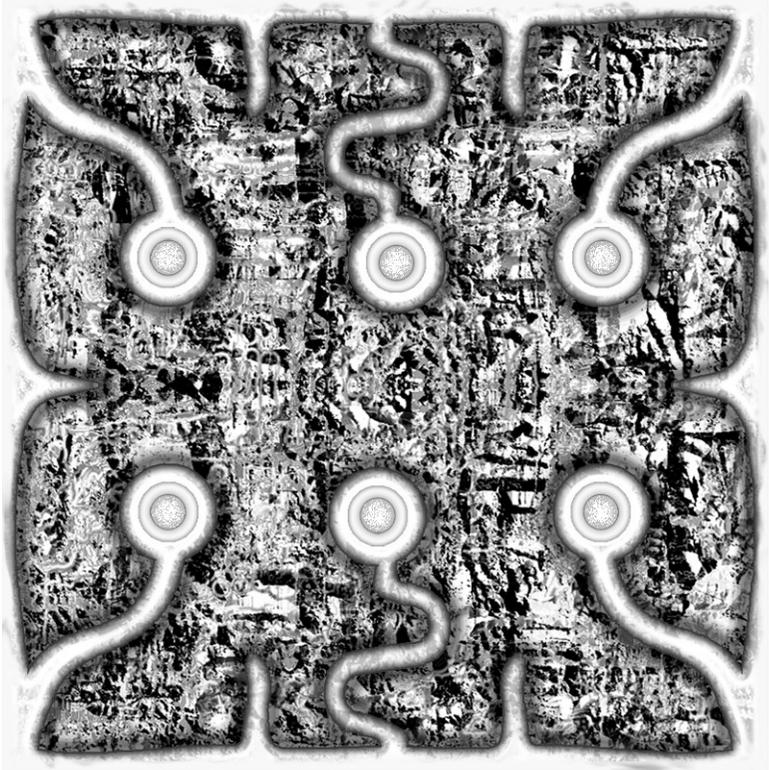
The part which my eyes could make sense of was only on the upper rounded center of the surface and it was a Medicine Wheel.

Examining closely, I was sure the tiny dots pecked in the surface continued on out from the wheel and down around the sides, but with the particular light and some moss growing there, I could not really puzzle out the sense of the drawing except right in the center top. But to me at that moment the Medicine Wheel was absolutely true fact and it was definitely enough for me to know.

Maybe later I'll tell you about another time there was an eagle flying.

But anyway, I did not run and get a shovel to dig the boulder out and take it to a laboratory.

And here's something this incident teaches about divination: The key essential vital thing is only that you must really ask for information. Giving that, the thing you see is usually the thing you are supposed to see. Reality hurries to make itself known.



Druid Chat

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Druid Chat (Episode 6)**

Last Thursday afternoon at 5:00 pm I visited with about a dozen college students in a series sponsored by their campus Pagan group. The kids were very bright. I was invited in my Druid pose and so I led the chat into an erudite but practical seminar on universal human mysticism while taking every chance to invoke the arts.

The kids were quite impressive. We ran two hours instead of one. The next group scheduled for the room arrived and started testing the video projector.

But then we found the fact that several of them create and play computer games as, in fact, a valuable meditation discipline. And we confirmed this quickly by comparing their experience with Oriental mental techniques.

So here was serious art work they do and so, at last, a door into the arts through which the chat might finally leap. But could I find a sharp stick to poke them with? I tentatively mentioned violence.

One of the gamers did a Kibuki sour face with a dismissive gesture of the hand, reaching to invoke some familiar reason why (contrary to my misinformed opinion) this is not an issue. But the Witch of Milford, my old friend whom the student

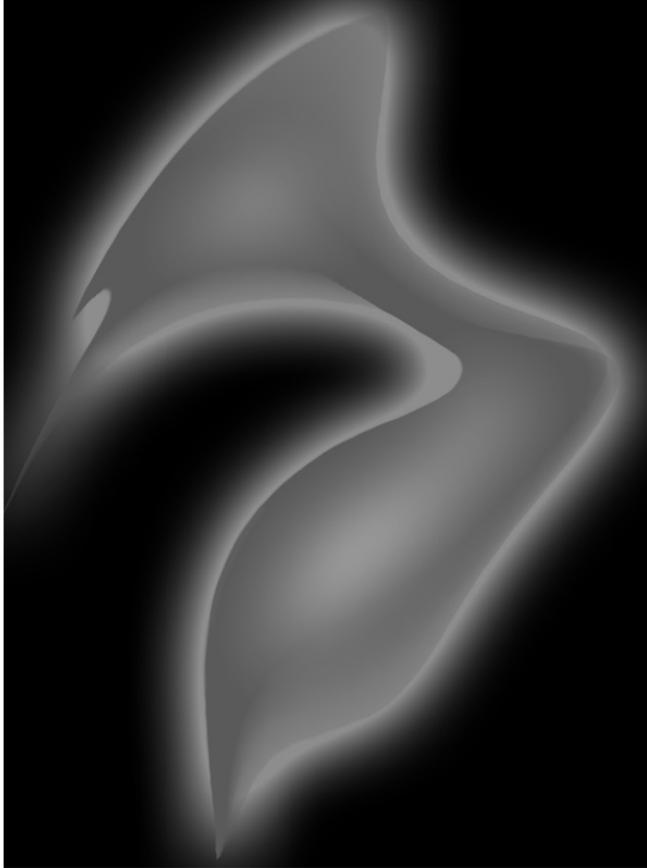
group retain as an advisor, spoke up offering her opinion that the charge of recreational violence in computer games sure seems like an issue to her and she'd appreciate an explanation.

The students looked embarrassed. They obviously knew this is a problem in their project which they had not satisfactorily resolved. With their fine aptitude I guessed they simply had not found a good applicable model from which to draw. So I trotted out a bit of great world famous art work that sure seems similar and does contain a resolution.

I spoke a detail from a great world famous story: All the demons of hell attacked the Buddha and he destroyed them all with just a gesture of the hands. The game designers' eyes lit up. Some jaws dropped.

So I spoke the story bit again like a title: *“All The Demons Of Hell Attacked The Buddha And He . . .”* et cetera. Then, posing as an artist's model, I struck a pose of shaman dancer deep in trance and executed various possible gestures of the hands.

Now it's the following Monday morning at almost 3:00 am. I have risen early, breakfasted on toast and jam and coffee, and set this incident into this manuscript.



## The Fig Tree

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **The Fig Tree** **(Episode 7)**

There was a fig tree where I was a child, filling one corner of our little house's little yard. Its beauty was amazing.

Indeed, after my childhood study of that tree, beauty seemed so mysteriously far beyond human knowing that the word “beauty” seldom even passed my lips for the next forty-odd years. Instead, I would speak and think of “joy” as the real fundamental of existence. I would remember stretching out my little self through the summer's sweet close fragrant shade along thick viney limbs, the green light kaleidoscopic in my human eyes, the big stiff leaves rustling like paper in the breeze but so fuzzy against human skin, the fruit so strange and good. In unaccountable entwining ways the fig tree was perfection far past knowing. But joy was inside me. I am joyful; I exist. That was knowable and known.

Then suddenly there was another summer day – me now far away and fifty-five years old but still there a conscious spirit in the fig tree – but now knowing more. Now suddenly my self was felt to be the viney wood, the sun soaked leaves, the strange good fruit and all and all of this was known by its self, my own self, to be extremely beautiful.

Of course the mode of this awakening, at last, was erotic love.

• • •

I was a lonely quiet child, for so I learned to be and learned I was. Happy laughter sprang up from my heart quite naturally, but in that house it found poor nourishment.

Our mother, from some cause forever now uncertain – perhaps her father's early death and then her brother's then her mother's – was a worried and sometimes despairing woman.

Our father, though he was the one who set the fig tree sapling in its place, was a very earnest brooding man. His childhood had been wounded by starvation poverty and then his youth by desperate struggle in a great war.

This woman and man who made us – a girl, a boy, another boy who was myself, and then another girl – did right by us. Their love proved itself by unstinted labor that fed and housed and clothed us year after year, and in a gentle discipline that taught so well. They gave us health, honesty, literacy and cleanliness.

But love was not spoken in that house. There were no kisses. There was not even wishing for a kiss. There was no tender touch.

• • •

In my childhood study of the tree, what I noticed most was the viney kind of curve its trunks, branches and twigs all made. I have tried ever since, in every art, to make that curve.

It was a compound line describing all the aspects of reality at all the points that it inhabited, the gravity and wind and sun and mechanical adhesion in the fibers of its wood and its evolution in previous habitats and the natural tendencies of the universe and plenty more sublimely joyful dancing fluid interactions of reality far outside my knowing.

That is to say, I understood the curving of the fig tree was extremely real. It was much more real than my unconvincing notions of my self.

And so passed forty years and more, although with various awkward twists as I tried to stretch my self into that viney curve and never figured how.

• • •

That summer I was fifty-five, I was in New England. I was renting half of an old house on an unworked farm. This house's other half was rented by another fellow.

You'd surely say it was a run down place but he was doing photographs and I was doing paintings and it was a joyful spot. It was a four acre hilltop hay field deep in the big woods with a mountain view that would pop your eyes out. There was delicious air.

The other renter was a nice thoughtful fellow, very lonely, who found great comfort in contemplative retreats at a Buddhist monastery nearby.

I had my girlfriend up on weekends and we screwed a lot.

This lady was the very person I had absolutely given up hope of ever finding. In fact, I had carefully calculated the arithmetical unlikelihood that she would be alive on the same side of the planet as myself and

been mistaken. I had composed a philosophic poem in which her nonexistence stood as an element of the universe. In other words, logic had completely failed me in the search for her. And I could not possibly even list the lady's charms – her forthright honesty and grace and wit and intelligence and generosity and strong insistent heart that she has proven so amply since, for through her virtues she would later save my life – because at that time when we had only recently met, I mainly saw her virtues only through an utterly compelling intuition that could not be itemized. And the lady openly avowed that she was similarly bewildered by this peculiar creature me. Indeed, both our feelings seemed to be that we must simply throw away caution, figure this out as we went along and absolutely screw whenever possible.

And our next door neighbor is a quiet lonely visual artist guy familiar with Oriental stuff.

And I guess you may have seen the famous photos of those old Hindu temples where sinuous entwining lovemaking couples, all smiling very sweetly as they serenely consummate the universe, adorn every archway and pillar. You may even be aware that the ornamental vegetation in those famous temple carvings – those curving viney trunks and limbs and sheltering leaves which the lovers inhabit so joyfully – are, of course, unmistakably fig trees. They are figs, to be precise, of the species under which the Buddha sat for his awakening.

And, you understand, in the past year, since months before we found each other, I had achieved sudden astonishing success in making beautiful paintings without yet knowing beauty is real.

• • •

So anyway, it's a lovely summer Saturday or Sunday. A breeze that is quite irresistibly intoxicating in its meadow forest fragrance and also bursting with glowing sunlight is absolutely flooding into the place through our open windows, all of which are open you may be sure. She and I are cuddling, lounging very dishabile, luxuriantly satisfied for now, me more luxuriantly satisfied than I have ever been before in my entire half century life, you may be sure, and her too by all indications that she is giving, on the disordered mattress on the floor in our living room, which is on the back of the house where the wide window view of the wooded mountains that surround us is more stunning, a room where large bright canvases filled with shining paint and glowing shamanic vision cover the walls above this uncovered bed where we lie serenely entangled. I am breathing in the scented light and growing actually hallucinogenic with it, studying the visions in their tactile structure. I was already drunk with her. It's more or less morning.

So Neighbor knocks. He's knocking on our front door, not the back, doesn't see us but the cars are out front as usual so he figures we must be here somewhere and he calls a friendly confident hello.

I suddenly realize that Neighbor might well go out back to look for us there in the yard, perhaps sunbathing with books, and thence discretely spy into our wide living room window just the way that I might likely do if the situation were somehow horribly reversed, and so I bellow an answer.

After all, the lady has another life as a Quite Respectable Person who dresses very presentably for a professional occupation in a city and goes home to the company of three adult daughters whom she dearly loves and who, I'm absolutely sure, cast unrelenting aspersions on the old nasty Hippie freak in the woods whom their mom is inexplicably screwing, and to whom, therefore, I really don't want the lady carrying home a displeasing report.

So now I'm suddenly struggling to get this emergency sorted out inside my head while rummaging for yesterday's trousers.

The lady is amused. She pulls a sheet up to her chin.

• • •

So here stand two men, a screen door between them. One stands out there in the brilliant stunning summer day, on the doorstep looking up, holding up a hand to shade his eyes, outside looking in. The other is a stout old fellow naked to the waist, white hair and beard a tangled mass around his face, squinting and blinking in the hallway's deep shade. And now the old stout guy is leaning sideways, slouching onto the door frame. He has expended his reserves in dragging to the door and is now overcome by a strange exhausted relaxation. He is buttoning his pants.

Both men know there is a woman in there.

So of course I'm looking at this situation, thinking Darwin thoughts about how Nature is our lives. From this point of view I suddenly see that with all this screwing I am being powerfully recruited to a Clan where a Grandfather is sorely needed and the

Matriarch of which believes that she has found an exceptional candidate. So my old lonely heart swells with relief and pride. And I fall in love with her. In fact, I am now surrendering much of the fear and doubt which all that loneliness gave me.

But Neighbor is talking, shrugging ruefully, reminding me, apologetic because he clearly feels ridiculous – and maybe even made a fool and maybe even hurt – about the very interesting old wrecked beaver dam in the woods which he mentioned once a couple weeks ago, to which I did indeed answer him that the lady and I would probably like to walk out for a look and to which he is going now to make some photos in this very fine light, so he shrugs again. And would we like to go?

And here, for your information, let me just interject that I am still sorry and somewhat ashamed that I never went to see that beaver dam.

But now, in my intoxicated state, I am carried off by thoughts about the tender poignancy of life. I used to be so much like Neighbor just so recently and for so long before. And he is me of course. I have escaped that fate but should I rejoice or mourn? Of course I must do both and in them both know joy. In fact, I am surrendering what remains of the fear and doubt which all that loneliness gave me.

• • •

Now comes the Lady in her person. I hear a step and look and see her coming from the living room into the hall. I gape. She is appropriately clothed. She wears her lover's shirt from yesterday, a quantity of silver finger rings, some Gypsy bangles

at her ears and that is all. The shirt falls just exactly long enough. In the dark her gleaming thighs are glorious. I either gasp or moan.

So the Lady is by me and takes my arm and strikes a friendly pose and says hello to Neighbor.

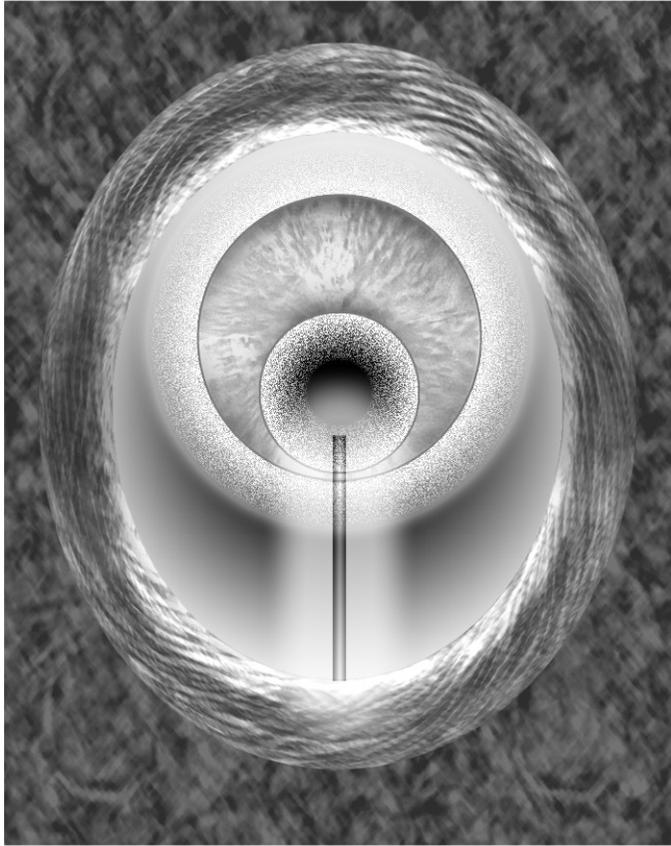
Neighbor's eyes fly to a spot up in the air and there they stay. But he says hello. Furthermore, he briefly, with commendable aplomb, outlines the invitation to a friendly woodland ramble.

Before she speaks to answer him, she moves. It may be a gesture quite directly answering the invitation. It is a dance. It is undoubtedly an artist's pose. It is indeed an apt quotation from great famous art which Neighbor knows.

The Lady wraps my arm around her back to put my hand at her waist and holds it there. We are embraced. Her other hand goes up behind me to my farther shoulder and there she gives her weight. She lifts a foot with heel on other ankle, pointing the toe, so she is reclining on me like I am reclining on the doorway post. And I feel her relax into me.

So what is this? We are now beings above the temple threshold steps. Are we not? In fact, we are the fig tree now. We are real; we are beauty.

For me this is an ecstasy.



## Reawakening

Digital image  
(modified digital photomontage)  
by Stone Riley

## **Reawakening** **(Episode 8)**

*A dream during 1995 at age 39.*

'Twas moonless night. 'Twas early Spring.  
'Twas in a sheltered valley pass  
amid the highest uplands of the Windy Hills.  
And here beneath a starry sky,  
so black and cold, so deep and still,  
here lay a mirror lake awaiting.  
Stars above and stars below,  
from depths of sky and lake they shone,  
their eerie shadow bathing Earth  
and filling all the distant world with secret song.

A footloose wanderer, a nighttime walker,  
the seeker of a strong and noble soul,  
leaning on a staff of oaken wood,  
stood drunken with the beauty  
of this haunted place which welcomed him.  
Perhaps he was not here.  
Perhaps he lay somewhere  
wrapped in his cloak beside a dying fire  
and dreaming.

Bright Venus drew him on.

Above the farther hill stood silver Venus,  
beacon of the dusk and dawn.  
Her light shot to his heart.  
She drew his footsteps down  
across the grassy slope, across the pebble shore,  
until he stopped with boot heels on the Earth  
and toes into the water where,  
gazing in the mirror depths,  
he knelt to pray.

Why do the hearts of men  
reach out beyond their ken?  
Why does an earthly soul forswear its bonds  
to journey forth and there commune with gods?  
There are no men and gods.  
There is no Earth and Sky.  
There is no one but One Forever Singing.

Eyes fluttered open. His own face,  
all translucent in the deep and all aglow,  
gazed back through dreaming eyes.  
No more a mortal man, what was he now?  
A shadow in the lake? A shadow in the air?  
Or just a song?  
This moment fear was gone.  
This moment when a seeker gazed  
in through him in the deep  
his soul was everywhere,  
so doubt was washed away.



## Awaking In A Dream

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
with the same title  
by Stone Riley

## **Awaking In a Dream** **(Episode 9)**

*A poem with a painting, during 2001, at age 55.*

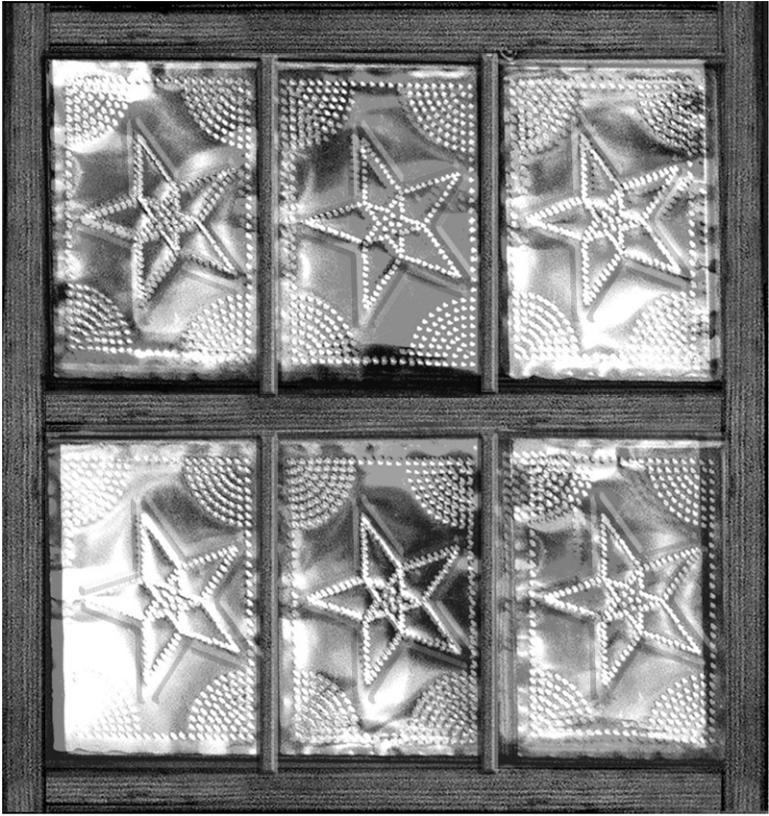
There are many tales, of course, of Lao Tzu who, according to the legends, wrote *The Watercourse Way*, a little book of nature poetry upon which other thinkers then built up the lean, beautiful and tough spiritual philosophy of Taoism. Here's one of them.

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.



## The Substance Of Reality

Digital image based on a photograph  
by Stone Riley

## **The Substance Of Reality**

### **(Episode 10)**

I hit a child with my car. It was a big heavy car and a little boy running out into the street to chase a ball. The boy, in my visual impression, looked about six or seven, but tall and thin for that, in one of those growing spurts you get before you're ten.

It was a crowded suburban neighborhood. The place was grassy green and shaded with trees but the neatly kept houses were crowding close behind small front yards, so there was very little space for the children of the neighborhood to throw a ball.

The street was also long and narrow and even lined on both sides with parked cars crowded nose to tail so the child's view of that street where he lived his life was very closed.

I was already standing on the brake, and the brake was working, and in fact my big heavy car was then exactly stopping, exactly when the child reappeared on my right from between two parked cars where I had seen him disappear an age-long moment before, his face now appearing in the lower right corner of my windshield where nothing should have been while I was moving, his innocent beautiful

face still utterly absorbed in thoughts about the utterly innocent life that he was leading here and about that damn ball he was chasing. And then this lovely child vanished.

My car was in the last few inches of its stopping at the time when he was struck, but he was struck as if by lightning. He was thrown out of his shoes a little way ahead and then from there had run on across the street to sit down on the curbing stone. There, after leaping from my car, I would find him sitting deep in shock, wordless and unmoving.

No blood was to be seen and yet the innocent beauty that was in this face before was now being overcome, as if the moving shadow of a cloud was in him now, a cloud of creeping death, for he sat there staring straight ahead and deeply pale but flushed and catching puffs of breath in little gasps.

They rushed him to a hospital. He was treated and released. I was not there, of course, but waiting by the telephone at home till word came from his family in early evening that he was considered by a doctor to be well. Nor have I ever heard of him again, nor do I know what deeper harm or lingering harm he may be suffering to this day. I wish him well with every beat of my heart.

The brief police investigation cleared me. A policeman got there on the scene quickly and spoke quietly and looked around carefully. He finally measured the speed I had been traveling on this crowded residential street, by measuring the marks my tires had written on the road while I was standing on the brake. Very quietly, not quite smiling reassuringly, winding up his measuring tape, he told

me that my car was going slow. And so I never heard from the police again.

And yet, in a certain way this trauma broke me. In me this crisis brought the psychological “shamanic break” that is described by modern scholars of human magic. Astonishing truths about the world have been discovered. These truths are so fundamentally astonishing that in response a new and different self must be constructed. It must be a true self, a self of truth, a self who knows how to be intimate with the beautiful mysterious horror of reality.

When I turned down to that street, very narrow with all those parked cars, I realized with surprise, instantly, that there was no way of safely backing out with this big car. Then, the following instant, when I looked and suddenly saw the children playing far ahead, how they chased the flying ball with complete abandon, a recognition broke into me of descending to a passage where there was a horrid test.

And I understood at once that I would likely fail this test.

Although my foot at once went down to tap the brake, I must go onward to escape the place. Of course I must slow down more when approaching but little else was obvious. In fact, the substance of this world was such that I must certainly measure out my speed so as to stop by standing on the brake between the time my eyes recognized a child running toward the street and the time the child emerged into my path, but otherwise I should creep forward fast enough to minimize the time of danger. And I was not finding any competence in my eyes and limbs that felt

sufficient for that impossibly difficult calculation. And failure was destruction.

I must simply summon every faculty that my heart's cry could reach and do my best.

Therefore my consciousness was thrown into the realms of waking myth. I was now consciously with Frodo or Odysseus or Black Elk or such, inside their story.

This summer was 1979. I was thirty-three years old. I was a former anti-war medical corpsman soldier. I was by now a beginning dabbler in various arts. I was a seeker equipped with scholarship and wonderment but no religion, an employed but poorly earning husband of a wife in struggling health that would later kill her and the adoptive father of a little girl. I was the driver of a big old cheap junker car. This city was Houston. We had moved here from Boston seeking better work. I was lost.

But when you are as lost as anyone may be, someone awaits you. A destiny, an image of the person whom you can become and should become, a person closer to the truth than your bewildered self, is waiting for you. The person you are destined to become is waiting for you just as surely as the oak tree is waiting for the acorn that is waiting too.

Our eyes are always looking for the visions our true self would recognize. That person's thoughts are always whispering in our ears. That person's arms and legs and feet and hands and every faculty are ready to be ours if we will stretch our limbs into their shape. Our true self can burst into this world of physical reality at any moment when the acorn shell is broken.

When I had turned down into that street and recognized the true dimensions of that mythic place, immediately a voice that usually whispers in the ear started speaking clearly, describing this impossible task, and calling me to courage. That voice, my true voice, even seemed to be a person standing at my side, standing with me on the deck of our peculiar ship, gazing watchfully in all directions.

Then while we approached the children, me already gently pressing on the brake, and we saw this beautiful young boy in particular reach for the flying ball and miss and start running out toward the street, and then when my true self thrust his leg in mine to stand upon the brake, then it was with true eyes that I saw that beautiful face and saw through the face into the mind behind the face, into the world the child inhabited, truly saw into his world, so that my heart burst out into a flowering of love. I think that is the moment I inhabited the shaman.

Then when the car was finally stopped and I was leaping out toward fate, it was my true self who knew the certain way the child had run, between the other cars, to where I found him sitting on the curbing stone and staring fixedly into his world and deep in shock.

So now the bit of medical training I possessed was absolutely clear: Proper action now depended on the question of internal injuries. If the victim's only major issue was this horrid shock then he must be rushed at once in any vehicle to hospital. But if there were ruptured tissues behind the child's unblemished skin then an ambulance with well equipped

professionals, even if the wait took precious minutes, would be needed.

And the wrong choice would be so dangerous, and the overwhelming likelihood of grievous wounds in such a case was so obvious, that if I did not know his status then I should not even dare to touch.

And now the mother came, screaming in her agony but held back in another woman's arms to stand there on the far side of the street, the far side of a river which the boy and I had crossed, the mother reaching out to try to seize her child out of this distant place that was so instantly turned to horror, those two ordinary women mystically transfigured into figures posing in a tragic drama, thus compelling me along the story's path.

So now I knelt behind the child. Kneeling there behind the boy, I suddenly began to pass my hands through his body's aura. Quite surprised to find I knew this part and yet performing it, I passed hands everywhere about him, just half an inch from touching but not touching.

Carefully around the head and face and neck I did not touch, carefully reaching long electric fingertips into the trunk, the arms and hands, the legs and feet. These real etheric hands, my real self's shaman hands that were my hands, saw deep into the flesh, into the flowing colored and transparent substance of the flesh.

There were no internal injuries.

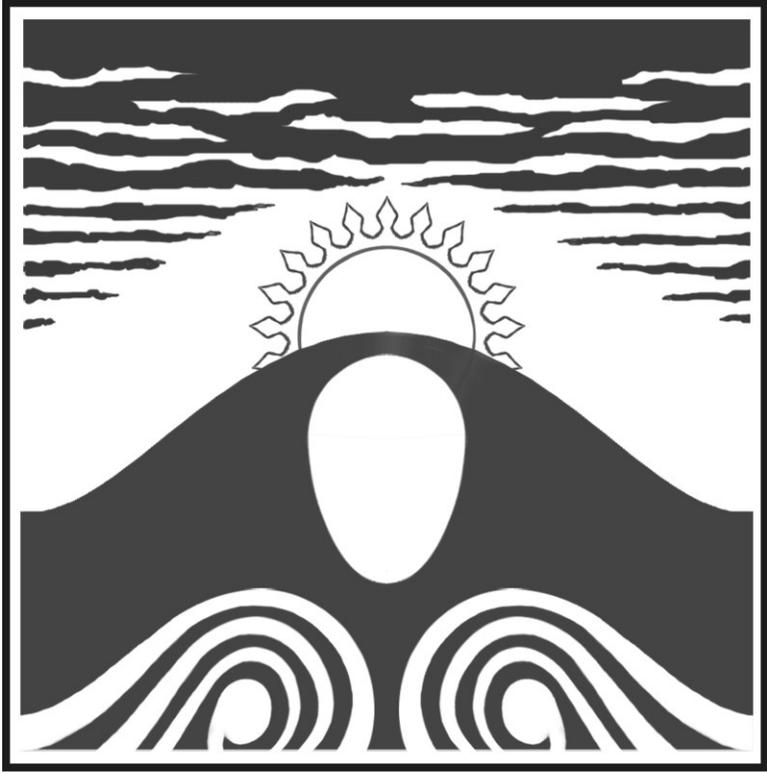
And yet, the boy was closing down. The heart was slowing. The vision of the eyes was thinning like a mist that is vaguely lifting. The woven web of conscious thought was loosening. Inside the mind I

even saw a figure of the child as he now saw himself, surprised but willing, standing bidding farewell to his world. In him everything was slowly sinking down toward quiet death.

So first I shouted to the mothers that he was not hurt. I shouted this astonishing news to them several times back across the river. Then I stood and started shouting for the other men and women who were running up to get him to a hospital at once. I quit shouting when they laid him in the backseat of a car that sped away.

Then the wait for the policeman. The brief investigation. The drive home, the wait beside the telephone, the news that he was well. The intimate examination of my heart. Next day, a day at work and then a month and then a year. But certainly my life had changed.

I understood that I had seen and touched the liquid substance of reality. And ever since I found that seeing touch, it has not left me.



Journey To The West

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Journey To The West** **(Episode 11)**

*Written 1997, age 51, near the end of my 3<sup>rd</sup> marriage,  
while still lost.*

Love is not the thing, nor hate. Hope is not the mouse's scurrying feet and owl's sharp beak, no more than these are fear. What is the purpose of the poppy's fate then, or the logic of my heart blood's heat, or yet the celestial motive of the sky's Great Bear? How do we live? Why has the Cosmos brought us here?

When I was full of hope, I thought that was the beginning and end of all things. Then, full of yearning to be loved, I dreamed love was the wellspring of delight. But then, immersed in deep despair, I chose to live this life for purposes that were far too obscured in smoke and flame for me to know and name. Why did I, in that dark hour, choose to live this life? Why did I not yet fly away?

Love is not the thing, nor hate. Faith is not the prisoner's chain, nor doubt the prophet's holy flame, nor greed the mother's teat touched to the sleeping baby's lips, nor is blessed charity the tyrant's grip. All this is life, but what is life? What is the melting of all opposites?

There is a man I truly hate; there is a woman whom I love. That man is dead as he once wished for

me, the woman never met although my eyes search through the worlds for only she. Where is this woman who'll return my glance? Where is that ancient foeman now when in my hands I hold his broken blunted lance? And where am I? Where is this land wherein I stand alone? What is this place? Is this my home? I simply call this place my Skysealand.

One year when I was young and starting out across this continent, I strained my eyes to look ahead to map the way. That year, each Monday I would take a poem from an ancient wisdom book and I would fold up the coded rhyming wisdom neatly into my purse. Then for seven days I'd search the curving trunk of every tree and every mottled turtle's shell that I might pass beside the way for explications written there by unseen hands for me. Well, the Gods were generous and kindly gave some of their secrets up, but the boy I was then did not know their language well.

An eagle's mighty flight; a turtle shell; amid the lovely ripples of a brook, the various colored pebbles very artfully arranged; I made the best of it I could. Indeed, several turnings of the way and crossroads were very helpfully pointed out to me in advance by these magic signs. But now I've come a good way further on and, even though the sunlight and the stars and meadow flowers and hills and snow now all sing and whisper to me audibly; and even though the web of jewels of which all things are made stands manifest and visible and palpable to my fingers; yet even so, more hidden secrets still remain.

Buddha says that all is bliss. Solomon recommends a carefully considered trust. Christ says

you should take his word on faith. Ganesh and Krishna both respectfully suggest that you can dance your life with happy grace. But for me, Merlin stands with a lantern held high in his hand, leaning on a wooden staff up on a windy mountain top. That wind blows down to gently touch my face and it speaks to me in a woman's voice and all she says is just:

"Come."

No, love is not the thing, nor hate; not victory nor defeat. Whatever guides my fate, whatever it may be that lures me on, whatever it may be, it is not anything that I can know so as to name.



## An Eagle's Mighty Flight

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **An Eagle's Mighty Flight (Episode 12)**

I was on a religious retreat one time, at a campground in the New England woods, and it was a time when I was very troubled about some personal issues. Really it all came down to a question of courage and a question of which way to go.

Now, as you may know, the bald eagle is very sacred in North America and I knew this in a theoretical way, just like I knew that various species are seen by humans as great sacred animals all over the world. But bald eagles are very rare these days in New England, and every other place where I had ever lived, and I had never seen one flying free.

Well, I went out walking in the woods that morning in a very prayerful state. I was not communing with any specific deity, you understand, but striving to open my being as a whole to the Universe as it was manifesting there where I was in that region of physical existence. And I was offering a request for specifically useful wisdom.

I had stopped to sing some chants along the way, and such as that, and then came to the big open meadow where our rituals and celebrations were done on that retreat. Of course I paused in the shadows of the forest edge to stand and gaze on this sunlit place, empty of other humans there so far that morning, but

a space where a human community lived consciously inside of Nature. And I was opening myself again and sending forth my yearning prayer again as I had done in several other scenes along a wandering path.

A mighty eagle rose from the treetops of the farther verge, absolutely in the center of my right eye's vision.

It was huge, exactly spanning all the breadth of my right eye's vision.

Up it rose with mighty wing beats, but only high enough to easily clear the tallest trees, facing straight away from me, and beat its way straight ahead of me until it disappeared beyond that close dark green horizon.

Should I explain the meaning that I gained from this or can you read the omen?

There is a little more. Some months passed, another year, a different summer. A lady friend and I drove up to a big public fair they're having annually in Maine. This big do is a folklife festival, natural agriculture exposition, left wing political convention, free speech venue, handicraft shopping outlet and down-home tourist attraction rolled up into one, with definite overtones of Nature veneration.

For example, I bought myself a really far-out hippie magic hat for use when doing children's storytelling. A useful item and excellently crafted. But along the way to that, before the tent where they were selling these unusual hats, my lady friend and I walked into a big tent that was reserved for Native American endeavors.

The air was somber. This was not a merry day for them. But still, I had a sense of something waiting.

We threaded through among the nearly silent shifting crowd in the labyrinthine paths between the laden tables of the merchants, artisans and activist associations, there in that deeply shadowed grassy hall.

Then finally, not quite to the sunny open door at the farther corner, I came upon a little family camp defended by a barricade of tables. That is the only apt description, unless one were to say the family huddled there were on a boat adrift, the tables being gunwales and the shifting crowd a sea.

A man, his son, the young man's pregnant woman. A look near desperation on the father's face, he standing, gazing on the son who sat, the woman in his arms, on a blanket on the earth, she looking resolute and very young, the boy in some confusion. The eagle's gift was now to be repaid.

The father and the son were fine carvers in wood, the man a master of that art, the son apprentice. Beautiful pieces of their work were set out on the tables, statuettes of beasts and birds, implements that must be sacred to any needing hand. There was an album of photographs of more through which I leafed in hopes that clarity would come before the moment came to speak.

But then the father looked at me, resentful of my looming psychic presence, and so I must at once snatch off my Druid's kind of cap and lean upon my tall Druidic walking staff in a very modest and

apologetic bow for the interruption and let the words flow how they would.

With the woolen cap held to my heart, I heard this from my mouth: "Good morning, sir." I gulped a breath. I shrugged. "I don't know your people's ways; I follow Celtic ways myself."

The father let me have an impatient but accepting nod.

"But if I can take a minute of your time, there's a story I'm supposed to tell."

Astonishment came to his face almost as if – I have to say – this meeting was foretold. That was the obvious impression.

And blink! The boy was on his feet, pressed to the father's side just like a brother would have been, and with astonishment written on him too.

And so I rose into it then, an open gesture with an outstretched hand, but then a gawker from the crowd perked up, a smile stuck on his silly face as if to see the show, so I must bring a curtain down and there we stood as if it were indeed a camp with darkness all around and I a stranger from the darkness come to tell a tale.

I told it briefly, the man still nodding with impatience, now straining toward the story's end as if that were the only thing he didn't know already. The morning of my walking prayer for guidance from the land, the meadow field, trees beyond, Mighty Eagle rising. It filled my right eye and flew ahead.

And the lesson I had read in it: I said, "I understood from this that I should go *strongly!*  
*Forward!*"

I paused.

He nodded, quite as though to say my reading was obvious enough and obviously correct, but he waited for the rest.

I said, "And now today, although I don't know why, I felt that I should tell this to your son."

I shot the lad a look.

A gasp from them, a startlement beyond before, and to each other's eyes they turned and deep into each other's heart they gazed.

There was a story there I have no wish to penetrate, a privacy I do not want to understand.

With humble thanks and bows, unheard, unseen by them, I took my leave.

I went and found a magic hat.



## Nature Walk

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **Nature Walk** **(Episode 13)**

*Written 2000, age 54, after the end of my 3<sup>rd</sup> marriage, before finding my heart's true love, while rediscovering the path.*

There were three quarters of an hour in one sunny summer day when I and a little boy whom I had just then met found ourselves – by quite unlikely circumstance – lost up on a wooded mountainside.

We had no gear. We were alone. I damn sure had to find the freaking road. I had to keep the young lad hardy too. That is a mountain range where failing hikers sometimes die.

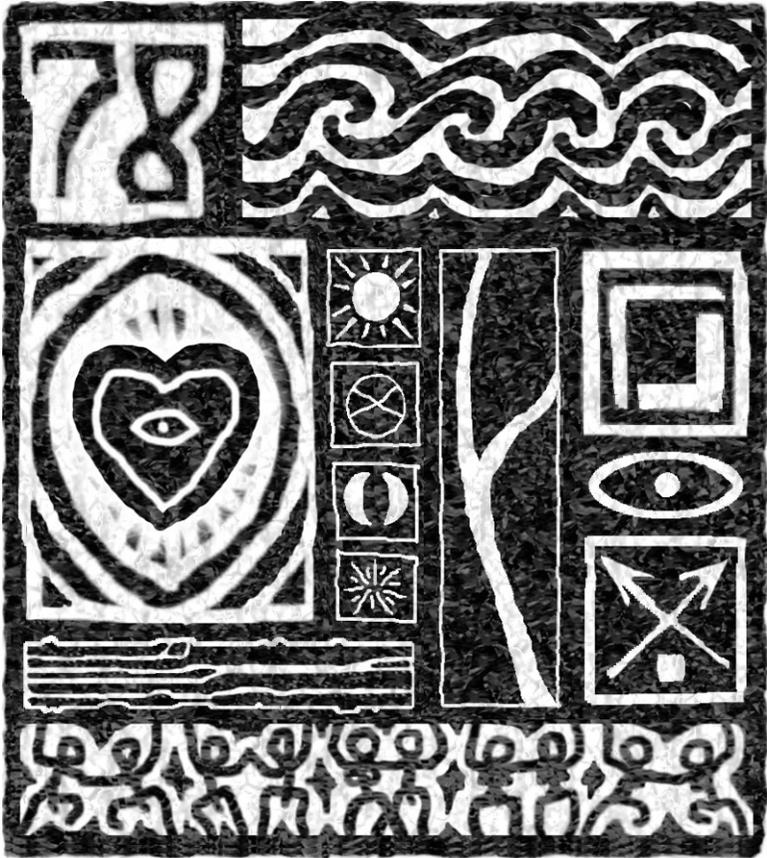
I helped him choose a fallen hard wood branch as walking staff and taught its proper use to save your ankles from a sprain. I watched for any large fresh scat and warned against the verdant beds of poison ivy as we passed.

And yet, to my delight, it soon became an easy pleasant task and I was very very happy in its doing, very glad indeed to have his gruff and silent earnest company; me looking round to see the strange little boy catching up, me grinning at his frown.

I found a dry rocky stair-step way beside a steep and tumbling rivulet, so cool in dappled shade that we did not thirst.

I did not ask his name nor offer mine – for I had best be cautious of his childish self-protective delicacy – but when the thing was safely done I made him shake my hand.

That was so long ago that now I would not recognize his face.



Invitation To A Student Of Tarot

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Invitation To A Student Of Tarot (Episode 14)**

*Written 1980, age 24, early in my 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage, while on the path. The Simple Tarot was made this year. Please note that I am both the speaker and the student.*

This is a fortune telling system, a magic book,  
a diagram of human life and soul  
wherein your intuition speaks the truth  
your self can never know or soon forgets.

Here is the classic deck of picture cards,  
the old city of 78 squares, the ancient map drawn  
up as though life were an ever-shifting game of 78  
tiles whereon each human token at each moment falls.

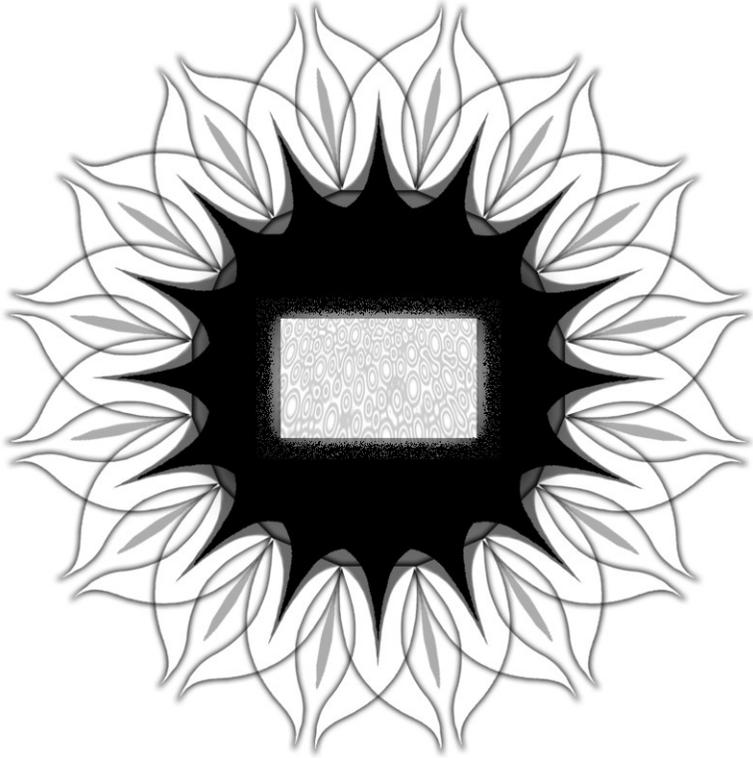
In this book of pictures, poetry and prose  
you will come upon a certain numbering of roads,  
a careful survey of the gods and men in their abodes,  
a full accounting of the ancestor odes.

Naked, clothe your self in daring  
and simply touch the flow of an infinite  
and ever-present moment which you know is now;  
feel at once the night and morning; thus come to be  
like a dolphin touching echoes  
in the ever-present sea.

Ask a question, touch a page; there study what  
good fortune and your own eye have to say.  
To learn of life just ask for guidance;  
your own hand can point the way.

If you wish now, come with me;  
stand upon my shoulders as I walk the sea.  
Repeat the journey trod when you were young;  
hearken to the tale from your own tongue.  
At every marker stone embrace the view;

**Comprehend the truth and speak it new.**



Preface

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Preface**

### **(Episode 15)**

*Written 2002, age 55, early in the union with my heart's true love, while on the path again.*

In August of my fifty-fourth year, leaving my last wife, I moved out to a quite peculiar place a friend had found for me to rent – a kind of modern day shack to tell it candidly, though plenty roomy for a bachelor life – at an old ex-horse farm no longer working, on an elevation of the ground called "Spirit Hill", a steep round haymeadow hilltop where a range of small size forest mountains hold up the skyline all around, at a dirt road's end, amid several hundred acres of these well-loved wild New England woods. Of course fine little creeks wind and tumble down the bony creases of this land. And my new place had – and still has now – several small rooms, one of them with lovely morning light, and in that room I soon propped up a soft pine board left over from some simple furniture just built, and picked out the old art brushes again from their tool box after leaving them aside for twenty years. (To tell it candidly, I'd made a sign or two and such as that from time to time, so had the proper kind of paint on hand as well, though in few colors.) I painted me a picture for a space of wall. I must. Who else would paint the picture that was wanted in that place? It was a magic morning

picture of the Sun. It turned out pretty goddam good, to my surprise and even shock. (That's speaking candidly.) Now – eight months on and eighty-seven pictures later – much has changed for me. The walls are full for sure with only space remaining in the attic. But my interior space has blown out to the furthest reaches of the stars beyond all walls, and I have reached down to the deepest waters of the soul, and found myself alive in all the realms of myth.



Attributions Of The Minor Arcana  
In Spirit Hill Tarot

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **Attributions Of The Minor Arcana In Spirit Hill Tarot (Episode 16)**

*Written 2002, age 56, early in the union with my heart's true love, while on the path again.*

Now here's an interesting story from my life in art.

The initial concept for this project (Spirit Hill Tarot) was really just to paint maybe half a dozen of the Major Arcana for a particular show. An acquaintance of ours was hoping to do a Pagan oriented art show and benefit sale – the first occasion of that sort in our immediate area – and it would be good to do a little something special in support of the event. This idea sounded pretty easy if I mainly worked from the old pencil treatments in The Simple Tarot. Tarot paintings would certainly be a good bet to sell at such a venue if they were reasonably cheap; i.e. if moderate size canvases were used and not much time and effort were invested. Also if, whenever puzzled, I would seek advice from my aesthetic consultant immediately. That's how we had it figured. The show is actually tomorrow by the way.

Well, I ripped through the Major Arcana in fifteen weeks.

Along the way we gave the public an early peek at the first seven canvasses, at a nearby city's Main Street show, and the public raved. I actually did successful readings for passersby all afternoon by having them choose a picture. I got this bright idea as a hot wire test with a kind of Druidic savor and tacked up a small hand-lettered paper sign among these seven canvasses to make the offer. "These paintings are Tarot cards;" the little sign announced; "tell me which one really strikes you and I'll tell your fortune!" I even gave the sign my signature. Some of the customers would actually tiptoe up and whisper in my ear "The Star!" and such as that. We would stand there in the street before their painting and discuss their lives while spirits whispered. At times there was - I swear to any god - a veritable little mob of rubberneckers milling around our awning and card table and chairs there in the green shade of a big locust tree on that city sidewalk corner. One lady even came from Europe. So I was optimistic.

So, three weeks ago I've got these twenty-two small canvases of the Major Arcana finally hung up chock-a-block two-high all across a wall in our studio's home computer business office, some of them really good in my opinion, and the collection lapping around the corners of the smallish room somewhat. Till now these keys to wisdom, as they're often rightly called, have been accumulating in growing stacks in safe corners of the place so you can understand how

hungry I am to study them en masse, bold, complete and in numerical order. The first six pieces off the easel have been professionally photographed and come back to our home, and their photographic slides were scanned to make computer files – a normal bit of business for any pieces which look good enough to justify the extra cost – and I have even (on a rather idle whim, I thought) printed out those first six pictures in little card size and cut them out and spread these few slips of paper on a three-drawer bureau's top against that wall there as if they were intended to be real Tarot cards, you see, and when you approach this conveniently located table-like surface of a convenient height you find there is a divination reading which appears to be in progress, surrounded by this overhanging cloud of the Major Arcana, you see. It is a damn fine fine art installation in the highest sense in my opinion, thank you very much. Quite affecting to the higher senses. It's Saturday. I had rather scurried, moving furniture and all, to get this private world premiere ready for my private advisor's arrival on her accustomed weekend spiritual retreat to Spirit Hill. And no one but me has seen these twenty-two pictures exhibited together ever, and for me it's only been about an hour since the final hook went in the wall. I keep wandering in to stare.

She's gonna love it.

She took a look around at everything then shook her head and said; "You've got to get these commercially published."

Right.

"Well . . . . . !" sez I; ". . . nobody's going to publish the Major Arcana by itself. There are fifty-six other cards in a Tarot deck, my darling."

She shrugs and sez: "How long will that take?"

Right.

Three loathsome options had suddenly arisen to confront me:

1: Paint fifty-six more pictures on a theme on which I had already painted the longest series of my career so far.

2: Paint only the portraits and aces (just 20 more canvases) then gin up the rest as mute pip cards (the Three Of Coins would be a decorative display of three coins, et cetera, which is a cowardly dodge despised by connoisseurs) through easy computer editing.

Or 3: Find a different girlfriend.

I pondered deeply.

On Tuesday evening I slapped my forehead like the Stooges used to do. There was also, quite obviously:

==> Option 4::::: Use fifty-six existing art works for the Minor Arcana.

!!!!!!

All of the aces and some of the portraits leapt immediately to mind as perfect fits. Several obvious choices stared down from the walls around me with a distinctly grumbling attitude as though they had been quite impatiently awaiting this cosmic revelation. I walked about the place and sorted through the stacks. After all, I always ponder Tarot deeply while painting, even for the most slapdash piece that's really nothing but a scribbled diary entry. After all, this seems to be my inmost native mode of self-expression and I had been living Tarot thoroughly for more than twenty years. So, now, how much of a Minor Arcana could I easily assemble from stuff on hand?

Gee Mister Wizard, let's find out.

Now here's the interesting bit:

Tuesday evening into the wee hours, then Wednesday and Thursday (dragging off to the day gig or crawling to the rack betimes) I sat bleary eyed at this little old virtually obsolete computer with its cobbled up tool kit of very cheap software tossing bits and bytes around - with a summer landscape in flaming green spinning through sunlight and night outside the tall wide windows which stand beyond that makeshift desk of wooden planks - and the wonderful breezes up here on the hill - and all of the Trumps towering beside me on the walls - to gin up the initial proof-of-concept version of a revolutionary treatment of

one of the Western World's great ongoing works of art and thought from whatever picture files had landed there at hand. I had the old Simple Tarot there to hand as well of course, sorted out by suits, the four piles of unassigned cards dwindling steadily, me frequently sorting through the convenient sayings hand-lettered on it twenty-two years before while pictures of the recent seasons of my life paraded in a very interesting and supposedly random fashion for perusal behind the computer's vision screen.

It worked perfectly.

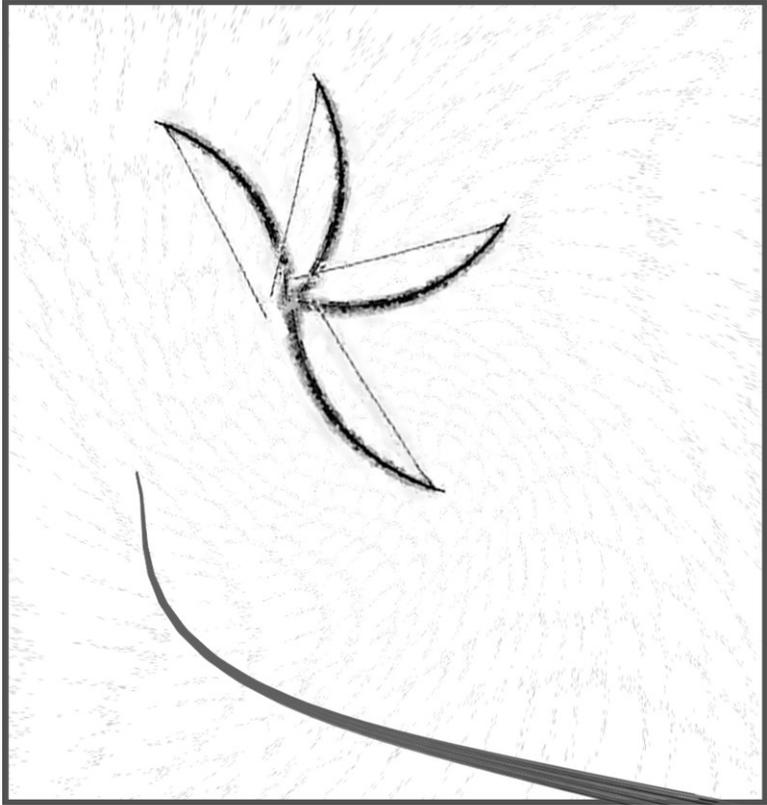
The pieces all fit.

With many of these canvases, I had wondered why I made them. Some had leaned in dusty corners since the moment when they left the easel where I'd snapped a camera shot from habit more or less. Some of these paintings were a total mystery to me until the moment when I hit the rotate button and the blessed thing suddenly took shape exactly as prescribed by a puzzling aphorism on one of the old cards in the dwindling piles of those not yet remade.

I must confess, however, that I really wanted "Poppy" for the Nine of Fire (. . . life, subtle and vigorous, denies all obstacles . . .) but did not have a file for it on hand. So Saturday afternoon my bosom friend and I hung "Poppy" up on the dining room wall where the light was good and screwed my cheap amateur digital camera to its tripod and took some shots with various settings.

And I should explain the King Of Fire as well. It's the only picture in the deck I didn't paint or draw or snap. I only posed for it. My sweetheart took a snap of me and here it is. So her work is here too. And anyway, I thought you ought to see my face.

And that's how the attributions of the Spirit Hill Minor Arcana were produced.



The Distant Sunset

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **The Distant Sunset** **(Episode 17)**

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 grounds. 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?"

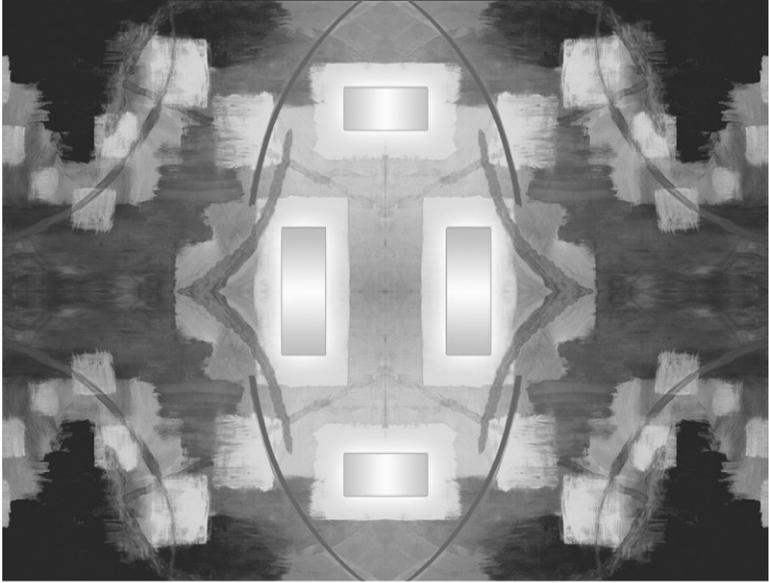
They were astounded. They laughed together one loud laugh of sheer astonishment. Alike, they cautiously approached eyeing one another's bodies for whatever news might be written there before seizing hands and grinning in each other's face. It looked for sure like this other fellow lately came through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

And so, 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.



## Rebirth Of Courage

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Rebirth Of Courage** **(Episode 18)**

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.



Scribble Scrabble

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Scribble Scrabble** **(Episode 19)**

Here's my earliest unforgettable visual art experience: It must have been 1948 or '49. I was surely two. Houston after World War Two. After emerging from a catastrophic war, my parents found and bought the house where three little children lay on a polished hardwood floor earnestly working coloring books with hard wax crayons. I see it clearly now in fine detail although the sound is only echoes. A future social scientist, bless her heart, my elder sister, was trying out the rules by which that sort of work is done. My brother, next in age, a future spacecraft engineer no less, was intently working on the hand-eye coordination that the rules demanded. The youngest of the family so far, myself, was marveling at the way the white matty surface of the paper took the colored wax, smooth or rough, responding to the varying pressure which the hand exerted.

Furthermore, the drawing printed in my book was an interesting composition, a teddy bear in lifelike pose apparently to be a railroad man, clad in railroad cap and overalls, with pleasant smile and one paw raised to wave, most likely waving to the driver of a choo-choo train that stood somewhere nearby beyond the edges of the paper waiting for that signal to begin a journey. Unconcerned at that age with communicating to a viewer, with no experience yet in

putting myself into a viewer's eyes, the placement of the ultramarine and sienna wax I chose to use was therefore uncompromisingly devoted to painting what I saw the way I saw it. Also, a person of that age is conscious of the sense that color is loosely attached to things, for that is in fact the truth in most parts of the human visual system, where perceptions of thing and color are done separately and finally assembled near the output of the process. There is a sense that things exist in a sort of halo or nimbus of their color, especially moving things. Moving things like waving teddy bears. Those are the reasons people at age of two or so use large loose strokes to indicate the colors in their pictures.

Finally satisfied that I had caught the vignette satisfactorily, and proud of the work to say it frankly, I turned my book about to show the others. I asked "How's that?" in utter innocence. My elder sister, bless her heart, surveyed the piece and responded quickly. Pointing with her crayon at my work; "Oh, that's just scribble-scrabble!" But she went on kindly to explain, pointing instructionally at her own intensive effort; "See, you're supposed to stay inside the lines." My brother grunted his agreement. Well. There then ensued for me a most peculiar metaphysical sensation. There ensued for me at once a most delightful, marvelous and weird peculiar metaphysical sensation which has taken more than fifty years to satisfactorily describe.

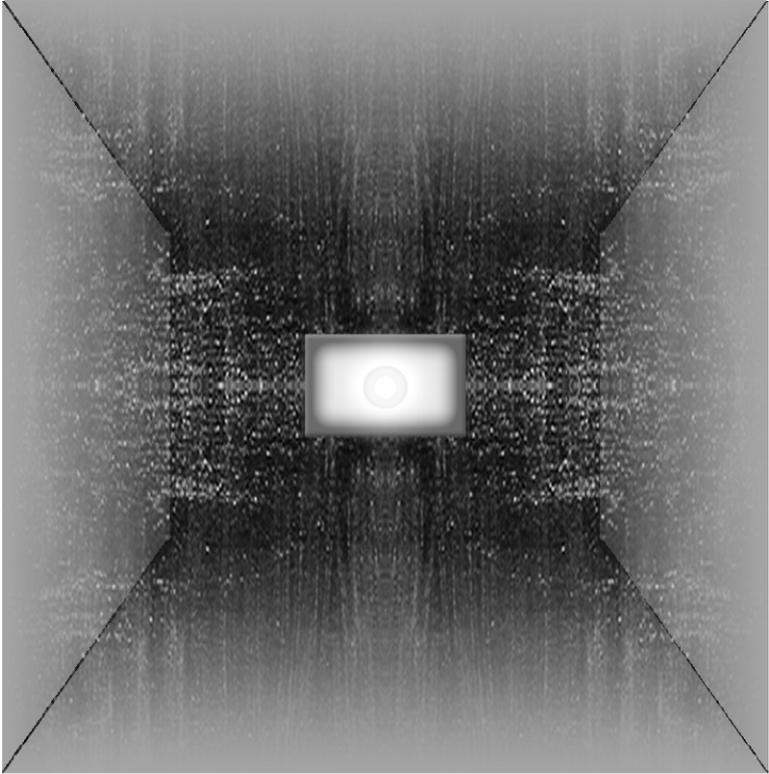
It was as if you had a bucket that you stuck your head in with a flashlight. Okay? And the bucket's full of margarine. Soft warm margarine. Not too soft. Maybe yogurt. So, you see, it's like the

light's inside your head but your head is really big. Or shall I try to put the case another way? It was conceptually holographic. Scribble-scrabble? Startled, wondering what on earth my sister meant, I looked down at my picture and saw it suddenly through a viewer's eyes. The waiting choo-choo train, the journey, all of that, was missing. All of that imaginary fabric which had been there vanished. The picture swelled forward as I watched and it became a solid sheet of paper with some printed lines and broad loose scrawls of color. Inside my head, the light of consciousness had palpably moved. I had felt it move and seen it move, and the pervasive color in my mind's eye had visibly changed into a flatter unshadowed tone. And yet I still remembered where the light of consciousness had been before. So I reached with imaginary fingers, with a feather touch inside my head, to shift it back. And suddenly the waiting train and the impending journey and the color in the mind's eye, all of that, reappeared there in the opened volume of the picture, perfectly visible in the mind's eye. By deliberately adjusting the light of consciousness. This was a fascinating pleasure.

And intellectually the implications were vast. There comes a time in human intellectual development when we realize that there are others in the world besides ourselves. This moment was that time for me. There comes a time we realize that there are unaccounted mysteries inside ourselves, another when we glimpse the inter-meshing mysteries that join us to the weaving world and thus perhaps a knowledge of the mighty innocence of all. Yes, here was all of that. So too here was that first

indelible glance at a particular thread of mystery such as we sometimes follow in a lifetime of our steps.

Yes, do the work. Do the work the way it should be done as best you can. You owe that to yourself.



Persephone's Gate

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Persephone's Gate** **(Episode 20)**

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.



## A Sorcerer's Apprentice

Digital photo of a polymer clay sculpture  
by Stone Riley

## **A Sorcerer's Apprentice (Episode 21)**

*Written 1996, age 50, late in my 3<sup>rd</sup> marriage.*

My father taught me long ago that a really smart man is one who can do for himself, on pretty much any job that comes to hand, for himself or for those he loves or for any purpose that seems right. My father's ideal did turn out a bit too high for me in practice, for there is much I cannot do, but I did definitely come to understand that a smart person is a resourceful and courageous open-hearted person.

Then last spring, my step-daughter asked me to take a stronger hand in raising her little boy, to see if I could somehow lead the child a few steps further up the road toward self-possession, for this little boy definitely needs to learn some way to keep his wild behavior in control. He is a child of great promise but the very feature of his mind that's causing his unruliness – a soaring brilliantly lit and fiery imagination – is sure to be one of his greatest future strengths; this is actually a virtue which must not be spoiled.

All of this was unclear to me at first in the spring, not so clear as it became with summer's passing, but I did have some glimmerings at least of the boy's personality and strengths and weaknesses and needs; and his mother was correct, I thought,

about the proper general approach that should be taken. This richly imaginative and intelligent boy was a very likely one despite his tender years, we both believed, to benefit from entering Higher Magic.

What this little man truly needed (if I may use a metaphor) was a lump of true philosopher's stone to clasp in his hand, so he could shine its light about to see reality whenever one of his flights of fancy might require. But actually, a different metaphor has taken hold of our doings in this summer: He needs to get the voice of Merlin to speak inside himself, like young Prince Arthur did, whatever real historical person Arthur was.

But the boy is seven. I have taught some of the higher realms of magic to adults and done some good, but he is seven. No magician that I know has ever taken charge of a serious student at that age. And how could I grope a path through such profound and foggy ground as Higher Magic with a partner who has never read a real book in his life (nor scarcely even a hand-written instruction) and cannot do so now? So, with the summer growing and passing – under the guidance of my wisest god – naturally I have taken to exploring the primitive Shamanic Rite. In that rite, or so I have always heard, only the barest rules and requirements apply.

I've really done a lot. I've told the boy a bit about the Fairy Folk and got his help in a work that I had pledged to do for them myself, where we opened the ground together, and the boy won a magic wand. I have introduced him to the honored dead. I've drummed with the boy, doused by means of a stick, gazed at the sky and forest with him, scried the

doings of animals and plants with him and promised to scry a fire. We wielded a few sharp-edged and pointed tools together and the earnestly striving child did not even scratch me with the foot-long rasp. I lately got a board of oak and fashioned a little twelve-string harp for him to listen to and then on the first day when he took the harp from the box where I am keeping it, there happened to come up on that day a little job of divination at which I was striving hard with my drum but had no blessed time for, and as soon as I explained my problem, with no thought even of requesting help from him, he sprang to in proper order, a barefoot little boy in dirty clothes walking about the dewy grass with a primitive harp pressed to his ear, plucking the strings, and he came back later, much to my surprise, with an answer that proved admirably useful. And other successful events have happened too, all along that line. All through circumstances and success, it's been one blessed shamanic thing right after another for months.

He is an excellent apprentice, despite his tender years, but this Shamanic Rite is a new thing for me, a place where I have never quite precisely been in this life (nor any other life which comes to mind) and I do not even have a human teacher in this subject, because my current human teacher practiced shamanism and left it some years ago. I have never even read a book with the word "shamanism" in its title, though I did try to read my teacher's once.

Shall I try to tell you what I've found so far? It seems to me there are a hundred things to mention and each deserves a paragraph.

For one thing, please rest assured that I am not copying exercises for the child out of books, not old books nor new. That would be irresponsible. The priestcraft that I am plying should be a better-tailored sort; I shall do as much as possible myself in hope of gaining the kind of result that I think he needs. I am relying just on general knowledge of some principles of Mind, on a great many accounts that I have heard of different ways that this is done across the world, relying on my own more or less related experiences, and on my mysterious divine inspirations, and on the boy himself. I am relying greatly on the boy to do the best he can whenever tests and tools are set before him, however dotty they may be. I am relying on him to make good choices if only I can make the choices clear. And too, I am relying on another deity who knows us both, a little god of the love we share, to tell me right and wrong.

What else to say?

I am a modern Celtic Pagan priest (a Witch and Druid, to be more precise) and so a Pagan Celtic mythic theme has pervaded the summer's proceedings quite as if we'd spent the time in some kind of "Celtic Magick" theme park, or quite as if we'd been locked up as two prisoners in some astounding chamber in the Disney Castle. The boy is mainly Celtic stock too, but he also lays claim to a bloodline of Tecumseh besides, the famous and admired Old North American visionary commander. When I look at this active and ambitious child, I think perhaps here is Tecumseh indeed, the selfsame soul come to this realm again, in walking distance of his former land, or at least a spirit like him. And so, you see, my European witcheries

must be woven in their finest thread carefully between my fingertips, so as not to knot and bind.

What else?

I think some basic theological training is required between us, but only the most basic. One evening he was here and we found ourselves alone in my tiny, overflowing, cramped, disordered library, and he was leaning over into a big desk drawer looking for some small thing which he did not find. The boy glanced briefly to see if I was paying attention, whispered the word "Jesus!" as an expletive, then looked at me again to see what I would say. I suppose he got this item of speech from a fellow who is one of his other grandfathers, a plainspoken countryman with an overly religious wife. I told the listening child what came to mind, that he shouldn't talk like that because Jesus is a god and it's a bad habit being disrespectful to goddesses and gods. "A god!?" spoke the boy's soft voice in sudden unmistakable alarm; "Will he punish me?" I poo-pooed that in a hurry; no, Jesus doesn't really care who's disrespectful to him, Jesus will not come and punish you – and profanity is a bad habit too! That may be enough theology for now.

I guess there's just one other thing to say, about initiation.

It was just a week ago that the first thought even occurred to me of fashioning an actual initiation for the child. He is only seven. The thought of trying any initiation at such an age is almost preposterous and would even generally seem dangerous. Legal drinking age, whatever that may be in any given state, is usually required. (All of the magicians I have ever

talked with on this topic have professed an iron-clad rule of not initiating anyone who has not made love with another person, as another kind of minimum maturity requirement.) Surely, all decent magicians see this piece of work as a clear and powerful aspect of the Great Work itself, and that is not to be attempted lightly. But this admirable boy is such an excellent apprentice – he pursues this whole business with a heart and mind so freely given to it that even an observer with an unbiased eye would be amazed – and his need for a powerful result is true, and I am his adopted grandfather. And besides all that, the Great Work itself makes no demand at all for applicants to be mature, or if it did no person in this world would ever get to it. And frankly, if overwhelming circumstances really convince me that some initiation ought to be offered to some person, then ipso facto I am really sure that person has a right to take a running jump (if I may use a figure of speech) and try it.

So, last Sunday in the laundry room where I was folding clothes – after a convincing vision which I had got while smoking a tobacco pipe – I did offer him initiation.

Surprisingly, the language barrier was not too steep. Last month, the boy had briefly discussed his mental difficulties with me. There was a moment when I stopped him right in the middle of acting out a fantasy – he was wildly waving a stick around toward my friendly dog as if he were a bold warrior against some enemy, the boy growling menace through grimacing mouth at the bewildered and innocent creature – and I asked him quite sincerely what was

going on. He was a mite startled to find himself suddenly outside the fence of his private Disneyland, but he listened to my sincere question and chose to answer candidly. His answer was simply to bang a fist one time on his temple and say with genuine frustration that his "brain" gets "stupid ideas", all while looking seriously in my face to see if I could take his meaning. In just that though, I felt he gave an apt and thoughtful description of his problem, and I hugged and kissed him, and promised he would get himself together in a few more years.

So then after my vision last Sunday, when the boy happened to swagger into the laundry room with a yellow beanbag chair hoisted on top of his head, I called him over to sit down on a footstool there by the washing machine and broke the news that we could try to fix his mental problem, if he wanted to, by means of a hard work of magic. I described his fantasy mental situation to him as I understand it, as succinctly as I could, and asked for confirmation, which he gave by looking away and giving a curt nod and a "Yep". I did not offer any description then of what the work would be like, but only stressed it was a "bigger deal" than anything we'd done before. As is his way, he asked just one or two apt questions then took the matter seriously and silently into consideration. I said in closing that he should bring his magic tools sometime when he comes over, if he wants to go ahead.

Then half an hour after that, he was doodling on a sheet of paper with a pen and found a tightly whirling pattern that he liked well enough to cut out with scissors and stick up on the refrigerator in a blue

little magnetic picture frame while I was standing there, and he called for me to look at this finished installation of free art work. I saw this deeply swirling design there in a tight thick frame on a white space, and it seemed to be a miniature impressionist depiction of the interior of a cave, with a sort of psychedelic reversal in color, from the perspective of someone lying down inside and looking even further in. Rather startled, I asked him if it was a cave and he at once agreed that it was with bright enthusiasm, as though he had been wondering what it was. According to the vision I was given by my god – and like I instantly informed the boy – the big job really should be done inside a cave. "In a cave?" he cried, and I only had the wits at that moment to shrug and answer "Yes".

We shall not use an actual cave but a simulated one instead. I'll ask his uncle or his father or the young buck magician up the hill to scrape out a little shallow pit in my back yard between the great old dying ash tree and some baby oaks – maybe even in the snow since winter's coming on – and we'll cover that with branches and blankets and an old skin off a dead sheep. I have called one of my former human teachers, one of the local Witch kings, in hope that he'll be able to attend; that admirable scholar was a lad at the time when I took up with him, so he is young enough now to wield a shovel too if required. I have no doubt that such a simulation of a cave will do just fine in Shamanic Rite.

The boy has not been given a drum to take, which some authorities might claim is required, but this is Celtic style so I believe he ought to carry in

the oakwood steel-strung harp instead, and the ashwood wand as well just so he's well equipped in case of Fairies. But I shall ply my willow drum outside in a steady heartbeat rhythm. And too, before that does begin, I'll cast a Witch's circle up by the house, and in that circle tell a tale how Merlin fled the madding world of war into the woods and wandered long without sleep or rest, and fled at last with his spirit as a wren pursued by hawks into a cave, and then we both shall stand and call Merlin to meet us there, conjuring that holy spirit by bonds of friendship; then we shall fly with such a pantomime of wrens as we can make, and the boy will crawl inside to pluck the harp and wait there for my ancient god.

And when Merlin arrives (as he or someone surely will) the boy shall call to mind all of the verbal instructions that I gave on how to properly make one's arrangements with such folk.

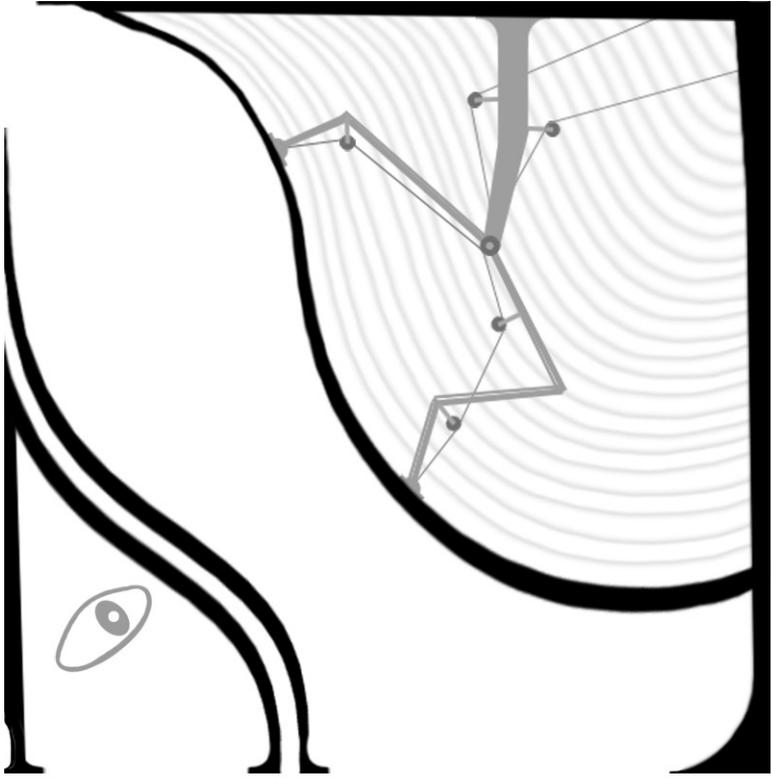
But mind, I do not know if this will come to pass or something else entirely instead. I have not even spoken on this topic of initiation yet with his mother, nor with her mother either (who is my wife) and I don't know how far the ladies will object to my judgment. But most of all, I do not know if my grandson will ever come to my house and say, "Grampy, I brought my stuff."

I warned him clearly that it is a hard job and I emphasized twice already that he can gain the same desired goal of possessing himself without doing this job at all, just simply through a few more years of age. If he asks me what is hard about the job, I don't know what I'll say, perhaps; "It makes you really

scared!" But why is it scary, and is the cave too hard a place for him to be sent at all?

First off, going about this world with bouts of a kind of inappropriate madness; that is hard enough. And then, to trust someone (whether it is a grandfather spirit or any other kind) who tells you that they know a way; that isn't easy either for such a one as him. And then to ponder and ponder and finally choose (if he does choose) then wait on tenterhooks; and then at last to do whatever mumbo-jumbo that you're told will help the ritual begin, with your heart in your throat; and then to really listen to the sacred tale, and call the god or goddess to your open soul, and really do the dance or pantomime or such for all you're worth; and then, with your body throbbing and weary and bound into a space of darkness, to await the deity. How hard is that? But then, and far above all else, some deity arrives where you await and you must raise yourself to speak with her or him or it, and you must feel a great increase of dignity.

Ah well, we'll see what we shall see.



Being Many Voices

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Being Many Voices** **(Episode 22)**

I was studying a painting in a museum one time, not too long ago, lunch time more or less, perched on one of the little stools provided, sitting very still for quite a while and staring fixedly, stalking a picture like a cat. It was two fuzzy gauzy patches of two different colors, three feet tall or so, a Rothko canvas from maybe 1956.

Entered then some high school kids upon the scene. They gathered around this curiosity with smiles and silent nods toward me for introduction. Most of them crowded right behind me, leaning down and actually craning their necks to peer scientifically over the shoulders of this purported Galileo and along his line of sight. Amusing. Practically a Monty Python sketch. But one bright forward commendable young woman, standing to the side, spoke up, rather shrugging off some irritation, asking if I understood this picture. I claimed I did. Sure. I'd better, although I didn't say that. Furthermore, I asked what she might make of it. Rothko was a mystic visionary, more or less an esoteric Jew.

The smart girl took a fair stab at the thing all right, lunging toward the canvas with a hand up, pointing. She allowed the red might be to stand for

passion of some sort, fear or anger, and maybe green might be to symbolize . . . Her waving fingertip was like to hack the picture deftly leg from wing and I could not help but cry out immediately "no!" several times repeatedly, actually in a sincere fit of mental anguish. That sort of intellectual decoding mode can awake some pictures, Kandinsky's from his theoretical years and Torres-Garcia generally, some others, but never Rothko. Never Rothko. She was spouting nonsense, going nowhere, and she knew it from the silence she got back. Therefore her irritation at this thing. That picture simply does not talk in "symbols".

But how was I to answer? I did not know her. And besides, my thoughts before – when I myself was looking for a way through that particular canvas veil into the Holy Mysteries – had equally gone nowhere. What if some well armed seeker strode boldly up to you in a public square, loudly demanded a flower sermon or a koan or a rune at once and you (obediently rifling through your pockets) found none? Embarrassing. Especially with a crowd of slackers lounging round. But here's a dodge that's sometimes handy for such moments: Glance outward and snatch an omen from the air. To wit: The smart girl had deftly demonstrated fencing; actors learn fencing; she might be an acting student; I might try an acting metaphor. This works more often than you'd think.

So I quickly conjured up an Arts Professor voice and turned its spigot to see what might come through. It spoke – to me as well as her – about a practical approach. You should look into that painting like an actor pondering their part in a script. Does it

say "red"? Well then, put yourself in various modes of thought and feeling till this red is what you see, then speak from there. Green? Likewise cast about until you find yourself in such a place, then try to speak from both those places. I said all that.

But I thought: All right, but what about some promise of the Mysteries? What about some little hint at least of Kabala or something of the sort? And yet that's all the Arts Professor said, and that even in a quite pedantic tone, rather scolding even, which I did not care for in the least. And even worse; to my horror, one of the slackers lounging round behind me actually giggled at the worthy girl getting marked down.

And yet she took it in good spirit. After first growling feline menace at the fool who had laughed, evidently in an on-going rivalry where she held an upper hand, she took the Arts Professor seriously enough to gaze into the painting for a long moment silently. And I could plainly see the colors of her mind folding in and out like a kaleidoscope or rather like one of those delicately tinted origami paper flowers that you can morph from shape to shape.

And then, wanting to respect her mental privacy, I looked away into the picture. And there was Rothko's mystic vision waking up to present life. There was not what you would call a flow of energy but more a wave of complex harmony standing there now between this woman and the man who stood before that self-same surface with a brush. The colors of that Veil which stood before them both were billowing, overlaying, separating, merging. Amazing.

That's Modern Art.

## New Modern Art: The Theory In A Nutshell

To give an art work several interacting voices is, of course, a fundamental good in any medium. Art is an effort to communicate (even when we're only dancing for ourselves) and if we do it well, the more voices the better. With different harmonious or dissonant messages encoded in our various different kinds of gesture, if we do it well, it is possible to achieve a theatrical meta language. It is then possible in that theater to explore some deeper larger messages.

But of course we do accept a serious constraint when endeavoring to make good still pictures. The only movement permitted is the movement of the viewer's eyes while they search the piece for meaning. So you need a way to cue the viewer to speak with changing voices during their contemplation, in their effort to construct some meaning from this stream of signal they themselves direct within. This has been done in various ways, and at various times in various cultures but at this point in Western history we have a very powerful method in our hands.

The art industry will, however, mostly think your pictures stink. Most people in the industry today find this kind of work distressing. They are psychologically incapable of seeing it. They don't know how. Instead, they choose a pattern filter from their kit of tools, hold it up into the signal stream, and only see whatever light comes through. To put the thing in terms that Dr. Jung might like, this kind of work requires a Dionysian perception mode and they are stuck in Apollonian. Screw 'em. The public will support us.

Modern art, from its start, was made to show the public ways to see. That's what the diaries and letters of the founders say it's for. In this disjointed, cruel and catastrophic modern world new ways of seeing and acting are needed. Ways of understanding that would actually tell the truth in peoples' lives and the genres of the Modern masters functioned like competing research labs. Now the playful Dionysian mode of seeing has grown and bloomed. Now we can pull together all the findings of the research pioneers to coax forth fertile fruit.

This is a way to do polyphonic painting – to make pictures look the way a jazz ensemble, chamber orchestra or a cappella choir sounds – now at our current point in history.

Human visual perception is a complex process with many sub-processes. The major genres of Modern art are actually native dialects inside of these sub-processes. And a great many people in our culture now are hip to Modern art. When looking at an art work they are pretty well accustomed to playing with the stream of incoming visual impressions (hosing it around toward here and there inside of Socrates' famous cave) to discover which sub-process or sub-processes of their perception will light up in recognition and call out realization of some meaning. **So now we can construct a polyphonic painting by bringing in techniques from several Modern genres and pulling them together to a reconciliation of some kind.** In fact, the public likes very much for us to do this. This is first class entertainment. And the more genres that we interweave, provided that we do it well, the better.

Many painters are already reconciling disparate Modern genres in their pictures. Ignored by ninety-nine percent of the establishment, yet this effort is no less than an important forward movement. What I hope to do is promulgate a theory that will help guide our efforts to make Modern art that will absolutely prove its worth.

by Stone Riley (C) March 2006

**We painters stand now in a time like Shakespeare's time when the English language was newly coalescing. Like the poets of that time we now can build a language of astonishing communicative power.**

## New Modern Art: The Theory In A Nutshell

Digital image by Stone Riley

**New Modern Art:  
The Theory In a Nutshell  
(Episode 23)**

*Written in March 2006, age 59.*

This is a way to do polyphonic painting – to make pictures look the way a jazz ensemble, chamber orchestra or a capella choir sound – now at our current point in history.

To give an art work several interacting voices is, of course, a fundamental good in any medium. Art is an effort to communicate (even when we're only dancing for ourselves) and if we do it well, the more voices that we weave into a piece, the better. With different harmonious or dissonant messages encoded in our various different kinds of gesture, if we do it well, it is possible to achieve a theatrical meta language. It is then possible in that theater to explore some deeper larger message.

But of course we do accept a serious constraint when endeavoring to make good still pictures. The only movement you can use is the movement of a viewer's eyes while they search the piece for meaning. So you need a way to cue the viewer to speak with changing voices during their contemplation, in their effort to construct some meaning from this stream of signal they themselves

direct within. This has been done in various ways in various times in various cultures but at this point in Western history we have a very powerful method in our hands.

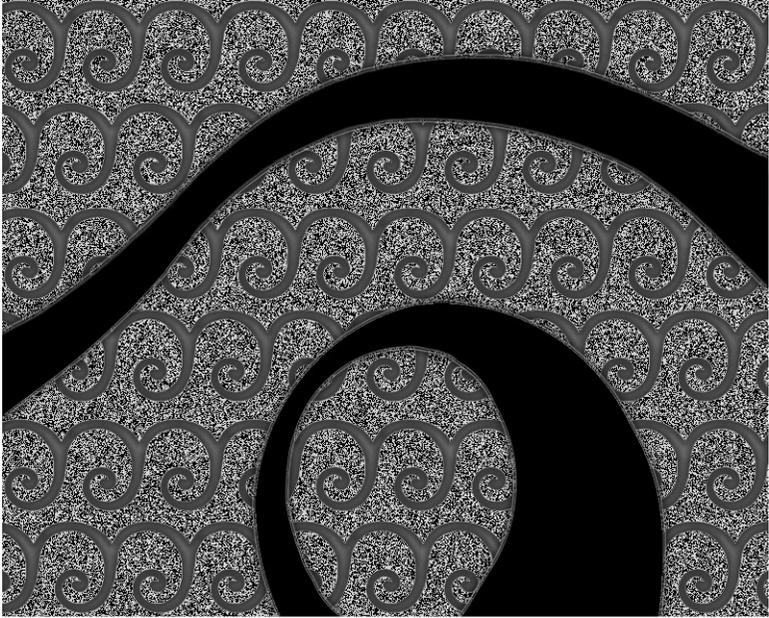
Human visual perception is a complex process with many sub-processes. The major genres of Modern art are actually native dialects inside of these sub-processes. And a great many people in our culture now are hip to Modern art. When looking at an art work they are pretty well accustomed to playing with the stream of incoming visual impressions (hosing it around toward here and there inside of Socrates' famous cave) to discover which sub-process or sub-processes of their perception will light up in recognition and call out realization of some meaning. So now we can construct a polyphonic painting by bringing in techniques from several Modern genres and pulling them together to a reconciliation of some kind. In fact, the public likes very much for us to do this. This is first class entertainment. And the more genres that we interweave, provided that we do it well, the better.

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We painters stand now in a time like Shakespeare's time when the English language was newly coalescing. Like the poets of that time we now can build a language of astonishing communicative power.

Many painters are already reconciling disparate Modern genres in their pictures. Ignored by ninety-nine percent of the establishment, yet this effort is no less than an important forward movement. What I hope to do is promulgate a theory that will help to guide our work, coin a name for it ("New Modern Art") and show examples that will absolutely prove its worth.



## A Sailor's True Tale

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **A Sailor's True Tale** **(Episode 24)**

*In the twelve months from early spring to early spring when I was twenty-six and twenty-seven, through deep contemplation, memories of three lives vividly emerged into my current consciousness. Here is the one life of those three from which remembering brought the most relief of present pain. Whatever it may mean to say so, this is me.*

Early summer is a coming of age. It brings a leap into maturity for Nature and for human hearts. The sun is rising up to rule the sky; the moon has turned her crescent and is falling low. It is a time for us to plow and sow. It is a time to glory in the forces rising in the Earth and dance in Heaven's light. *Why not rejoice?*

One autumn night a gale came howling in across the rocky northwest coast of Spain, in from the trackless sea. Eight brave sailors and a leaky boat were lost. The tons of corn for which they cast their lives into the game were lost. High hopes and pride were lost. The money in the game was lost. All was lost save I who was their captain and three other shipwrecked wretches, beaten, bleeding and torn, twisted and broken, cast up high upon the cliffs, spared by fate to die a different day. The year exactly I do not recall but I see my shipmates still through driven rain and foam clinging to the leaping

deck, all eyes straining through the raging dark, to spy the horror which must surely soon appear: the looming eminence of rock. The moon was high enough and just past full that night but we were riding in the vanguard of the gale, not even shreds of gleam, and doom was still invisible a rod away. I still recall the sudden pounding roar of surf. *I still recall the crashing splintering and screams. I still recall my scream. I still recall the brutal wet and pain and cold.* I who was their captain had been proudest of them all.

It's summer now; the world is waking now to warmth and light. It is a time to grow. It is a time for all that went before to burst into new form, a time for all the fields forgotten through the winter's gleaming night to sprout with green. It is a time to take possession of yourself and do things right.

We were boys together, all of us were boys. I was twenty-one that awful night and my first mate was twenty-three. It was my uncle's boat. Father long ago had run away to Africa to die in glory against the Moors and my uncle took his place; a good man was he. My uncle was a smiling merchant with warehouses in Seville and Malaga and other towns, and interest in many ships. I walked his partners' decks since I could walk at all and he placed great trust in me. I sailed as mate and navigator and supercargo all up and down the coasts of Spain and France and Italy and showed my aptitude and grew in pride and made my reputation, all before a razor ever met my cheeks. It was an age of glory when Spaniards trusted fate and trusted a man among men. I trusted my self-learned notions of the winds and

storms and currents and tides. One year at last a rotten little tub fell to his hands entire – he owned it himself outright – and he lent it to me. Three years I sailed as captain of this little tub with daring pals as crew. Three years we sailed in weather no one else would dare, for glory and for money too. We counted all our earnings out among ourselves in shares, like pirates or privateers, and always claimed percentage from the merchants, not a rate. We took the dangerous consignments, dogged the hurricanes, set sail against the tide in lowering skies; we did whatever I the captain calculated we should dare. They obeyed me and I was proud. I loved them too. We went around the towns with purses too full to jingle and our names on every seaman's lips. I was a hero in these little towns, a man among men, but still I was a boy.

It is magic how the green sprout shoulders by the clod and stands up to the sun. It is magic how the calf emerges from the cow and stands on wobbly legs and looks around. The butterfly emerges from the worm, the nestling from the shell, the leaf and blossom from the bud. Long have they waited for this hour and suffered much. The field lay fallow half the year to rot in ice and snow. The tree has budded in every thaw and frozen back. A thousand worms will die to feed the bird. The cow was hobbled long by her great belly and lies at last in pain. With staunch enduring courage Nature hoarded up Her power to burst forth now in glory.

*Shame! Shame! There is no end of shame for one whose heart is swollen full of pride, and all the channels of his heart are stopped with stone. My*

heart was broken by the sea that night when all but three of my trusty and beloved followers died, broken by the sea which I had set to tread and conquer. My heart was shattered on the rocks where I had led them. My heart was broken, thrown up on that desolate coast and yet somehow left beating still. When morning finally broke and fog was lifted by the coastward wind, when our damned gale was far off ripping at the roofs of Leon, a fine clear autumn day came on with frosty breeze and the three survivors shouted for us all by name an hour or two. But neither I nor the other dead answered. They struggled their way inland while I cowered in the rocks in shame. Oh, in my guilty misery how I longed to be transported back one single day, or else to die! And I was still a boy.

The story runs on quite long but I'll make short of it. I passed another night up in the cranny of the seaside cliffs, and strangely it was fever and thirst which made me want to live. Dreams clotted my brain; every admiring stare which ever greeted me in any town and every tavern toast was turned back to me now in despising hate; my murdered comrades' women jostled one another in my dream for stones to strike me. I longed to live, but far away in exile. Another morning and a sail came by; I hailed it with all my feeble might and the good men came in their rowboat to my rescue. Their sloop was outward bound to the Canary Islands, leagues away far out to sea, and there on those dry islands life dragged on for years. An old bitter merchant woman lived there with a run-down wharf and warehouse from her husband's legacy and I ran that warehouse for her.

She was meaner to me than to any one else; I dressed in rags and suffered from her tongue and drank myself to stupor with Canary wine and counted it my due.

There is a striving in the human soul toward home. We struggle so but only long to lie down at the Mother's breast and hear Her crooning lullaby of peace, of rest; we long to hear Her say that all our failings are forgot. We know She waits somewhere on a summer isle with open arms and open heart. Yes, all that matters is the way left yet to go. *Oh, blessed forgetfulness! This world is a long hard school for a child of man* and oft we must forget the lies to learn the best. I did not know the way to Her. My only oblivion lay then in a flask of wine.

One spring the old widow died. No one owned her ramshackle business then; the sheriff came to lock it up and take her cash. I was soon penniless. How can I tell you what things were like then? I was twenty-nine. I lived in part on charity and part by telling tales like this one in the bars. I preached against pride, and steady on I drank. But I did not despair; there was no passion left in me, not even for despair. I simply waited.

From autumn dusk to winter night, as life subsides to lay down chill and dormant in the Earth, a true man lets his pride and shame both wash away. Then at winter's turning when the Sun has reached His farthest ebb and when the Moon sails high and near, They change Their spiral courses to gradually return. When your hands are empty and the heart beats slowly in your breast, when you lie in lonely exile far from home, when you stand at last unarmed

and naked against the tide, with the gates hung open and the wall thrown down; then at long last Wisdom, blessed Wisdom, whispers to your ear: "*Be thou still.*" Force nothing in that time. Long not for the man you were nor for the days gone by. By its own power the rising tide comes fresh and new; let passion swell up new and find its way through clearer well springs in your heart. When summer's full you'll feel the surging power in your hand. Be thou patient, for life is good.

Birth, death, birth and death. One time the waves would sweep across the deck of a Spanish admiral of the Caribbees and a sailor would let go a line, joyful and triumphant, to slip away into the Lady's deep embrace. When next I found that watery way the body was drugged to stupor, drunk, oblivious to the soul-deep grief of a murdered race, stumbling about an alien town as weird as Hell – I was an Indian. Face down in the gutter of the street I lay and called down the merciful rain. *Death, birth, death and birth, we are allotted all the lives we need.* The loving Goddess weeps for such a failure of a spirit thirsting light but death's forgetfulness can be a critical relief, and a noble sacrifice of clinging hope as well.

Life ebbed down in a youth who waited patiently in the taverns and along the wharves of a port in the dry Canary Isles. Vainglorious guilt for my own wasted years and my own foolish pride had burned down to a glowing grief and then to just regret. It was an heroic age for the Spanish race; the folk would toast their heroes' famous names and deride their victims while I would sit apart. These were the folk who cheered thousands to the

Inquisition's burning stake and I had been their child. But nothing was left in my heart of the lust to conquer and the lust for fame which had compelled my deeds before. I knew their way was wrong and I knew that life could hold much finer joy than they conceived. It seemed there was no will left in me anymore for there was nothing I desired except a place to be with *Her*, the mistress of my dreams, *the Lady of Life*; unknown to all, my only longing was to somehow make that secret mystic union real. I waited for a death to come and trusted it would take me home.

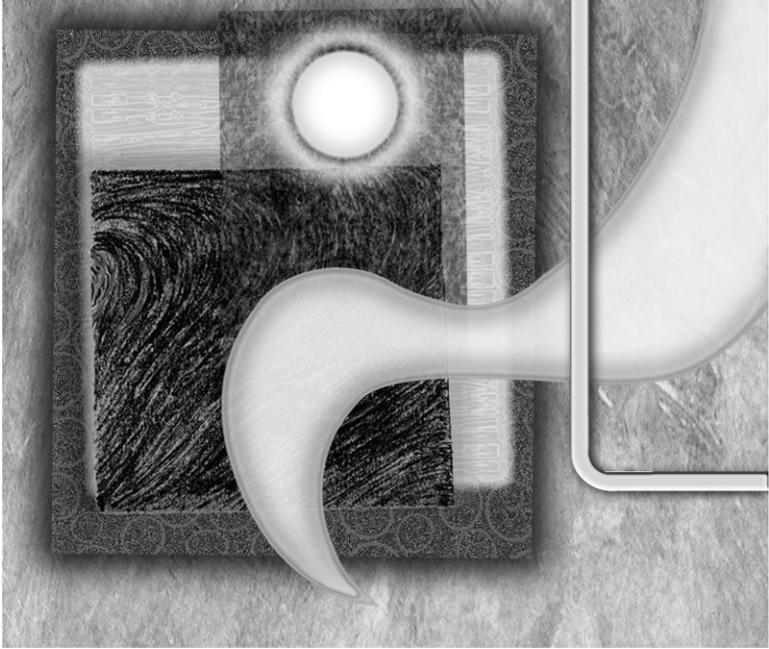
To learn one lesson in one life is quite enough to call that life well spent. Let me tell you now what it was I learned before I tell you how. (As an Indian I would find that every trail is home, but the Indian's a different time and another tale.) As a sailor boy of the Spanish race I learned a true man walks his trail alone. The waves that cross a heart are naught but ripples on a pond; the true man's heart is deep. The tides of love and joy that swell up in his heart spring from divinity. He walks impeccably; with every step he does exactly what he must and like the eagle's flight his spirit soars. A true man goes upon this earth so like a god and when his time has come he flies away. Full of gladness, always heedless of fools and yet a fool himself, he does his part.

There is scant upon this page to tell the rest, ever so fine I write. Would that I could paint the detail of the morn my ship came in and how the townfolk crowded all that day and night to hear the seamen's tales. It was a vessel of our ever-victorious Admiral of the Caribbees, from far across the ocean to the west, which hurried home on some

important business with our king. Would that all the news of Indians enslaved or dead could reach your ear, the news of heathen cities burned and golden idols melted down for coin. Would too that I could paint the face I saw among that crew, my boyhood chum, my first mate from the long-lost boat, and tell you how among the crowd I fainted at his feet. It is enough to tell how full of pity was my friend to find his friend so low, and how he carried me away and how we talked. I opened my mystic heart to him but he did not approve. We had been together in glorious youth; he was still young and I was old. I told him every vision of our Holy Mother I had seen, and how She differed from the pale weak virgin of the priestly tales, or the harlot Eve. I told him how the love of Her consumed my soul; he begged me never again to speak such dangerous thought. How can I describe the joy it brought to speak of Her at last, as I had never spoken to a mortal soul. He got me on the ship, signed on as a sailor once again and bound for home, and every moment we could steal from duty still we talked. No words can tell the joy it was to speak my heart out loud although in whispers, the peace and comfort and power it bought, and every word was right. I saw then as I'd never seen before that life and death and everything was good; I was with Her at last.

So now this tale is nearly done, take from it what you will. Scarce a pocketful of hours was left before our ship made shore. My friend and I sat whispering in the dark, I full of joy and he of fear. The ship was bounding under lots of sail when suddenly the seas she plowed through turned to great

Atlantic swells and she began to lurch; an officer on deck was crying out for men. Carried on wild abandoned joy more than my wasted limbs, I hit the deck with all the rest then crawled and clambered to my work up in the vessel's bow. Heads of good-size waves were crashing over our poor wooden shell. No man has known such combat if he has not been to sea. Foaming torrents buried me head deep and pounded at my frame; scarce was breathing possible and every moment periled I would wash away, and yet I struggled on. Suddenly somehow I came into the place I sought and yet once there, victorious, found that in such raging chaos I could do naught. I wedged my toes into a crack, braced hard against the sprit and clung for life to the very rope which I had come to slack away. But how long could I stay? The mighty strike of wave increased with every blow. I was submerged entire and strength was failing fast. Well, this human life is strange. Struggle mightily a bit, find your god, learn great things and always in the end you stand alone. So cling to life until you're washed away or let it go? I smiled and let it go.



## Catsong

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **Catsong**

### **(Episode 25)**

*These events took place in 1980 at age 24, early in my 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage, while The Simple Tarot was being made.*

Some long years ago, at the time when I had first begun to practice magic, I was a young man with a wife and little child living in the city of Houston.

We were poor and the place we lived in was a run-down big apartment complex, not a tall apartment block but a lot of long low two-story buildings. That city stands on a prairie near a tropic sea, you know, and hurricanes blow through there frequently, so most of the buildings there are built quite low. This place had a long row of apartments facing another row with a long courtway in between where there were sidewalks and plots of grass and unkempt shrubs and planters with weeds and flowers and such, where our children would all come out to play, and then behind that was an alley for the cars, and then another long low building with a courtway and another – and so on and on, several acres all built up like that, crowded full of people, lots of children with their toys and bikes and trikes and games. It was run-down and poor and ill kept and the shingles might blow off the roof in storms, yes, but it was nice.

And there were cats. Cats. A whole society, a town of cats.

You see, there was a kind of little patio in front of every door. On the ground floor every door had a wooden fence and a gate, and on the second story it was a balcony with stairs. It was just a little space but kind of private, kind of public, where you could put a chair and sit, and many of us would set out food and water there for the cats. We on the ground floor would leave our gates open just a bit. You know how humans love to live with other species. Well, even though the humans fed them – and doctored them too when there was a need – yet still these were not tame pets by any means. No. There were many dozens of them and they were living in their own world by their own feline law.

Maybe you've been lucky enough to watch some other species in their own society like that. It is a rare treat.

The cats partly lived out of grocery cans of meat, yes, but mainly on vermin. There were those giant filthy tropic cockroaches, those awful cockroaches big as your thumb that smell of stinky oil at night and scurry loud across a floor; the cats kept them down all right. They'd pounce on them and gulp them down in just two crunchy bites, with the little legs still wiggling. And mice – there surely were no rats – they ate the few unlucky mice that wandered in and such as that. So the cats lived outside where they hunted, among the bushes and the patios, although we humans would sometimes let a polite civil individual into our house to hunt inside a while and then exchange respects when leaving.

Maybe you know this too: Tom cats like to club up. Most of the toms preferred to hang together in a

little gang and take possession of a generous open patio. Other porches belonged to a mother with her periodic broods of kittens. Some individuals preferred to roam about. When the human kids came out to play with bikes and balls and toys, the cats would lurk within the bushes and watch, then come out sometimes for a soothing belly rub. You can imagine. It was no Tahitian paradise like Gauguin painted but it was pretty good.

But then one summer day a child molester came into the neighborhood.

At that time I had only just begun to practice magic, and only lesser magic still, but at least my eyes were open. So, from the first time that I saw this horrid fellow – he was someone's uncle visiting, you see – I knew he was a hungry tortured soul with another hungry spirit on him. There's no other way to tell you how that fellow looked. He was a little man, haggard with a malicious grin always on his face, always wringing his hands, always bent like there was a heavy weight on his back, just exactly like some character from Dickens, and always trying to hang around the children, always trying to chat them up. You couldn't call the cops. Houston was the kind of place where poor folks do not call the cops, not unless you absolutely know there's something going wrong. We feared the law. Nobody really knew what this fellow with all this evil on him was actually up to, if he was actually doing anything at all. When adults looked out there in the courtway and saw him, they would just cringe and call their own kids in and slam their door.

This went on about a week. I bespoke him sternly one time, standing close, glaring in his knotted countenance. I warned him off but he did not hear and so I walked away.

Well, let me tell you just a bit of where I was in life. I was young but had in my few years tried to live properly. I had tried to do my duty with sufficient courage when a need arose and tried to act with charity. I tried to always show all kinds of folks an open hand and open face. I had done all that – for so my father always taught – but as you know, that is not enough to fill a person's spiritual needs. My spiritual hunger was the sort that leads a person toward the mysteries of life, toward the hidden truths, beyond the boundaries of commonsense, toward the shining goal of reality and wisdom in their nakedness.

Just in the normal way of suchlike things, quite surprisingly and quite by chance, I had stumbled on a proper teacher. By that time this teacher lady had shown me where to stand upon this grassy plain to start the hidden path. She had given me, by then, to the holy art of telling fortunes; that was one thing. How to commune with disembodied spirits too. A little about herbs and minerals and music and scents and such. Just a little. And that particular witch was very given to ancient incantations in forgotten tongues, which is totally out of fashion in the Pagan movement now, but which she enjoyed to either cry aloud or else sometimes to scratch the peculiar words on little scraps of genuine parchment with colored ink. So on. And I was gladly taking all of this into myself to try and see what was the truth of it.

So there I was, a genuine and bona fide sorcerer's apprentice, with a real fearful danger for my own child and others on my hands, a danger which no other person in my neighborhood had even the least inkling of any means to face. There was simply nothing else for me to do, now was there? If you had been learning all that stuff and wondering how much of it was real, you too would feel required to take that challenge up. Wouldn't you? Right. You would have to at least give an honest try at banishing the hungry spirit which you plainly saw riding with its talons gripped into that disgusting insect of a man.

And so it was done. My teacher looked up the problem in her books. She copied out a ceremony for me, on ordinary paper with ordinary ink. And she came over the house and spoke with our little girl. Understand, she was a quite intelligent kindly woman and she spoke very well to our child. And she gave our little girl a large talisman, a protective thing, a disk of leather with a picture painted on it. The picture was a powerful wolf painted on it, looking alert and strong in a snow-clad wood, and the child should hide this talisman in a secret place by day then keep it in her bed at night. And the child evidently knew there was a danger lurking. To my surprise, our little girl accepted this unusual ornament in the manner actually of someone who is feeling some relief. And my teacher told me that the next night after that day's night would be a good time for the job, according to astrology, of which I have not got the slightest understanding.

Well, what would you have done in somesuch circumstances? Put yourself in my place (kindly for a

moment do) and pretend that you have found yourself somehow alive in some such strange unreal fantastic real actual pressing emergency situation, with this piece of paper pressed into your hand, and answer this: What would you do?

The ceremony called for me to very calmly wait until one hour after midnight, with the child asleep, then go into her room where I would accomplish everything with murmured spells, in English, and with a peculiar pantomime of exact ritual gestures. I must cast a bright sphere of divine light around the tiny room and the sleeping child, then put myself above the place to hide, and call the evil being in, as it would think, to feast upon this seeming victim. Then, with incorporeal blazing sword in hand, I must swoop upon the disembodied thing and hack it, bleed it, pierce it, weaken it beyond repair.

I built the fortress temple as instructed and hid myself and called. The thing arrived from somewhere across a dim-lit empty plain, arrived in the form of a giant running spider several times my size, and I went to it. I set upon the imaginary it with that imaginary blazing sword. Several times the ghastly thing retreated then came on again and I must dash to the new quarter of my crumbling walls to hack and thrust some more. But finally it had had too much, lame in every leg and spurting dark gouts of blood that vanished on the whistling wind, so that it finally screamed and fled across the empty plain from whence it came, away far out of sight.

Can you possibly imagine what this was like? I swear by any living power you may wish to name, this is all true. All that stuff you hear about other realms

of reality; in some way it is true. This combat was imagination, obviously, all in the mind's eye, but true imagination is not fantasy. Once I was prepared, the clear and powerful impressions following thence were forced upon me by the force of some real being outside myself. The mask of all these doings, you might say, was in my head, but the truth of them was not. Beyond all of my expectations, beyond all prior experience, I stood in the spirit realm and fought for good. I was utterly convinced of it as I am today. I was elated and my heart was very glad but I was trembling and exhausted too and dawn had nearly come. It was startling to learn the fight had taken several hours.

I'll tell you quickly how that bit of the affair came out; it came out for the good. Two days later with another spell I finally trapped that weakened spirit in a candle that I made of molten wax. At my kitchen stove in that small home, in broad daylight, even as I poured the molten fluid carefully to the candle form, that hungry wretched wounded thing came screaming in and fell imprisoned in the wax. I wrapped it tight in paper as my teacher said, and later gave it to her so she'd cast the thing into a fire and banish it to realms more distant from our own.

Next time that I saw that little fellow, he was a different man. He was quite utterly changed, apologetic in demeanor, meek and mild. I stood before him once again and stared hard into his heart. There were human weaknesses still evident but he was clean at least of the ugly thing that had been on him. So I pray he might be well. If he is dead, I wish him rest.

But in that morning, that early pre-dawn morning when the awesome fight was done, after the hungry spirit fled, after that disembodied battle in the small child's room, inside the crumbling fortress built of shining light that stood upon some distant empty plain, with the exhausting hours passed since it began, first thing I did was this: I heaped back up the glowing stones of the imaginary walls into a semblance of their power and mouthed a whispered blessing by the bed. Then I left the silent room. The child was sleeping quietly.

I sat out in the living room. That's when I saw the dawn was near. The light was slowly growing, glowing darkly through the window glass. And so, gathering in my strength again, I watched the sun arise. The sun came up. It shone in through my front window and little bits of rainbow struck upon the walls. There was a pretty crystal hanging in that window there and the light came through refracted, casting lovely bits of rainbow everywhere.

Those of you who walk a rocky path like mine can verify that when you reach the early upward slope which I had reached, and if you are a worthy candidate as I had evidently been, then the universe conspires to offer worthy tests. The universe conspires to let you exercise yourself so as to learn. So it had done. This timeless fact of life was that event. And if you pass those tests it offers fitting treasures as reward, and treasures that your eyes are fit to see and hands to grasp. I tell you now, only one reward in this whole universe could fit me then. After all that I had seen and done, after the heedless hungry evil whose nakedness I'd gazed upon, after that blood

gushing to the wind, the only treasure for my eyes and hands would have been some proof of fundamental beauty in this world. That's what the rainbows were. I knew at once on seeing them; a treasure and reward strewn in jewel-like bits around that room, a confirmation of surpassing loveliness in fundamental things. My eyes beheld the colored light with joy. My hands went out to touch the beams of it.

I did not know that there was even more treasure yet to come.

My heart was full of gratitude for all beauty in this world, and for the strength it gives, and for that sufficient portion of its strength which the divine light had gifted to me in the struggle. So I soon arose and found a little pottery dish and a bit of charcoal and some frankincense. You know, by that time in this life I owned a jar of frankincense. So I quickly got the charcoal lit and got the tiny pile of incense smoking on it and took the dish out to my little patio outside the front door there, then held it up to the sun in earnest prayer and set it on a little table, an offering of gratitude and love for the power of light that comes up manifested with the day. So there I stood leaning on the bit of fence and basking in the light and letting the smoke curl around me as it would. And so a new thing happened.

Cats. Cats. Yes, cats.

Just across the way, at the neighbors' place across the little courtway there, there sat the usual gang of toms who owned the neighbor's patio under feline law.

Now, that particular little club who owned that place consisted of four tom cats, one big old brawny fellow

with hardly a brain in his head but covered in bulging muscles, and three of his equally brilliant sons. They all looked much alike except the different colors. All were tiger-striped, you see, but the big old dad was orange, like one of the lads, while another was blackish and the other gray. But the old fellow was biggest and meanest and therefore undisputed boss. I knew all this from lengthy observation. Right now the big old fellow was lounging there beside the opening of their gate, rolling on his back most luxuriously on the cool cement before the day's oppressive summer tropic heat came up, while his three sons sat about like bodyguards just washing themselves and feeling quite important, just the way that stupid toms particularly will do if left to their own world.

I stood there hanging on my fence, you know, and studying these amusing quite Shakespearean fellows and smiling at the fineness of the world so manifested in its richly woven quirks, and wondering if the wisest human person in our world could extract any bit of moral lesson from this bit of feline tale, but there was more and finer yet to come.

Movement caught the corner of my eye. I looked and saw, way down at the far end of that apartment row, way down at the far end where the buildings gave way to a vacant lot that stood in prairie grass extremely tall and thick, prairie grass chest high on me in that vacant lot down past the buildings' end; two new cats had appeared from out of there and these two new fellows were creeping very carefully in the shadows along toward us, evidencing every sign and gesture of utmost caution. That wild and primitive prairie out there is called buffalo grass.

From the way they walked it was quite clear these fellows were strangers in this cat town. And as they approached I came to see how dirty and skinny they both were. Bony. Grimed with dirt. They walked shoulder to shoulder right in step and leaning on each other – maybe you've seen cats who really trust each other walk like that – casting wary glances everywhere – then they spied the gang of big toms by the open gate. They froze. I must guess they were drawn to this strange dangerous open place by drifting whiffs of the heap of luscious food that waited in a lump on a plate in there beyond the opening of the gate. Perhaps they smelled the bowl of water. They were starving.

But it seemed the three bully guards had not spied them yet, still preoccupied with washing, so the new fellows, with every move like a single being, fixed their gaze upon the gang of four and stepped off again, shoulder to shoulder, coming on again.

At last the bullies spotted them but they did not stop. The big guy saw them first and started, startling his sons, and they looked too, at this pair of dirty skinny tramps who now had the unmitigated gall to just stare fixedly at them and come on right ahead. The two strangers now were simply coming on while striving to fix a baleful glare upon the four. Well, the three sons jumped to their feet and started doing that feline thing where you stand sideways and put your back up and show your teeth. Oh, they looked fierce all right but the tramps just kept on coming, staring with their baleful eyes. I was amazed.

Finally, when the new guys were maybe ten feet off, just when the big boss too at last jumped up

and was turning sideways, getting set to show his teeth and hiss quite horribly as he could, suddenly the new guys stopped. They stopped. Unbelievably to all of us, they sat down upon their backsides in the regular cat way with every sign of confidence and startling self-composure. They straightened up their bony bodies tall. I was amazed but now I understand. They had a magic trick. They knew they were in range by now to hurl this overwhelming stupefying spell of magic they had got from somewhere. And so help me, that is what they did.

The two guys, both as one, turned their faces upward to the sky. They opened their mouths wide. They sang.

They sang. These two souls sang one long single note in perfect ringing echoing harmony together. Where had they learned to do this? How had these two wild ones from the buffalo grass learned, and learned such confidence that it would work? They hit this one note exactly and immediately together, not even reaching for the note but both at once, their two screechy voices blending in a tone that I have certainly never heard from human throats, a tone that pierced right through and struck a chord of splendor in my brain. Splendor.

Music can do such things. Certain notes and rhythms have effects. There is a rising strain that tears the heart from out your breast and sends it winging toward some distant home that waits for all our race. There is a certain waterfall of cascading notes that wakes the lonely yearning for your long-lost love, even if you haven't got one. And this particular vibrating piercing wail had mystical effects.

It brought transcendent vision. The world opened all around, as if this cosmos were a blossoming rose or lotus flower. Oh, it was lovely.

The world there in that place vanished when that note struck in my ears then penetrated to my brain. All of space in all directions opened. So then the wheeling stars turned round at every hand while I marveled at the vast infinity of space and time. And when it stopped, it was a startlement to find myself somehow back again. I simply blinked. Once more I leaned upon that bit of wooden fence as if I'd never left. I had never heard that note before and never heard it since. And these were cats.

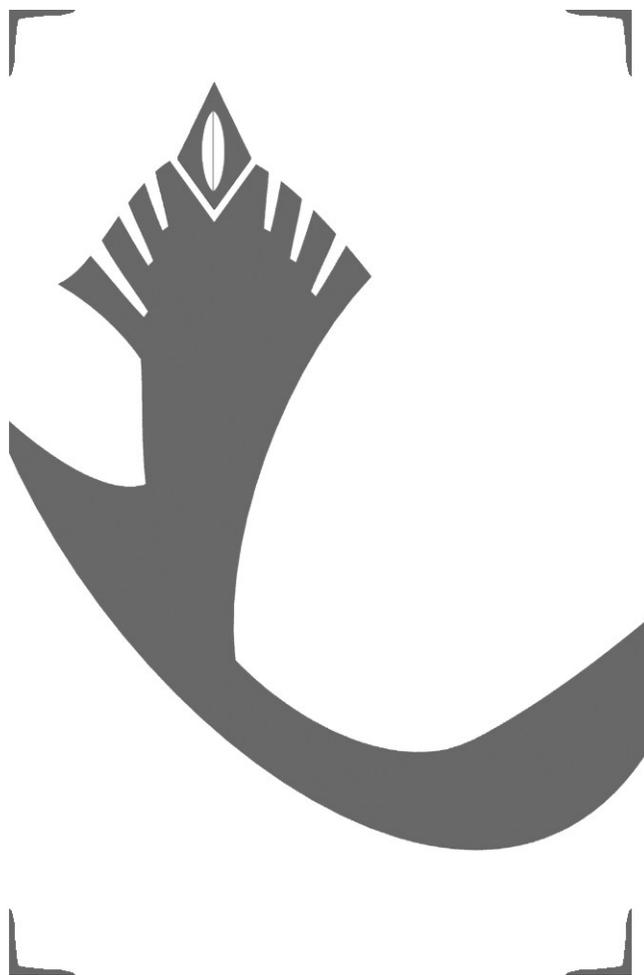
Well, the four bullies were farther stunned than I. This mystical vision thing was apparently new to them. They stood frozen even when the long note faded. Their stupefaction obviously lingered.

And so the two ragged troubadours eyed them, eyed them warily to check on the effect. And suddenly the big guys simply sagged. All four sat down at once with eyes open wide and staring unblinking at the singers. The skinny troubadours then, reassured by this delayed response, crept cautiously around right by the four into the open gate. Without a backward glance, they laid into the fragrant feast of meat and water. The four watched them for a moment, then began to wash again.

And that's all of this tale. The sorcerer's apprentice gained a test and, having passed the test, was granted just and glorious reward. My heart was full of strength and beauty and amazement and that wondrous vision, all of it, is with me to this day. One sorry note that I must say: the orchestra broke up.

That's how musicians are sometimes, you know. One of the fellows stayed there in our neighborhood but the other one I never saw again and surely no one else has ever heard their mystic song.

And by the way, this story is all true.



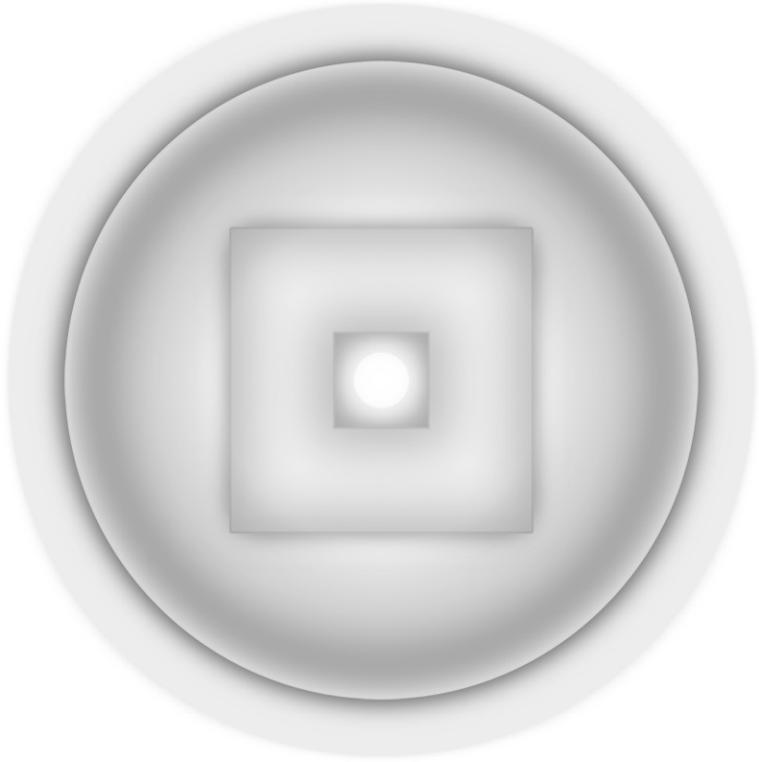
Absent Friend

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **Absent Friend** **(Episode 26)**

Fabio Saavedra, where are you? You were a friend. I have two of your paintings on my walls today, that third one being gone lamentably to California. I have a folder of your drawings. Your apartment just across from mine, across the poor and lovely courtyard where the Five of Cups stood waiting to be seen and where the Wheel of Fortune hung before my startled gaze one morning in the opened air, your apartment, that cool dark den of conversations. Where are your brother and your father and your mother and your wife? Where is your little baby boy? Houston, summer 1980. I will never forget your generosity that day, the invitation to your brother's airy sunny house, where several of your pieces were arrayed along a wall and, much to my surprise, some honored person suddenly arrived, a famous critical writer visiting from South America your brother whispered to my whispered inquiry, there that day to view your paintings and advise. I never will forget the manner. Utterly courteous and utterly confident of competence amid the nervousness that filled the house. Here was the Four of Wands indeed. And when the honored critic, fragrant cigarette held delicately in fingertips to be a sort of ceremonial wand, duly progressing down your wall of

paintings, nodding calming murmured affirmations of your explanations and your work itself, came to the little dining table where you'd stationed me, I duly arose with my little half completed deck of handmade cards in hand, seeing smiles around me, and made bold to speak with gestures of utmost humble courtesy, apologetic for the English which he did not understand and for the excess inches of my physical height, holding out the deck tentatively and shrugging, asking if he'd care to see a work in progress. I never will forget your generosity that day, to share a treasured resource. He found the pictures interesting. He manifestly did. He found some of them actually arresting, pausing for a moment, murmuring assent, as they filed before his eyes from hand to hand within the fragrant smoke. Perhaps the Eight of Coins was one of those, its political dimensions being so acute in 1980 South America, although it was the man's Indian face I principally watched, in its intelligent pleasure in surprise. Handing them back, smiling encouragement and nodding, repeating twice some word I did not know, he positively said the piece of work is good, smiling round to all, returning to the pleasant task for which he'd come. So the project went on with confidence renewed. The damn things worked. Fabio Saavedra, you are still a friend.



The Soul's True Yearning

Digital image by Stone Riley

## **The Soul's True Yearning** **(Episode 27)**

The soul's true yearning is to make itself known.

That is a common thought among our most poetic thinkers. After all, it makes such lovely sense of our intimate experience in inward contemplation, when we go to find and understand the things within, behind the masks which we ourselves present the outward world. Go in courage through dark places seeking truth about yourself, and familiar but forgotten forms do stand forth from the dark toward light and consciousness. Hidden faces do appear and even speak.

And it makes such lovely sense about the hidden nature of all things. If the soul of all the world, like her daughters for each being, yearns toward the unity discovered in the flickering but brilliant candlelight of consciousness, then we are the *Hieros Gamos*. We are all the holy bride and groom.

And it makes such lovely sense about the way before us. Do we lose the wit to do good in this world? Do we close our hearts and fall among the evils here? Does the bridegroom stumble on the way to bed? Only for a moment. If we simply truly love, then ecstasy is in our reach; passion and compassion lure us truly on.

The soul's true yearning is to make itself known.



## Shamanic Vision Dance

Digital image  
based on an acrylic / canvas painting  
by Stone Riley

## **Shamanic Vision Dance** **(Episode 28)**

Back some years ago, while the last glow of the great flowering of the 1960's was finally fading in the dust of the latter 1970's, I and several thousand other people started the Pagan movement in America. I do remember it clearly. Basically, we asked a single question of the universe and of ourselves.

Our question was this: Given all the truths that anthropology, history, psychology, mythology, and all sorts of other traveler's tales now in this age of myriad books, and photographs and documentary film as well, can teach a serious student of the human race; and given all the teachers of the whole world's ancient ways then still alive; and given our own astonishing encounters with the infinite mysterious divine; and given our own weary thirst for understanding; and given all the particular and general evils we saw gathering – given all of this – what sort of good religion could be built up from whatever solid ground there is to find, up into that world in which we lived?

It turns out now that the answer is not surprising. Paganism in America has become a faith and practice similar in many ways to what most thoughtful people in most times and places choose.

I do recall a cool and breezy summer day in Boston. The Public Garden, a lovely sturdy well kept park in the city center. This was most likely 1975. This day was, for me, a threshold of a beginning of a

start. I, a poor man of the city, working hard to find a living and full of worries, and with a suffering woman in ill health who would widow me, and yet a thinker, coming out alone to stroll amid a country recently released from war, had found here in this park the dappled sunlight and the shade and great green trees and brightly colored radiant erotic graceful flowers and strolling crowds.

At the Garden's center is a good sized pond where, of a summer, flocks of ducks quack very seriously. Wooden boats creak to and fro and lovers laugh with children. There where the center of the pond is built to narrow, where all paths of that very tame wood converge and simultaneously curve away, there a tall arched bridge of carved gray stone is built above the darkly gleaming rippling water, above among the surrounding skyscrapers' gleaming window lights glittering with Sun in countless multitude, this bridge across from grassy bank to bank. Lured by the open light, I climbed the gray granite span. There high on the zenith of the bridge I stood, seeming to be nearly among the rustling foliage of the trees and yet nearly among celestial glitterings, between a Sky and Earth suspended. My stroll had found its goal and halted. I stood there leaning on the smooth stone balustrade and breathed.

In those bright dark days the most intriguing most ingenious thought I'd had was this: We only need to look to see that all of this is one. This fundamental fact – that all is one and all is knowing living flesh, and that there is no need for proof of this because we only need to look to see this great reality which changes human attitude and therefore actions –

this thought had lured me safe and sane through other troubles then already.

But now, gone as far as one might go into that level of life's maze, I wondered what else could be known, what further true vision might lead farther on and find an exit from that place into some other. And then of course there came a dancing fool in jangle bells and flowing ribbons.

Yes, it was astounding and yet instinctively it was no surprise at all, for here he came, he himself, the holy fool in manifested living person.

Garbed in crazy printed billowing gauzy robe and flowing snaky sashes, tall forked walking stick in hand, it waving as he strode, the forked staff hung with colored ropes of bells and flashing mirrors, he quite seriously was dancing with his striding steps, dancing shamanic chanting prayer and prayer and prayer to unseen spirits. And he was a young man about my age. And his words echoed in a surrounding silence.

He was a Hari Krishna devotee. A Hindu of a certain discipline. A fresh adherent to an ancient way but evidently trusted by his elders in that faith for he was a young man who firmly held that staff of office. He was about my size and race, and coming up the very same curving path where I had come. And he had set out alone, unusual in the extreme for those devotees. So here he was immersed in shady sunlit breeze and whirling to a cunning rhythm, jangling flashing twirling chanting through the strolling crowd that Saturday in 1975, amid a silence where all else listened, perhaps to demonstrate his movement's faith and practice to the city, or perhaps indeed exactly for

an audience of one who stood up there so visibly on the apex of the bridge, or else for purely simple joy and easing of his pain.

Thus came he, the one, to me, the one, there at a center of a center of a center.

What new thing can we say of life? Surely here was something new but ancient in our oldest ancient times and ancient in our furthest future. What meaning was there in this meeting?

He did come to me as though we had been brothers. A rendezvous as though we had been somehow psychic lovers. But more, it felt to me, as though two sparrows flew across the seas in opposite directions, east and west, and then at length had found themselves together here.

My ear was caught at first, of course, by the rhythm of all those small brass bells and breathless little chanting words. Then looking down the way that I had come, there was the crazy apparition whirling through the strolling folk who smiled and watched and gave him silent space. His manner was intent and yet aware of them and glad. For a moment as he mounted to the climbing span, his head alone was visible to me above the paving stones, a bobbing shining jack-o-lantern head, a singing severed head, the royal poet hero oracle, a token from my own Celtic lore of mysteries irrupting.

Then he rose to me directly up the bridge, dancing then unmistakably especially for me, until he finally simply stepped out of the whirl before me there, and became to my surprise simply a young man flushed with action and achievement, garbed as a sort of Gypsy dancing woman. He was leaning lightly on

his staff of office, as though a sparrow had alighted on a branch. As though we were well known to one another.

My personal admiration was surely clear in my manner. Smiling with a nod for greeting, I think I told him quite sincerely, "Very nice." Just the thing I sometimes say to other worthy artists. But whatever thing exactly that we said for greeting, the conversation did go very easily and well. Though we never yet have met again, he is my brother.

I think he opened, as an opening move in chess or whist, with some statement quoting from his scripture. I can imagine that it spoke of holy joy and beauty manifesting in this world, for that is and was a central tenet of the Hari Krishna faith and quite appropriate to the efflorescent beauty there around us. I seem to have some memory that's what it was: holy joy and beauty manifesting in this world.

Whatever quote it was, I found myself at once directly leading on quite naturally from there with a brief but apt synopsis of my favorite thought, agreeing that all here and elsewhere is one living blooming substance and that we only need to look to see and that this joyful sturdy lovely reassurance will then mold our thoughts and deeds. Offering this treasure of my own to him.

And yes, in turn, he quite agreed with that and found a perfectly fit quotation from his scripture fully apt and proper to the purpose, somewhat to my surprise and pleasure giving irrefutable proof that my thought was recognized and valued in the wider world. And then he very likely rounded out his turn

by politely asking how my current life was manifesting holy oneness.

I'm sure his motivations were complex, such as perhaps a possibility of gaining a recruit. But still, his foremost motive, or so it seemed there in that moment, was an honest one I should respect. As was the frequent custom too of ancient Druids, whom I sometimes emulate, he was testing his own metal in a thinking match. Was the reasoning of his path in life sufficient to a skeptic's scrutiny? So I could not fault him for the purpose of a probing question which he must have asked himself. How was he manifesting holy oneness? For his sake, and for my own, and for the sake of honesty, I ought to answer. How was I manifesting holy oneness?

My problem, my slowness, my coy reluctance for the holy dance, the one and only reason why I did not take his hand and whirl a waltz upon that parapet, for honestly I would, of course was this: the nature of my discipline compared to his. However apt a scriptural quotation, and however well encyclopedically absorbed, I sought reality in actual experience. I wanted data raw. I wanted data shaped by a place and time which also might be analyzed by I who lived there. Not shaped by some purported genius in some other place and time who chanced to have on hand a pen and paper. I wanted wisdom that was mine and fairly won, hammered out of my own struggle with the world. I wanted wisdom that would not show flaws and gaps and cracks when molded to the uses of the world in which I lived. So I would follow life into its lair. Leaving my self aside

abandoned, I would walk with those who walked with me along the winter shore.

Well, so, how was I manifesting holy oneness?

Now of course I see the day more clearly.

Now I have the pictures: There I stood, an Emperor in thought, but hung suspended like the Fool, beneath a Sun reflecting in a darkly gleaming Moon-like pool. There the World in all its love and laughter and its trembling fear was gathered around infinity's shore. So there with whirling feet on the up-turning Wheel danced he the Fool himself to me in breezy robe and bells and ribbons. And there with steady hands he held out to me the overflowing sacred Cup by asking me the Lovers' question. Now of course I see it was a spread of Tarot cards. And even then, somehow, I seemed to read it rightly.

How was I manifesting holy oneness?

Of course I answered that the journey is the goal. A clear eyed glance which seeks the truth is truth itself. A forward step that enters through a veil of real mystery is in fact a step to solid ground. We are the World, what some name God, as we become ourselves. Our participation in this world, whatever world this is, if done in consciousness and willingness and joy – which is to say in reverence and charity and honest yearning – which is to say in beauty – is our participation in the Universe. We are here now. And all of this was spoken quite politely in some summer day in some modest form of words.

A look of satisfaction lit his face. His question had been answered. His clearest thoughts were known and honored in a wider world. And he had taught his teacher. And he was manifesting holy

oneness satisfactorily today. My brother bowed. Our game was drawn.

So, like a sparrow on a neighboring twig of that broad tree where wisdom shimmers in the leaves, the instinctive ceremony of all living things, I smiled and bowed to him as well.

Given all such travelers' tales and all that they can say, what solid ground is there to find? Here. Now. Where we stand.

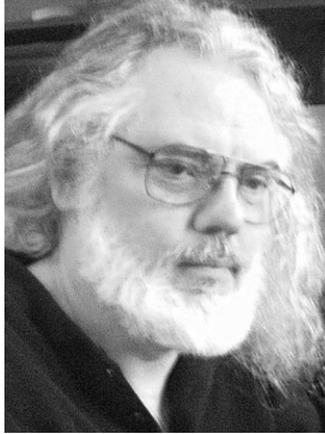
Given our own thirst for understanding, and our astonishing encounters with the infinite divine, and the evils that are gathering, what good religion might we root here now to grow into this world? A faith and practice of ourselves. A faith and practice of reverence and charity and honest yearning discovered in our nature which is Nature.

And what meaning is there in such meetings? What new thing can we say, but ancient old? That all we humans are all human. That when we truly seek to know of life, life does contrive to show itself.

And so my brother took to wing again, whirling off along the way ahead, dancing chanting down to where the paths diverge and on the way which he would go.

And so I turned back to the way that I had come, down into that world again, and yet a different world that opened now to give my vision space, and trudged with lighter step toward whatever lay awaiting, toward whatever tiny part there was to play in the deep long history of these times.

A little later on, the Pagan movement in America was born.



## **Stone Riley**

Photo by Zoe Salmon

### **About The Author**

Stone Riley is a multi-disciplinary artist active in the Pagan movement. He paints, writes, interprets classical material for the modern public as a storyteller, reads Tarot, plays drums, engineers software, and has even been known to dance before a theater audience. (Briefly, once.) He lives west of Boston, USA. He's sometimes called the "Druid of New England".

FYI: Paganism (or Neo-Paganism) is an avant-garde bohemian shamanic religion in which religion is regarded as an art. You craft spiritual experiences for yourself and friends in search of actual real reality. Results seem encouraging so far. Politically, the movement is green and progressive with pacifist tendencies. It is unorganized by choice and has user-participation literature instead of holy writ. It is growing quickly now, with maybe something like approximately half a million adherents in the USA, more or less. Small religion; big art project.

Peace through justice.

# Bright Jewels

Beautiful moments in a strange life

An illustrated memoir by Stone Riley

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For-  
ever now  
uncertain

Obscured  
in smoke  
and flame

Boston  
Public  
Library

Picture  
Story  
of  
this  
world

Summer's  
sweet  
close  
fragrant,  
shade

So what is  
this?

A long  
moment  
suddenly

The fool  
who had  
laughed

Blow  
off the  
roof

I went and found  
a magic hat

In a nutshell

Un-  
usual or-  
nament

held delicately in fin-  
ger-  
tips  
Fragrant  
cigarette

A sailor

of wands

Four

Between a Sky and Earth suspended

Above the temple threshold steps

