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NewAcropolis

Philosophy and Education for the Future

The Esoteric Symbolism of Plants

The ENDURANCE Expedition

Chernobyl's Eternal Memory

The Sweet (and Sour) Dream of Nuclear Power

The Games of Maya

PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
SOCIETY
ESOTERICA
ART

AND MORE

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About Us

NEW ACROPOLIS is an international organization working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society for the next generation.

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Editorial

Is Nature an 'It' or a 'Thou'?

This year we joined again in the celebrations of International Mother Earth Day on April 22 with talks, a sacred dance, a very successful litter pick and a nature walk where we were able to enjoy the beautiful British bluebells at their best.

Earth Day has been celebrated for more than 50 years, the environment has been a topic of concern for decades and scientists have been warning about the consequences of climate change, pollution and resource depletion for as long as I can remember. There have been countless efforts to address the crisis: International agreements, government policies, innumerable actions by individuals and organizations, increased awareness and education about the importance of protecting the environment, even businesses have started to adopt environmentally responsible practices... and yet: the situation is still getting worse, year after year. Why?

Maybe because we have not yet addressed the real cause of this crisis. When we talk about the ecological crisis, we tend to focus on the physical and material aspects of the problem. But they are only a part of the picture. If we ask ourselves why we are not able to stop our destructive behaviour despite all the alarming evidence, we need to go deeper.

The following quote by James Gustave Speth, a former dean at Yale university, environmental lawyer and U.S. Advisor on climate change, for me goes to the heart of the matter: *"I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy."* And he went on to say that *"to deal with these issues we need a cultural and spiritual transformation – and we scientists do not know how to do that."*

I think he is completely right. We truly need a cultural and spiritual transformation, and for this to happen many things have to change on a very deep level: we need a shift in consciousness, a profound change in the way we think about nature and our place and role in it. We also have to change the way we *feel* about the nature because, ultimately, love is a much better and more effective force for change than fear or guilt.

Exactly 100 years ago, in 1923, the Austrian-Israeli philosopher Martin Buber published the seminal book *I and Thou,* where he explores the nature of relationships between individuals and the world. Buber argues that there are two fundamental ways in which humans can relate to the world: through "I-It" relationships and "I-Thou" relationships.

"I-It" relationships are characterized by objectification, where the *other* is reduced to an object to be used or manipulated for one's own purposes. In contrast, "I-Thou" relationships are based on mutuality and the recognition of the inherent value and dignity of the *other*, which for him also included nature.

Over many centuries, Western civilization has shifted from seeing the human being as a part of nature to thinking that we are 'apart' from nature. This has led to the objectification of nature and, combined with materialism and scientific reductionism, to the exploitation, pollution and destruction of it.
We have forgotten that the Earth is a living being and we have lost touch with the sacredness of the natural world. In all ancient civilizations, nature was revered as Mother Earth (Rhea, Gaia, Pachamama, Prithvi, to name but a few).

Ecological and sustainable thinking on its own is not necessarily the outcome of an inner transformation. Recognising that ecology and sustainability are in the long term more viable, does not necessarily prevent us from continuing to see trees as timber producers, oxygen providers and shade givers. It does not necessarily mean that we have started to see nature as a 'thou'.

We need to recover a sense of reverence for nature. When we lose our reverence for the natural world, we also lose touch with our own spiritual selves. We become disconnected from our own sense of meaning and purpose, and we begin to suffer from a spiritual emptiness, which is reflected in the high levels of anxiety, depression and addiction that we see in our society today.

Somehow, we have to find our way back to reconnect with nature. This thousand-year-old inscription from the Chinese philosopher and politician Zhang Zai (1020-1077) might help awaken a distant memory in our souls: *"Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all the things [in nature] are my companions."*.

Sabine Leitner

The Endurance Expedition

What we can learn from Shackleton's Antarctic adventure

As a philosopher I have always felt attracted to knowledge that can be gained from experience and/or ideas that arise out of action; because both of these often seem to come close to real wisdom, which I think is a mixture of knowledge and experience. So I have always been interested in the lessons that can be drawn from true stories, especially when they can offer us something valuable for our daily lives.

A few years ago I discovered a fascinating story, one of the most legendary exploits of the last century: Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition. For people who are only concerned with results, this expedition might be described as a total failure, as it didn't even come close to achieving its objectives. But for those who see life as a journey, in which the most important thing is to learn from experience, this adventure will perhaps remind them of Homer's Odyssey, and the expedition's leader – Ernest Shackleton – would be a 20th century Odysseus.

The "Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition", also known as the Endurance Expedition (after the ship in which they were travelling), sailed from London in August 1914 (at precisely the moment when First World War broke out). Its aim was, for the first time in history, to cross the continent of Antarctica on foot, passing via the South Pole.

Before even reaching Antarctica, however, when they were barely a day's walk away from their destination, their ship – the Endurance – became trapped by an immense ice floe that was drifting across the freezing Weddell Sea. It was at that moment that the real adventure began: to get home safely. And it was then that Shackleton began to demonstrate such remarkable qualities as a leader that he would go down in history as an example of leadership, especially in the area of crisis management.


Portrait of Ernest Shackleton

Over the next ten months, the expedition members waited for the ice to break, but to no avail; instead, the ice ended up crushing and sinking the ship, leaving its 28 crew with only lifeboats. Faced with this situation, they decided to head north, dragging all their belongings behind them across the ice. Shackleton soon realized that the journey was pointless, so he decided to pitch camp and wait for the current to take them north. There they remained for as long as they could until they realized that there was no alternative but to put to sea in the lifeboats, and soon afterwards they reached Elephant Island. It was the first time they had set foot on dry land for 16 months. Their provisions had been running low for some time and they survived by hunting seals and penguins.

Knowing that it was highly unlikely that they would be rescued, Shackleton chose a group of five men and set off for the island of South Georgia in a 22-foot boat. This journey is considered by many sailors to be one of the greatest feats in the history of navigation, as it involved a journey of 800 miles across one of the most dangerous seas on the planet, in the middle of autumn in the Southern Hemisphere. Once they had reached the island, they still had to pass another gruelling trial before reaching civilization: to edge their way across the island, crossing frozen mountains and glaciers with no proper equipment. After 36 intense hours of continuous effort, which brought them to the edge of total exhaustion, they managed to reach the whaling port of Stromness, where they finally received help.

Meanwhile, the men who had remained behind on Elephant Island had to do their best to keep up their morale and fight off despair, as they knew that every day that passed might be bringing them closer to death.

Finally, on 30th August 1916, four and a half months after he had set out for the island of South Georgia, and after three failed attempts, Shackleton succeeded in rescuing the 22 men he had left behind on the island. All in all, he had managed to ensure that not one member of the expedition lost his life.

With this very brief description, I have tried to summarize this incredible journey, but in such a short space it is impossible to convey any real idea of what it was like. There were many problems, stories and situations which would need a whole book to describe. But what I would like to do is to highlight some of the things that we can learn from this experience and apply to everyday life. Here are is a list of some of them:

- The importance of remaining optimistic in the face of difficulties. In this case, their situation was desperate, almost hopeless, so something more than optimism was required. In fact, survival strategies cannot only be based on realism, they have to be more optimistic than the counsels of reason alone.

- The importance of seeing problems and difficulties as challenges. The person who knows how to take the drama out of a crisis will find it easier to deal with it. Strange though it may seem, the more serious the situation, the more effective this attitude becomes.

- The importance of acknowledging our mistakes, without giving way to pride. Shackleton made several wrong decisions, but he was able to rectify them in time.

- The need to maintain a team spirit at all times. Shackleton was a real master in this respect, because he knew that the value of the team is greater than the sum of the value of its members, because the relationships between them create synergies. He therefore made a great effort to build work teams and social units, and if someone became pessimistic he tried to ensure that this person didn't associate with people whose morale was lower than their own.

- The need to pay minute attention to details, however insignificant they might seem.

- The necessity of sacrificing oneself at all times for the good of the group, a virtue that Shackleton never lacked.

- The importance of leading by example – Shackleton never asked his men to give anything he was not capable of giving himself.

- The need to keep the spirits of the group as high as possible. To achieve this, Shackleton would follow two strategies: 1) keep his men busy so that they wouldn't dwell on the severity of the situation – for example, by drawing up a strict and thorough cleaning programme, in which everyone was included – and 2) try to keep the men's spirits as high as possible – by performing plays, playing music, etc.

- The importance of building a team without class distinctions: Shackleton tried to ensure that no crew members were ever considered "second class" and everyone had the same privileges and duties. For example, as there wasn't enough quality clothing to go round, Shackleton held a raffle to distribute the highest quality articles to in which coincidentally all the ship's officers were the losers – obviously a strategy on Shackleton's part.

- To understand that the sense of responsibility can work wonders. One of the keys to the impressive willpower that Shackleton embodied was the intense sense of responsibility he felt towards all his men. This sense of responsibility towards others enables us to overcome our own limits.

- "By endurance we conquer": this was the motto that Shackleton followed throughout his life; it was the motto that inspired his whole life. It is what enabled Shackleton to be mentally stronger than the rest when the situation became desperate, because his philosophy of life included the inevitability of difficulties, in fact he even sought them out, and this was why he felt perfectly prepared for them. It is a magnificent example of applied philosophy, of how important philosophy can be in our lives, as long as that philosophy is lived and is not mere intellectualism.

As a result of all these things and many more, this story has become essential reading for all those who love adventure, heroic tales and impossible challenges, for all those who are interested in the development of the human potential and especially in the overcoming of limits; because this story is an example of the saying: "There are no limits, only limitations".

Antonio Belda

Suggestions for further reading:

- *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* by Caroline Alexander
- *Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer*, by Margot Morrell and Stephany Capparell.

Chernobyl's Eternal Memory

Half a decade ago I was invited to a wedding in Kyiv. I still remember some flyers I found on the streets of the capital, which lured tourists to visit Pripyat and Chernobyl, where one of the biggest nuclear disasters happened 40 years ago. Somehow it was bizarre to see how many people were attracted to this doomed place, which was once home to 50,000 people, but then became their enemy. The curiosity about Chernobyl peaked after HBO screened its mini-series on the catastrophe, and people from all over the world flocked to this remote place, less than three hours by car from the capital of Ukraine.

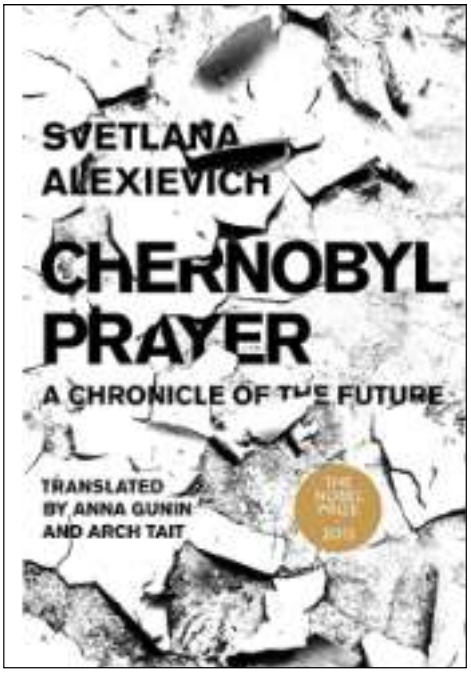
The name Chernobyl derives from a plant, the mugwort. The city had been inhabited since the Middle Ages and always had an important commercial and transport role. Chernobyl has a busy history with many battles and has been ruled by many different countries. After the Second World War it became part of the Soviet Union, and was close to the commuter town of Pripyat, where families of the nearby atomic

Image by Justinite from Pixabay

plant workers lived. While Pripyat was highly developed by that time with fully equipped new houses, schools, a swimming pool, and so on, and had a population four times the size of Chernobyl, the latter was still the administrative centre. Ironically, in the accident, Chernobyl was less affected by nuclear contamination than many other places, including Pripyat, which became uninhabitable, but the name of the disaster was associated with Chernobyl forever.

Many films and books have been made since April 26, 1986, when the catastrophe happened. One of them is written by Svetlana Alexievich, a Belorussian journalist, who later won the Nobel Prize for literature. In her famous book, *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*, she described the disaster and the aftermath in a subjective way, through the voices of the witnesses. From this book the historical event can be traced from various perspectives, including the wife of a firefighter, who was the first to arrive at the fourth reactor, but died in a short time because of the heavy radiation. Or peasants, who had to bury their crops and dairy products because of the contamination. She wrote: "What lingers most in my memory of Chernobyl is life afterwards: the possessions without owners, the landscapes without people. The roads going nowhere, the cables leading nowhere... It sometimes felt to me as if I were recording the future."

That tragic night in the newly built fourth reactor of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (named after Vladimir Lenin) the operators led by Anatoly Dyatlov ran a safety test during the scheduled power-down of the reactor, which was preparatory to a planned maintenance outage. The operators were trying to measure the ability of the steam turbine to power the emergency feedwater pumps of the RBMK-type reactor in the event of a simultaneous loss of external power and major coolant leak. It was the fourth time they had made this test; the last three tests in the previous years had been unsuccessful. During a planned decrease of reactor power, the power output dropped to near-zero. While recovering from the power drop and stabilizing the reactor, the operators removed the control rods, which exceeded limits set by the operating procedures. The operators triggered a reactor shutdown by pushing AZ-5 button, but due to a design flaw, this action resulted in localized increases in reactivity within the reactor, which further increased coolant temperatures and led to steam explosions and the melting of the reactor core.



As a result of the explosion, 50 million Ci of radionuclides were released into the atmosphere, and 70% of these descended on Belarus. The country lost 485 villages and settlements, 70 of which were buried underground forever. The Soviet regime had never faced such a disaster before, so the government was not prepared about how to react. There was chaos in the first few days, and even the inhabitants of Pripyat did not evacuate immediately. In the morning, many people felt ill, suffering headaches, vomiting and

feeling metallic tastes in their mouths. As Alexievich said: "You couldn't see radiation with your eyes. You couldn't smell it. It was intangible." But very lethal. Those who did not die of cancer were still affected in many ways, like the babies of young women from the region who were stillborn. Over the following days, the Moscow authorities brought thousands of people to the area, including army personnel and volunteers to help to evacuate the "Zone" and

Photo by Wendelin Jacober/ www.pexels.com

clean up the debris. They tried using robots, but they failed because the radiation destroyed them. The difficult job was done by liquidators who worked on the damaged reactor, suffered acute radiation sickness and died in a short time.

Though it was known from the very first moment that a huge accident had happened, the authorities did not inform other countries about the incident, but kept it secret. It was Sweden that first recognized the rising level of radioactivity, 1100 km away from Chernobyl, when radioactive particles were found on the clothes of the Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant workers and the detectors at the entrance gate went off. They soon found out the source of the heavy radiation, and the Soviet Union could no longer hide what had happened. Contamination from the accident reached every part of Europe, and other continents as well. In the Scottish Highlands for example, it caused radioactive rainfall. It is estimated that about four hundred times more radioactive material was released from Chernobyl than by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki together. Most of the fallout with radioactive dust particles was released during the first ten days after the accident. During the year, a sarcophagus was installed on top of the damaged reactor to cover it and prevent further fallout. This concrete construction was made as a temporary measure, only for 30 years, and cracks and small collapses threatened to cause another nuclear disaster. Finally, with international help, a confinement was built on top of the sarcophagus, designed to last at least 100 years. But the remains of the radioactive building are still there, beneath this huge construction, and they will be radioactive for more than 10,000 years.

Despite the tragedy, Chernobyl and the "Zone" are not a wasteland; nature quickly reconquered its territory, many wild animals live in the area, and people too, who want to live there and do not mind the radioactive threat. But the "Zone" is not safe, the soil, the forests, the groundwater and lakes are poisoned for a long time to come. And the abandoned streets of Pripyat are a reminder to everyone who comes to visit the closed plant that mankind is not the ruler of nature, but part of it and very much dependent on it. Chernobyl led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union. But it also inaugurated a new era, in which human activity continues to have an impact on the long-term future of the planet.

Istvan Orban

The Esoteric Symbolism of Plants

Traditionally, plants constitute one of the four 'kingdoms' of nature – mineral, vegetable, animal and human – and correspond to the element 'water', which is the element of the life force or 'prana', as it is called in Eastern esotericism. Symbolically, the four elements are related to either vertical or horizontal movements. Earth and Air are horizontal, while Water and Fire have a vertical movement. In this way, the plant and human kingdoms (Water and Fire) are both vertical in nature. Plants grow upwards and humans not only stand upright, but also have upward-tending aspirations.

Artist's representation of the World Tree

As in all the kingdoms of nature, there is an immense variety in the plant world, from mosses and lichens to all sorts of species of trees, vegetables and flowers. Even with 40% of plants being under threat of extinction due to human action, we can still continue to be amazed at the profusion and beauty of nature.

As we contemplate this microcosm of the plant world, we can also appreciate the great benefits it provides to humanity: not only food, but also air purification, beauty, psychological health and even teachings about life, if we know how to read the 'book of nature'.

And although in the light of the current biodiversity loss, it is easy to come to the conclusion that humans only take from nature, it is also true that we are capable of contributing something to the world of plants, for example by creating new varieties (e.g. roses), designing beautiful gardens and landscapes, and generally working with the plant world, not only on the material level but also on more subtle planes, as the great occultists of all times have always done.

The Cosmic Tree

One of the universal plant symbols is the Cosmic, or World Tree. It is normally depicted as growing upwards, but sometimes we find the symbol of the inverted tree, which grows downwards from Heaven

to Earth. In the latter case it is the symbol of the emanation of the Cosmos from an invisible source. H.P. Blavatsky describes the process of emanation using the following imagery: "The tree… grew out of the rootless root of all-being [the root that never dies]. Its trunk grew and developed, crossing the planes of Pleroma [the divine world, abode of the invisible gods], it shot out crossways in luxuriant branches, first on the plane of hardly differentiated matter, and then downward till they touched the terrestrial plane.[1]"

Thus, we can see in the tree an image of the Cosmos, with its mysterious origin, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes, its inexhaustible life.

As an image of death and regeneration, the world tree also gives us a key to the cyclic nature of the Cosmos: it withers at the end of an age (a 'Manvantara' in Hindu symbology), but its roots are eternal, enabling it to be reborn at the end of a 'Pralaya' (period of non-manifestation). Thus, the living Cosmos is in a state of perpetual regeneration. By analogy, on an individual level, human beings also undergo birth, death and rebirth in various ways.

The trees chosen to symbolize this cosmic tree are usually large and majestic: the Oak among the Celts; the Lime (or Linden) among the Germanic peoples, and the Ash among the Scandinavians.

The cosmic tree has come down to us in the West as the Christmas tree, from which hang spheres (planets), stars and animals (constellations). At the top of the tree is often a star, symbolizing the ideal towards which the Cosmos is moving; or a fairy, symbolizing the link that has always existed between plants and the world of 'elementals' – beings that are said to exist on the energetic plane of nature (prana) and look after the life of plants, which are also a manifestation of that second plane of nature, the element Water or energy, on a more concrete level.

The tree also symbolizes the world axis or centre, which becomes the link between heaven and earth: its roots are in the earth, its trunk rises vertically through the air, and its branches reach up into the sky.

A symbol enables us to relate to nature, of which we form part, by identifying it with aspects of ourselves – the principle of 'as above, so below', or analogy between the macrocosm (cosmos) and microcosm (man). So, like the tree, we live on Earth, in our body with its material needs, but we also have spiritual, mystical aspirations, symbolized by the sky or heavens – the dimension of the infinite and the ethereal. In this way, the tree symbolises the unification of those two worlds in ourselves.


Photo by Adarsh Kummur on Unsplash

Paracelsus, who is a major source of esoteric knowledge about the plant kingdom, spoke of two 'fires' in the plant: the terrestrial fire (the innate impulse of the seed-plant to expand and develop) and the celestial fire (the Sun), which calls it to grow upwards. From this combined power, plants derive their healing or poisonous properties. We also have our own innate earthly fire and force, and we are drawn upwards by the call of spirit.

1. The Secret Doctrine, Cosmogenesis, Stanza VI.

The world axis is also a symbol of the path of ascent and descent from the visible to the invisible world and back again. In shamanism, it is sometimes symbolised by a post, or an actual tree, with notches symbolising the different stages of ascent, which the shaman climbs in a trance-like state and then descends to pass on the messages or visions he has received to his tribe.

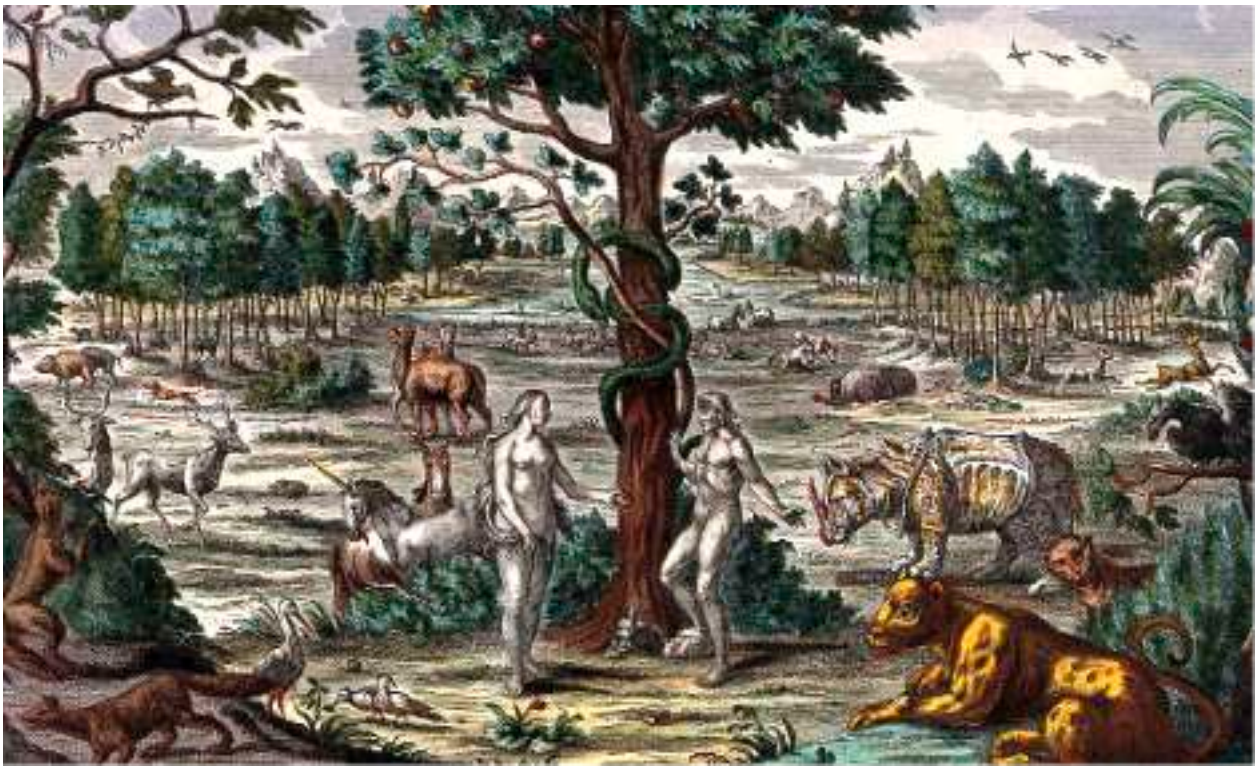
What are these 'visible' and 'invisible' worlds? The invisible is the 'pleroma' that was mentioned earlier, the abode of the invisible gods; Plato's world of archetypes or ideal forms, of which the visible world is a reflection. So, to go from visible to invisible is to go from darkness to light, from ignorance to wisdom, from Plato's cave of illusion to the bright world of Truth.

In many traditions, the Cosmos is described in terms of three worlds: the Underworld (unconscious), the Earth (conscious), and Heaven (supra-conscious). In turn, these are related to the roots, trunk and foliage, with some associated animals: roots – dragons and snakes; trunk (earth) – lion, unicorn, stag; foliage – birds.

In alchemy, the parts of the tree are related to the four elements in the following way: Earth – Roots; Water – Trunk; Air – Leaves; Fire – Flowers.

In its simplest form, the tree can be symbolised as the "Pythagorean Y", which stands for Oneness branching out into duality, and ultimately into multiplicity; because from the one trunk come many branches, as we saw in the quote from H.P. Blavatsky at the beginning of this article. And in those branches thousands of beings live – birds, bugs and, according to tradition, 'elementals'.

In a myth of the Altaic people (a Turkic people from southern Siberia), before human souls come down to earth, they dwell in heaven or perch on the celestial tops of the cosmic tree in the shape of little birds.



Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden standing in front of the Tree of Knowledge.

One further aspect of tree symbolism is that of the masculine and feminine polarity in its traditional sense: the tree is male in its ascensional power and female in its foliage, in which birds nest and which produce fruit (the fruitful mother).

A similar duality can be seen in the parallel existence of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge in the Book of Genesis. The Tree of Life represents the manifestation of life and energy

in the Cosmos; whereas the Tree of Knowledge refers to the development of thought, the effort to understand life, rather than simply living it unconsciously. We could say that they are two sides of the same coin; for we cannot, ultimately, just live without thinking, because we are human beings characterized by thought. The root of the word Man is the Sanskrit Manas, which refers to the thinking mind and the consciousness of spiritual immortality.

The Symbolism of Flowers

Some common concepts that are often associated with flowers are beauty, love, perfume, colour, innocence and perfection. Flowers can be seen as the culmination of a plant, expressing its essence. So, symbolically speaking, they often represent the virtues of the soul.

In many cultures there was a mystical cultivation of flowers. In ancient China, for example, it is said that there were centres of initiation that were dedicated to perfumes, gardens and the study of flowers. And the Aztecs of Mexico cultivated ornamental flowers in gardens, partly for the pleasure they provided to gods and men, partly for the inspiration of artists and poets, and partly for their intrinsic symbolic value. In their art and religion there were many references to flowers, such as the 'flowering war', referring to the conquest of one's lower nature, which would result in the flowering of the virtues of the soul.

Cosmically, the stars are sometimes described as flowers in the firmament, while the flowers on Earth are like terrestrial stars. Although this might be dismissed as mere poetic fancy, if the axiom 'as above, so below' has any truth to it, then this 'fancy' might contain a hidden reality.

The colour and perfume of flowers and plants are particularly important: the leaves and resins of herbs, shrubs and trees are often burned in magical or religious ceremonies. Flowers are also traditionally related with healing the sick and helping the dead to pass over to the other side. This is esoterically attributed to the healing power of the elementals (elves) which are said to live among their petals, imbibing and at the same time helping to produce their perfumes.

I would like to end this article with two flower references in the teachings of the Buddha.

It is said that he once gave a "flower sermon" to his assembled disciples, which consisted of holding up a lotus flower, without any speech or explanation. Only one disciple (Mahakashyapa) understood. According to one interpretation, the flower was an image of the perfection to be attained, an expression of the inexpressible.

And in the Dhammapada, the Buddha associates the perfume of flowers with virtue and wisdom:

> **There is the perfume of sandalwood, or rose-bay, of the blue lotus and jasmine; but far above the perfume of those flowers, the perfume of virtue is supreme.**
>
> **Even as on a heap of rubbish thrown away by the side of the road, a lotus flower may grow and blossom with its pure perfume giving joy to the soul, in the same way among the blind multitudes shines pure the light of wisdom of the student who follows the Buddha, the One who is truly awake.**
>
> (Dhammapada, Chapter 4. PUPPHAVAGGA: The Flowers of Life).

Julian Scott

Suggestions for further reading:

- J. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology.*
- J. Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant *Dictionary of Symbols.*
- E. Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols.*
- M. Eliade, *Shamanism.*
- F. Hartmann, *The Life of Paracelsus*
- J.A. Livraga Rizzi, *The Elemental Spirits of Nature.*
- *Paracelsus, Selected Writings* (ed. Jolande Jacobi).

Turner's Odyssey

J.M.W. Turner was a prolific English painter who, on his death in 1851, bequeathed his entire life's work of oil paintings, watercolours and sketches to the English public, requesting only that they be kept together and displayed in one building to be seen free of charge. His wishes were unfortunately not quite fulfilled in their entirety, the collection being split up and put on display in many different galleries around the world, but a large collection is on permanent display at Tate Britain and can indeed be seen by the public, gratis.

One of the most enduring of many interesting stories regarding Turner's life relates to an oil painting first exhibited to much uproar and outrage in 1842 called *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*. Critics said he had gone mad, others described it as "soapsuds and whitewash". Turner was hurt by the criticism but is likely not to have been surprised by it, saying later:

"I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like; I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did."

A huge fan of Homer and Virgil, it is likely that Turner was conscious of the parallels with Odysseus' ocean passage to endure the Song of the Sirens.

J.M.W. Turner - *Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*

What is clear from this painting and story is that Turner was less interested in representation and more concerned with experience. Painting was his way of exploring the experience of existence, and one of his main concerns was the effects of the Sun, of light. The scenes in his early paintings were largely vehicles for his explorations into the reality of light, theories of colour, paint itself and the subjectivity of the observer. Turner was very interested in the optics of vision, realising that only a small area of the human visual field sees an image in sharp focus and that our field of perception is built up by many small movements of the eye. He also realised that this limited area of optimal resolution is a curved surface, which led him to depict light in a radial arrangement which went against the perceived wisdom of the time that light travels in straight lines. Turner felt it travelled in waves. Turner wasn't only interested in light, paint and optics, however – these were merely vehicles for his interest in the sublime, in time passing, light fading, the inescapability of death. He was fascinated with the decay of empires such as Carthage and Napoleonic Europe, human loss and apocalypse.

J.M.W. Turner – *The Decline of the Cathaginian Empire, 1817*

In Turner's depiction of *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* we see a masterful depiction of the sun setting. From the textures of the clouds, the change of hue in the sky to how the light bounces from different surfaces and textures on buildings, nature and man we are left in no doubt that we are seeing the sun setting on a once great empire. We can notice that the buildings in the distance are rendered softer, more hazy. Turner's observations of the effect of atmospheric haze allow him to give the painting depth and realism, but realism wasn't his prime concern. His famous last words were "The Sun is God" and, with his interest in the sublime and the apocalyptic, we can interpret this as a kind of understanding by Turner that the beginning and end of everything we know is contained within one place. The apocalypse clears the chaos ready for the next garden of Eden. It is the overcoming of dualities, the process of transformation. Turner was on his own Odyssey to understand existence, the sublime and death, and he left his findings for the public to view at the Tate Britain, gratis.

Tom Moran

The Mystery of Time in Various Cultures

Part 2: Cultural Perception of Time

If we are to understand time from a cultural perspective, we need to look compare our general understanding of time today with that of other past cultures.

Our current worldview seems to imply that there is a unidirectional progression from past to present and into the future, which means that everything in the past must have been less developed than it is now. Different sciences examining the development of life and evolution study how gross forms of matter were formed from more subtle forms of gases. As the environment was rapidly changing more elements were formed which gave a rise to a successful combination of chemical reactions that eventually gave birth to simple forms of life. Then it was just a matter of millions of years of trial and error to develop a complex system of living organisms which contain consciousness and even self-awareness. In this chain of events, the further back we look into the past, the more primitive

Photo by Josep Castells on Unsplash

forms we encounter. Following this model of thought and looking at the development of humanity, our civilization would be the most civilized and the most advanced. And at first sight, how could it be otherwise? For we can clearly see the progress from simpler to more complex levels of organization and technology. We have moved a long way from the stone age, through the bronze and iron ages, to the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and to the technological era. Also, when examining our ways of thinking we can note

that there were distinct steps which we have developed over periods of time. We have moved from primitive tribal animism, from mythological stories and dogmatic beliefs of religions, to a culture based on science and reason. Such a view is the generalized linear model, which today is most commonly accepted, at least in the Western world. When comparing this worldview with the views of other past cultures, it is quite different and certainly more self-centred and materialistically based.

Most of the ancient cultures were based on an understanding that time moves forward in cycles. The clearest example of this comes from ancient India. In Hinduism time is divided into long cycles of time, called yugas. And contrary to our understanding of linear time and evolution, humanity does not advance as it moves from one yuga into another. On the contrary, it starts with the golden age, or Satya Yuga, and moves into the silver, bronze and finally the iron age or dark age – Kali Yuga. When there is a lack of virtues and values, and ethics and morality are in decline, humanity moves away from the golden age, into an age of corruption. The bad news is that we are currently in Kali Yuga, and to make it worse, this age is said to last 432,000 years and it only started in 3,102 BCE, with Krishna's death, according to the Hindu scriptures. When Kali Yuga comes to an end, the cycle of four yugas repeats itself another 71 times. This larger cycle of 72 smaller cycles is called a manvantara and lasts 306,720,000 years. After the manvantara, the universe is dissolved and enters a period of inertia, or rest, for the same amount of time, until the new manvantara begins.

This should not be a cause for a pessimistic perspective that everything is only going to get worse before it gets better, because with the theory of cycles, there are also smaller cycles within greater ones, like the periods of cultural renewal that occurred within the Middle Ages. According to the Eastern teachings, when there is a big decline of humanity, avatars come to revive the spiritual and civilizational impulse. This would also imply that there is certain order that goes beyond our human world of affairs.

In Ancient China, more then 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Confucius spoke of ancient people who were more aligned with the cosmic order than the people of his time. He spoke of the mandate of heaven which was given to the emperor to establish the celestial order on Earth. If the emperor acted unjustly, he would lose the mandate of heaven. The celestial order is something eternal and beyond time.

In Ancient Egypt they believed that the first kings were not mere mortals, but gods who taught humanity many practical skills as well as philosophical teachings. Their rule was just and people lived in prosperity. That distant past was seen as a golden age as well.

To put this distinct difference into perspective, it would be fair to say that of course there is some truth in both views, the main difference being that our current model has a more reduced view. It only relates to the development and evolution of form or matter, while not being able to grasp the notion of consciousness and life as something separate, which does not derive from matter. With that view, we have reduced the scope of reality and the idea of life.

Platonic philosophy also made a clear distinction between different orders of reality, of which the temporal or mundane reality would be the last. As I mentioned in Part I of this article, Plato wrote in the *Timaeus* that 'Time is a moving image of eternity', which means that what we see as a manifested reality is a reflection of a higher reality beyond time and change. It also means that it would not be possible for matter to create life or intelligence, and that consciousness is not a product of chemical reactions, just as music is not the result of a speaker from which we can hear it, but the speaker is only a medium.

According to Mircea Eliade, in his work *The Sacred and the Profane*, traditional societies and ancient cultures saw reality as "a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype". This means that reality is not a one-dimensional plane, but has many levels in a hierarchical order, and time is only one of them. Our task is to be able to perceive celestial archetypes, Platonic Ideas, and faithfully reflect them. This universe and the world are not a coincidental creation, but has a purpose and a supporting intelligence.

The idea of cycles is not only interesting because it resembles natural rhythms; it also relates to our different phases in life. Each cycle is an opportunity for regeneration and rebirth and to rebalance our energies. When considering the movement of time in cycles, what also emerges is the idea that our life is also cyclical. Not only that we have many different cycles in life, but for most of the ancient traditions, we also have many lives. This inevitably brings us to the idea of reincarnation, something not so commonly accepted by the modern Western model.

We can clearly see many differences with these two distinct models. One is lacking in metaphysics, meaning and purpose, while the other is able to integrate other levels of reality and places the human being within the greater universe. If our model lacks those elements, the culture we create will also reflect that. How we treat nature, animals and people is a sign of a civilized society, which

Artistic illustration of Multi-dimensional time

maybe today has not climbed as high as technology has. For ancient civilizations the sign of advancement was the alignment with the cosmic principles and with the law of righteousness. Our view of a timeline and evolution will hopefully change and with that our narrative will also change. And when we try to describe transcendental truths, we might well use mythological language with many symbols and, most likely, faith will be there as well. What matters today is that we can change the perspective and bring back the missing parts to enrich our culture and thrive within the cycle of a dark age.

Miha Kosir

The Sweet (and Sour) Dream of Nuclear Power

Nuclear physics is a relatively new science, which began at the dawn of the 20th century, and its potential applications have fuelled the imagination of many writers, businessmen and scientists with the sweet dream of (almost) unlimited power and energy. After the Second World War, which ended with the dramatic revelation of its destructive power, the development of nuclear powerplants began slowly. It was with the first oil crisis in the 1970s that the installation of more power plants throughout the Northern Hemisphere gained a second wind, as the promise of never-ending crude oil was showing signs of fatigue.

There have been plans since the 1950s for nuclear power to replace fossil fuels in the long term. The idea is that the huge amount of energy from nuclear power plants could be used to synthesise a variety of carbon- and hydrogen-based fuels. It was around that time that the term "energy transition" was coined. This was the plan that Cesare Marchetti, an Italian physicist, had in mind in the 1970s in order to transition from fossil fuels.

Image: Zoonar.com/www.artushfoto.eu/picture alliance


Photo by dhahi alsaeedi on Unsplash

Marchetti predicted a transition in 50 years, and the fossil fuel industry jumped on this opportunity to use the term and justify the use of their products to help with the so-called transition.

The problem is that there has never been an energy transition in the past, but rather an energy addition. As new energies were discovered they were added in to the mix in order to have more power at our disposal. The same is happening with the renewable energies today.

So, what happened to the types of plans such as Marchetti's? Well, in the 1980s nuclear power met with quite a lot of resistance and, of course, Chernobyl happened. Also, in the 1970s and 80s other techniques to extract oil offshore encouraged the oil companies to keep digging and misled the public.

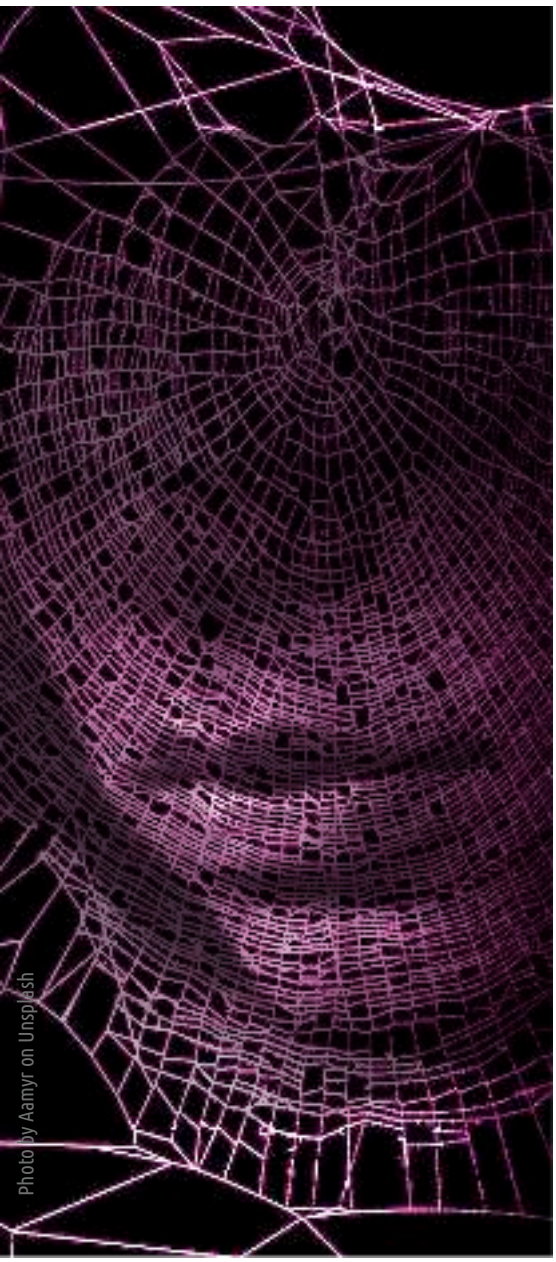
But nuclear power is far from dead. As you might have noticed, I have only referred to nuclear fission, which involves the splitting of atoms. But I did not mention its more elusive twin brother, nuclear fusion, which consists of the fusion of atoms, similar to the nuclear reaction that happens in any star. Within stars, atoms of hydrogen collide in a plasma at more than 5 million degrees Celsius and form atoms of Helium, as well as releasing an incredible amount of energy, which gives life to the universe. The idea of replicating this reaction on Earth is extremely complicated due to the temperature of the plasma. It has been possible to replicate such reactions in laboratories, in very small quantities and for brief moments of a few milliseconds to a few seconds only.

There is a fusion reactor called ITER being built in the south of France, which is supposed to replicate the reaction over a few minutes and with a much greater quantity of plasma. However, the application of such fusion reactors in electrical power plants does not form part of ITER and there are no projects at the moment that are working towards that goal. Therefore, it is unlikely that nuclear fusion will be used in any capacity to produce electricity in this century.

Unfortunately, we can't wait 100 years for nuclear fusion to replace fossil fuels. Some scientists, such as the astrophysicist François Roddier, argue that having an almost infinite amount of energy would be catastrophic to our ecosystems as we would have the power to transform our environment beyond recognition and any sense of sustainability. They argue that the only sustainable nuclear power is that which comes from the sun, as it provides a sustainable flux of energy that Nature has had hundreds of millions of years to adapt to, and would give humanity more than enough for the many millennia to come to prosper.

Florimond Krins

The Games of Maya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INTRODUCTION

Maya is an ancient deity from the East, whose name means illusion. She is the veil with which Nature covers all things so that we humans cannot easily discover her hidden laws, and in this way the beauty of Maya and her manifold games beguile us, seduce us and help us to pass the years of life which are allotted to us on this Earth.

Illusion plays with our senses. And, more or less consciously, we join in the game. Illusion is not exactly something that does not exist, because we can perceive it. The games of illusion are based on real, but not permanent things; they are truths which live as long as a bubble – or an illusion – lives. But we, in our ignorance, suppose that those momentary truths are everything.

It is by setting our efforts and our highest hopes on the games of Maya that we come to know pain. Everything that we want slips through our fingers, and we become blind to the possibility of seeing those other things that are more lasting, less fallible, closer to immortality.

Why do we play? Why do we accept the illusion of Maya without realizing it? To answer this question would be equivalent to knowing precisely why children play. They play, even though they know that the games they are playing are not real; but they need to practise, to test their abilities and to prepare themselves for the greater game which is life itself. We humans are always a little like children. Uncertain of the final destiny which awaits us, we play in life, trying to prove to ourselves that we are capable of achieving things. All of us are taking part in the "Games of Maya".

THE GAME

Once upon a time there was a very serious child, so serious that he felt deeply sorry for the other children who spent their days playing. This child had noticed that the dolls, the toy cars, the masks and all the other toys, were treated by the grown-ups as worthless and unreal. And so, not wanting to be less than them, he decided to do without these illusions.

While all the children played, the child of our story remained solitary and aloof, suffering as he watched his poor companions enjoying their games and imaginary adventures. The solitary child tried to find

consolation in reading, but he soon saw that the books too were filled with fantasies and stories that were not always true. The child then turned to the contemplation of nature and discovered to his horror that nature too was playing... beguiling and deceiving with lights and colours, forms and perfumes...

The child needed an explanation, so he went back to his former playmates, and asked them:

"Why are you playing? Can't you see that all your toys are not real, that they are of no use to you in real life?"

"We are playing at being grown-ups."

"But your cars are not like those of the grown-ups... you can't drive them in the streets... And your dolls are not like real-life children."

"We know that. But while we are using these little cars and these little dolls, we are practising what we will do when we will be grown-up men and women. Then we won't be afraid of having children or of driving vehicles if we need to."

"So you know that you are playing with illusions?"

"Of course we know, but we don't think about it. If we were to be constantly reminding ourselves that our toys are imitations, we wouldn't be able to play. And we need to play, we need to rehearse what we will be doing tomorrow in reality. That is why we throw ourselves into our game and enjoy it as if it were real."

The solitary child retraced his steps, and understood the reason for his eternal sadness. It doesn't always bring happiness to know the truth about everything or to be continually aware of the truths of life.

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Once upon a time there was a man whom everyone called a

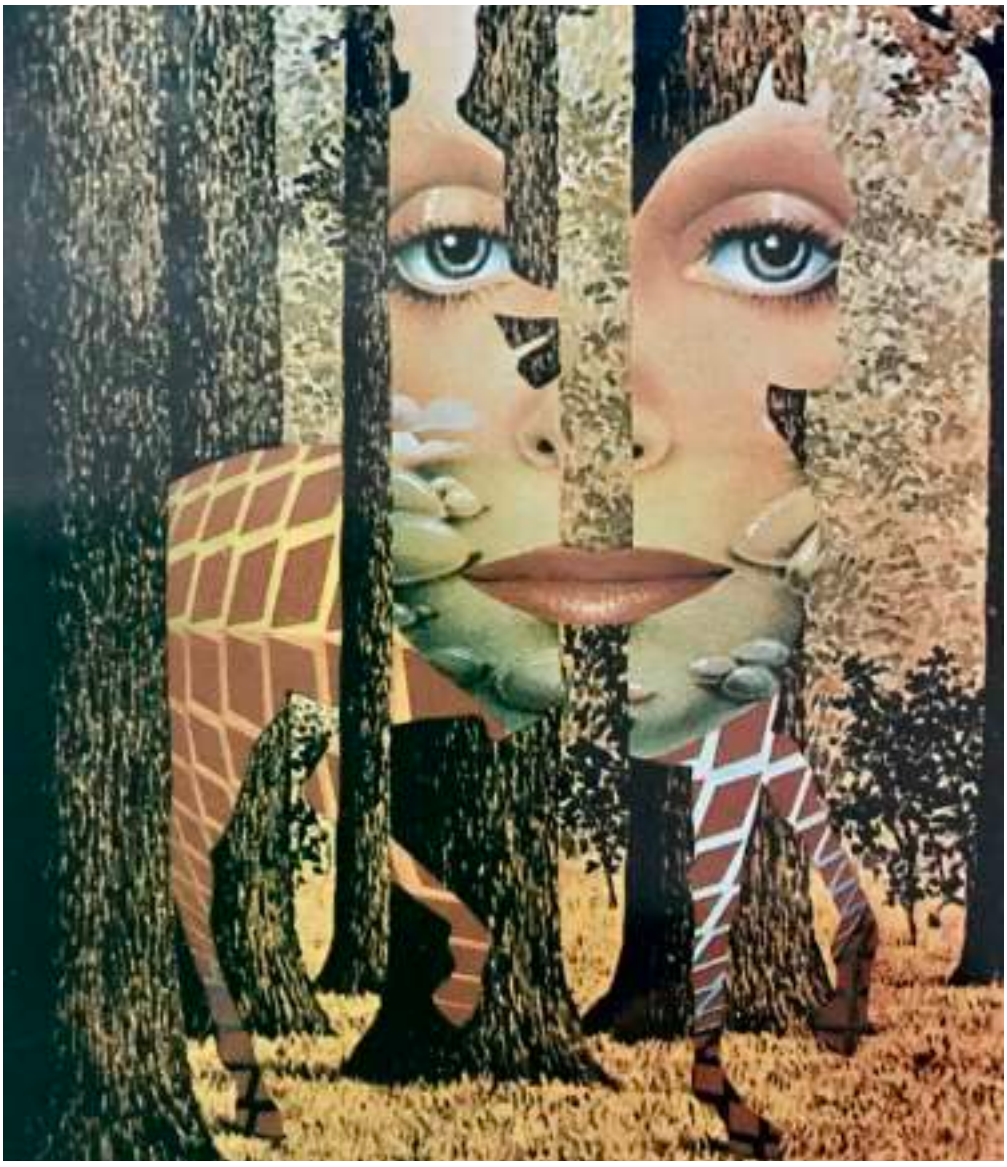

Photo by Jeremy Hynes on Unsplash

"philosopher". He was different from others and was not interested in the same things; in fact he felt a great contempt for the day-to-day concerns of "normal" humans. The philosopher knew things about life and death, about good and evil, about destiny and its laws, and wanted nothing to do with the vanities of the world.

While all the other humans rushed about like industrious little ants, our philosopher remained aloof, thoughtful and solitary, suspicious of the feelings, thoughts and intentions of everyone else.

He watched others acting with an ironic smile. How could they fail to realize that they were playing in the great game of life? Couldn't they see that all their efforts were in vain, since the destiny of humanity was already traced in the spheres. How could they suffer and laugh, worry and desire, without realizing that nothing was worth any laughter or tears, any desire or longing?

For the "philosopher", to eat was a torture; to sleep, a necessity of his body; to love, little more than a lack of maturity and self-sufficiency. To read, futile; to act, unnecessary. To suffer ... something which he could not avoid even with all his philosophy. And that made him terribly similar to the rest...

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For Maya and her games also constitute one of the laws of life. One thing is to know her traps, and something very different is to want to escape from them. To become aware of the game of Maya is to acquire human consciousness. To escape from the games of Maya is equivalent to being much more than a simple philosopher: it is to have reached God, it is to have leapt beyond the human level and its necessities.

As long as we exist in this moment of evolution, Maya will be our inseparable companion. She not only tries to deceive us, but also to give beauty with veils and smiles to the harsh experiences through which we all have to pass, if we really want to overcome ourselves. There is more mercy than evil in Maya, more desire to help than to harm. And


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it is also up to man to notice and to be grateful for this effort of Nature's to make our life on Earth more pleasant to bear.

To play, without forgetting what we are doing: this is the secret. To prepare ourselves for when "we are grown-up", for when we will no longer need toys or props to make our way through this existence. But meanwhile, to accept our condition as children, and try to grow. With Maya at our side, with her games and ambushes, her enchantments and her traps, with the flavour that makes life pass quickly and adds a new and important experience to our knowledge. Knowledge removes evil and ugliness from things. With knowledge, the games of Maya are the spice of life.

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As I write this, I remember that when I was little and weary of the demands of social behaviour, I often used to think that the whole of life was a great game, a great drama on the stage of existence. Then, I delighted in each of my actions, imagining that I was the actress and that I had to play my part in the best way I could, since thousands of eyes were watching me. And I played at acting, paying attention to my clothes and my gestures, my glances and my movements.

In adolescence, I threw aside the illusion of the theatre and its stage. .. Life was something too serious and important to be playing at representing it.

And now, I have returned to the principles which inspired me in my childhood. All of this is a great game. Maya, her toys, all human beings and me, we are the actors. Life is the stage. When the curtain falls and the lights go out, this type of performance will have ceased and the doors of a new mystery will open. And I am not sure that Maya will not be there as well, among the shadows of the curtains, awaiting us with new toys to help us live in that other new world.

Excerpted from the Book *The Games of Maya*, by Delia Steinberg Guzmán, Honorary President of New Acropolis International

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