

This essay, which is intended as a contribution to the Jungian literature concerning the imaginal figure variously known as the *puer aeternus*, interior daimon, and divine child, was originally published in *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy*. Fall 1988, vol. 24, no. 3. pp. 51-57. All rights reserved.

Learning To Swim On a Piano Bench

And Other Gnostic Secrets

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I

“You can't learn to swim on a piano bench.” “Jump in and get your feet wet.” “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” “Experience is the best teacher.” “Live and learn.” “The proof is in the pudding.” “Don't just stand there, do something.” The logic common to all these adages is the logic of incarnation. The ideal must be rendered concrete. Theory must be subjected to experimental verification. Spirit must actualize itself in the world of hard knocks. Piety must commit itself to social action. Just as God became man in Christ, so, on the secular level, everything ephemeral or potential must become humanly actual. Pure science must become applied science. Sub-atomic physics must be used to build bombs. And when the bombs are built they must, according to the same logic of incarnation, be placed into the world, tested, made flesh.

That incarnation may lead to crucifixion, even as it did for the incarnate Christ, also reflects in our popular speech. Structurally speaking, the expression, “You've made your bed, now lie in it,” or better, “Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself,” is equivalent to the ancient cry: “Crucify him, crucify him!” The maverick of today, like the Messiah of yesterday, will learn his lesson through actions and their consequences, stimulus and response, the incarnations and crucifixions of behaviorism. Sooner or later, on the cross of his own experience, the wind of mortal limitation will dry him off behind the ears.

Commonsensible though these proverbs may seem, there is another tradition, a tradition that asserts that you *can* learn to swim on a piano bench, and that the proof is *not* in the pudding. What is this tradition so anomalous to common sense? Heresy? Esotericism? Occultism? Yes; it is all

three. It is Gnosticism.

According to a Gnostic creation myth, the creation of the world and man was the result of a terrible error. Before God was able to bring forth creation, the blueprint of his intended creation fell into the hands of impatient angels who attempted to finish the work themselves using mud. The result was a disaster. Every aspect of the creation which the angels had cloned was riddled with imperfections. Worst of all, man was a mere worm compared to the blueprint of God's creative intention.

When God saw what the angels had done, he took pity on the poor, misbegotten creatures. Breathing on them with his potent breath, he implanted in them a divine spark--words and semen (*logos spermaktikos*), seminal ideas and fantasies.

In the Gnostic view, we are all prematurely born and all the pain and suffering of our lives can be attributed to the original sin of the impatient angels. And, yet, as stuck in matter as we may be, salvation is still possible. The breath of God abides in us. We have a divine spark--ideas and the capacity for reflection. To the extent that we can approximate God's original blueprint in ourselves as a knowledge or gnosis, we can reverse the error of the angels and find our proper form.

But how do we come to know the original blueprints? How do we gain this Gnostic knowledge? Gnosis is a very special kind of knowledge. It is not gleaned from experience and has no basis in the empirical world. Indeed, to know things empirically is to lose sight of God's original blueprints, for the empirical world is entirely the product of angelic error, a source not of knowledge, but of ignorance.

In contrast to incarnational ignorance, Gnostic knowledge is devoid of common sense. It is a knowledge of things unseen and of things hoped for. Strangely, it is a knowledge that is prior to experience, a knowledge of the categories of experience, which we infer from the insights of experience. For the Gnostic, the blueprints of God's original intention are knowable through the recognition of their absence. The vicissitudes of our worm body, "the thousand shocks which mortal flesh is heir to," remind us of our other, higher body.

But, of course, literally speaking, the popular adage is correct: we cannot learn to swim on a piano bench. If, however, our destination is the divine blueprints, if, like the Gnostics, we wish to swim against the mistaken current of creation, we can only do so on a piano bench.

Piano bench aquatics do not require a thrashing of arms and a kicking of feet, for they are of a buoyancy that is entirely conceptual and metaphorical. At a piano bench the divine sparks that would be dispersed through the waterways of the mistaken world by actual swimming are turned into sonatas and returned to the divine blueprint. If swimming at a piano bench makes any sense at all today it is because, as Stevie Wonder sings, "Music is a world within itself." Art, so long as it is art for the blueprint's sake, art for art's sake, approximates God's original design and gives us gnosis.

Like Gnosticism, learning to swim on a piano bench, or, for that matter, at a typewriter or an easel, is an activity entirely unanswerable to the literal order of things. A swimming lesson is taking place on a piano bench whenever we refuse to get our feet wet or learn from experience. It is by refusing to trade poetry for fact, myth for statistics, human idealism for the pragmatics of the clone, that we swim up the stream of history and against the current of the false creation.

To enter the blueprints that intercede creation, to enter the reality of the discarnate soul, we need not willingly suspend our disbelief (Coleridge) so much as willingly suspend our common sense. The getting of wisdom Gnostic-style means recovering our uncommon sense from the oblivion of the commonsensical. Gnosticism is not something we learn. It is a process of unlearning. Like the suicidal wisdom of Socrates, it is a critique of consciousness, a knowing by unknowing, a knowing by knowing nothing.

As incarnated into life as we all are, there is a part of us--a Gnostic part--that wants out. It doesn't matter if we have everything or nothing, a part of us always feels stuck in a world that lacks necessity. Though common sense makes passionate testimonials, the articles of its faith are never quite enough to convince us that the order of existence is anything but arbitrary. No matter what we see, hear, taste, touch or smell, a part of us never totally converts to the world of appearances. Gnosticism is the mysticism of this sense of disbelief. As a spiritual discipline it starts with man's basic sense of incredulity before mere being and tries to amplify it. Gnosticism is a fastidious process of dis-believing the witness of the senses in order to free perception from the angel's mud of materialism and to return it to the metaphors that back the mind, the divine blueprints, the categories, the Platonic forms of cognition, the archetypes.

When we were young and had not yet been sprinkled with the baptismal waters of common sense, our Gnostic sensibility was especially keen. As youngsters we sensed the absurdity of our incarnational life, less with the cynicism of the old Gnostics, than with bewildered puzzlement and wonder. Why do we have five fingers and not six or three? Why do we have to eat, to sleep, to defecate? Why Mommy? Why? Why? Though laughed at by grown-ups, these questions suggest the capacity, already in youngsters, for reflection beyond the contingency of concrete life.

The anthropologists who told us that human history properly began with the acquisition of dexterous fingers and an opposing thumb were wrong. It is the capacity of the divine spark in us to wonder why just two opposing thumbs and not one-hundred-and-two that makes us human. Paradoxically, our humanness is rooted in our innate sense that absolutely nothing is innate or necessary. Man is the creature that re-creates himself and in order to do this he must believe that nothing in the temporal world is hard-wired, carved into stone, immovable or fixed.

Our given body or worm body is not our human body. Our bodies only become human by calling them into question and creatively exaggerating their arbitrary features. It is by means of earrings and tattoos, circumcisions and punk hair-cuts that we smelt down the misbegotten form the

angels gave us and mint ourselves new ones. This is not to say that the mohawk hair-cut is the hair-cut God intended. The mohawk, the earrings and the tattoo are important only as a kind of Gnostic punctuation. As we go about dressed in the quirks and foibles of the day we are walking question marks. Why are we here? Why do we suffer? Why is the world so strange?

No matter how we ask these questions and no matter where we look for answers--psychology, the natural sciences, theology--the answers we get are nothing more than elaborations of our mother's commonsensical reply, "because." Mankind finds its lowest common denominator in the anti-awareness over which the word because presides. When we enquire into the necessary and sufficient conditions for the worm-wit that justifies and shapes so much of our lives we find this little word. In the mistaken angelic beginning there was the *Word* and the *Word* was *because*.

The highest common denominator of mankind, on the other hand, is simply the question "why?". Consciousness begins with the asking of questions, but--and here is the rub--it is destroyed if the questions are answered in any final or definitive way.

During his crucifixion, Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?" Inasmuch as this lamentation was a question it was a moment of pure Gnosticism. Jesus had lost faith in his incarnational mission and become incredulous in the face of his own fate. But the question did not remain an open one for long. Orthodox Christianity patched together an answer. God subjected Jesus to the most piteous of human deaths because only such a pitifully human death could serve as a container for the sin and suffering of our mortal existence. "Glory be to the Lamb that slain hath redeemed us."

The Gnostics could not abide this theologizing away of Christ's "why?". From their point of view, if God had become incarnate in the man, Jesus, it was for the purpose of calling our incarnation into question. Even in the approved gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--that seems to be Jesus' point: Don't get so invested in the material world that you miss the kingdom which is to come.

In Gnostic gospels the incarnated world is called into question by a Christ who is represented as

being not quite corporeal. When he walked he left no tracks. When the disciples tried to touch him, their hands would sometimes pass through him. When it comes to Gnostic accounts of crucifixion the same idea persists. In the Acts of John, a work of Christian Apocrypha assigned to the fire by the Nicene Council of 787, John recounts how while Jesus seemed to be undergoing crucifixion down in Jerusalem, he appeared simultaneously to John in a cave on the Mount of Olives where he passed on to him the saving gnosis. In the cave Jesus showed John a subtle, incorporeal cross, a cross of light, and said to him:

You hear that I suffered, yet I suffered not; and that I suffered not, yet I did suffer; and that I was pierced, yet I was not wounded; that I was hanged, yet I was not hanged; that blood flowed from me, yet it did not flow, and, in a word, that what they say of me, I did not endure, but what they do not say, those things I did suffer. Now, what these things are, I secretly show you.... You must know me, then, as the torment of the logos, the piercing of the logos, the blood of the logos, the wounding of the logos, the fastening of the logos, the death of the logos. (Barnstone, 1984, p. 420)

In the Gnostic view, the crucifixion of Christ was the crucifixion of the uncommon sense. Christ nailed to the wooden cross was a metaphor nailed to a fixed interpretation, a “why?” nailed to a “because.” The danger they saw in the common view of the crucifixion was that men and women might find the mistaken world more comfortable if God was believed to have taken their form and died in the world as they did. In the Gnostic view, the crucifixion of Christ should not quiet Man's questioning spirit; it should raise it to an even higher pitch of incredulity. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me to the error of the angels, to my incarnational life, to my worm body?”

The question “why?” has a counter-incarnating effect on our mental life if it is allowed to remain an open question and is not cancelled out with a “because.” Perhaps this is the reason that why-questions are so unpopular with psychotherapists. Not only do they fail to facilitate adaptation to life; they promote estrangement from it. But the goal of Gnosticism is not life, but the divine

blueprints from which life is fallen. To return to these blueprints, to return to its true home, the Gnostic part of us must question the accidents and circumstances of life that divide it from them.

Among the images of Gnosticism is that of the crucified worm or serpent which hangs upon the cross like a writhing question mark. In the Gnostic view, Christ is a tormenting question. Like the koan of Zen Buddhism, His incarnation and crucifixion poses a question so frustrating to the common sense that the common sense dies and an uncommon sense is resurrected in reflection. For the Gnostic, resurrection is not the literal event in the life of the historical Jesus; it is the mental event upon which our imaginal life is founded and built. Like the satori experience of Zen practice, it is a transfiguration of consciousness into an expanded awareness, an uncommon sense, an endlessly self-interrogating gnosis.

III

Perhaps no one today has captured the spirit of Gnosticism as poignantly as the film maker Stephen Spielberg. His film, *E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial)*, is a masterpiece of nostalgia Gnostic-style. The little brown creature from outer-space, with his strange extra-terrestrial body, is beloved to children precisely because he resonates with the part of them that once wondered at the strangeness of their own bodies. By exploring the possibility of life on other planets, science fiction films relativize our human existence and expose it as arbitrary. If E.T. looks strange to us, must not we too look strange to him? The idea that there may be strangers among us, strangers from another planet, makes us strangers to ourselves. All we have to do is entertain the possibility of another form of intelligent life, and picture it with a few appendages or faculties more or less that we have, to call into question the earthly reality in which we feel most securely grounded.

This is not to say that the alien's form of being is any less absurd than our own. Indeed, from the Gnostic point of view, E.T. is every bit as much of a worm as we are. And, yet, like two locked

boxes each containing the other's key, the earthling and the extra-terrestrial hold for each other the possibility of becoming *conscious* of this absurdity.

The relationship to the alien or stranger, the relationship that alienates us from our usual selves, is a dialectical one. As the monolithic thesis--"My reality is the real reality"--is cancelled by the alien's similar, and, hence, antithetical claim, a synthesizing idea, higher than the accidents through which the assertions of each differed, is called into play.

When two or more are gathered together in a dialectical recognition of their own strangeness, not only will the Christ-like E.T. be there, but his "why?" will get through to the divine blueprints, and a mother ship will be deployed to fetch him home. The communication line by means of which the Gnostic in us taps the saving gnosis, the communication line by means of which E.T. phones home, is in this sense a party line shared with the stranger. Dialectic is the *difference* between dialects. We need the conversation of strangers whose idiosyncratic use of language underlines our own idiosyncratic usage, to release our words from their enslavement to common sense reality. Only when our words are released from the attenuating predicates of the mistaken world can we know them as the breath of God. Though good communication skills may help us get on with the business of practical life, it takes anti-conversations of interminable nit-picking over the definition of terms to initiate us into our words as images and perspectives that are as prior to common sense as the divine blueprints are to the world that has proceeded from the angel's error. As the deconstructionist literary critics have said, words are not a function of the objects in the incarnational world which they supposedly signify, but, rather, like the figures of a text or blueprint, they are a function of their relationship to one another.

E.T.'s phone call home is an act of consciousness that renders the familiar strange and the particular archetypal (and *vice versa*). Whatever he looks at through his alien, and, hence, discarnating eyes, resonates with the divine blueprints and rings home. Keats (1959) called this mode of communication with the ideal "negative capability" (p. 261). By recognizing the absence of something, the poet calls its presence to mind in an exalted fashion. Applied to Gnosticism this

suggests that to return to the divine blueprints we must find the negatives in us that correspond to them.

Joyce “returned” to the Dublin of the divine blueprints by staying on in Zurich and writing from the Dublin of his homesickness. Only by utterly removing himself from the mistaken Dublin and immersing himself in its absence could his consciousness return to the city's original image--the unfallen complexity of its signs.

Our home in the divine blueprints is light-years away from the world of common sense. Like Spielberg and Joyce, the only way we can return to it is by means of that un-identified flying object, the imagination. Poems, pictures, songs--all the expressions of the breath of God in us--are the extra-incarnational piano benches that take us home. Active imagination--so long as it is not enslaved to the concerns of common sense--is the Gnostic's saving gnosis. It is by activating our images and fantasies that we return to the blueprints from which our lives have fallen.

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