



Personal essays

2016-2023

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beginning again

15 January 2016

I've been rereading Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and as ever when reading these wonderful books I try to guess what form my daemon would take. If you haven't read the books: do, because they are exquisite. If you have read the books, then you'll know that in the fictional world of *HDM*, people take the form of two connected entities, a human being and an animal daemon which evokes the person's innermost nature.

I imagine that my daemon would be a cricket. Last year I crafted a new blog, [The Necessary Game](#), and left behind the cricket icon on my previous site, [The Claypit's Hearth](#). It felt like the right thing to do at the time, but I didn't appreciate how much I would miss my cricket.

Meanwhile I have decided to move here into this yet again new space, and to reinstate my wee cricket while I'm at it. I don't know why I keep creating these iterations of web identity. I like playing with WordPress, and tinkering with it behind the scenes; I even like the puzzles presented by html and css. In any case, I'm enjoying myself immensely. David Bowie crafted a good life dipping into a toybox of personas so I'll just take my cue from him.

Thanks are due. My friend [Susan Moir Mackay](#) gave me the nudge I needed to take this next step, and I'm so grateful for her encouragement. (And [check out her beautiful artwork!](#))

So: welcome!

recovering the creative self

17 January 2016

An old friend from college days has commented on this blog. “I never imagined, knowing you in your teens/early 20s, that all of this creative genius was inside your head,” she said.

In my teens and early 20s, I didn’t know the creativity inside my head either. It had been scared right out of me. Years and years of school and society and unhelpful people had chipped away any confidence in my own creative abilities. I didn’t think of myself as a creative person – I regarded creativity as a special privilege reserved for others.

My experience was by no means unique. Countless people have their creative selves stomped out of commission for one reason or another, or for many reasons. ‘Creative types’ are assigned their own place in our social order, and we uphold the myth of the artist as either gifted and talented beyond belief or tortured internally beyond relief. Yet what a loss: creativity comes in all shapes and sizes and is a universally-shared human trait. There are myriad ways to express it – not one ‘right’ way.

Julia Cameron’s classic book *The Artist’s Way* explores this phenomenon through a 12-week programme of reflective practice. She calls it “a course in discovering and recovering your Creative Self.” The book digs into the various ways that we sell ourselves short, and helps to work through the issues that are preventing the creative self from flourishing.

Starting in mid-February, I will be hosting an *Artist’s Way* check-in group. (“Check-ins” is Cameron’s term for the end-of-chapter review sessions she has included, as a way to observe the internal processes that the course sets in motion.)

The group is free and limited to 8 places; it will take place here in Edinburgh where I live. You can [find out more here](#) and [register for a place on Eventbrite](#). If you live too far away to join me, please hold a good thought for the group as we embark on this project. And if you live nearby, or know of anyone who would be interested in coming along, please do let them know.

master of love

25 February 2016

This two-year-old article from the Atlantic came across my social media radar today: [**Masters of Love**](#). It describes research in which the body language and communication patterns of married partners correlated with the quality of their relationship. The conclusion of the research echoes common sense when it declares, “Science says lasting relationships come down to—you guessed it—kindness and generosity.”

More surprising, however, are the terms used to describe the results. The research subjects fell into two categories, we’re told: ‘Masters’ and ‘Disasters.’ Masters are kind and generous to one another while Disasters are not. Masters have successful, happy and fulfilling marriages while Disasters do not. I didn’t read carefully enough to examine the actual data results, but I take it for granted that both researchers and journalist spun this dramatic and polarising story out of data that was perhaps not so clear-cut as all that.

I can imagine the reaction of my friend Sue: her eyebrows raised, a wry guffaw from the bottom of her belly. I know which category she would put herself into, with a smartass aside while she was at it. Sue worked with lone parents and she was one herself, divorced like me – one of the Disasters. I suspect that she would agree with me that the painful truth of ended relationships is far, far more complex than that binary categorisation of good guys and bad guys, successes and failures.

Sue passed away very suddenly, and her funeral was yesterday. She left the legacy of a messy, unhappy divorce (Disaster!) but that’s not all she left. She left two lovely daughters and three beautiful grandchildren. She left decades of hard graft in the precarious charity sector. She left countless memories with good friends who enjoyed her wit; her fine taste in food, drink, music, film and travel; her thoughtfulness and kindness; her drive for social justice. She left an indelible mark of perseverance and faith – taking one step after the other, carrying on whether it felt easy or not. With all due respect to the so-called research, I will remember my friend Sue as a Master.

on paying attention for the shopping

20 March 2016

Earlier today I was in our neighbourhood supermarket, doing the weekly shop. Peering down at my list, steering around other trolleys, examining the shelves: my attention was focused on getting through the shop as efficiently and swiftly as possible. Other people formed the backdrop to my quest, their conversations drifting past me as they passed me in the aisles. I manoeuvred past employees unloading crates and straightening items into neat rows, around small children in pushchairs with beleaguered mothers holding their laden handbaskets. And when I finally reached the tills and had unloaded my shopping onto the conveyor belt, there was a pause as the couple in front of me packed their bags and shuffled about for their debit card. I stood by the checkout and stared back into the expanse of aisles, lost in a daydream.

Very gradually I became aware of a small knot of employees standing a few feet away, discussing some aspect of their work. And then I happened to notice in the corner of my eye that the woman at my till was making a comment to the woman at the next till across the way, something to do with the timing of their breaks. At that point a manager in a shirt and tie, carrying a clipboard, walked past and over toward the customer service desk, calling out to someone who was stationed there and issuing some instruction or other. And finally I recalled that as I'd walked through the shop, the employees straightening the shelves had been chatting and gossiping together as they worked.

I suddenly became aware of this complex network of people and tasks, which had been buzzing along right under my nose as I'd filled my trolley. It was as though this parallel reality had been taking place invisibly, entirely unnoticed by me. Two layers of narrative: the employees and the shoppers, each focused on their own agendas. Of course there are plenty of points where the two narratives meet: customers asking where some item may be found, requesting cigarettes at the news kiosk, or paying for their goods at the till. But for the most part, the two narratives co-exist, each in their own realm. The employees focus on their given tasks, with customers forming a constantly moving backdrop; the shoppers search out their items, with employees likewise forming a backdrop.

All it took was a shift in attention, to suddenly become conscious of that parallel reality taking place right beside me. And it occurred to me, what if reality itself is along a spectrum, like the wave spectrum in physics? What if we're merely tuned into just a very small fraction of what is taking place around us? What if there are parallel narratives extending indefinitely? Well of course there are: every person in that shop carries around their own individual narrative, their personal history and their network of family, friends, acquaintances and co-workers. So all these different narratives co-exist simultaneously, all these threads of individual consciousness and attention, as well as all the infinite connections between them – all these layers upon layers of information that form the stories of our lives.

Certainly this isn't a new speculation. Mystics across the centuries and in many cultures refer to the idea that spiritual grace flows through the here and now, if only we stop striving so hard for something beyond ourselves and instead simply shift our attention, allowing ourselves to be fully in the present. Spirituality is not something remote and abstract, it is very grounded and intimate.

All this reminds of a book I've recently read, *The Naked Now* by the liberal theologian Richard Rohr. In it he suggests that

The essential religious experience is that you are being “known through” more than knowing anything particular yourself.... We are always and forever the conduits, the

instruments, the tuning forks, the receiver stations.... We slowly learn the right frequencies that pick up the signal.

I know from my own experience that reality can become very strange indeed. I've tuned into new frequencies which were the-same-but-not-the-same, there-but-not-there, as real as real and as ethereal as the bent light of a rainbow. Very much like the shift in attention which occurred this afternoon at the supermarket; all it takes is a shift in consciousness to finally see what has been there all along. It's surprising, and at the same time, very much unsurprising.

And kids, this is something you can try for yourself at home, or in your own local shops. Just pay attention while you pay at the till – how many realities can you spot, and how far along the spectrum can you sense?

go home, sister

25 April 2016

When I went away to university, the first friend I made was a sweet, goofy girl named – well, let's just call her M. She was a small-town girl from rural Iowa, and the first in her family to go to college. Her main subject of study was French, of all things. She had even visited France itself on a high school study exchange, lodging with a family in Paris and soaking up the cosmopolitan vibes of continental Europe. M's personality was delightfully dissonant with that Parisian chapter: she was playful and silly, unsophisticated and about as stylish as K-Mart's top line, but also hard-working and loyal. Too loyal, I thought.

She had left an older boyfriend back in her hometown – no, not just a boyfriend: a fiance. In his mid-twenties, he had apparently proposed to her 17-year-old self as soon as she stepped off the plane from that trip to France. None of her college friends ever met him, we just saw photographs and understood that he was there in the background, waiting impatiently for her to stop wandering and settle herself down as his wife.

M's family leaned on her too, I recall. Perhaps not deliberately, but certainly their financial instability weighed deeply upon her; she came from a working-class family for whom an academic degree in French must have seemed a bewilderingly pie-in-the-sky aspiration to chase with good money. M struggled to keep up with costs, working a 30-hour-per-week job at a local fast food restaurant, on top of her full-time course load. But it was all too much. After a mere single term at university, she gave up. She went home at the Christmas break and never came back.

I wrote to her repeatedly; so did her roommates – they even sent her a we-miss-you care package full of gifts and treats – but not once did she reply, to any of us. We never heard from her again. She had simply disappeared.

I'm thinking about her now, because this morning I learned that my friend E has a similar story. She shares it in this passage from her wonderful [Surviving Work blog](#):

Twenty-something and smart as boots, Yasmine and I worked happily organising stuff. Mediation workshops in the diamond mines of Congo to gender awareness for the pharmaceutical workers in Nepal. She had a natural political mind ...

We worked quietly and steadily until her father died. She quickly got married to a man recently returned from an Islamist camp in Jordan and over a period of six months she covered up everything that distinguished her. Her grief and anger vibrating under her hijab. The last time I saw her she turned up at work wearing a niqab. This was before the time when I'd had the chance to think through how to work with women in veils, now mainstream if you work in HE in the UK. I remember locking myself in the lavs and sweating – how to ask her if she's OK?

She didn't turn up for a week. So I asked HR where I could find her. Without skipping a beat they said Maalbeek, in an 'are you stupid?' tone. I ended up going to her apartment block and when nobody answered the door sitting on a bench outside for six hours. This wasn't because I thought it would work, but because it took me six hours to process what was happening both for me and for her. In hour six a woman in a niqab came and brought me a cup of mint tea and said, in English 'go home sister'.

There is a place in my heart reserved for these disappeared young women. These bright sparks,

swallowed up by pressing obligations to family and culture. These intelligent, capable women cut off from any ties outside a closed circle of expectations. When I was younger, I felt aggrieved by the sudden dumping of my friendship by M, her lack of response to my reaching-out letters. But deeper still, I felt worried and frightened for her, and imagined her cornered and pinned down by an oppressive marriage, by the curtailment of her personal dreams. I still think of her, and wonder where and how she is in her life. I wonder if she remembers me at all. I wonder, would she think of me as an old friend, or as a forgotten stranger, or as the middle-aged soul sister I imagine myself to be?

In her well-regarded *Women who Run with the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estes devotes a chapter to a woman's experience of returning home. In this case, home is "the soul-place," the source of instinct and inner strength – not the place of familial duty. Our true home, she says, "is an internal place, a place somewhere in time rather than space, where a woman feels of one piece. Home is where thought or feeling can be sustained instead of being interrupted or torn away from us because something else is demanding our time and attention." She also reassures us that "We all know how to return home. No matter how long it's been, we find our way."

Yes: go home, sister. Rentre chez toi, ma sœur, mon amie.

on spellbinding time

22 October 2016

It's been quite a while since I've written anything here. During the summer I was preoccupied with preparations for my fledgling to fly from the nest; she's now settled in at university and making her way there, and so far so good.

I've also been channelling my written thoughts recently into another webspace – [**the Pandora Project**](#) – rather than here. The Pandora Project is still in its early stages, and behind the scenes I am busy researching and planning how to take it forward. But it's fair to say that it has usurped my attention.

And otherwise I just haven't felt like writing all that much. So I've respected my need to step back and recharge, something I certainly didn't learn to do when growing up in an American culture that encouraged me to go, go, go and keep going and keep busy and work hard and play hard and always be trying to prove myself in some way. One of the most valuable things I have learned as an adult (and partly with the help of the relatively-less-stoked culture of the UK) is to appreciate and nurture downtime, do-nothing time, lie on the couch and stroke the sleeping cat and stare into space time; that spellbinding kind of time which is celebrated in one way or another by [**The Idler**](#) and [**the Slow Movement**](#) and the New Economics Foundation's [**21 Hours campaign**](#), for example. I have learned to concern myself less with output and more with outcome, and to be more patient about the limits of time which bind my efforts. As Eleanor Roosevelt wisely observed, "we have all the time there is."

Even in this deeply troubled world I take comfort from that thought, from that paradox: that despite the urgency of the complex, wicked problems our world faces, some part of the remedy lies in learning how to step back, slow down and go quiet.

So yeah, it's been a quiet spell here for some time, a spell that just now I feel ready to break.

on the body politic

23 October 2016

Here in Edinburgh we have a museum dedicated to centuries-old body parts suspended in jars of liquid. It's called the **Surgeons Hall Museum**, and is run by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, an esteemed professional organisation that has been around since the sixteenth century – back when they were all 'barber surgeons.' You can pay money to go look at diseased lungs and lesioned brains and so on, as well as antique surgical implements like the wrenches used to pull out teeth and the knives used to dissemble cadavers. That sort of thing.

I mention this because it does much to explain the current US presidential election. The whole world is watching in sick fascination as a cherished democratic institution is cut open like a dead bird with a blunt kitchen knife found rusting on the playground tarmac. We're fascinated with the grotesque, and that in itself explains the rise of Donald Trump. Admit it: he's mesmerising, in the same way that a car crash is mesmerising to rubberneckers driving past. He's brilliant news copy, that's for sure.

I prefer Hillary Clinton, of course, and I hope she wins the election. **This list of her achievements** demonstrates a lifetime of public service and she is hands down the more mature and reliable individual, to be holding a position of such power. Having said that, however, I must confess that I've come to terms with the possibility of a President Trump.

In the big picture, our human civilisation is in crisis. It cannot and will not continue forever in its current form. The big beast of global capitalism is beginning to struggle with terminal illness: a complex cancer of greed and violence and soulless exploitation has been growing within it over centuries of western expansion. Like any terminal illness, it will advance in a measured decline, punctuated by spasms of crippling emergency.

President Hillary Clinton will shore up the status quo, like a shot of morphine. President Donald Trump will wreak havoc, like a failed intervention. Either way, the end will come. Like a dying patient, at some point we will take stock of our life's choices, reach for our loved ones, and turn inward to await the inevitable.

In 1943, in the midst of the chaos and destruction occurring all across Europe, Simone Weil wrote an essay entitled *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*. In it she argues that "Democracy, majority rule, are not good in themselves. They are merely means toward goodness, and their effectiveness is uncertain."

For Weil, morality lies not in a position one takes, but rather in a personal commitment to truth and justice. The mechanisms of party politics demand that the individual compromises one's inner compass to fit the needs of the group and to achieve the group's aims, "in order to play an effective part in public affairs." She goes on to say, "A man who has not taken the decision to remain exclusively faithful to the inner light establishes mendacity at the very centre of his soul. For this, his punishment is inner darkness."

The battle between Crooked Hillary and Bully Trump may resemble a gunfight at the O.K. Corral, but that is part of the spectacle that is deliberately arranged by the political establishment and the corporate media. Decades of partisan maneuvering and calculation, by both entrenched two-sides-of-the-same-coin parties, has brought us to this point. Democrat or Republican, it doesn't really matter: neither party wishes for anything but its own security and growth, its own firm place at the banquet of power. Weil goes on:

Political parties are organisations that are publicly and officially designed for the purpose of killing in all souls the sense of truth and of justice. Collective pressure is exerted upon a wide public by the means of propaganda. The avowed purpose of propaganda is not to impart light, but to persuade. Hitler saw very clearly that the aim of propaganda must always be to enslave minds. All political parties make propaganda....

Nearly everywhere – often even when dealing with purely technical problems – instead of thinking, one merely takes sides: for or against. Such a choice replaces the activity of the mind. This is an intellectual leprosy; it originated in the political world and then spread through the land, contaminating all forms of thinking.

This leprosy is killing us; it is doubtful whether it can be cured without first starting with the abolition of all political parties.

Indeed. Someday we will be looking at our modern world like we look at the ancient one – in museums. We will look at our political institutions through the glass of a jar, floating in formaldehyde. Perhaps by then we will have learned to live exclusively faithful to the inner light, and will have created a different kind of society. Perhaps there is a cure out there, waiting to be found.

There is a passage in the book *Things That Can & Cannot Be Said* in which Arundhati Roy describes to John Cusack an experience she had in the forests of central India

where the poorest people in the world have stopped some of the richest mining corporations in their tracks. The great irony is that people who live in remote areas, who are illiterate and don't own TVs, are in some ways more free because they are beyond the reach of indoctrination by the modern mass media. There's a virtual civil war going on there and few know about it. Anyway, before I went into the forest, I was told by the superintendent of police, "Out there, ma'am... my boys shoot to kill." ... Anyway, then the cop says to me, "See, ma'am, frankly speaking this problem can't be solved by us police or military. The problem with these tribals is they don't understand greed. Unless they become greedy there's no hope for us. I have told my boss, remove the force and instead put a TV in every home. Everything will be automatically sorted out."

This put me in mind of Jerry Mander's classic polemic against mass media, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Written in 1978 by an ex-advertising man turned political and social activist, the book articulates the problems of mass broadcasting:

1. The Mediation of Experience – in which the viewer succumbs to a passive role as observer rather than participant;
2. the Colonisation of Experience – in which the sources of broadcasting content are centralised and controlled by a minority who can afford it and who shape the content according to their own interests;
3. the Effects of Television on the Human Being – the physical and mental impact of television viewing; and
4. the Inherent Biases of Television – by which the spectrum of experiential information is limited and filtered by television viewing.

Coincidentally, my edition of the book is a 1998 reprint by The Other India Press. In its forward, the publishers explain:

The book was originally published in 1978 in the USA at a time when television had begun taking control of the American mind in a big way. Now that a similar situation is overtaking us here twenty years later, we have decided that an Indian reprint of this book would be well appreciated by all those sane humans who are getting increasingly disturbed over the impact of television on their lives and habits of their families particularly the kids.

The relentless onward crush of modernisation across the globe – including the role television plays as a tool of conformity – has been documented in films such as Helena Norburg-Hodge's *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (based on her 1991 book of the same name) as well as her more recent *The Economics of Happiness* (2011). Filmmaker Thomas Balmes has also explored this theme in his 2014 documentary *Happiness*, observing the experience of Bhutan, which in 1999 became the last country in the world to introduce television. So has more television created more happiness? What do you think?

Television has been tightening its grip over humanity now for over half a century; it is difficult to imagine life without it. Even those of us who try to avoid it cannot escape its touch. How many

(countless!) times have I been asked “did you see....?” It barely registers when I reply with no, I don’t own a television, so I didn’t see. The conversation inevitably rolls over this impediment and carries on without me.

Even my idealistic resistance flags. Working fulltime now, my daughter away at university, I arrive home at the end of the day with a brain like mince. What could be easier than sitting back and surfing YouTube, with its reruns of sitcoms and clips from American late night talk shows? The evening is washed away in a blur of mind-numbed disconnection. And that my friends is precisely the point of it. Television provides us with the illusion of connection, of tapping into a shared culture that is greater than our small selves, while all the time we are surrendering our autonomy and allowing our communities to fragment into isolated rooms lit by the glow of a screen.

Don’t worry: I’m fully aware of the irony of arguing against screens here on my WordPress blog. I offer you once more the question I asked you earlier, the question I now ask you in all sincerity to pause and consider: what do you think? Because *what we think* is the only solution that we have in the face of global broadcasting. Stepping back from what we are told to think, and reclaiming the power to think for ourselves – how beautifully simple is the way out of this mess.

What *I* think is that it’s time for me to step back from the mindnumbing allure of YouTube, step away from my queasy fascination with US election coverage and my nostalgic binge-viewing of old BBC series; time to refresh my commitment to choose other ways of being.

I’ve been reading Charles Eisenstein’s book *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*, in which he describes an emerging paradigm that he calls ‘the Story of Interbeing.’ He writes:

So many people squelch the expression of their gifts by thinking that they must do something big with them. One’s own actions are not enough – one must write a book that reaches millions. How quickly this turns into competition over whose ideas get heard. How it invalidates the small, beautiful strivings of the bulk of humanity; invalidates, paradoxically, the very things that we must start doing en masse to sustain a livable planet.... Choice is only small through the eyes of separation. From the perspective of interbeing, your choice is no more or no less important than any of the president’s.... I am not actually suggesting that we do these small acts because they will in some mysterious way change the world (although they will). I am suggesting, rather, that we orient more toward where our choices come from rather than where they are going.

Perhaps as this Story of Interbeing emerges, the power of television over the collective imagination will wither and fade. Perhaps we will rediscover how connected we already are, without the artificial, distracting illusion of mass broadcasting. Perhaps we will somehow – through our small, individual acts of resistance – manage to sort things out.

no class

9 November 2016

Time to take Joe Bageant down from the shelf and consider his more-relevant-than-ever reflections on the American hologram.

He wasn't kidding when he wrote that "the four cornerstones of the American political psyche are (1) emotion substituted for thought, (2) fear, (3) ignorance, and (4) propaganda." Those ingredients have now put a beligerent, misogynist ass into the country's highest office and a conservative majority into both houses of Congress.

Bageant told it like it is: what we are witnessing is a class war.

"Class," however, is defined not in terms of income or degrees but in terms of power.... Leaving aside all numbers, "working class" might best be defined like this: You do not have power over your work. You do not control when you work, how much you get paid, how fast you work, or whether you will be cut loose from your job at the first shiver on Wall Street.

Why on earth anyone thinks that Donald Trump heralds a corrective to this, I don't know. Well yes I do: see above numbers 1 through 4. Trump is a class hero precisely *because* he has no class.

Bageant goes on to observe that

The New Conservatism arose in the same way left-wing movements do, by approximately the same process, and for the same reasons: widespread but unacknowledged dissatisfaction, in this case with the erosion of "traditional" life and values in America as working people perceive them. Otherwise known as change.... There is no good reason why for the past thirty years the uncertainty and dissatisfaction of people... was automatically snubbed as unenlightened by so many on the left. If the left had identified and dealt with this dissatisfaction early on, if they had counteracted the fallacies the Republicans used to explain that dissatisfaction, if they had listened instead of stereotyping blue-collar angst as "Archie Bunkerism" (itself a stereotype of a stereotype delivered unto their minds by television) and maybe offered some gutsy, comprehensible, and practical solutions, we might have witnessed something better than the Republican syndicate's lying and looting.... Real movements take advantage of the protest-potential to be found among dissatisfied and disappointed people – people disenfranchised by bureaucracy, technocracy, and "experts." Rightists tapped into that dissatisfaction by lamenting the loss of community and values and attributing it to the "cultural left's" feminism and antiracism, the gay movement, and so on. The Republican message, baloney though it is, was accessible [while] the Democrats didn't have any message at all.

Joe Bageant passed away in 2011 and so missed the culmination of New Conservatism, playing out as it is into this endgame called President Trump. The working class people have now got what they want: an ignorant, mediocre, self-obsessed white man dragging us all down with him. Trump is the President of

Plain Americans, isolated by the rest of the world by the certainty that it's better to be American than anything else, even if we can't really prove why. Even if we are one house payment away from homelessness, even if our kids can't read and our asses are

getting so big they have their own zip codes, it's comforting to know we are at least in the best place on earth.

The best place on earth, soon to be great again. Or so he says.

Excerpts from *Deer Hunting with Jesus* by Joe Bageant, Random House, 2007.

on a hopeful note

12 November 2016

When I was a child, one of my very favourite picture books was *The Wump World* by Bill Peet. We didn't own a copy at home but the public library did, and I borrowed it repeatedly. *The Wump World* tells the story of a small planet covered in rolling meadows, twinkling streams and large leafy bumbershoot trees. The only residents of this world are the wumps, a gentle and innocent species of herbivore mammals who live together in a large flock.

The story tells of how one day this peaceful, unassuming planet is invaded by the Pollutians from the planet Pollutus. They arrive in a horde of roaring metal spaceships that vomit black smog into the air. The frightened wumps run away and hide themselves in an underground cavern, while the Pollutians settle into the task of building a vast, heaving civilisation full of skyscrapers and motorways and factories and shopping centres, with cars and trucks zooming around and crowds of stressed-out Pollutians buzzing and bumbling their way through the streets.

It doesn't last forever, of course; it becomes so awful that even the Pollutians can't take it anymore. They pack themselves back into their spaceships and go off in search of another planet, leaving behind their devastation.

Any child reading this story will identify with the wumps, sharing in their fear and their misery as they hide underground. Any adult will concede sadly that we are the Pollutians, and will recognise with disquiet the assumptions and behaviour of that race, with their willingness to exploit and pave over the natural world. And child or adult, any human reading the story – humans, with story running through our very blood and our bones – any human will understand in heart and in conscience the sad truth of the Wump World: civilisation as we play it now is a failing game.

But it's just a story, you might say. What can we do about it anyway, you might say. Stop reading picture books and grow up, you might say: grow up and join the real world. Get a job, pay your bills, live for the weekend. Watch tv, go to the shops, plan your vacation. Calm down, take your pills, join the club.

Well that's what you may have said, even a week ago. Are you still so sure about the solidity and inevitability of the 'real' world? Are you still convinced that 'they' will take good care of 'us,' that 'they' will ensure that 'we' don't go too far? When will it sink in, that there is only *us*, there is only *we* – and we are them, and they are us. Pollutians, planets, bumbershoot trees and wumps – this is we, this is us. Social activist **Charles Eisenstein** refers to this truth as 'the Story of Interbeing,' which he explores in his aptly-titled book ***The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible.***

The story of the Wump World ends on a hopeful note: the beleaguered wumps venture out of the caves and eventually find a small, undamaged corner of grass and trees where they can survive.

In time the murky skies would clear up and the rains would wash the scum from the rivers and lakes. The tall buildings would come tumbling down and the freeways would crumble away. And in time the green growth would wind its way up through the rubble. But the Wump World would never be quite the same.

on wordpower

13 February 2017

“A word after a word after a word is power.” Margaret Atwood

My favourite bookshop in the world – **WordPower** – is moving into the next stage of its life. Its lovely founders have given 22+ years of intense loving slog into raising this baby, which has grown into not just a shop but also a hub of progressive thinking. As well as individual author events, they have also hosted the Book Fringe every August, International Women’s Day dinners and the annual five-day-long Edinburgh Independent Radical Book Fair – a massive undertaking just by itself!

Now they are planning to move on to pastures new, and WordPower’s future is on the table. A **fundraising campaign** has been launched with the idea being to transition the business into a social enterprise and to develop its role as a community resource. Needless to say I am wholeheartedly supporting this and want to see it succeed.

WordPower and its fine selection of books have seen me through my own journeys of discovery, up dark mountains of unknowing and back down into light valleys of understanding. WordPower gave me Derrick Jensen and Joe Bageant when I needed to rage; Tom Hodgkinson when I needed to rest; David Edwards and Erich Fromm when I needed to believe; Carol Gilligan and Inga Muscio and Laurie Penny when I needed to *be* believed; Jane Bowles when I needed to laugh; Joanna Macy and Rebecca Solnit and Margaret Wheatley when I needed to hope; oh and there’s just so many other good friends there on those bountiful shelves in that purple painted place.

If you love books and you love the joy of reading and writing and sharing ideas, please consider pledging something toward the **WordPower crowdfunding** effort.

who owns wellbeing?

19 February 2017

Two different mental health events fell across my radar this week. They both arrived by email, in their different ways. The first landed in my inbox at work: a slick mass mailing with graphics and corporate logos and link buttons, leading to an even slicker website dedicated solely to promoting a full-panel plenary of high-ranking, primarily white male, mental health policy professionals and public officials. The second was a personal message from someone who had read my piece in the LSE Surviving Work blog series, inviting me to attend a small conference on wellbeing in which “the central concern is a question of whether the wellbeing policies of large organisations actually come to undermine the very people that they are designed to support.”

Mental health is a political issue: it boils down simply to power, that is, who holds *the power to define* what constitutes “normal” and “sane” and indeed what is meant by “wellbeing”. The Icarus Project has written an incredibly insightful (or should that be inciteful?) publication entitled Madness and Oppression, examining the critical factor of power in the context of mental health.

When I was growing up, mental wellbeing didn’t figure in any public discussion. The fact that there are now conferences of all types to consider our wellbeing is a welcome development of the new century. It is also a sign of how distressed we have become as a society. Pick up any paper these days and you’ll find headlines about the multiple crises facing our mental healthcare services as the need rises while the resources dwindle. I’m not convinced that the professional and political classes can solve this predicament; it is going to take a quiet and creative revolution on many levels to dismantle the powers which enforce a standard of normality upon the person.

I can’t help but think of Krishnamurti’s observation: “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.” I know which conference I’d be going to.

hearth cricket wisdom

5 March 2017

So I've finally organised a project that has been simmering in the background for some time. This spring I am launching a **pilot series of workshops** which explore ideas which deserve some space to grow.

All my life I have loved playing with ideas, whether browsing the library and bookshop shelves searching for hidden treasures, or sharing conversations that transcend small talk, or writing blog posts that dig into places that interest me....

I know I'm not alone in this. Sharing ideas is the hallmark of humanity, it is our pride and our joy, and the fuel that feeds our souls. Perhaps the most courageous and astonishing thing a person can do is to venture into a new idea.

If you're in Edinburgh and fancy coming along for one or more of these Saturday mornings, please add your name to the list and bring your thinking cap with you.

in case of emergency

8 March 2017

Whenever we have made our plans and laid down the path of our future the trickster will come along and play a trick on us.

F. David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics*

A few months ago I was in my front room when I heard something outside on the street. It took me a moment to make sense of it, and when I did, my adrenaline surged. Someone was crying out for help, repeatedly: “Can anyone hear me? Please help me, please help!” I grabbed my phone and went downstairs into the street, where I found three other people assembling at the curb just beyond my door. They were looking up, at the window of the flat beside mine, where my neighbour had somehow caught and trapped her hand in between the panes of the window when it had dropped down as she’d been opening it. She couldn’t move it without further crushing her fingers – she was already in great pain, tears rolling down her shocked white face.

I rang 999 while the others talked to her and tried to soothe her. Then one brave/foolhardy young man took it upon himself to climb up the drainpipe and along the narrow ledge of the brickwork – like a mountain goat perched along a cliff-face – where he managed to shift the window and free her hand. But here’s the thing: she was freed but now he was stuck, clinging to the window frame and trying to work out how to get back down. When the emergency crew arrived a few minutes later, it was him they had to help. They used a long ladder and assisted him back down to the pavement, where they chided him good-naturedly for his heroics.

We all experience crises of some degree at various points throughout our lives. Illness or injury, unemployment, relationships ending or relatives dying, or even the central heating going bust midwinter or the cat needing urgent care at the vet. Or getting ourselves painfully stuck in a window. Crisis occurs in many shapes and sizes, with its main flavour being urgency. The calm routine of a more-or-less comfortable existence is rudely interrupted. Our perspective is drawn sharply into focus upon a very particular issue, and at the same time we are jolted out of complacency and reminded that life is much, much bigger-and-beyonder than our own small stuff.

When there is an emergency, we pull up and pay attention. We become ready, poised to spring, and in most cases we step out of ourselves and become available to others in need. We go downstairs or across the street, we phone for help, or we climb a drainpipe. When there is an emergency, our better natures emerge.

Crisis is what it is. At worst, it causes suffering; at best, it allows for emergence. And Trickster knows this.

healing crisis, one person at a time

18 March 2017

My lovely friend Steve of **21st Century Soul** has been a broker of healing in my life.

I met Steve through our mutual dabblings in the **Dark Mountain Project** – we exchanged emails in the runup to the second Uncivilisation festival in August 2011, an event that I helped to put together from behind the scenes. We communicated about event-admin details over the summer and then I must have met him briefly there at the festival – though I was in such stressed-out misery I could barely function, let alone make any real connection with anyone. I didn't understand it at the time, but Dark Mountain was the instigator of the deepest and most difficult crisis of my life.

In her new memoir, *Tristimania*, **Jay Griffiths** writes beautifully about her own experience of crisis:

Do episodes of madness have causes? What do they need, to unfurl themselves? They unfold like tragic dramas and, just as tragedy needs a tragic flaw, a backstory and the dramatic incident which kicks off the drama, so chapters of madness also need a tragic flaw (genetic vulnerability), a backstory (long-term stress) and an incident (a trigger).

Genetic vulnerability? Tick.

Long term stress? Tick.

Trigger? Happened like this.

... And then he wanked all over me.

Gosh, that's almost exactly what happened to me too! Only with Dark Mountain it was mansplaining intellectual ego-wanking that splashed all over me and left me stunned and vulnerable. For them it was nothing out of their own ordinary, so why on earth did I have a problem with it? No doubt they wished I would just go away quietly and leave them to their important job of shaping the cultural narrative.

Like Jay, however, the trigger had been sprung. Like Jay, I headed into a period of bipolar madness: long descents into terrifying depths and later, spinning dances among the stars and the angels.

It was during this time that I became better acquainted with Steve. We mingled in some of the same online circles and he contributed wise, and humble, contributions to the issues that were getting hashed over in the discussion threads. And then, eventually, by way of his Unpsychology project, across my threshold fell his invitation to join him in Soulmaking.

There was something about this invitation that tickled at me, something about Soulmaking that spoke to me, and beckoned me with its gentleness. It was the right thing at the right time, as so many things often are, when we look back in hindsight – even the painful things, like Dark Mountain. If I'd spent much of my growing up and adult life in building up scar tissue around a wounded psyche, then my experience with Dark Mountain was like ripping off the scab and setting the blood flowing, and now it was time to take a gentle swab to the sore spot. The wound was open but it needed a healer to tend it. Steve stepped gracefully into that role, and the Soulmakers Gathering of spring 2014 served as triage. Some wonderful and inspiring people came into my life there, and I felt a shift under the surface.

My journey with madness was far from over, but my story turned toward resolution, and began finding a path of restoration.

So this brings me to now. Steve recently published a series of essays which started with a cry of distress and discouragement at our current state of affairs, and then worked their way in – like a surgeon making an exploratory probe. In the course of this he made the following comment:

...this crisis cannot be done away with by pills and talking. It can't be healed one person at a time...

and this pulled me up short. It felt so out of place, coming from someone who in my own life had contributed to healing – to my *one person at a time*‘s worth of healing – that I felt I must engage him in finding out where that thought had come from, and if it was true. It led to this dialogue between us, published today on the Unpsychology site via Medium. Please have a read of it, and join us in the conversation if you feel inspired.

I'll end this here, with a heartfelt thank you, Steve, for Soulmakers and for Unpsychology, for your friendship and for your healing ways. xxx

the soul of money

19 March 2017

I grew up in an affluent suburb of Chicago, a place of large houses with expansive lawns, and two or more cars in every driveway. I was educated privately, among peers who were the children of doctors and lawyers and financial executives. Leisure took place in tennis clubs and shopping malls. I think of it now as “the belly of the beast.”

But everything is relative. I never felt secure in that setting, and my family didn’t especially fit into the surrounding culture. My parents both worked hard to earn enough for that private education – no stay at home mother, no home help to manage the domestic chores. We belonged to no clubs, took no summer holiday trips, and shopped at Sears. (Unless you grew up there you’ll miss the cultural reference. Suffice to say that the kids in our family wore Toughskins brand denim rather than designer jeans – and it marked us.) To our minds, we weren’t rich: we lived modestly and we got by.

The message drilled into me by this place was simple: achieve, make money, achieve, make money, achieve, make money. Self-worth? Achieve, make money. Relationships with others? Achieve, make money. The meaning of life? Achieve, make money.

It wasn’t until I left for university that I found some relief. Leaving the country was even better. I discovered people with less onerous value systems, places with less privilege and pressure. I made connections and assembled my tribe. And I made choices about how to live that would have terrified my younger self: even now, I own no house or property, I find my clothes in charity shops, I take the bus or walk.

In *The Soul of Money*, Lynne Twist explores what money means to us, and how to change our perceptions. As a tireless fundraiser for **the Hunger Project** (an international development organisation which aspires to end world hunger) Lynne has worked with people from myriad economic backgrounds – from wealthy philanthropists to backwater villagers, from bejewelled trophy wives to starving street beggars. In this beautifully written book, she “demonstrates how we can replace feelings of scarcity, guilt and burden with experiences of sufficiency, freedom and purpose.” She calls scarcity “the great lie” and sufficiency “the surprising truth,” and digs into these assertions fully with a rich mix of personal experience, sincere reflection and above all, warm compassion.

Since reading her book, I’ve been able to look back on that high-stakes environment of my upbringing with gentle regard rather than anxiety or resentment. I can recognise the pain behind the habits of spiteful judgment, and the need behind the relentless competition. To have so much, and still feel so driven – to own so much personal wealth and yet feel so little *personal wealth* – is living in a fairy tale curse for sure.

When my friend and I named our social enterprise Personal Wealth, three years ago now, we received many confused responses. Were we a financial services provider? Were we money advisers? Did we play the stock market? No, no and no – we worked with people and organisations, and tried to open up the conversation about what wealth really is. It usually took a moment for our response to sink in, and then typically our inquirer would say “ah-ha” with a delighted light in their eyes.

I will be revisiting the conversation on Saturday 1st April, when I host the first of **four experimental workshops**. Participants will be invited to play with the phrase “personal wealth” and we will learn more about the ‘great lie’ and the ‘surprising truth.’ If you are in Edinburgh and fancy

coming along, please do [add your name to the event list here](#).

thank you friends

9 May 2017

It's always good to recognise the dappled patterns of one's perspective. 'The way it is' contracts and expands. Memories come coloured with emotion.

I wrote in my last post about the environment in which I grew up – one of middle class privilege and relentless competition. This was the 1980's and the Reagan years, a time when America rode a wave of material prosperity and the promise of evermore: endless growth and profit, bountiful rewards for joining the rat race and playing the game. I called it "the belly of the beast" and indeed, when I imagine myself as a teenager walking through the local shopping mall, with its designer boutiques and its trendy brand logos, its parquet floors and potted trees and fast food courts, the picture takes on the discordant atmosphere of uneasy dreamtime.

However: even in the midst of the spectacle and the striving, there were lifelines of human warmth and belonging. A few days ago I was reminded of this when I received an unexpected greeting from an old friend and neighbour: one of the little girls I used to babysit for, now grown up and a mother herself. It threw me into reminiscence.

The girls were three years old and three months old, respectively, when I first met them – and I was only thirteen myself. It's easy to say I watched them grow up but really, we grew up together. Mr and Mrs H took a regular and well-earned weekly break: an evening out to the movies or dinner with friends; sometimes if their calendar was full I would be at their house twice or perhaps even three times over the course of a week. When I learned to drive I was entrusted to take the girls on outings to the library or the swimming pool. I was invited to join their birthday parties, and occasional holiday gatherings, introduced to visitors and relatives, and I was always, always made to feel welcome in their family.

Some stray memories: sitting on the couch in the evening with the girls in their pyjamas, watching Fraggle Rock or Fairy Tale Theatre. Playing Rainbow Brite. He Man and She Ra. Smurfs. Drawing pictures with coloured markers, and making a game of mixing and matching the pen caps with the pens. Sitting on the carpeted bedroom floor, back leaning against the bed, choosing bedtime stories from a pile of picture books. Angelina Ballerina. If You Give A Mouse A Cookie. The Berenstein Bears. Plastic bags full of gorgeous handknitted sweaters that Mrs H passed on to me from her mother. Mr H walking me home, along the pavement to my own house down the street, the dark summertime air heavy with humidity.

All just ordinary snippets of ordinary American suburban life. Nothing dramatic. No crises or conflicts, no serious accidents or notable difficulties. When I imagine myself as a teenager, in connection with this family, the picture takes on the gentle atmosphere of nostalgia. Fondness and gratitude wash over me.

A Big Star tune comes to mind: thank you friends.

climate minds

30 July 2017

I grew up in a midwestern American suburb, with neat rows of houses each on their own patch of tidy lawn. It was still a fairly young housing development, perhaps twenty years old. The trees of the neighbourhood were beyond the sapling stage but not yet grown to their full height or strength. Ornamental bushes and beds of flowering plants decorated the edges of front porches and backyard decks. Residential streets and long driveways crisscrossed the groundscape, establishing car traffic as the dominant species in this constructed environment.

Yet some of the most emotive memories from my childhood are connected to the natural world which insisted on existing beside and around the self-contained boxes of suburban housing:

sitting on the front porch in a heavy, pressing air watching the spring sky turn the deep grey-green of tornado weather; weird fingery flashes of lightening scratching along the cloudscape, punctuated by groans of thunder, rumbling and grumbling in sometimes alarming closeness overhead. Rain breaking through the salty tang of sulphurised air, pouring steadily down in a loud beating cadence, driving all the earthworms from the dirt out onto the slick wet black of the tarred driveway

deepening dusk on warm summer evenings, a long lingering at the threshold of darkness, and the sudden magical smears of fireflies' golden light, appearing and disappearing in a slow blinking dance

bright yellow blobs of dandelions scattered across the grass, on a fresh summer morning, with the sun reaching its way upward behind the houses opposite

moody grey overcast autumn sky, lost in its own thoughts, and leaves turning red gold brown, dropping into crisp rustling layers and skittery scattering across the pavement

waking up to the first frost, a crisp white icing sugar coating each stiff blade of grass and each dried up, gnarled up, long gone autumn leaf – and then, weeks later, the first snowfall, thick feathery flakes drifting down in slow motion and gathering like feathers into sparkly soft contours over bushes and rails.

tulips appearing, from nothing to something, steadily green and then surprising bright pink and deep red with yellow streaks

grey squirrel leap-jumping across the lawn and scurrying up a tree, bushy tail a fluffy curl

robin landing with a thump by the kitchen window, beady black eyes peering around, taking off again in a startled flapping rush

white papery moth beating against the wire mesh of the window screen, creepy tiny rustlings of summertime night-time

Despite the best efforts of suburban town planners to build over and tame the midwestern landscape, the natural world persisted. Green weeds pushed through cracks in the pavement. Spiders explored bathrooms. Black ants invaded kitchen cupboards. Changing seasons demanded attention and the grass – oh the grass. The grass never stopped. It needed to be mowed again and again and again – my brothers' weekly chore.

I am reminiscing for a reason. My relationship to the natural world sat uneasily beside the more pervasive lessons of my childhood, which involved bug spray and cellophane wrapping. Twentieth century American post-war suburban life gave me interstate highways and shopping malls and a two

car garage. McDonalds and Wendys and KFC. Oreos and Cheerios and Cheetos and Doritos. Pacman and Walkman and synthetic clothing in neon pink and green. The culture of my upbringing worshipped the artificial, the mechanical and digital, the automotive, the commercial, the televised and the mass produced. Nature was just a messy nuisance.

Those memories of mine were collected *despite*, not *because*, and in truth I know very little about the natural environment. The names and characteristics of all but the most obvious of flora, the habits and habitats of all but the most common of fauna – I know so relatively nothing of who they all are and what they’re all like. In a wilderness challenge, I would die quickly. Foraging, protection from predators, weather patterns and terrain? Sorry, but no. No idea.

That leads me finally to the point of this post, which is to ask: how have I been prepared for the spectre of climate change? How does the average mind of modern civilisation grasp the information that is coming at us about global warming, and all the evidence we have marking the gruelling degradation of our natural ecosystems? Psychology is so commonly associated with human culture, human relationships – but what of our relationships with the natural world? What of my intense internal dialogue with those mesmerising stormclouds as I sat watching the sky from our front porch, what of my tentative, curious friendship with the worms on our rain-drenched driveway? What of my far more intimate relationships with my collection of factory-made cuddly toys, my menagerie of small plastic animals and my beloved Merlin with its battery-operated blinks and bleeps? How have I been set up, for the predicament I face as part of the human community?

Do you ever wonder the same? What are your own experiences and ideas at this unique, bewildering and many would say terrifying juncture of civilisation? Can we humans ever be forgiven for the damage and even extinction we have caused to so many other species and ecosystems in this world? Can we create a human culture that harmonises with the natural world, rather than destroying it? Can we clean up the mess we have made? Will we even survive?

These questions and others inspire the next issue of *Unpsychology magazine*. My friend Steve Thorp, founder and editor of Unpsychology, has invited me to co-edit this upcoming issue which takes as its theme *Climate Minds*. You can [**read the brief and the call for submissions here**](#).

Please consider contributing to this issue, or circulating the invitation throughout your own networks. The deadline is 30 September 2017.

Allow your imagination to soar. Remember those moments of your childhood, when the natural world bewitched you. Consider how you fit into this remarkable web of life. Share your thoughts, your fears, your hopes. And above all, trust your heart, which remembers so vividly the joyful fresh air of a summer morning, lawn mowers rumbling in the distance, and those damned inevitable dandelions smiling up at you.

Frankie Vah meets Laurie Penny

19 August 2017

Edinburgh in August becomes a swarm of performers and tourists and buskers, there are posters and flyers plastered onto every available fence or lamppost, and the pavements are littered with dropped handbills and ticket stubs. With hundreds upon hundreds of shows and concerts and talks and gigs on offer, it can be overwhelming. Choosing what to see becomes a gamble: it could be great, and well worth the money, or it could be a lemon. This year in the lucky dip I came up with real prizes: performance poet Luke Wright, in his acclaimed one-man show *Frankie Vah*, and journalist Laurie Penny, talking about her new book *Bitch Doctrine* at the Book Fest.

Both Wright and Penny advocate for the political left with spitfire gumption. They both wield words like eloquent weapons, aimed with clarity and precision, that cut open hesitancy or prevarication and rally the troops to the cause of social justice for all. (God knows the left needs to be rallied.) And both operate from the same base: a deep and abiding respect for words as voice, and voice as political agency. But what resonates most for me in their work is this: both understand that the most radical act anyone can take in life is to learn.

Frankie Vah tells the story of a boy growing up during the 1980s, setting himself against the conservative, religious dogma of his father (a vicar) by embracing anti-Thatcherism. We watch a tentative, yearning teenaged Simon evolve into a snarling, adamant Angry Young Man named Frankie Vah. Along the way Frankie becomes consumed with his own righteousness and self-creation, eventually insulting, betraying and alienating everyone close to him – until he breaks. The anger-fuelled facade falls away, leaving a raw and humbled human heart on full display.

Likewise, Laurie Penny offered a graciously open interview, the most notable point of which (for me) were her reflections on the responsibility we must each take to keep learning. ‘I don’t always get it right’ she admitted, ‘I make mistakes,’ and she acknowledged the privilege she holds as a white, middle-class, well-educated person who holds a very public platform in her writing. She described her personal commitment to listen and learn from others about what is needed to create a just society.

Both Wright and Penny draw on this fundamental truth: the personal is political. Every individual holds values and makes choices that contribute to the collective human experience. Every individual is responsible for their impact on others. And every individual makes mistakes along the way. But as Penny pointed out, we need to create safe spaces where people “can get things wrong.” Getting it wrong is the fuel of learning – but only when it is digested and transformed into a usable energy.

Anger at injustice can be a form of getting it wrong; it is a valuable resource from which we can create a useable constructive energy, so long as we don’t stop and linger with anger for its own sake. Frankie Vah learns that righteous anger hits a dead end if one doesn’t remain open and listening to the equally valid emotions and opinions of others.

It’s a balancing act, for sure. One audience member at the Laurie Penny talk was a German lady who referenced Karl Popper’s “*paradox of tolerance*: Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.”

Penny replied with Oscar Wilde: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

The discussion also touched upon the relationship between truth and reality, in this age of so-called

post-truth. How can truth and reality either of them be anything but subjective, and aligned with an individual's experience and perspective? Penny alludes to this when she writes about journalistic objectivity: "I have never held with the notion of objective journalism.... When I started out, my world was overfull of stern men imploring me to strive for objectivity – which meant, in practice, that I ought to tell the story as a rich older man might see it."

In this way, objectivity becomes confused with telling one's story from a *worthy* point of view. When we listen to individual perspective as indicative of a greater legitimacy, we grant it the power of voice.

Here is where Laurie Penny and Luke Wright veer off from one another: while they share a vast common ground of ideals and values, Luke Wright will only ever speak as a white man, and Laurie Penny as a white woman – and their experience of voice reflects this. Interestingly, Frankie Vah is a persona created by Simon, who is himself a character created by Wright. These layers of identity fall away like tshirts tugged off and flung to the far corners of a teenaged bedroom: Luke Wright as Frankie Vah paces and swaggers and sweats and vibrates with an indignation summoned from his own alive-and-beating heart. Luke Wright as Simon at the start of the show stands in awkward gawky adolescence, eyes gleaming with eagerness to connect and participate in life; he stands in lone, vulnerable hurt at the end, when Simon faces up to his life choices. Wright's honesty and self-examination drive these characters. He channels himself into a story that leaves him poised at the edge of reason, and we love him for it.

Like Wright, Laurie Penny digs deep into the viscerally personal and channels her soulful passion into the stories she tells through journalism. But what happens when a woman voices righteous anger, and travels to that same edge of reason? Penny can tell you: she takes vicious and unrelenting flak for daring to hold an opinion, daring to express herself, daring to challenge the demand that she be quiet and submissive. Her voice becomes a dare, a transgression, for which she will be emphatically trolled, verbally abused, even threatened with physical violence. And most likely of all, she will be dismissed as irrelevant.

In *Bitch Doctrine*, Penny writes "When women write and speak the truth of their own lives, it is called 'confessional', with the implication of wrongdoing, of sharing secrets that ought not to be spoken aloud, at least by nice girls. When men do the same, it is called literature, and they win prizes."

That particular observation resonates, because I've experienced the same. Too personal, I've been told about some of the things I've written publicly. Too raw. And yes, even "confessional" – that last by an otherwise open-minded, feminist, liberal friend who is also a man. It was a throwaway observation about my blog, probably forgotten as soon as he said it – but on my end, the word stung. There was a gentle reprimand in its tone, a suggestion that I was being incautious by baring myself so openly. It instilled a pinprick of shame, which I can still feel despite all efforts to rationalise and yes, excuse the friend who said it. He is a gentle soul, a considerate and loving and well-meaning person, very willing to reflect on and engage with feminism, to question the assumptions of masculinity, and to acknowledge the privilege he holds. Yet even he found it somehow unseemly that I would write candidly about my personal experiences and opinions, and felt entitled to chasten me.

It hardly seems worth dwelling on this, given the scale of crises which are engulfing our world in the 21st century. But no, on the contrary: I think it is well worth dwelling on even the most subtle of dilemmas, exploring any avenue which may lead us to learn from one another. Learning is at the core of our salvation, if there is to be any real healing of the wounds which fester so doggedly in the human psyche.

Organisational theorist Margaret Wheatley once observed that in natural systems, dysfunction is

only resolved by introducing new information. Our human system is deeply dysfunctional, bloated with injustice, mired down by obsolete and discredited philosophies and customs. It is time to welcome the new information being voiced, to flood the system with fresh ideas and different perspectives. We can learn to do better; we *must* learn to do better. We can and must learn, individually and collectively. Our capacity to learn is the most powerful thing about us, and the most beautiful.

me and my daughter too

16 October 2017

When my daughter was 10 months old, as I held her in my arms – in a bookshop in Louisville Kentucky – she was touched inappropriately by a man in late middle age. He approached us and commented amiably on her sweetness and I smiled in return and made some innocuous reply. Then I realised that he had put his fingers in her mouth and rubbed them along her gums, as he asked me conversationally if she had any teeth yet.

I pulled her back away from him as I replied to him, sensible of the physical imposition – but I didn't rebuke him. It didn't even occur to me to rebuke him. I was swept along in the imperative to be polite and friendly in public. And it all happened so swiftly. He didn't linger, he headed with his purchase out of the shop and that was that.

My friend had seen it all from a few feet away and she moved over to us quickly, indignant on my behalf. She asked if we were okay as we watched him walk out the door, and wondered scathingly how he would like it himself if a total stranger stuck their fingers into his mouth. I brushed it off, played it down. He probably meant no harm. He may not have even been conscious of what he was doing. He had just been trying to be friendly. Well anyway it was too late now, he'd left the shop. No point in dwelling on it. Just a weirdly unpleasant encounter, best forgotten.

The trouble is, I have never forgotten it. I remember being surprised, caught off guard, when he reached out and touched the inside of her mouth. I remember pulling her back and away from him, my gut instinct being that he had crossed a physical boundary, and wondering when he'd last washed his hands. I remember the immediate mental negotiating, trying to rationalise why it was no big deal, that I shouldn't worry about it, that it didn't matter. I remember a seed of disquiet lodging itself inside me and spoiling the rest of that day, what should have been a wonderful day visiting with my friend.

Time hasn't eased the disquiet. That seed has grown steadily over the years, and with it my anger. I'm not especially angry with the man himself. My baby daughter wasn't harmed, and he really may not have meant to cause any offense. I'm not angry with that man himself but I am very, very angry that it happened. It makes me angry that he felt so thoughtlessly entitled to touch her. He imposed himself upon her, and upon me too by proxy. It makes me angry that I didn't stop him or confront him – that I didn't have the social tools or the inner confidence to confront him. My ingrained response was to swallow my discomfort, to not rock the boat, to minimise and excuse and push it all aside. It makes me angry that I accepted it with a smile, even though it didn't feel right.

Jesus, it wasn't even sexual contact.

Like every woman alive on the planet, I have experienced inappropriate behaviour and sexual harrassment from acquaintances and strangers. I have been ordered to wear shorter skirts and sexier tops by my male boss, and fired when I failed to be flirtatious enough with his pub clientele. I have had my ass touched in public places, and been ordered to smile by complete strangers. I spent nearly an hour one afternoon trying to peel away from a man who had attached himself to my side, demanding that I tell him my name and join him for a drink. I've sat next to men on the bus and the train, squeezing myself into as small a space as possible, while they stretch themselves out, often with their legs splayed wide apart. I've walked past innumerable men with a hand resting on their crotch... why? To intimidate me? To reassure themselves? To make sure their dick hasn't dropped off?

But of all this **everyday sexism**, it is the encounter with the man in the bookshop which sits like a

grim pit in my stomach and still nauseates me nearly twenty years later. It was so casual, so nebulous, so invisible a transgression. So insidious in its power dynamic: you are there, available for me to touch, this old man told my infant daughter – and in doing so told me as well. I can touch you as I like, and then walk away as though it means nothing. And you won't complain. You won't kick up a fuss. You will try to tell yourself it doesn't matter. But it does.

two women

8 March 2018

Two women have been on my mind today. I've not met either of them, but they have both been instrumental in teaching me about feminism and about compassion. I toast them both, in honour of International Women's Day.

Woman #1 was an online critic of mine. Her tone was scathing, I would say withering. The putdown was simple: I was whining pathetically about imaginary non-issues in the small community we both – well, I wouldn't say 'belonged to.' She proclaimed her belonging fiercely, to this tribe of would-be culture-busters, while my unbelonging clung to me like smoke in my clothes. She hadn't experienced what I had, and therefore neither could have I – I must be creating a storm in a teacup. It was my own problem, this dissatisfaction and frustration with The Menz and what I perceived as their stranglehold on our group's dynamics and narrative. I had already weathered a shitstorm of backlash from The Menz themselves, but her online slap stung me deeply, coming as it did from another woman.

Even then I understood the threat I posed to her. She was riding along in the approval and acceptance of these men in a way that I had too, earlier in the story. Casting off the backbreaking cloak of little-sisterhood in order to stand up for myself and my gut feelings had been a profound step for me. It was the work of a lifetime and one of the bravest things I'd ever done. Some of my sisters responded with love and support, but others balked at the messiness of rebellion.

Writing [today in the Guardian](#) about the growing wave of feminist activism, highlighted in the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, Rebecca Solnit points out that social change doesn't happen out of the blue; it is the accumulation of a million unseen nudges. She observes that

the shift comes from the cumulative effect of tiny gestures and shifts...

What this wave brought is recognition that each act of gender violence is part of an epidemic. It's brought a (partial) end to treating these acts as isolated incidents, as the victim's fault, as the result of mental illness or other aberrations. It's meant a more widespread willingness to recognise that such violence is extraordinarily common and has an enormous impact, and arises from values, privileges and attitudes built into the culture.

.... something long tolerated is finally recognised as intolerable, which means that the people for whom it was not a problem finally recognise the suffering of those for whom it was. This shift from tolerated to intolerable is often the result of a power shift in who decides, or a shift in what stories dominate, or in whose story gets told, or believed. It's a subtle shift in who matters that precedes dramatic change.

This online critic of mine, she wasn't prepared to acknowledge my story as one that mattered. And I understand exactly where she was coming from: I've been there myself, in countless ways, and surely still am as I stumble on through the painful and complex process of growing as a person.

Woman #2 became a household name as the butt of a million jokes by male talk show hosts: Monica Lewinsky. At the time of her infamous affair with Bill Clinton I had already moved to the UK and that scandal seemed peripheral to the dramas of childbirth and divorce which were playing out in my own life. However I do remember thinking her foolishly naive, and I didn't stand by her or voice anything in her defence. I remember thinking with pity of all the women named Monica who were suddenly tainted by association to a name which now had so very much mud sticking to it. I certainly never gave a thought to how isolated and desperate she must have felt, nor to the

imbalance of scorn heaped upon her while he got away with a collective roll of the eyes.

I have been following Monica Lewinsky's growing public presence as an anti-bullying activist. She is an articulate and insightful woman, who has turned her painful experience into a source of personal strength and immense compassion. I admire her deeply, and feel shame for the part I played in discounting her. When I see her now, I see my own complicity in a system of oppression in which women's accounts of their experience count for so much less than men's.

So this International Women's Day, I raise my glass to both Woman #1 and Woman #2 – the two women in me. In them, I see how much I have already learned and also how much I have yet to learn.

Rebecca Solnit writes, "Who determines what stories get told, who gets believed, whose words have weight, who's in charge has changed." Changed for the better, I say.

environ-mental health

24 March 2018

Today marks the launch of **Unpsychology Magazine Issue 4: the Climate Minds Anthology**.

When Unpsychology founder Steve Thorp invited me to co-edit this issue, I was delighted with the opportunity to get involved in a project with so much heart and soul behind it. It touched me especially to help address the elephant in the room that sits with almost every relationship in my life. I think of myself as Cassandra, Pandora and perhaps a bit of Antigone, in my quest to unravel and face up to the twisted logic of the culture I was born into.

I have known all my life that despite the wealth and prosperity of the techno-industrial west, our way of life is essentially corrosive. And not just to communities all around the world and to the environment of our planet Earth, but likewise corrosive to our inner sense of wellbeing and ecological belonging. Exploitation disturbs the mental health of the perpetrator as much as the victim, and a system which thrives on exploitation is a sick one indeed. Even the spoils of systemic, invisible aggression such as the kind found in industrial-scale agriculture, privatisation of the commons and mass advertising to manipulate the values and behaviour of millions of people: these are forms of violence which we tolerate all too easily.

Now those of us living in the 21st century face the spectre of entrenched global warming and increasingly extreme impacts of climate change and ‘natural resource’ depletion. It is not unusual to turn from bad news – far easier to (try to) ignore it, deny it and avoid it – but this isn’t going to go away. It’s fucking scary, for all of us. Our environs have become so weighed down with the effects of so-called progress that we face a collective environ-mental breakdown.

Unpsychology Magazine was founded by Steve as a response to the emotional journey that we undergo when we face our fears and our demons, whatever they may be. It invites writing and artwork that cultivate wild mind, and that tell “stories to challenge assumptions of culture, psychology and therapy, and to make soul.” This *Climate Minds Anthology* is Issue 4 in the Unpsychology series, and in it we invite you to consider the questions *what is? what might be? and what can be done?*

This beautiful digital publication is available to download for free – we want it to be as far-reaching as possible, in the hope that it may be used as a starting point for opening up that most difficult conversation: how do you feel about climate change?

Climate Minds Anthology is part of a campaign to open up a conversational movement, which we are hoping to facilitate with the help of crowdfunding. You can **connect to the funding drive here**.

We invite you to join Climate Mind Conversations in any of the following ways:

- **download Unpsychology 4: Climate Minds Anthology** and share it with your own contacts;
- **go to the crowdfunding page** and if you are able to help support us, please donate to the fund;
- visit **Unpsychology Magazine on the Medium platform**, where you may join the dialogue around the publication and its content.

There will be a launch event on Thursday 5 April as part of the Alchemy programme at Oriel y Parc in St Davids, Wales where Steve is currently writer-in-residence.

Steve and I both hope that you enjoy Unpsychology Issue 4 and will join us in the Climate Mind

Conversation.

traveling beyond on the bipolar express

1 April 2018

In *Tristimania* Jay Griffiths tells the story of her struggle with a year-long episode of mental disturbance caused by bipolar disorder. Struggle indeed: the entire narrative bristles with her tension, bitten-down fingernails of reason digging down to keep a thin grip on sanity. She writes beautifully, skillfully, documenting every subtle aspect of her plight with clarity and astute detail, and the confidence of a master wordsmith. Griffiths claims to be sharing her story altruistically, “because what is individual can speak to the general, and if this book can befriend just one person in that terrifying loneliness, it will be worth writing.” Yet the fierce energy driving every page belies a desperation deeper than any community-mindedness: this woman writes to exorcise her demons.

I read the book with the particular critical insight of a fellow adventurer in bipolar lands, and I share my thoughts here through the lens of unpsychology, which Steve Thorp describes as ‘post-civilised neurodiversity and wild mind.’ Similarly, the **Icarus Project** has positioned neurodiversity within the spectrum of civilised and wild states, and more specifically as an issue of oppression whereby ‘normality’ can be viewed as the colonisation of one’s mental space. Rhiana Anthony of the Icarus Project teaches that authoring our own stories allows us to claim that mental space as our own territory, by deconstructing the labels that have been assigned to us by our families and communities.

Griffiths is familiar with the tension between the civilised and the wild. She earned her chops with a book entitled *Wild*, in which she traveled world to report on the impact of so-called civilisation on indigenous cultures and natural habitats. But where *Wild* goes on a freedom ride, *Tristimania* creeps along buzzing with anxiety. If the entire book could be condensed into a single idea it would be: *don't let go*. She stands at the brink, stares down into the abyss, shivers with awe, goes so far as to stretch an arm out into the void – but she never takes the final step, over the edge. She never lets go. She never learns the secret of letting go: that she will be held, that she can fly.

My own experience of mental unraveling put me in a similar situation to the one described in *Tristimania*. For well over a year I held my shit together with increasing strain and exhaustion, avoiding crowds and phone calls like the plague, shaking with anxiety and panic in any shop I set foot into, talking and laughing to myself as I walked along the pavement. I managed somehow to keep up with a job and with parenting, but the pressure was building steadily and the steam beginning to push through the cracks. My distress at the state of the world turned inward, because our civilised society insists that the state of the world is the benchmark of normality. But unlike Griffiths, I didn’t reach the other side of my experience with my grip still on that precarious wooden-slat bridge of sanity. The pressure within me imploded, and I let go, into full-blown psychosis. I let go. First I plummeted; then I flew.

I don’t mean to romanticise something that is ugly and traumatic. The crippling undertow of depressive anxiety turns the most basic steps of living into an ordeal. Crossing a room becomes as complicated a challenge as crossing a desert. One wakes each morning to bone-deep weariness and fearful misery. Breath comes short, tears well up, hands shake. The world closes in upon you, leaving your lifetime of experience to feel as empty as a cardboard carton crumpled up and tossed into a bin. For many people, the pain digs in so relentlessly and horrifically that suicide beckons as bittersweet relief, an oblivion that can be bargained for. Is this the same as letting go? Or is it the

ultimate expression of clinging on, one's fists clenched upon the steering wheel of existence, crashing into a wall of despair?

Griffiths has written honestly in *Tristimania* about the energy-sucking negativity of the bipolar downswing. For her honesty, and her courage in opening herself up to scrutiny, I respect her. Yet I can't help but surmise that she wouldn't respect me in return. Her judgment upon me crops up in the myriad ways that she holds herself apart from the other crazy people – the *really* crazy people, the ones who *do* let go. Her doctor shores up this invisible line: "I never lost my insight, according to my doctor; never lost the overseeing part of the mind which charts the craziness of the other parts.... He said later that he thought hospitalisation would make me worse, and that the other patients, in particular, would affect me badly."

Griffiths comes across as an apologist for the status quo, framing her *annus horribilis* as a breach and an offense to her narrative voice. Embarrassment and shame nip at her constantly, even prudishness as when she sniffs in distaste at an impulse to run "barefoot and naked" through the streets of London. ("Dangerous stupidity?" Bless you, Jay – it's really not as bad as all that. There's been far more harm done in the name of clothing than actual "trouble" caused by the odd naked rambler. Think sweatshops, illegal trade in endangered skins and furs, the psychological torture popularised by the fashion and modelling industry, the carbon cost of landfilled textiles... shall I go on?)

She relates her story with a constant grinding disappointment for falling short of normality: "When I was flailing around trying to force myself into recovery, impatient and angry with myself for all I could not do, [my doctor] gave me wiser counsel, permission to be ill, repeatedly saying that if I'd broken my leg, I'd have no problem accepting that I couldn't use it properly." Since when is propriety a benchmark for health? Are we really well-served by placing mental health within the medical model – casting mental irregularity as pathology? The mental landscape is more diverse than all our earthly ecosystems put together – so why do we try to pin it down into binary categories of normal vs abnormal?

Griffiths too expresses a vein of doubt about the medical model: "He seemed to think of psychiatric illness purely as a brain malfunction, a mechanical problem. To me, the psyche is also a matter of the soul." She goes on, "Where does self end and illness begin?" Where indeed? The devil in me advocates: define self, define illness, define soul, define mind. Take your precision to its illogical conclusion and see it for what it is: an arbitrary boundary upon the essentially boundless. Let's open up that can of worms, and let them all go, to wriggle back out into the mud and the grass.

However much we try to map out the terrain of our mysterious minds, we reside mainly in the precarious chasm of a many-coloured, shape-shifting, uncanny unknown – and it evokes fear and trepidation in most people. Griffiths herself acknowledges this in *Wild*: "I was taught – as we all are – to be scared of the prowling Unknown, of the wild deserts of Beyond."

Yes, I was taught that too – but I am so very, very thankful that insanity took me by the hand into the wildest of wild places: my wild mind. *Tristimania*, for all its eloquence about the manic depressive experience, paints a view from the threshold but never ventures Beyond.

on soulmaking

13 July 2018

My friend Steve of **21soul** and I have both experienced recent bereavements, though in very different ways (a close family member in his case, a beloved family pet in mine.) Both deaths involved the culmination of a long period of illness and decline. The heaviness of the sickroom so gradually accumulates that one doesn't realise its weight upon daily life, until that weight has suddenly lifted.

When I attended Steve's Soulmakers Gathering in Trefin, back in autumn 2014, those of us assembled set ourselves the puzzle of what we meant by 'soulmaking' and indeed, by extension, what on earth we meant by 'soul.' I recall Curtis Mayfield being invoked – but is it any surprise really that we didn't manage to reach a conclusion?

Plaything of philosophers it may be, but when we lose someone we love, that death serves us the bittersweet mystery of the ultimate existential question: what are we? What is this impulse of personal awareness that moves us through time and space? What is it that disappears from the room when our breathing finally ceases?

In her exquisite book *Belonging*, Toko-Pa Turner proposes that

Soul is not a thing, but a perspective. It's the slow courtship of an event that turns it into a meaningful experience. It's the practice of trusting that if we sit silently and long enough with the absence of magic, the miraculous will reveal itself. Nothing is sacred until we make it so with the eloquence of our attention, the poetry of our patience, the parenting warmth of our hospitality.

The experiences we co-create with a loved one, the time and space shared, this is soul. When we reach out to one another, whether we are sharing a caress in real time or sharing a memory in hindsight, this is soulmaking.

I used to become very anxious when I considered the vast multitudes that have perished over the millennia, the anonymity of all those individual beings:

all those people, all those lives: where are they now?
with their loves and hates and passions just like mine
they were born and then they lived and then they died
(the Smiths, Cemetery Gates)

Will I really disappear into that throng? A thousand years from now, even a hundred, will there be any trace left of me? In the grip of that long lens, what really matters? Turner continues:

Let's consider the word 'matter,' which comes from the Latin root *mater* meaning 'origin, source, mother.' In pre-Socratic times, *mater* was used to describe the underlying nature of the visible world. We still use it in that sense when we say, "This is what matters most." Though we may not be able to articulate why, we use it in this way when we're near the essence of a thing.

Of course, our culture also uses 'matter' as a noun to describe the fundamental substance of reality. Yet what is matter? Quantum physics and indigenous cultures across the globe understand energy – movement – to be integral to all forms of matter (organic or not.) Or as Bill Hicks put it, "all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration... we are all one consciousness experiencing itself

subjectively, there is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves.”

Language reveals our mindset, giving us both nouns and verbs: things and movement. What if this division is artificial, merely a way of navigating the world? Imagine if you can that nouns and verbs are actually the same, that to be a thing is to do thingness: a person is to person; a soul is to soul. Out of curiosity, is there any language which does not distinguish between nouns and verbs? Google tells me that there may be:

[David Gil] argues that there is no distinction between nouns and verbs in Riau Indonesian. This paper examines a series of grammatical environments, which in many other languages provide diagnostics for a noun/verb distinction, and shows, based on naturalistic data, that none of these distinguish between nouns and verbs in Riau Indonesian. ([Oxford Scholarship](#))

I’m digressing into linguistics, but what else is there? Consciousness expresses itself through language – whether the familiar complexity of human language, or the differently complex communication styles of the myriad other entities with whom we share existence. When Hamlet muses “To be, or not to be, that is the question” he captures our dilemma in a single sleight of hand: the question (thing) is to be or not to be (doing thingness.) We live and breathe the unknowing uncertainty of a question without an answer.

I reign myself back in, from the ponderings of deep speculation to the tangible truth of a personal loss. Somebody who shared their alive-time with me and was cared for and loved, is now missing and missed. And with the absence of this very particular magic, this individual’s particular being-ness, the miraculous does indeed reveal itself: soulmaking matters.

music and joy

18 November 2018

“Singing brings joy to people. You just need to look at people’s faces when they sing.” Maryam Ghaffari, founder of Got Soul choir

It’s becoming more and more difficult these days to look at the world around me with joy. As the problems mount, and the news drips out its steady beat of grim stories filled with hubris and suffering, where on earth can I find joy?

When I contemplate the bigger picture I see a self-made mess, rather than the Better Life embedded in all the promises of civilisation. Ecological crisis, economic strain, political chaos, bigotry and violence, and the deep dysfunction of our institutions... and to top it all off for fuck’s sake, the potential extinction of giraffes. Those graceful, gorgeous creatures are now officially endangered. Where is the joy?

Where indeed? In the last week alone I have witnessed: the birth of a much-wanted and much-loved tiny new baby; extraordinary generosity and kindness from friends; collective effort from a whole network of long-distance family and friends to arrange their hectic schedules during the mayhem of the holiday season, in order to see me when I visit. Joy is still there, up close and personal. It comes in small packages but it packs a big punch.

Music is like that: a three-minute song can last a lifetime in one’s mind and heart. Whether the sweet melancholy lament of minor chords or the jumping beat of a pop song, the soft croon of a lullaby or the tingling anticipation of a Christmas carol – music and singing deliver their own magical gift of ineffable, enduring joy.

Unpsychology magazine invites you to share that joy in its next issue, which explores the role of music and dance as a response to the world’s mixed blessings. We are accepting submissions until 31st December – **read more about the call for submissions and guidelines here.**

As long as there is music, there will be joy.

on silence and otherwise

13 October 2019



photo by LoriAnn Norcross

I've done some work with rocks and what I've learned is that their primary consciousness is of silence. It's much easier to feel that with a boulder. You might try this, go find some boulders, the bigger the better, and feel them blasting silence. When you tune into it it's really powerful... A pebble is just a grain of silence, but once you've become attuned to it through boulders and bedrock you might also become attuned to it even for little tiny pieces of silence.

Charles Eisenstein, [Metaphysics and Mystery](#)

I too am a little tiny piece of silence – or at least I have been, over the past nearly-a-year on this blog. All my attention and energy has been directed at moving from a home of 16 years, into a new home – so flat hunting and bidding and mortgaging and packing and moving and unpacking and settling in and learning new routines and habits and systems. Between that and fulltime work and other side projects, I have been too utterly depleted to write.

But here I am again, back in the land of Blog, following that period of silence. The last time I was here I was sharing thoughts of music and joy, as *Unpsychology Magazine* had put out a call for submissions for its issue 5, *Earthsongs*. Since then, *Earthsongs* has been published: a lovely collection of essays and poetry and artwork and even a spectacular playlist of music, all of which can be [downloaded for free from here](#).

And once again I am here to introduce a new call for submissions, this time for issue 6. Our theme for issue 6 is *other-than-human*. We invite submissions of writing and art that explore this theme in whatever way speaks to you (like the silence of rocks, for instance?) You can read the [guidelines for submission here](#) and the deadline is *16 December 2019*.

For some context, and a history of *Unpsychology Magazine*, see Steve's [wonderful piece celebrating its journey](#) over the years, from its birthplace in the margins of the Dark Mountain Project, to its latest explorations.

on life coaching

13 September 2020

We are born into perilous states, and we end by dying – so, have a nice day! – James Hollis

I am a life coach. That wasn't easy to say. I can't help but look at the life coaching industry with skepticism: so much flakiness and sham-shammy dished out in slick sales pitches. And yet there is also a thick streak of gold in there amongst the nonsense. There are many sincere and skilled people offering help to those who are stuck. And I'm one of them.

Can you relate to that word: stuck? Does it need defining? I doubt it. Stuckness is part of the human condition: "to be or not to be, that is the question." And we can't do it all alone, we need others in our life to connect with and to share the load. Life coaches are trained to listen, ask questions and generally to walk alongside you, as you explore the ways to come unstuck.

I have used a life coach myself, and it was really beneficial. It gave me some time and space to reflect on what was going on for me, and what I wanted next in my life. It was a space of contemplation as well as creative thinking. For all my skepticism about the way the industry presents itself, I can vouch for its usefulness.

So I've been working out my coaching niche, and it's pretty grim: I work with people who are experiencing overwhelm, crisis and troubled times. My clients have been in tough circumstances, and use the coaching space as a place to replenish, to take stock and to recognise their own strengths and resources. I work with people who are stuck, even struggling, and together we explore the depth of their own creativity and resilience.

In my personal experience, and in my experience as a coach, there is no easy answer. It's not a simple fix, or a magic bullet, or a comprehensive solution. It takes time, and the magic that happens is more like an undercurrent. It's not always visible until you look back and can see that things have changed and that you have grown. Having said that, there are definitely ah-ha moments, which are points at which one's perspective shifts. A question asked, a meaningful quote shared, an observation made – it can be a subtle prompt, but the impact is significant.

In my coaching, I work with the concept of soulmaking. The poet John Keats coined the phrase in a letter to his brother. He wrote:

Call the world if you please "The vale of Soul-making." Then you will find out the use of the world.... Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and Troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways.

For me, soulmaking is a practice of living with depth and meaning, in a world which promises difficulty and suffering. Soulmaking embraces the challenges of the human condition, and finds purpose within life's rich pageant.

I know, I know. I'm not selling you a pretty picture, full of happiness and ultimate fulfillment. Sometimes I wonder what life coaches are on, to subscribe so energetically to the positivity movement. Have they taken a look at the state of the world? It's terrifying!

So yeah, I don't offer a promise to find Your Best Life Ever. Nobody's life is that simple or fantastic. Life has ups and downs, it has challenges and disappointments, and the wise soul works with these as gifts, as treasures.

I am a life coach, and my offer is to walk alongside you as you plumb these depths and create a life

of worth and value. I help to create a space in which you can learn about soulmaking and about living with grit and imagination. I stand by you as you dig deep and take root.

on soul

18 October 2020

I think the question we have to ask ourselves is: “Do you believe you have a soul?” John Cusack

I nearly wept when I read this question, posed as it was in the middle of a discussion about the impending US election – the most soulless circus in town. I can barely read the headlines, let alone an entire interview about the fascist threat facing my country of origin. My jaw clenches with stress whenever I read or see anything about the current president or the sycophants enabling him or the corruption and injustice in which he revels. But that’s not what I want to write about: please don’t take me down that rabbit hole.

I’ve been reading a lot about soul recently: James Hollis, Thomas Moore, Robert Sardello, John Cottingham, James Hillman – philosophers and psychologists whose primary concern is that of the soul. I’ve also been writing in dialogue with my friend Steve Thorp, on the subject of soulmaking. You could say I’ve been slightly obsessed with discovering what we mean when we talk about the soul.

Cottingham takes his reader through a careful history of the concept of soul, as seen through the lens of the great philosophers over the centuries. He concedes however that “The philosophical temptation is always to classify the transcendent. If this means to give a positive characterization in literal language, such an undertaking is impossible.... Many writers trying to grapple with this have had recourse to metaphor.”¹

Is the soul transcendent? Or is it grounded in our daily lives, is it embedded in each moment, in each breath we take? Is a soul a thing, or a process? Thomas Moore suggests that “ ‘Soul’ is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance.”²

In the article I was reading, Cusack introduced soul to the context of our world situation:

Q: How do we get out of this mess?

Cusack: *Usually everybody tells you you have to separate church and state. But I think the question we have to ask ourselves is: “Do you believe you have a soul?”*

If you do believe you have a soul, then other people have a soul, then you have to start looking at being a different way. You have to start by not worshipping capitalism. You have to start to have different values.

The guy that I read and study, Rudolf Steiner, says that we live in an age of materialism, and our thinking is even materialistic, and we need to know spiritual truths and spiritual laws, and if we don’t learn them or embrace them out of our own free will, we will have cataclysms.

Right now, we need to be shaken out of our materialistic, self-centered view of the world, where people are either customers or marks. Capitalism will sell you the rope to hang yourself with and then make you pay for the coffin and pass the debt onto your kids.

So people need to awaken to the fact that human beings have souls, and we have to treat

each other with compassion and grace. ³

Is soul the missing piece in our world's troubles? The way we get out of the mess that we ourselves have created? Have we arrived here through neglect of soul? Robert Sardello reflects here:

We are now in the midst of a time when there appears to be very strong concern for the world – for ecology, preservation, restoration, control of pollution, recycling, saving the animals, saving the forests, curbing corporations, saving the planet. The world is very much on our minds. All of these actions are... on the side of illusion, because they all assume that it is we who can gain control through enacting measures of restraint on destructive forms of consciousness; they do not propose a radical alteration of consciousness itself. Alone, these measures encourage the illusion that with carefulness and planning, we can be in charge of the world.... For the real problem is diseased consciousness. We can throw money, programs, policies endlessly into these world concerns and absolutely nothing will be different. ⁴

Diseased consciousness! How on earth do we heal such a thing? Is it even possible?

Ironically, the scholars of soul remind us that soulmaking is not about fixing or curing. Moore lays it out: "So, the first point about care of the soul is that it is not primarily a method of problem solving. Its goal is not to make life problem-free, but to give ordinary life the depth and value that come with soulfulness." ⁵ And Hollis explores "some of these underworld regions we have all experienced and long to escape. I will not offer solutions to the dilemmas they constitute, for they are not problems to be solved. Rather they are omnipresent experiences of the journey assigned to us by psyche." ⁶

We must embrace a paradox: to solve the world's troubles we must abandon the project of solving the world's troubles, and turn instead to the inner work of consciousness and soul. We must have the courage to live from our hearts. Moore puts it like this: "This is another aspect of the life of the soul: It doesn't always fit within conventional boundaries....That may be the reason why we don't have a terribly soulful society: We choose standardization and compliance over listening to our hearts and living from love of both self and other." ⁷

What does it mean to live from one's heart? Well, Cusack suggests that we "treat each other with compassion and grace" and he so rightfully repositions the argument away from the methods of solution to the question of soul. When we begin with this question (a question, mind you, not an answer) we let go of that project of solving the world's problems and instead turn to our fragility, our vulnerability and also our innate magnificence. The political emergencies of our time are crises of soul.

And here I give a nod to the brilliant book *Spiritual Activism* by Alastair McIntosh and Matt Carmichael. It points to a political activism which embraces soul:

The causes to which any of us might apply ourselves in life should be more than just personal passions. They should also be wake-up calls to those around us. Equally, wake-up calls to our own deeper selves and thus, spiritual journeys; a form of activist pilgrimage through life. What makes "spiritual" activism so exciting is that it approaches demanding issues in ways that invite an ever-deepening perception of reality and of our positioning – individually and collectively – within it. ⁸

I circle back to where I started: the US election. Marianne Williamson, previous candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, points out that

We must awaken, now. It is a political awakening. And what's very important is that we must never go back to sleep. If anything – there will be a lot of changes after this. As soon as this

*man is out of the White House, there are going to be some big changes, including changes having to do with executive authority. That's a given. But there has to be changes in each and every one of us, or this stuff will be back.*⁹

Personally, I don't think "this stuff" will ever go away, it will always be present in some form or another, whether simmering in the background or bubbling up into the mainstream. The challenge for us is to live with heart, with soul, and to bring compassion into the world. We do this moment by moment, breath by breath, person by person, and choice by daily choice.

1 In Search of the Soul, John Cottingham, p.150-151

2 Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore, p.5

3 <https://progressive.org/magazine/john-cusack-interview-nichols/>

4 Facing the World with Soul, Robert Sardello, p.32-33

5 Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore, p.4

6 Swamplands of the Soul, James Hollis, p.15-16

7 Ageless Soul, Thomas Moore, p.105

8 Spiritual Activism, Alastair McIntosh and Matt Carmichael, p.11

9 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/2020/10/14/transcript-conversation-with-marianne-williamson/>

love to learn

1 March 2021

Why am I here? It's the ultimate question, posed to myself each morning when I rise to face the day. I've pondered, and read extensively, about life purpose, from beautiful reflections like Parker J Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*, to more practical studies such as *7 Questions to Find Your Purpose*. There are dozens of books about life purpose, many with step by step programmes for analysing and plotting out your raison d'être.

Of course they can only go so far, providing context and structure to one's contemplation – but in the end, one must turn inward for the answers being sought. A person's purpose is deeply personal, arising from their own groundings and aspirations. It needn't be complicated. Whatever pulls at your interests, your motivation and your heartstrings, this speaks to your purpose.

My own life purpose, I've come to realise, is to learn. Learning is the thread that has carried me through my life to this point, and one that I will wholeheartedly follow into the future. So imagine my delight this spring, to be enrolled on two separate courses from which I will learn. They are both courses that I hope will augment my coaching practice.

Transpersonal Coaching Psychology (hosted by [Alef Trust](#)) explores the transpersonal dimension, in the context of coaching: "Students will investigate what the criteria are that promote transformation in coaching, with a focus on what transpersonal perspectives can contribute. This will include identifying transpersonal states that can be leveraged for positive change, as well as detecting and dealing with psychospiritual crises in the context of coaching."

Climate Change Coaching (hosted by [Climate Change Coaches](#)) digs into the role of coaching within the context of environmental activism. Climate change coaches "help people to make sense of the impact of climate change on themselves, their organisations and their businesses, both emotionally and practically."

They may seem like very different subjects, but I believe that climate change is indicative of a deeply spiritual crisis, whether this be at an individual level or more broadly cultural. Studying coaching from these two perspectives – with a healthy cross-fertilisation of ideas – will enrich my learning, and will hopefully help me to be a better coach. I'm really looking forward to it: I do love to learn.

two toned

28 September 2021

How we view a problem will shape our response. As Abraham Maslow famously said, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” So how do we find other tools? And do we need a tool at all, or perhaps a flower?

I’ve been thinking about this because at the moment I’m exploring two very different responses to the climate crisis: the rational, and the imaginal.

First, the rational. I am reading David Wallace-Wells’s bestselling book *The Uninhabitable Earth*. If you’ve not read or heard of this book, do check it out – but be warned, it is not easy reading. In fact, it is compendium of the doom which awaits us (and has already begun) in our current trajectory of global warming. Wallace-Wells batters the reader with relentless information about the impacts of heat, flooding, wildfires, pandemics and economic collapse which will increase year upon year. He cites reports, statistics and warnings from the scientific and medical communities. It’s a well-written and impassioned, rational look at the consequences of our choices. And I am reading it because I want to remind myself of the facts and stay up-to-date about the fierce gravity of the situation.

Next, the imaginal. I am just embarking on an online course called [Courting the World Soul](#), designed by the lovely Sharon Blackie, author of *If Women Rose Rooted* and *The Enchanted Life*. Blackie is a depth psychologist and mythologist whose work is deeply embedded in a rich, nourishing tradition of imagination, dreamwork and fairy tales. I have only opened the first of eight modules, but am already immersed in the understanding that Anything Can Be. And I am participating in it because I want to remind myself that another more beautiful world is truly possible.

I wonder: what does it mean that the entrenched rational argument is wielded by a man, and the playful imaginal approach by a woman? Perhaps I’m not being fair – but the dense information of *The Uninhabitable Earth* seems profoundly masculine, while the gentle uncanniness of *Courting the World Soul* seems profoundly feminine.

I believe this climate crisis, this awful consequence of the industrial age, is the result of a deep imbalance in our world: too much masculine energy, and too little feminine. Too much dependence upon the rational realm of facts and too little appreciation of the imaginal realm of dreams and stories. I also believe that we each and every one of us hold it within our power to respond to the world’s problems with a flower rather than a hammer.

So I will finish reading *The Uninhabitable Earth* and I will also keep opening the modules of *Courting the World Soul*. They both hold value. But I do know to which one my heart is more drawn.

on freedom and belonging

27 April 2022

“Freedom is perhaps the ultimate spiritual longing of an individual human being, but freedom is only really appreciated when it falls within the parameters of a larger sense of belonging. In freedom is the wish to belong to structure in our own particular way.... We are strange, difficult creatures who long for both freedom and belonging at the same time, and often run a mile when the real thing appears. That is the frontier on which we dwell.”

The above quote is taken from David Whyte’s beautiful book, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* – one of several books I have read over the past few years, to do with work life and vocation. It resonates following a conversation with a dear friend who is going through a rough patch, a what-is-the-point patch. This is a friend for whom I have the utmost respect, whose gifts in the world include kindness and intuitiveness and creativity, intelligence, discernment, good humour and a healthy dose of oh-fuck-it-all. His work in the world is subtle, poetic and deep-reaching. And yet he too has his what-is-the-point patches.

What after all is the point of our work in this world, whether it is a paid job or a private endeavour? I mean, beyond the obvious: to earn our living, to keep ourselves afloat in this strange circumstance we find ourselves, of being alive in a particular time and place. What nonsense is this, to seek freedom through the bondage of wage-earning, to seek belonging among strangers?

We bathe ourselves in our identity: our personal style, our preferences, our skills and talents, our favourite band/film/book/food, the colour of our sofa. Is this our verse? I would argue not: I would suggest that our verse must be in dialogue with others, and is therefore all about relationship. When my friend asks what-is-the-point I must respond to him that our connection as friends is the point.

Another friend once shared her dilemma: “what am I here for?” And my tongue-in-cheek response to her? “You’re here for me!” But within our relationship to one another, this really is the point: to be here for one another. And it’s so true: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” (Maya Angelou) Our real work in this life is to be there for one another, to make one another feel valued, respected, loved.

But back to freedom, and belonging. We often associate freedom with our rights – the right to do what we please, in our own time. I remember a friend once sharing an insight: that we think we have rights, but we have only responsibilities. Again this was about relationship, about the responsibility we hold to one another as cohabitants in this world. When we invoke freedom we often forget about our mutual responsibility, to other people and indeed to all other beings with whom we share our place on Earth. Which leads of course to belonging. We all belong here together – there is not a single creature alive who elected to be born and to participate in life; we all just landed up here.

So how do we respond? This is our work, I reckon. And the work is about how we relate to others, with whom we fall in step while we are here – whether friends or family members or colleagues or strangers or plants or animals or even rocks or water. The work isn’t about finding or securing our own belonging, it is about extending belonging to others. And we are all free to choose this approach to life.

Answer:

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Walt Whitman

thank you friends

30 July 2022

There are no strangers here; Only friends you haven't yet met.

William Butler Yeats

Today is the **International Day of Friendship**. Now in its eleventh year, this commemoration by the UN marks the relationships in our lives that give us strength, sustenance and joy: our friendships.

When I was three years old, we moved away from Louisville where I had been born and formed my first friendship with the toddler next door. I still remember that Baby Karen Bunting was my favourite playmate and that it was a significant development to lose her when we moved. We're primed to form our bonds early: with kin, but also with those in our extended networks, the village around us. Friendship is part of who we are from the very first.

Following Baby Karen, my close friendships multiplied as I grew up: Kristin, Paula, Virginia, Cindy, Laura, Katie, Denise – all precious to me in their own ways, and some of whom I still call my dear friends. My adult friendships too have shaped me and now form the 'family I choose.' Indeed, my friends are the foundation of my life.

Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born. Anais Nin

So today I want to acknowledge and thank the many friends in my life, the worlds they have opened up for me through our connections.

madreality

6 August 2022

“A lot of people don’t struggle with depression, they struggle with the reality we live in.”

I came across this quote by Keanu Reeves – by all accounts a very kind, generous and thoughtful soul – and my first thought was to correct him: *consensus reality*, Keanu: *consensus reality*.

A lot of people struggle with all kinds of mental distress, including depression. Mental distress is a very unsurprising response to the world in which we live, full as it is with injustice and suffering, not to mention the horror of humanity’s own-goal eg the persistent degradation and destruction of our habitable climate.

But to accept this as reality? I believe we miss a trick in doing so. What we actually experience is *consensus reality*, a complex web of social communication and context which is co-created with every word spoken and action taken. *Consensus reality* abides by the parameters of what we agree together, as a society. It is cultural and it is impermanent.

Those who experience something outside of those parameters are deemed to be mad – and in Western society, madness is situated within a medical paradigm which describes such states as pathology. Other cultural traditions may describe these states as spiritual experiences, or as exploration of the frontier of consciousness.

When I experienced this myself, I was told that I was psychotic – that is, experiencing psychosis. Psychosis derives from the Greek and means disease of the mind or soul – suggesting illness or pathology. The term carries baggage from the medical model. “*Psychosis* has come to mean that a person... has developed a private view of the world or a private reality not shared by others.”

**(Encyclopedi
a Britannica)**

I’ve made up my own word to describe my experience: *madreality*. *Madreality* is a state in which one is perceiving the world without the binding limits of *consensus*. It may be uncommon, but it still has a validity of its own, and is made up of information which can be interpreted as meaningful and valuable – should one choose to do so. *Madreality* is a lens of meaning through which a person may be experiencing the world, as legitimately as the lens of meaning of someone whose perceptions happen to be aligned with *consensus reality*.

“What if information is the basic ingredient of the universe? This is not a universe of things, but a universe of the ‘no-thing’ of information. And this information is organised by a second invisible element, meaning.” **Margaret Wheatley**

When we perceive the world around us, we are bombarded with information – and we use our senses to gather that information, we use our mind to sift through it, categorise it and assign meaning to it. What about a dog that can register smells which a human nose cannot? What about animals who can hear pitches of sound that the human ear cannot? Just because a human cannot sense something doesn’t preclude it from being real. Just think: there is a whole realm of sight, sound and smell which exists outside of human perception. What would our *consensus reality* be like if we did perceive the world outside the range to which we are accustomed?

And what if *madreality* is a state in which someone is simply perceiving beyond the *consensus* range? How might a person describe this, in *consensus* language? How might they translate it into *consensus* meaning? What they say may seem nonsensical, or farfetched, or just crazy.

We begin with information, gathered via perception, and combine these with our predispositions, our values, emotions, personal histories, assumptions – this is what creates our meaning. We are

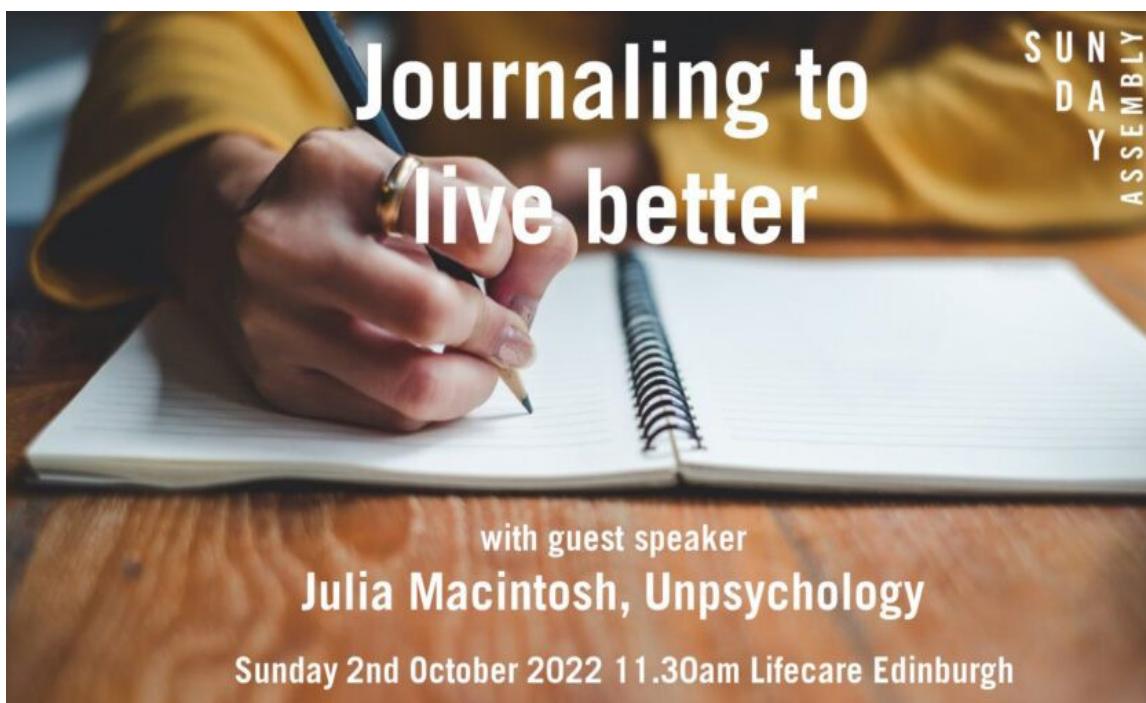
meaning-makers. It is only consensus which calls these meanings ‘reality’.

journaling to live better

15 September 2022

I am delighted to be speaking at Edinburgh’s Sunday Assembly, on Sunday 2 October.

Journaling is a writing practice that invites personal growth. It is an excellent tool for increasing resilience and wellbeing. It creates a holding space for all that is within you, whether recording the minutia of your daily life, or digging into the deep questions of your mind and heart. Taking the time and space to explore your truth, conversing with your values and beliefs, and delving into your ideas, plans and memories – these are all ways that journaling helps you to live better. Join me on 2 October for a celebration of this unique form of self-expression and personal development.



in fact

14 January 2023

I heard a very interesting statement the other day, from a class colleague. It was the Induction Day for the Mad Studies module at Queen Margaret University, which forms a core element of the MSc Mad Studies programme. I'm attending as an associate student, which means that I'm not undertaking the entire MSc, just this particular module. (As it happens, I am thinking about pursuing a PhD... but haven't yet decided. This module is my taster session into the subject.)

Here's the statement which was shared: "Feelings are facts." It was offered as a quote by a colleague who had been told this by a fellow choreographer – so perhaps in the context of the work that is performed through dance. A dancer uses their emotions as material for their expressive artwork. Actually, all artists use their emotions as material for expression. Actually, all people use their emotions as material for expression.

Feelings are information, they are what Nora Bateson refers to as 'warm data.' And what is a fact? Let's see: the Oxford Concise Dictionary says that a fact is "a thing that is known to have occurred, to exist, or to be true." So yes, when we pay attention to our feelings – whether these feelings are positive (contentment, joy, exhilaration) or negative (sadness, anger, distress) – we are gathering facts.

The concept of a fact, of the factual, has been usurped by the Enlightenment and subsequent centuries of rationalism in our Western culture. Facts are deemed to be dry and stolid, unwavering, like bricks in a wall. On one side of the wall is the rational, the explainable, the predictable; on the other side is the irrational, the nonsensical, the dismissable. Yet when we think of facts as warm data, the terrain becomes softer and less polarised. Irrationality has its own value: playfulness, ambiguity, nuance. Irrationality has a bad reputation which needs redeeming, and the mad movement is one step in that direction.

But back to feelings as facts, emotion as information. This is information that provides context for our thoughts and decisions. We do not, cannot set aside our feelings from our thinking experience. We are complex and multi-faceted and messy, muddy creatures. Our feelings are integrated and entwined with our thoughts, they are part of our actual physicality. (When I am *thinking* about pursuing a PhD, I am also *feeling* excitement, trepidation, downright fear, as well as courage and hope. This is all contributing to my decision-making process.)

And here I'd like to bring in the idea of particles and waves. "*Wave-particle* duality is the concept in quantum mechanics that every *particle* or quantum entity may be described as either a *particle* or a *wave*."¹ If we think of rationality and irrationality as particles, then they have a substance to them and can be positioned as opposites. But if we think of them as waves, then they are on a spectrum that flows from one extreme to the other, without a boundary line to separate them.

This is especially relevant when we consider the idea of madness. Is madness a state we reach when we tip over a line, into the realm of the irrational? Or is it a state that we reach by degrees, like a temperature rising until it reaches boiling point? It seems to me that the relevance arises because when we think of madness in the particle-sense, as a line that we cross, then this maintains an us-versus-them separation to what is actually a very common human experience. But when we think of madness in the wave-sense, as a place along an existing spectrum, then it becomes something for which we all carry potential. And we do all carry the potential for irrationality, whether it is as trivial as liking Marmite or as monumental as conversing with angels. (Do you see what I just did there? Personal bias can never be shed.)

I'm currently reading *The Art of Losing Control* by Jules Evans, and this particle/wave image has persisted for me throughout the text so far (I'm about halfway through it, so it may well be addressed at some point.) For Evans, he seems to be exploring the idea of losing control whilst under control, that is, finding 'safe' ways to lose control – for example in religious ritual, or through abandoned lifestyles (an entire chapter devoted to rock and roll culture) or via psychedelic experimentation. He seems to hover around the edge of the cliff, entranced by vertigo, yet never stepping over into the open void. I made a similar critique of Jay Griffith's book *Tristimania*.² What exactly do we mean by losing control, and why is it such a fearfully stigmatised form of experience?

Anyway, I shall stop here with the fact that I am feeling tired of looking at a screen, and ready to end this post. Feelings are real, and true, and worthy of being considered valid information. More on that surely to follow!

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wave%E2%80%93particle_duality

2 <https://atomic-temporary-105216383.wordpress.com/2018/04/01/traveling-beyond-on-the-bipolar-express/>

a new space on substack

2 March 2023

I've set myself up on Substack, and will be posting in a space called madreality, where I will be exploring all things to do with madness and mad scholarship.

The reason for this development? Unpsychology Magazine is migrating its online space – Unpsychology Voices – away from Medium and Mailchimp platforms and over to Substack for a more integrated publishing process. So I'm setting up shop there as well, in order to be involved in the writing and editing that takes place under the Unpsychology banner.

Please do come and visit me over there!