Poetry as a doorway to spacious awareness

Stuart Higginbotham

Session One: Spiritual Imagination and Poetry

What are the elements or aspects that make up what I see as "myself?" **How do I understand my core vocational image?**

- Episcopal Priest (Baptist and Presbyterian Background)
- Contemplative Practice: (working with many communities)
- Interspiritual influences (Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, Sufism, Shamanism, etc.)
- Jungian analysis (dream work, vision, oracle, metaphor, archetype)
- Poetry–an embodiment of spiritual experience...

Who am "I?"

Situating ourselves...



We are lived by powers we pretend to understand... W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Ernst Troller"

In the archetypal world, much more powerful forces control us. Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee, *Alchemy of Light*

How do we know?

...Beginning with Rumi

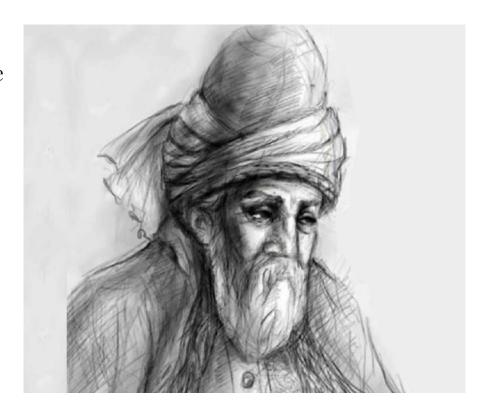
There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world. You get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside through conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

Trans. Coleman Barks et al.



The Importance of Spiritual Imagination

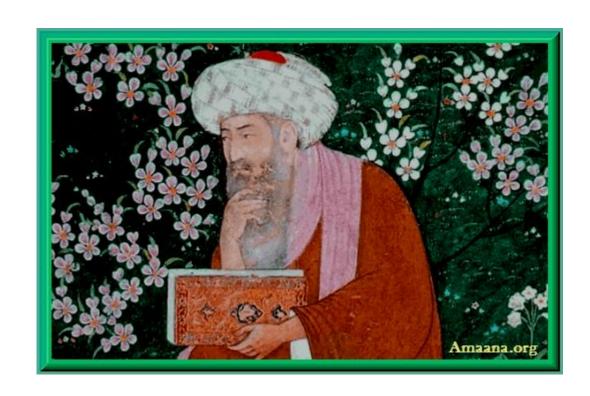
It is at the level of the imagination that the fateful issues of our new world-experience must first be mastered. It is here that culture and history are broken and here that the church is polarized. Old words do not reach across the new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown and new-name the creatures.

Before the message, there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn, before the prose the poem.

Amos Wilder, Theopoetic: Theology and Religious Imagination

"The whole of existence is imagination within imagination, while true Being is God alone."

Ibn' Arabi



Helpful frameworks:

Within the broad framework of meditation practices, we can consider two poles or focus points: **concentrative and receptive.**

A **concentrative practice** uses a mantra or visualization practice to focus and stabilize aspects of the mind. Example: Refuge Tree Practice

A **receptive practice** fosters a certain awareness that seeks to rest, ultimately, in a non-conceptual awareness. Example: Centering Prayer

These are not mutually exclusive, and many practices begin with a concentrative element that flows into a receptive, non-conceptual awareness.

Example: Refuge Tree, Lectio Divina

Helpful frameworks:

In Christian theology, we have a theological framework, as well, to describe our experience/engagement/orientation with the mystery/Source we call "God."

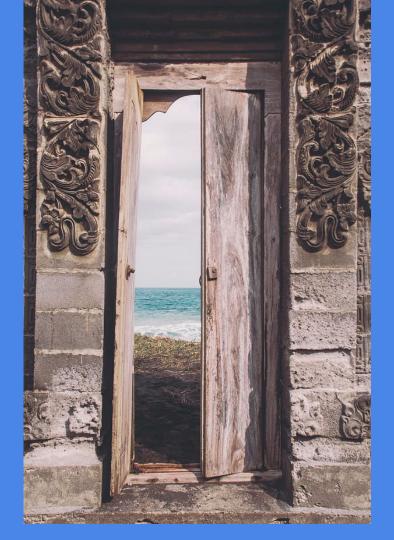
Kataphatic: (Greek) speaking toward, *kata–phasis*, (from phanai)

Apophatic: speaking away from, *apo-phasis*

We can think of these as postures, and both have deep theological traditions and examples within Christian theology (and other religious traditions). Do we focus on affirmation (God/Spirit is like), or negation (God/Spirit is not like–cannot be rationally understood or engaged, etc.)

Connects with, of course, Immanence and Transcendence

Poetry as a doorway...



Engaging poetry: the idea or premise

Rather than being only a literary expression, poetry can serve as a devotional/meditational 'tool' or experience that fosters a deep spaciousness awareness. A contemplative embodiment or posture...

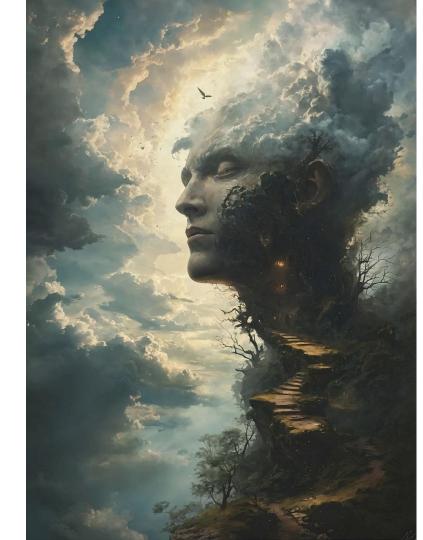
The structure and images within a poem can provide a doorway or "gap" through which we can enter or "fall," nurturing an awareness that is beyond our rational constructs. Example: a caesura within a poem...

The practices of spiritual imagination and spacious awareness are intimately linked through the experience of poetry.

Dreams and Poetry

Sometimes I dreams lines of poetry

Follow the green star as it travels
through time
as I turn your face towards mine
and whisper things unknown
until now



The Imaginative/Creative Process...

It's not just your own personal opinion, it's something in the work. It's *lumen naturalis*, the inner light of the image, and maybe the inner light of the image asks to be seen by the world. Maybe revelation or enunciation isn't something a person decides about. It comes with that strength within it, what the French call idée force, there's a force in the idea, and that needs to come into the world one way or another.

–James Hillman and Sonu Shamdasani, *Lament for the Dead: Psychology after Jung's Red Book*

Poetry and Alchemy

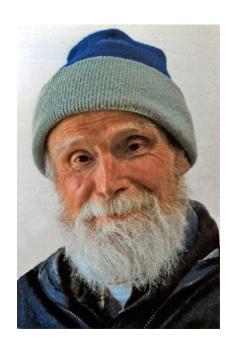
But now we know that these primal patterns and rhythms, which earlier societies revered as their gods, are archetypal forces, and that they exist within our own psyche. In order to reclaim the harmony we have lost, we need to reconnect with these forces within ourselves. (p 46)

The symbolic world is the intermediary between the direct experience of the

Divine and the physical world of the senses. (p 102)

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, Alchemy of Light

There is magic in good poetry: a transformation and a communion, an exchange of being as external reality is permeated with the light that shines from within us. Poetry is alchemy, transfiguration.



Bruno Barnhart, Camaldolese, Second Simplicity: Inner Shape of Christianity

Poetry and the Levels of Reality

We also need to realize that we ourselves function at these different levels: that we exist not only in the familiar physical world of the senses, but also in the symbolic world of archetypal images, on the plane of the Self which is a world of pure love and pure consciousness, and beyond that on the planes of nonexistence, the void of the mystics. Human consciousness has the capacity to be awake in these different worlds, and it can move back and forth between them.

Vaughan-Lee (p 113) connect with Henry Corbin, and also with Cynthia Bourgeault and other deep work with the *Imaginal Realm*

Poetry as immanent presence

And now I see that poetry is a form of attention, itself the consequence of attention. And, too, I believe that poems are presences, themselves the consequence of vivid presentations, events as may be called, in Dame Julian of Norwich's word, 'showings.'

-Donald Revell, *The Art of Attention: The Poet's Eye*

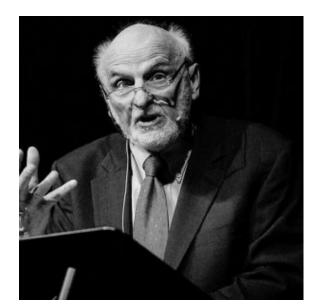
The full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames—ever–flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them.

-Owen Barfield, Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning

Poetry and Prophetic Imagination

Indeed, poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality. The dominant reality is necessarily in prose, but to create such poetry and lyrical thought requires more than skill in making rhymes.

Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination



Ecstatic Poetry

Perhaps the genre of **ecstatic poetry** nurtures this experience most fully.

A tradition that evokes and nurtures an **experience of the Divine within the spiritual heart.** A poem can transform our hearts, to nurture a more **expansive**

consciousness.

Examples: Hafez, Rumi, Rabia,

Li Po (Li Bai). Kabir.

Also Rilke, Zeynep Hatun. Many

others!



Rabia Al Basri (8th cent, Iraq)

I carry a torch in one hand

And a bucket of water in the other:

With these things I am going to set fire to Heaven

And put out the flames of Hell,

So that voyagers to God can rip the veils

And see the real goal.



Doorkeeper of the heart: versions of Rabia. Translated by Charles Upton

Reflections and Associations

Session Two: "Falling through the gap" into a spacious awareness



At a certain point, a falling through...

We begin to experience a 'falling through' with images from the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra:

Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.

Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness not other than form.

Poetry's highest purpose is to remind us of our true nature, the untainted mirror-like mind that exists beneath our layers of conditioning, unchanging in the midst of constant change. Not a separate self, not an ego, but a wide-open, limitless awareness that flows throughout the cosmos and connects us to all things.

-John Brehme, ed. *The Poetry of Grief, Gratitude, and Reverence*

"A motion to no-motion"

I would suggest you teach that poetry leads us to the unstructured sources of our beings, to the unknown, and returns us to our rational, structured selves refreshed. Having once experienced the mystery, plenitude, contradiction, and composure of a work of art, we afterwards have a built-in resistance to the slogans and propaganda of over-simplification that have often contributed to the destruction of human life. Poetry is a verbal means to a non-verbal source. It is a motion to no-motion, to the still point of contemplation and deep realization.

-A. R. Ammons, "A Poem is a Walk," essay in *The Paris Review*, 1967

From the Tao te Ching...

The Way that can be walked is not the eternal Way.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.

The named is the mother of all things.



Therefore:

Free from desire you see the mystery.

Full of desire you see the manifestations.

These two have the same origin but differ in name.

That is the secret,

The secret of secrets,

The gate to all mysteries.

From the Tao te Ching...

The tao that can be told

is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named

is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.

Naming is the origin

of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations

arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

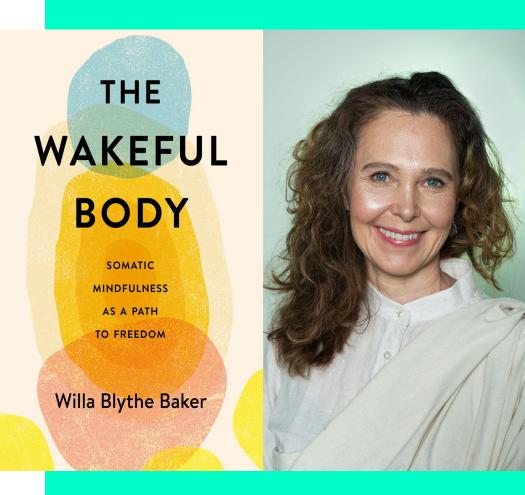
The gateway to all understanding.

Stephen Mitchell, trans.

Lama Willa Blythe Baker

In some meditation texts, such a glimpse is called 'the exhaustion of all concepts.' It refers to a pivotal moment when all our schemes, our attempts to manage things, in fact the entire scaffolding of the conceptual mind, just falls apart.

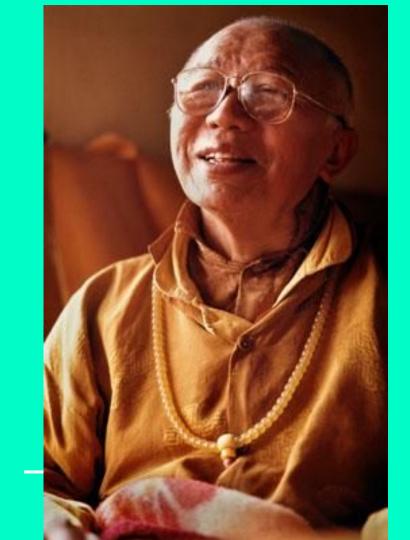
When we are completely spent, such a falling apart happens easily. We may not ever have thought of exhaustion as a blessing, but to be tired—to be completely at the end of our rope—is an opportunity to encounter the nonconceptual. In the gap that is left when our thoughts collapse, there is clarity—an open, free, unencumbered space that is both fresh and as old as time.



Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche

This original wakefulness, yeshe, is not a blank void; it is cognizant. It has the ability to know. When we talk about the real, the original, this is what it is. . . . Original wakefulness is also all-pervasive in its capacity. . .

As It Is, Vol. 1



Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra

Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā.

"Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone utterly beyond, Enlightenment, hail!"



Tilden Edwards

Within us there is a capacity for touching reality more directly than the thinking mind. It is activated when we're willing to let go of the thoughts that come through our mind and to sit in the spacious openness that appears between and behind them.

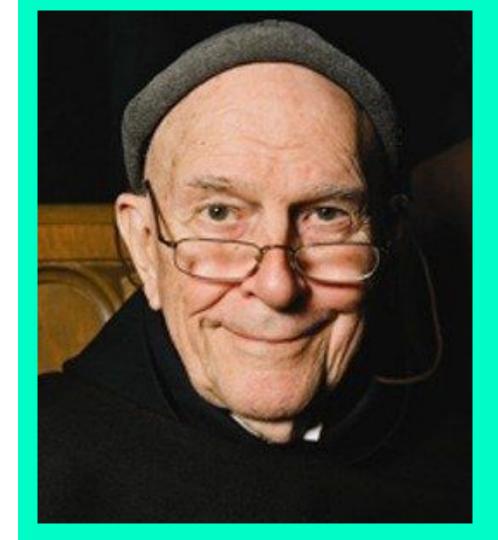
This preinterpretive faculty, our capacity for intuitive 'direct awareness' belongs to each of us. We touch the same substantive reality there. In that direct awareness we share an inclusive sense of community with what is, because we find everyone and everything present and interrelated.



Thomas Keating

This presence, once established in our inmost being, might be called spaciousness. There is nothing in it but a certain vibrancy and aliveness. You're awake. But awake to what, you don't know. You're awake to something that you can't describe and which is absolutely marvelous, totally generous, and which manifests itself with increasing tenderness, sweetness, and intimacy.

From Mind to the Heart



Poetry: Engaging a Creative Tension

So, we engage in this creative tension between spiritual imagination and spacious awareness, as seen with poetry and 'falling through' into a space of awareness.

To live fully, perhaps, is to have a hermeneutic that appreciates and engages the creative capacity of our spiritual hearts, knowing that the "point" is not to "understand" or to grasp or control, but to rest in that spacious awareness beneath and within.

We can participate fully, nurturing our spiritual imaginations, and "holding things lightly"....and this nurtures a deepening trust in the Spirit's movement in our lives. I think of this as an oscillation of receptivity, a posture.

Non-Dual Awareness...



Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding.

Reflections and Associations

An example... "The chalice"

This example demonstrates my own engagement with this creative tension, wondering how poetry and spiritual imagination intersect and enrich (and are enriched by) my contemplative practice and spaciousness.



The dream-the poem

There is a wound on my left leg, near the knee that will not heal.

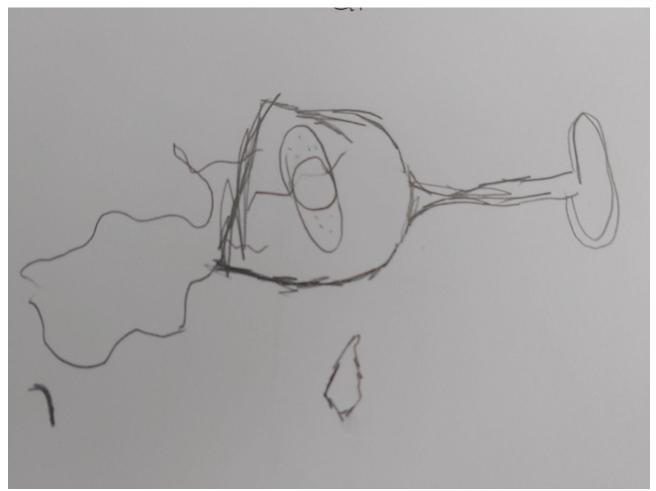
I look closely inside the wound and find a cup, a chalice that is deep within the wound.

I reach into the wound and remove the chalice, bringing it out and holding it up to the light.

The wound begins to heal.



The sanctuary meditation space at the Charis Mandala Center, Des Moines, NM



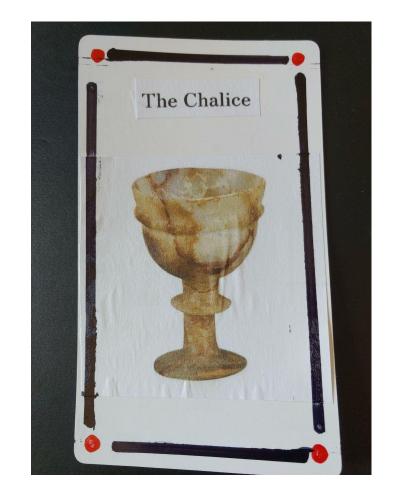
Picture drawn by Meg and Mike McPeek's daughter, a few years before NM, with Meg journaling the same morning at Charis Mandala Sanctuary in New Mexico.

Meg opened her journal while we were there, on the morning after I shared this dream with her.

This was the photo on the next page.

Creating my own prayer/oracle cards to help me nurture the awareness that comes from this dream.

What Jung would call "Amplification"



The Holy Grail

An immediate association may be with the Holy Grail, a powerful mythological symbol. But what do we understand this to be? Digging deeper...





Associations...

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.

- Gospel of Thomas, verse 70

The wound is the place where the light enters you.

- Rumi

Continuing to reflect on the chalice as a symbol

Associations with alchemy–the inner experience/process of transformation.

With alchemy, you need a container. The chalice becomes such a crucible that can hold the energy of the transmutation that is called for.

As one person noted, the meeting of divine intelligence and receptive wisdom.

Also, see the deep resonance with the Divine Feminine. (i.e., the wound on my left leg)



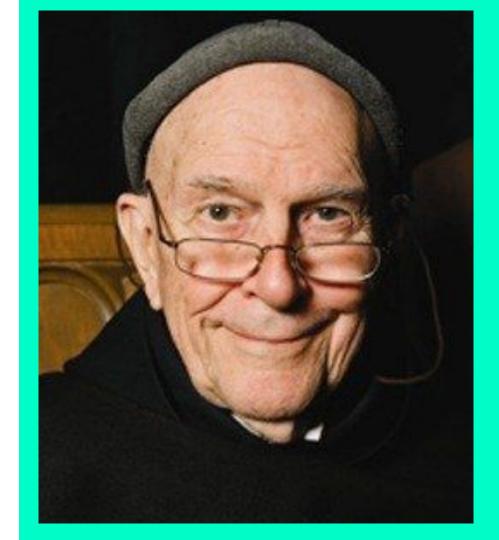
Receptivity and Awareness

Session Three: Exploring the poetry and teachings of Fr. Thomas

Thomas Keating

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From Mind to the Heart



The highest call of humanity is to manifest the Un-manifested, or more precisely, the Un-manifestable. Ultimately there is only THAT WHICH IS. Rational consciousness is a major step along the evolutionary way, but it is only the beginning. We must bring our conscious presence to the divine presence and all that we are-body, soul, and spirit-to all that God is in order to receive all

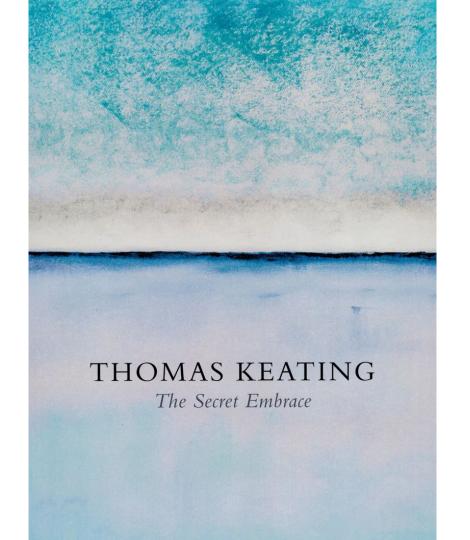


Reflections on the Unknowable

that God is.

Fr. Thomas's Poetry

The intersection of imagination and spaciousness



"Out of Nothing"

To be nothing
Is to consent to being a simple creature.
This is the place of encounter with
"I AM that I am."

When there is no more "me, myself, or mine," Only "I AM" remains.

Then the "I" may fall away, Leaving just the AM.

God empowers our powerlessness So that we never despair Of unconditional forgiveness and infinite mercy.

Such is the grace of inner resurrection, And the reward in seeking no reward. "Stillness"

Our true nature is stillness, The Source from which we come.

It manifests itself within us As a rising tide of silence,

A flowing stream of peacefulness, A limitless ocean of calm, Or just sheer silence

The deep listening of pure contemplation Is the path to stillness.

All words disappear into It, And all creation awakens to the delight of Just being.

At a certain point...

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