

Forest Light

(On the Messengers Nine)



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The Ninth Symphony

There is a memorable scene in the film “Immortal Beloved” in which Beethoven lies immersed in a watery mirror of the heavens as the melody of his *Ode to Joy* resounds in his mind. It is an extraordinarily powerful image of union with the cosmos. Perhaps this is what Beethoven actually meant with this music; we shall never know because the only description of Beethoven’s vision is found in the music itself (and who would want to read an *interpretation* of an artist’s work?). What we can say for certain is that the Ninth Symphony (just like many other examples of “nine-ness” found in our expressions of the sacred) unfolds as an incredible journey that is finally rewarded by an unspeakable glory. This *Prize at the end of the Quest* has been described in many ways; I see something different in conjunction with this sublime symphony...

Falling from astounding celestial heights, starlight rains upon a lonely terrestrial oasis in the empty wastes of the interstellar desert. And falling too are black and terrible mountains of iron, shredding the stony flesh of the fragile sphere with world-cleaving fury. Burning continents collide and explode, heaving miles into the sky, ever churning, collapsing, and colliding again as they writhe upon a globe-shaking vortex of boiling rock. Vast oceans lurch and spasm, belching out a choking exhaust that rolls inexorably into a globe-enshrouding smog; a blazing turbulence whips it into thundering island reservoirs in the sky. These air-born seas founder on towering shards of stone and break open to release tectonic avalanches of mud and rock and steam, which hack and pulverize every feature between the horizons. Oceans fall, fire blows, continents flow...

That paroxysm of creation was the Wrath of Chaos and the Making of the World. And yet, to the implacable tumult of that global firestorm, something silently *other* has come - a benediction and promise of possibility toward which that empty devastation had looked with great longing and expectation. Her arrival and long sojourn in the molten land is something strange, wonderful, and utterly beyond comprehension - Life on earth is as *foreign* as a flowing crimson gown in the green primordial forest...

Nine and The Trinity

As discussed in *Song of the Hummingbird Muses*, our identical words for the *root* of a tree and the *root* of a number, in fact mean the same thing. A root is that which connects a growing thing to that from which it grows. As a tree grows from the earth, nine grows from three. The square root of 9 is 3 ($3 \times 3 = 9$): the root of nine is the *Trinity*.

The Trinity is an ancient idea found in the spiritual traditions of people from every part of the world; it is a prevalent but still difficult concept. Whence comes the pervasive fascination with the notion that, somehow, God is a tripartite entity? As I mentioned in *Celestial Apparition*, there are three dimensions of space (length, width, and height), and three dimensions of time (past, present, and future). This “threeness” in the form and duration of our cosmic house is, perhaps, part of the meaning, part of what we hope to explain with a godhead of three aspects. The Trinity is the fundamental unit of perpetuating life: Mother, Father, and Child. It may be that this is another component of the influence this archetype has upon us. Perhaps a more arcane illustration of the Trinity is found in the complementary polarities of existence (one-many, up-down, rest-motion, dark-light, pull-push, etc...) that in conjunction become mysterious *unities* within the dance of the living cosmos (not pull and push but *tension*; not dark and light but *gray*, not rest and motion but *rhythm*, etc.). For example: male is one form of phenomena, and female is a second form of phenomena; in union they are together a third form of phenomena - Life - a unity of which male and female are merely component halves. Stated (not very) simply: The universe is the Two that become Three, that is truly only One.

Nine is a very common number in the sacred stories of humanity, and it always appears in the same guise. Fortunately, that guise has very little to do with nebulous contemplations of the Trinity. We shall see that the significance of nine rests in its proximity, not to the *smaller* root, but to something *greater*...

The Nine and The Quest

In ancient Egypt (land of the Nine Gods), their name for nine was “Mountain of the Sun.” The hieroglyphic symbol for nine was also a component of the glyph for both “sunrise” (new sun), and “new moon.” In fact, many languages within the Indo-European complex derive their word for “new” (Latin, nova) from the Sanskrit word *nava*, which means nine. In sacred stories from across Eurasia, nine is very often the guide that leads us to the edge of something *new*...

The Aztecs, in accord with all Central American belief, constructed temples of nine stories to match the nine heavens. To ascend the mountain-like nine-level pyramid was to imitate the nine-step crossing of the sun; it was a symbolic rehearsal of the nine-stage journey into the afterlife wherein one finds eternal rest.

In the philosophy of ancient China, there were nine heavens above, and nine springs in the land of the dead. In emulation of this cosmic order, there were nine steps that lead to the imperial throne, and nine gates that insulated it from the exterior world. We see another reflection of this “guiding nine” in the Taoist classic, Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, which has 9 X 9 (81) chapters.

That he might drink from the infinite depths of Mimir’s well, Odin (Ruler of the Nine Worlds in Norse mythology), sacrificed an eye to achieve knowledge of all things past, present, and future; ever after one empty socket looked inwards, while the remaining eye looked out. Odin was then left to hang for nine days on the world-tree Yggdrasil, learning the secrets of the runes, until finally beckoned by the Prophetess into the Wisdom of Eternity.

Christ hung upon the Holy Rood for three hours; in his aspect as one third of the Godhead we may say that the Trinity entire hung upon that world-axis for nine hours (3 aspects X 3 hours each). “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried in a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34) This then is a final expression of humanity made by a man standing at the horizon: behind him is the temporal world of suffering and strife, forever limited by fear and desire; before him is the Holy Spirit (imagined as feminine in many early Christian traditions) beckoning him into limitless one-ness with the Kingdom

of God.

Demeter (Greek Goddess of the bounty of nature, and She who wears the nine stalks of wheat) was the Sister of all-powerful Zeus, and the Mother of Persephone. Demeter adored Her young daughter, but did not know that Zeus had promised Persephone to their brother, Hades - Lord of the Underworld. When Persephone disappeared from Mount Olympus, Demeter searched the earth for nine days, before learning of the abduction of Her daughter. In anger and sorrow She withdrew Her regenerative grace from the world; the crops, forests, and grasslands soon withered. Demeter was inconsolable, and so eventually a deal was made: each year Persephone - the Daughter of Nature - must dwell in darkness with Hades for 3 months. There, while the earth sleeps a barren winter sleep, Persephone will remain until ushered by Demeter Herself back into the world of life, brought forth as the 3 Living Seasons: 3 seasons of 3 months each = nine months.

The Greeks summarized the pursuits of human intellect - our arts and sciences - with the Nine Muses: Thalia (comedy), Clio (history), Calliope (epic poetry), Terpsichore (dance), Melpomene (tragedy), Erato (love poetry), Euterpe (music), Polyhymnia (sacred hymns), and Urania (astronomy). These nine sisters were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory); they represented the living incarnation of all knowledge. By proper action and contemplation, the adept would communicate with each muse in turn, each time ascending another level or sphere of existence. From the dim and opaque depths of the human realm, successive raptures would summon the spirit to ascend into ever higher planes of being until, from the vantage of Urania’s starry vault, one might bask in the transparent incandescence of Unbounded Knowledge.

Dante was nine years old when he first beheld the terrifying spiritual glory of divine grace. Her name was Beatrice, and he writes of her in *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life): “...at the beginning of her ninth year she appeared to me...clothed in a most noble color, a modest and becoming crimson [...] At that instant, I say truly that the spirit of life, which dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble with such violence...and trembling, said these words: ‘Behold a God stronger than I, who coming shall rule over me’” Many years later (long after Beatrice

Portinare had died at the age of 24), Dante's muse appeared to him again and lead him on an extraordinary spiritual journey through the nine rings of hell, and the nine spheres of paradise. And from that ninth sphere, Dante, with lovely Beatrice at his side, witnessed the empyrean beauty and perfection of *The Infinite*.

(There is a heavenly counterpart to this beautiful, archetypal image of decent and ascent: Venus (Goddess of Love and Life), in Her celestial incarnation as the Evening Star, follows Apollo's solar chariot (the Sun) into the underworld darkness wherein he will find regeneration and prepare anew to smite the darkness with his blazing spears of light. And Venus, as the *Morning Star*, will be there to guide him again into being as his luminous consciousness approaches the horizon...)

The Odyssey

The Trojan War waged for nine years. After the final victory of the Greeks, Odysseus, a vigorous but unwilling participant in the battle, attempted to find his way home; his journey took nine years. A soldier, like a child, is always subject to the will of another, and to make the essential transition into proper and complete life, the *boy* must break from parental authority and exercise his own will as a *man*. This is the objective of *The Odyssey*. And just as we have seen in the examples above, Odysseus' transformation was mediated by The Feminine. In his travels he encountered three nymphs (and we shall soon see why a trinity of Goddesses is always a nine), each one representing a different aspect of the Goddess of Many Names:

Circe (an incarnation of Aphrodite) is the seductress and temptress, the irresistible invitation to abandon the innocent games of youth. The erotic dimension is the first motive impulse to the Ritual of Life. She guides Odysseus on a harrowing trek into the underworld and back again, followed by a celestial journey to the God of the Sun. This narrative (one of the most common in mythology), we may say, is like a journey from consciousness into the unconscious, and then returning again - somehow *more awake*; it is a voyage to the primeval depths of the unknown mystery whence all life comes, and an aspiration for the illuminated

knowledge that lies only at the summit beyond the far side of darkness. To a soldier of Odysseus' time (and all too often in our time as well, it seems), women were nothing more than the spoils of war. Circe introduces Odysseus to a grander view of the world in which women are equal partners in the eternal dance.

Calypso (an incarnation of Hera) is the wife and mother, the call to productive responsibility. The second motive impulse in the Ritual of Life is the will to achievement. Calypso is that force in the feminine that compels an aspiration to power and authority that is sublimated in the service of life. She is the imperative for which stable and prosperous societies are erected, so that new life is nurtured and protected. Calypso represents the terrifying knowledge that, contrary to boyhood fantasies, there is only power in the service of Life, and power in the service of death. There is no third way.

Nausicaa (an incarnation of Athena) is the enchanting virgin daughter, the beautiful miracle of the Ritual of Life. She is the reminder that the Wheel of Life churns ever onward, and that as new life comes into being, so, too, must old life go out of being. Athena is also the matron saint of heroes; so, paradoxically, Nausicaa is also the Prize for which those little boys fight - whether they know it or not.

In this symbolic reappearance of the three goddesses from *The Iliad*, we may say that *The Odyssey* represents a kind of redemption for man. In *The Iliad*, we encounter - in the soldiers' contemptuous disregard for women - the misogyny of frightened boys. Paris humiliates the life-bestowing mystery that is the Goddess, but we can see him for the boyish puppet he is. Odysseus and *The Odyssey* represents that next bewildering step into true manhood, after all the sticks and stones are thrown. The Goddess' essential action is existence; it is man who must act and be found worthy of that which *transcends* action.

What is common to all these references to "nine-ness" is a recognition that nine is the last number, the threshold. In the sacred stories briefly described above, we have seen that it is nine that brings us through the limited dimension of existence to a point of new departure into the *unlimited*. To step beyond this boundary of the nine single-digit numbers is to ascend into the higher realm of infinite repetitions and reiterations of the principles and

relations established in The Nine. The Greeks called nine “The Horizon.” Nine is the end of the quest, the expectation of transition and transformation from one phase to another - the expectation of The Prize. The Chinese use the same word for both “nine” and “gift.” There are some interesting reasons why our sacred stories identify the beckoning gift-bearer as feminine.

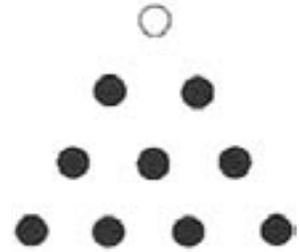
Sacred Tetraktys

Of course, the first step from nine into the boundless ocean of spirally-cycling number is ten. Nine is the last number with its own distinct identity; ten is a composite number, for it is considered (in our system of *decimal* notation - from the Greek *deka*, for ten) one collection of tens, just as twenty is two collections of tens. Ten is a return to unity because it is *one cycle* of number. Virtually every form of numerical notation in the world has distinct symbols for each successive accumulation of ten. In the West these accumulating “hierarchy of tens” are called *orders of magnitude* (10, 100, 1000, etc...). From ancient Sumer (the birthplace of writing 5000 years ago) to Egypt, Greece and Rome, India, China and Japan, and right into the modern world, we have chosen to count with our fingers. We are able to ascertain very large numbers very quickly because we *count by tens*.

This may seem rather obvious and banal, but there was a time in the development of man when there was only *many*. The realization that we could quantify the world in a precise and therefore meaningful way - that we could *count* things - was almost certainly the inspiration that led to the invention of writing. (We can easily see that the first surpluses enjoyed by the early city-states made possible a new human endeavor: *commerce*; and trade and exchange requires *accounting*.) That a meaningful and intelligible model of the world could be constructed with something as ethereal as *number* was a source of awe among wise men in those ancient times (and still is among physicists and mathematicians). Many schools opened to pass on the mysterious secrets of *quantity*; the foremost of these ancient schools was that of *Pythagoras*.

The Pythagoreans called ten - the first step into the

empyrean cosmos of infinity - the “Perfect Number.” From this “holiest of numbers” they constructed a mandala-like glyph known as the *Sacred Tetraktys*, which was the foundation of all Pythagorean philosophy. It is a triangular symbol which consists of ten dots assembled in four rows: a bottom row of four, a row of three, a row of two, and a crowning summit of one.



They related the four rows to the dimensions of geometry: the absence of dimension is a point, one dimension is a line, two dimensions is a plane, and three dimensions is a volume. And in this geometric model they saw a reflection of nature itself, growing in four distinct stages: seed (0-D), stalk (1-D), leaf (2-D), and bloom (3-D). They established the close geometric relation of the Tetraktys to the five regular polyhedra. The four numbers of the Tetraktys - 1, 2, 3, and 4 - are the only numbers required to generate the ratios which determine the musical scale: the fractional lengths 1/2, 1/4, 3/4, and 2/3, sound as the octave, double octave, perfect fourth, and perfect fifth - the essential notes that establish the fundamental frequency relations between all the notes of the diatonic scale.

Pythagoras believed that sound, and specifically the geometrical nature of musical sound, was fundamental in the creation of the universe. In this philosophy there is a resonant frequency that is in harmony with the very structure of space and time, vibrating through creation as the “Music of the Spheres.” In India this sound is known as Aum; in China it is called Kung. Pythagoras called this first note of creation “A”, and set a value of 432 for it (more than two millennia later, sophisticated mechanical measurements established the frequency of middle A only slightly higher at 440 vibrations per second). There is, perhaps, even a counterpart to this notion in modern physics: the cosmos comes into being with a *Big Bang*.

The Pythagoreans even explored philosophical associations between the Tetraktys and the Four Elements. In the Tetraktys, as “the many” ascend towards the infinite One, it becomes ever more rarefied; as the elements ascend into the luminous heavens they too become ever less dense: solid earth, fluid water, vaporous wind, and ethereal fire.

Esoteric traditions, to this day, encourage the contemplation of this divine triangle.

We see in this simple graphic another representation what the Egyptians called “The Mountain of the Sun.” This upward-pointing triangle is an image of the World-Mountain. We can see that the summit of the World-Mountain rests upon the threshold of nine: $4 + 3 + 2 = 9$. And in this trinity of numbers (4, 3, and 2) there is an extraordinary *celestial* dimension...

Celestial 432

In the Poetic Edda (the sacred books of Norse mythology - c. 900 A.D.) it is said that 432,000 warriors will engage the Wolf in the battle before Ragnarok - the end of the world. In the Hindu Puranas (c. 400 A.D.), 432,000 years is the duration of the current cosmic epoch, the Kali Yuga; it is the last and shortest of four such epochs which define a specific lifetime (known as the Mahayuga) for the universe: 4,320,000 years. At the end of the Mahayuga, the entire universe will be consumed in a cosmic deluge. The Maya and Olmecs, too, reckoned the heavens by cycles of vast duration, and the end of a cycle heralded the end of all things. These cycles were counted by *Tun*. One Tun equals 360 days. 20 Tun make a Katun, and 20 Katun make a Bactun. And one great round of 6 Bactun consists of 4,320,000 days.

We find other references to this number in the equally eschatological Book of Revelations (c. 100 A.D.). The size of the City of God is described as “12,000 stadia; its length and breadth and height are equal.” Now $12,000 \times 12,000 \times 12,000 = 1,728$ billion cubic stadia, which divided by 4 equals 432 billion. Furthermore, we are told that “the number of the name of the beast ...is [666].” $6 \times 6 \times 6 = 216$, which doubled is 432.

The earliest *written* reference to 432 is found in a compilation of ancient Babylonian myth and history assembled by a Chaldean priest named Berossos (c. 280 B.C.). He describes a line of 10 kings who ruled the land of Sumer for 432,000 years before the world was destroyed by a terrible flood. Although the *earliest* reference to the flood of which he speaks is found in a small cuneiform tablet found in the ruins of the Sumerian city of Nippur

(c. 2000 B.C.), we cannot fail to notice an unmistakable similarity to the *biblical* story of the flood. In Genesis 5 we read that there were 10 antediluvian Patriarchs, forming an unbroken chain of succession, between Adam and Noah, of 1656 years.

The great Rabbi Akeva, and the other men who compiled the Old Testament (c. 300 B.C.), were of the generations after the Jewish exile to Babylon. They knew those ancient Sumerian stories too, and they employed an interesting mathematic trick to disguise the inspiration they found in them. (Mesopotamia was a powerful and ancient land; it is not as surprising as one might think that even prisoners of Babylon would admire and seek to emulate its greatness.)

There is a substantial difference between the Babylonian reckoning of 432,000 years for the Reign of the 10 kings, and the biblical reckoning of 1656 years. But there is a common factor of 72 in each number. 72 is the number of years it takes the for the zodiacal wheel of the “fixed” stars to advance 1 degree of arc in its long rotation. If, as mentioned in *The Return*, the zodiacal year is 25,920 years, then 72 years is a *zodiacal day* ($72 \times 360 = 25,920$). So if we divide 1656 by 72, we arrive at the number of zodiacal days in 1656 years: 23. Then we substitute a zodiacal day for a Jewish year: in 23 years of the Jewish calendar, plus the 5 leap-year days within that span, we find that there are 8400 days, or 1200 weeks. We now re-multiply 1200 weeks by the common factor of 72 to discover the number of 7-day weeks in 1656 years: 86,400 - which is double 43,200.

Perhaps the most enigmatic reference to Celestial 432 is found in the construction of the Great Pyramid of Khufu (or in the better known Greek, *Cheops*), one of the earliest and largest stone structures ever built. The most significant geometrical dimensions of a pyramid are its height and its perimeter. We find here, in the relation of the Great Pyramid’s height to its perimeter, an extraordinary ratio: 2π . This is precisely the same ratio we find between a circle’s radius and its circumference, and also a *sphere*’s radius and circumference. So this eternally astonishing monument is the pyramidal analogue to a hemisphere: in both instances we can determine the perimeter by multiplying the height by $2 \times$ the transcendent number *pi* (3.14...). This image of the World-Mountain, with its many air

shafts *exactly* targeting the traverse of certain mythologically significant stars, with its 4 corners *exactly* oriented to the cardinal directions, and with its location *exactly* on 30 degrees N latitude (*exactly* 1/6 of a complete circle around the earth measured from the north point of axial rotation), very clearly demonstrates that it is not merely a model of any hemisphere, but is, in fact, a model of a *terrestrial* hemisphere. And the scale of this model? The earth is larger than Khufu's Pyramid by a factor of *exactly* 43,200.

Wherefore art thou 432?

At the dawn of human history, civilization was very much closer to nature than we are now. The ever-present threat of consumption by the surrounding chaos of nature was the most prominent danger known to those early, tentative societies. And then someone discovered an underlying order in the heavens: the relative motions of the moon, the sun, the planets, and the fixed stars, are of *regular periodicity*. And this eternal, celestial order can be known by *number*. This realization was one of the most significant in human history, for if there is order in the heavens, man can *emulate this order on earth*. This powerful idea spread like wildfire across Eurasia and meso-America.

In ancient Sumer - the primary mythogenetic zone on earth - this emulation of celestial order found expression in sexigesimal numeration: base 60. A circle, that without beginning or ending, is the archetypal image of the Creator. And just as six circles of equal size issue from and exactly circumscribe a seventh circle of equal size in the center, so too are all *rounds* properly quantified by six. A single beat of a human heart is the fundamental unit of time, so 60 beats shall make a minute, and 60 minutes shall make an hour (which is 43,200 beats for day, and 43,200 beats for night). The solar year is 6 x 60 days long (plus 5 intercalary days of regeneration); thus the circle of the terrestrial horizon shall be 6 x 60 (360) degrees.

The period of the moon had been known for millennia by the time the first cities appeared. A reckoning of the sun's annual period happened, apparently, only sometime shortly before the emergence of those cities.

Knowledge of the planetary periods followed, perhaps, a brief time after that. It is difficult to establish for certain when it became known that the "fixed stars" are not fixed at all. A slight wobble in the earth's axis of rotation causes an effect known as *equinoctial precession*. Each year the equinoctial background (the stars which appear directly above the rising sun on the first day of spring) shifts very slightly; the "fixed" stars precess 1 degree every 72 years. The Zodiacal vault shifts 30 degrees (one Zodiacal twelfth of the sky) every 2160 years, and precesses 360 degrees through the entire Zodiac in a great "Celestial Year" of 25,920 years. (The discovery of equinoctial precession is generally attributed to Hipparchus of Bithynia (c. 2nd century B.C.), but the presence of very specific precessional numbers in both architecture and manuscripts that are known to antedate him render this claim untenable. It may be that this zealously guarded secret of the cosmos was known by Sumerian and Egyptian priests, but then was lost and forgotten in later epochs.)

72 years (and $7 + 2 = 9$), 2160 years (and $2 + 1 + 6 + 0 = 9$), and 25,920 years (and $2 + 5 + 9 + 2 + 0 = 18$, and $1 + 8 = 9$). And 25,920 divided by the divine Sumerian number 60 is 432 (and $4 + 3 + 2 = 9$).

In each day there is a time of sleep and darkness; so too in each month (the new moon), and each year (the winter). We find in the discovery of a *Celestial Year*, a mythological extension of the same motif: In every cycle there is a consumptive phase where light disappears into darkness for regeneration and rebirth. As night follows day, eventually even the vast cosmos must sleep. And it is the Goddess of Eternity - the round of time that is always a nine - who beckons him forward, guiding him into the underworld, back to the secret garden that is the genesis of all being.

The Inward Journey

We saw, in the Pythagorean Tetraktys, a graphic representation of the Nine that guides one to the frontier of the Infinite. And in that image the first step into union with the cosmos is an *exterior step*, a *centrifugal* inclination where the objective is *out there* and the energies of the quest are directed to *push* into the

unknown. But there is another representation of the Tetraktys, one with a *centripetal* inclination, where the objective is *in here*; thus, the energies of the quest are directed to *pull* into the unknown. In this “Chthonic Tetraktys” we see the familiar rows of 4, 3, and 2, arranged - not below, but - *around* the Ocean of Eternity. And this image is vastly older than the upstart Pythagorean version.



In this orientation we may easily see the full significance of this beautiful form: it is a yonic triangle surrounding the mystery of the womb; there could not be a more enduring and compelling image of the horizon, beyond which is the unknown Source of Existence and the Mystery of Creation. Here are the Nine who guide us to the Gates of Eternity; here are the Nine who bear The Gift; here are the Nine who Beckon...

There is a French cave at Angles-sur-l’Anglin wherein we find perhaps the earliest representation of this sacred image. There, carved into the very stone of the cave, are three Goddesses. These very stylized representations of the Feminine (carved about 15,000 years ago) have only the remotest suggestion of heads and limbs; they are swollen hips and very prominent genital triangles - religious amplifications of the regenerative power of nature incarnate in the Feminine. This three-fold incarnation of the Goddess may be the first image of the spiraling Wheel of Time: She is the *past* whence life came, the *present* in which life abounds, and the *future* in which life returns to the Unknown whence it came. This great Round of Eternity is symbolized by three triangles, each of which possesses three sides ($3 \times 3 = 9$).



The magical allure of a woman is well known and easily comprehensible. But the allure of the yonic symbol lies not in its resemblance to a woman’s triangle; it is rather that this simple three-sided shape is the terrestrial counterpart of a Celestial Form: *all images of sublime beauty are the hieroglyphs of Transcendent Ideas* - archetypal forms of

which woman and man are merely the most extraordinary *projections*. Like a form-embracing gown, such images are but adornment over the unknown body inside. Beauty is the *Raiment of the Goddess*.

All numbers multiplied by nine yield numbers whose constituent digits add up to nine. In this curious arithmetical property of nine we find yet another quiet whisper of The Creator who is *Sui Generis*: the Self-Creating Form-who-is-all-forms of the universe. And of course each one of us dwells nine months in the universe of our mothers before we are summoned to the threshold, brought forth to console an inconsolable pain, and make that first terrifying step into the Adventure of Life...

The One and The Many

The Many around the One, is one of the most common motifs in mythology, with several primary forms and literally thousands of local interpretations. There is the Duality that is, in conjunction, a third and greater thing - the Trinity. There is the Trinity growing from the Unseen Forth. There are the Four Elements aspiring towards Quintessence. There is the six-fold Order of Life winding around Spiral Seven. There are the Zodiacal Twelve who serve the Mystic Redeemer. And, as we have seen here, there are the Nine Messengers communicating knowledge from the Sacred Tetraktys. The salient common feature of all these different stories is that there is a dynamic exterior in constant motion around a serene interior, an active dimension always struggling and aspiring in the service of a Still and Silent Perfection in the Center. What we have in these many symbols is, in fact, a single archetypal image that is, as we shall see later, surely the most abundant in the universe...

The Mystery of Being

The 20th Century has experienced a kind of creeping desacralization, and adoration of the Sacred is commonly regarded with suspicion and derision (it is *tres chic* to be a cynical atheist). In stark contrast to the *Way of the Goddess* is the pre-eminent philosophy of the modern world: *Positivism* - the belief that *perception*

is *reality* and there is no other. In Paleolithic terms (when such ontological contemplation began), we might describe this, not as the tender-hearted ethos of the Shaman, but rather as the hard-hearted ethos of the Hunter.

This *very* powerful “can-do” ideology has achieved extraordinary things for humanity. The last 100 years has seen unprecedented (even inexplicable) progress in every field of human endeavor: history, physics, biology, medicine, transportation, energy, exploration, entertainment, communication, mathematics, engineering, etc. We have attained profound insights into the mysteries of nature, and exposed astounding secrets that have troubled mankind for millennia. We are now more secure, more prosperous, more knowledgeable, and more pampered, than at any other epoch in human history. As Paul Simon sang, “These are the times of miracles and wonders.” It is precisely so. In fact, the only problem with positivism is that it is *wrong*.

Like a child in the womb, we know vanishingly little of the cosmos in which we float. And all that we do know comes to us *impeded*. If we wish to ascertain the tactile quality of a soft downy kitten, we do not wear oven-mitts to do so. When we wish to ascertain the essential nature of the universe, we are similarly impaired, for between the cosmos and the mind are oven-mitts: our *very specific and limited* organs of sensory apparatus. Our sense organs gather data from the exterior world, and that data is subsequently processed by the mind into an intelligible, and quite often useful *model* of the world. But that model of the world *is not the world*.

Our primary image of the world is naturally a *visual* image, and in this product of our ocular sense we find our most comprehensive reckoning of our environment. The human eye can discern more than a million distinct colors, and with our innate understanding of the principles of perspective, we can determine the size and proximity of terrestrial objects with respectable accuracy. If we look at a vast expanse of blue, we might say, “*Yes, that is what the sky looks like.*” But the radiation we perceive as visible color is only a minute corpuscle in the middle of a colossal ocean of light. The entire spectrum of electro-magnetic radiation is an awesome vista of energies, ranging from very long-wavelength (low-energy) radio-waves, to very

short-wavelength (high-energy) gamma rays. Our eyes are completely oblivious to all but the tiniest fraction of light in the universe.

If we nick a finger, we often lick the small wound clean; we are all familiar with that viscous, salty taste. *Yes, that is what blood tastes like.* But a shark’s entire body is covered with sensory structures exactly analogous to taste receptors. A shark wears his tongue *on the outside*, and can taste blood even if present in concentrations of only one part per million - and thus is able to detect prey from a distance of two miles or more. A shark’s model of the world is defined by taste. There is not even the remotest corollary in the human experience that might allow us to comprehend the magnitude or quality of this perception.

If we smell another person, the information we acquire is mostly limited to whether the odor encountered is pleasant or otherwise. *Yes, that is what sweat smells like.* But there are dog breeds whose olfactory acuity is vastly greater than ours. We cannot even guess what untold volumes of biography are revealed by an *armpit times one thousand*. A dog’s model of the world is defined by smell.

If we hear a sound, we are usually able to establish its orientation and proximity with at least some crude precision; our stereophonic auditory sense easily detects slight differentials in wave pressure and time of reception. Furthermore, we can discern a truly astounding variety of waveforms - provided that the frequencies lie between 20 and 20,000 vibrations per second - and even extract very specific meaningful sounds from within a deafening cacophony of meaningless noise. And some sounds (like a Rossini overture) can drive a burning sword of rapture into the soul. But a bat *sees* by sound. The silent flight of a moth is tracked by ultrasonic (up to 100,000 Hz, far beyond the threshold of human hearing) echolocation with better-than-visual precision. A bat finds, in the impenetrable tangle of modulating wave differentials, a moving “picture” of his dinner. Modern medicine makes extensive use of sonographs, but these “sound pictures” must be translated into “visual pictures” to have any meaning. A bat makes no such translation; its model of the world is defined by sound.

Scorpions can feel the vibrations caused by the footsteps of a tiny insect three feet away. There are fish that measure their surroundings by fluctuations in a static

electric field. Other creatures orient themselves by a reckoning of the earth's magnetic field. There must certainly be many unknown mechanisms of perception, a vast multitude of Ways of Knowing, each understanding some small truth unknown to all others, each creating their own unique but *incomplete* models of the world.

We are undeniably the pre-eminent life-form on this planet. And for those perceptions beyond the sensory grasp of our inherent mechanisms, we have fabricated wondrous machines to augment and extend our reach. But those information-gathering machines must then communicate with us in a comprehensible manner; they must compress and translate data that we are simply not designed to absorb. Natural selection has chosen for us senses and sensory acuities that are appropriate to survival in the jungle; in relation to all that is, the jungle is a very small place indeed. Our model of the world is an artifact of the mind; *the world itself* is something entirely *other*. The limitations of our perceptions are great, and the universe is far greater still...

Where the Forest was the Thickest...

The political history of humanity - the history of the Hunters - is occasionally interrupted by extraordinary men who seem to have touched *the world itself*. From the mouths of Shaman-Prophets come words of eternal beauty, but in the hands of Hunter-Politicians such words quickly become instruments of temporal power. And for 99% of human history, those who would not submit to that temporal power were (and still are in some places) sent to the stake...

The mortal conflict of political ideologies that has so traumatized the 20th Century is a recent phenomenon. Before the first modern republics emerged two centuries ago, ideological conflicts (as opposed to mere thievery) between nations were conflicts between *religions*. In the collective temperament of a people, spiritual ideas are not merely notions about the origin and proper of reckoning of things; they also provide a profound sense of national legitimacy and identity. And to call the legitimacy of a nation's *Idea* into question is to call that *nation* into question. Powerful men are prepared to defend their legitimacy, and

in the European tradition we find one of the most egregious exemplars of this ruthless collectivism.

We do not hear of Buddhist monks who have visions of Christ, or of priests and nuns astounded by apparitions of the Buddha. We generally think of spiritual revelation as coming in the guise of the established local culture. In many individuals, the collective forms of religious practice are sufficient to assuage spiritual curiosities, and may sometimes even provoke genuine spiritual experience. But there shall always be men and women for whom the collective, socially authorized forms are *not* sufficient, who must seek their own way into the Mystery of Being. Like Gawain and the other knights on their quest for the Holy Grail (the sacred vessel which contains the Blood of Eternal Life - an unmistakable reference to the womb), such men and women "...thought it would be a disgrace to ride forth in a group. But each entered the forest at one point or another, there where he saw it to be the thickest and there was no way or path."

In the Christian era of European history, a personal quest for the Divine was a very dangerous and often fatal endeavor. And so it was necessary to *disguise* such individual pursuits within the acceptable garments of the collective will. One of these secret spiritual traditions eventually became the conceptual foundation for one of the most successful of all positivist sciences. They were the disciples of "The Great Work": the *Alchemists*.

Alchemy

The modern view of the Alchemists might be stated thus: "Stupid, greedy lunatics hoping to turn lead into gold." It is certainly true that among the Alchemists were some deluded profit-seekers, but it is also a fact that in those times the true province of corpulent spiritual corruption was found in the *orthodox* religions. In any event, our modern view of the Alchemists is misinformed; their objective was not to achieve gold one could spend (*aurum vulgi*), but to achieve Gold one could *know* (*aurum philosophicum*). Theirs was a quest for *Spiritual Gold*. Alchemy was a meditative discipline: by contemplating the material of creation, and thereby learning the processes by which one form of matter becomes

another form of matter, the Alchemists hoped for nothing less than communion with the Form-of-forms that is the origin of all matter. And the word matter (like the comparable words matrix and material) is derived from the Latin word *mater* - Mother.

The Quest for Spiritual Gold - the *Philosopher's Stone* - was a four-level process; like the four-level Sacred Tetraktys, each successive stage brought the initiate to a higher level of understanding. The Alchemists perceived a universe that is, in all aspects, *dual* (up-down, light-dark, active-passive, limited-unlimited, etc.); thus, the oscillating tendency between all such polarities represents the quintessential Rhythm of Existence - the inhalation and exhalation of the Cosmos itself, the systole and diastole of the One Celestial Heart. And the *fundamental* polarity of the universe is, they believed, Masculine and Feminine; the apparent diversity in the many forms of the world is an illusion and all the manifestations of nature are merely projections of just two cosmic principles - the *Two Gods*. The task of The Great Work, then, is to find unity in this division, to reconcile the irreconcilable in a Celestial Marriage of the White Queen (the female element, mercury) and the Red King (the male element, sulphur).

The guiding ethos of Alchemy was *solve et coagula*: purify and integrate. And this philosophy applied to the Alchemist even more than it applied to the contents of his crucible. By understanding the *material process* by which the Creator fashioned gold from elementary matter (*prima materia*), the Alchemist believed he might discover an analogous *spiritual process*. And so, as lead might evolve into gold within the crucible of the Alchemist's furnace, so too might the adept evolve from a material to a spiritual being within the crucible of his own burning soul. To obtain the Philosopher's Stone was to transcend perception and achieve perfect knowledge (gnosis) of the infinite cosmos itself.

Level 1 - The *Black Stone*, Base Matter. The first step was called putrefaction: the reduction of matter to a shapeless, featureless state. Base matter was usually represented as black, but as a symbol of the manifest aspect of the visible, natural world, this primordial incarnation of substance was often represented by the botanical color of the terrestrial illusion - *green*. Through a series of nine

secret processes, base matter was transmuted into...

Level 2 - The *White Stone*, Mercury. The second step was called solution: the corruption of matter was removed by series of elaborate purifications, leaving only an essential and universal substance of shimmering fluidity. From a distant and unknown celestial beacon comes a first purifying revelation of light to the abyssal dark of base matter. Through a series of nine secret processes, mercury was transmuted into...

Level 3 - The *Red Stone*, Sulphur. The third step was called distillation: as the cosmos emerged from primordial Oceanos, as life emerged from the terrestrial ocean, so too does the *earthly* element sulphur issue from the *aqueous* element mercury. (What Alchemists called sulphur - which is, of course, yellow - we now know as mercury sulphide, or red cinnabar.) With the creation of the second component of the elemental duality - the Red Groom for the White Bride - the Alchemist sought to chemically facilitate an elemental courtship through a series of nine secret processes, until Queen and King were united into the Glory of...

Level 4 - The Philosopher's Stone, *Gold*. This final step was called sublimation: the realization of perfect Absolute Substance. To achieve gold was not to transmute lead, but to transmute the *soul*: to complete our incomplete models of the world, to ascend to a luminous celestial plane that is infinitely beyond and infinitely *within* the world one has known.

Raiment of the Goddess

We see in this image an apparition of the Goddess of Eternity in the great Cathedral of Illusion; fluttering around Her are the nine messengers - each one a whimsical reflection-in-miniature of the Goddess Herself. And hidden within this image we shall find an unexpected visual representation of the Alchemist's Quest...

The *green* forest is the nature from which we issue, and of which we are prisoners; as the progeny of material nature, we can never be other than material beings. It is nature that has determined for us the very limited extent of our perceptions, and yet it is also nature that has provided the consciousness that might transcend those limitations. And the first step of transcendence comes like a beckoning light

in the darkness...or the *white* cascading flow of an eternal river bringing life to the thirsty *black* soil of the world.

Disappearing below the outer-sleeves of the Goddess' gown is an undergarment of white worn next to Her body. If black is the abyssal void of nothingness, then white is the first illuminating revelation of possibility. It is the delicate light that first appears in the eastern sky of retreating night, the dream of a day that has not yet happened. White is the nocturnal luminescence of the sun-reflecting moon, the eternal promise of a great golden light to come. Like a painter's empty canvas, it is the still and silent purity of infinite potential unblemished by unrealized aspirations. The White Goddess is the song of all colors, beckoning the knights of the rainbow into the task of *realization*...

Over this first layer of white the Goddess wears a sensual gown of deep, dark *red*. If white is the invitation into The Task, then red is the explosive aspiration of the struggle for life. It is our raging passions and emotions inflamed, the call to dynamic action, and the horrific suffering that is an inevitable consequence of action. Red is the living blood that flows like fuel into the life-consuming engine of nature: flowing from the womb that brings new life into being, and flowing from the sword that returns it to the germinating soil. The Red Lord is the mightiest of the warriors of the rainbow, the will and the power by which The Task might be *achieved*...

And ornamenting this somber, brooding red is a decorative trim of luminous *gold*. Gold, the most precious of all metals, will not tarnish, stain, or rust; it is immutable and will not alloy with other metals. This quality of eternal perfection bestows upon gold a sense of immortality; in fact, the Egyptians believed the flesh of the gods was made of gold. The shimmering luster of gold has its celestial counterpart in the blazing radiance of the sun that obliterates the limitations of the night. And like the sunlight, gold is the illuminated knowledge revealed by the evaporating shadows of ignorance.

And the key to the whole image is found in the pattern *in* the gold - the *foliaceous* forms of the illusion of nature. Just as carbon - the fundamental element of life - is in one aspect base black charcoal, and in another aspect perfect crystalline diamond, so too are gold and clay *one and the same substance*. All we see are sorrows, shadows, and

limits; but just beyond the threshold of our perceptions is the universe itself: Perfect, Luminous, Infinite. The presence of beauty in the universe is a Divine Beacon, a sign of hope that all this pain and blood serves some greater purpose - The Task - that we are far too small to understand. So we need not aspire to perceive the unperceivable, apprehend infinity, nor stare God in the face to ask our infinitesimal questions. We find the Grace of The Goddess when we realize that the beauty of the cosmos is a gift - *a gift of gold*...

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Personal Notes on *Forest Light*

This image had been bouncing around in the back of head for nine years or so (the artist said with a wink), and elements present here can be seen in many of my other images. *Forest Light* began as an attempt to redeem an earlier attempt at a very similar image called *Regeneration*, which I designed in 1990, but had always considered a very poor painting. I wanted to know if I could do a better job years later. And, as is usually the case, I found the real motivation and inspiration only in the process of painting the image; something that bothers an artist for *nine* years inevitably has an unknown psychological dimension.

Gnostic Alchemy emerged in Europe sometime shortly after the Emperor Justinian closed down all the schools of classical learning (pagan worshipers all!), although the tradition may be far older in India and China. And strange as it may sound, the restless shaman of whom I spoke in my essay *The Awakening* is apparently at work here too. I chose the colors and the patterning on the gold because that was the image I had in my head. I discovered the chromatic progression of the Alchemist's spiritual ascension only *after* I had completed the painting. Coincidence? The parallels are not merely close, they are *mirror images* of each other. The Alchemical tradition flourished for more than a thousand years only because it resonated in an unknown, quiet corner of the mind; and this empty cavity - the biological inheritance of every man and woman - perhaps serves no other purpose than waiting to be filled by the universal sound...

