

Meanings and Echoes of Childhood

Dancing as one

In this essay I want to capture some of the jewels of what is possibly the most significant stage of our lives. Living in London more than ten years ago, I came across an elegant and glossy pamphlet in a friend's apartment. It caught my eye and the resonance I felt with it increased when I found my curiosity justified, for it was a detailed program for an elaborate multimedia spectacle on the theme of the journey of the soul in this world. The emphasis of the spectacle was strongly on childhood, as a microcosm containing all the other developmental phases of our life trajectory. The language was poetic, not at all psychological jargon, doubling its appeal for me. Although I do not have the pamphlet now and can neither credit the company nor remember the name of the production, some of its essential sense was etched in indelibly in my mind.

As I recall, there was a poem in the program called "Gratitude and grief." This was, perhaps, the most poignant and memorable element, describing the earliest phase of infancy, when the infant is cuddled closely by its mother. The two beings exist in a condition of supreme bliss and heightened, tender love. Experiments have shown that at a certain phase in its development, an infant does not have a sense of its separateness from its mother; rather, it is conscious of only one dancing and morphing entity, of which it is an inseparable part. In this state there is pure love and harmony. Nothing can surpass this heaven and nothing can intrude upon or desecrate its beauty.

But, as all good things must end, the infant is forced to venture beyond this paradisiacal niche and face the music of the world. And as fate would have it, the music of the world is dissonant and harsh, a far cry from the benign harmony the infant had known. The infant experiences despair, hurt and confusion. He finds his hands besmirched with the messy ink of life, with all its privations and ugliness, its lies and unresolvable complexities and contradictions. Although there may be strands and moments of beauty, the music of the world is untimely and cacophonous.

Into childhood

Then comes the next phase in the journey, when the infant or young child must resolve to reestablish the truth and harmony it had known and embodied previously in its heart. This is the task of the philosopher-idealist latent in the child, whose pulse and purpose will sound again and again in the coming years of his life. Although I cannot recall the lines of the poem, my sense is that "grief" is the exile from that infant heaven, and "gratitude" is for the heaven that still exists, albeit at a distance.

At some level, there is a philosopher and seeker of truth in everyone, but when the vocation of poet-philosopher has been especially predetermined in the heart of an individual, some of these aspects of truth-seeking are intensified. One can see these characteristics expressed in a disturbed child more intensely. Sometimes what makes a person a poet may be an inherently stronger need to connect with truth, or with a deeper truth—if not a deeper truth, perhaps a more exotic and eccentric truth. Why is it that some people restlessly philosophize and feel the need to probe the aesthetics and ontology of art, music, books and personal introspection?

And why is it that some people seem satisfied with the merely practical and sensible solutions and explanations of life? The reason could be purely vocational. But I'm speculating that it might be that the separation from mother-harmony was perhaps more jarring for the philosopher, or perhaps because of an innate artistic nature, the separation had aesthetic and philosophical resonance. When one encounters the classic intellectual or artist, she could simply be idealistic and sensitive. The flip side of this is fastidiousness and pettiness. We all know such personages. We can reconstruct their profiles from their memoirs. This intellectual flies into a rage over what he perceives to be the glorification of inferior forms of thought. The intellectual writer often despises more popular forms of knowledge and beauty. They can lose touch with reality, living in the storm-cloud of their well-endowed mind. The dense and profound writer scoffs at the Paulo Coelhos of the world—perhaps out of envy at their popularity, or perhaps because the rift with mother-harmony or at some later phase left them feeling unloved. The intellectual writer refuses to celebrate the “lighter,” more popular artists, not necessarily out of envy, but also in keeping with the philosophy that wading superficially in knowledge is a waste of time and beneath contempt. In the end, knowledge for the spirited intellectual replaces mother-harmony itself, and the poet-idealist regains the waters of life through philosophy and art. These become prayer and the self-lullaby for the second cradle of death.

Artists are oftentimes crippled by destiny to become creators of worlds, visions and victims. Recall Baudelaire's Albatross whose wings were too heavy to sustain flight. The bird wanders confused and weighed down through unyielding and menacing lands, unlike the fluid realm of pure thought. Perhaps it sacrificed its character development for the pursuit of a rarefied consciousness which spews forth, as if its children, marvels with little apparent connection to everyday life, but in which we recognize those things which are the most characteristic of the dynamism and reality of the soul and greater consciousness: horror, hell, desolation, darkness, despair, confusion, fear, ecstasy, heaven, the joy of reunion, the fire of separation, the madness of love, all the extremes of emotion and the strangeness of alien states of being.

Of course, all these extreme conditions of existence are no strangers to childhood. We are born into these realities, torn from the warmth of our mother's protecting vessel like an electric plug from a wall socket. As children, we experience separation in terrifying ways. For a child to be separated from its mother at the wrong time is terrifying and distressing—think of the toddler lost in the supermarket—not to mention the actual process of birth. Beyond that, going to school can be fraught with dread and unfamiliar other children, gathered in a strange place. Even relatively healthy and well-loved children often demonstrate nihilistic tendencies, perhaps since the primal birth-separation is so recent. More than once, I have witnessed children being physically destructive or, in the case of more than one toddler, repeatedly bashing their foreheads against the floor.

From despair to intoxication

How many eons of despair and briefer seasons of delight must we traverse in our lives? For life cyclically repeats itself; in reality, we pass through the same spiritual stages umpteen times in the course of our lives—even, some have said, in the course of a day. With the years we become more or less equipped to cope with these experiences.

Yet nihilism in children is common. “I wish I had never been born!” “I wish I had another mother!” Nihilism in childhood is to be expected, if only because the violent despairs and disappointments of infancy are still distant. Children lack coping mechanisms and self-restraint, so their emotions are exaggerated. They have not yet been “domesticated” nor has any

alleviating philosophy coalesced in their consciousness. Since their prefrontal lobes are not yet developed, the self comes first, with little depth in perception. The moral imperative that the well-being of the group is sometimes more important than the needs of the self has not yet developed.

Of course, the nihilistic or dark emotions of childhood experience will surface later as the individual further develops, spurring the archetypal artist/intellectual to make it her life's mission to explore all these aspects of the conscious and subconscious. Symbolism, fictional narratives and ontological threading are all part of the artist's attempt to recapture the lost paradise of the unified state. When the conditions are right, the artist-intellectual is born whose task is to restore the lost harmonies of existence, even if this process is indirect and conveyed by means of distortion and chaos. The goal is probably always homeostasis at some level. Some artists—and even non-artists—may actually prefer spending more time in the heady valleys of disintegration than in the harmonized oasis of stability and clear vision. The purpose of disintegration of thought and energy is to then recreate from that chaos a deeper plane of truth and unity.

When the artist is a nihilist—as we see in films that show existence as meaningless and empty—perhaps he is simply unable to produce any visions of lost harmony and his world sings with personal despair. The film director shows us what he sees, or perhaps all he can see. Again, the question: why is it that some souls have it as their purpose to be the idealistic resolvers and restorers of harmony? Were these souls touched more deeply by the primal separation? Perhaps their hearts found it particularly troubling and offensive. I expand on the theme of separation in a prose poem:

I barely remember the first time I was lied to; or my mother's all-embracing love; or loving the walls and their natural magic of blues and brickish pinks—from this music I was left with the messy and stinking ink of life on my hands and hurt and spite in my heart; the first time I was betrayed and left dangling, confused.

Much may also depend on how the individual poet interpreted these separate events. Twentieth-century modernist art, with its pagan echoes, was nostalgic for a time that seems to be characterized by a more elemental and, at the same time, cosmic experience. Of course, the past cannot be so idealized and generalized, but there are some remnants today of the archaic period, with its shamanistic intoxication. I see intoxication as the short-term and highly concentrated experience of the disintegration/integration of consciousness, a kind of restaging of the bipolar childhood drama within, for the purpose of spiritual liberation, exploration or recreation. These processes were of course revived and extolled in the soul-searching sixties and seventies, and still are today. Interestingly, premodern paganism can be likened to a kind of collective childhood of humanity.

Lost treasures

Truly, childhood is marked by so many features that are lost later on, but which are, hopefully, recaptured with time and effort. A primitive plenitude. “Primitive” usually has a negative connotation, but one with so many beautiful over- and undertones. The animals and nature are primitive, and that is why we love them. They are unblemished by sophistry and artificiality. For the same reason, we love children. Children and animals have perfect and unaffected personalities. We see in them miniature versions of our own neurosis and pretense; even these qualities, when manifest in them, are often charming and down to earth. The directness of children's unlabored and honest speech is often amusing. I commented to one grape-soda-

sipping kid that grape was a great flavor. He remarked in a flat monotone, without looking up from his bottle: “especially artificially.”

In childhood, as at seldom any other time, we feel the limitlessness of our potential. I remember living in Santiago, Chile, with my family and how we would walk back from the center with my step-grandfather, grandmother and parents. I would repeatedly sprint ahead of the group with an eagerness that bespoke a will to fly and break barriers; I could feel my spirit bursting forward from inside of me.

Funnily enough, little boys by the time they reach eight or nine are anarchists. Mark Twain immortalized this in his tales of Huckleberry Finn. There is one particular story where Huck and Sawyer and friends gather at night in a cave, because they have decided to become highwaymen. I think it was because they didn't have weapons or anyone to rob, that they then decide to disband their meeting and go home. So funny and typical of childhood. I remember as a boy I went through a phase when I was very interested in knives and at some point, went through a pyromaniac phase, although I never burned more than newspapers.

I am prouder of my more creative and abstract yearnings though. Looking back, some of my pastimes were rather abstract. I remember a season when papers and stickers and envelopes were important. I could sit at a desk stuffing envelopes, then sealing them and putting these in larger manila ones. The whole dining table was piled high with office supplies. If anyone had disturbed my labors, or more unthinkingly, removed or destroyed the ordered logic of my project, I would be more than a little annoyed. These pieces of paper had a parallel meaning to whatever art I have created more recently.

I also remember an episode when I got hold of a big empty coffee jar and filled it, meaningfully it seems, with mud and rocks and grass and maybe even Coke and cold coffee. This concoction was so important to me, that when the maid said I had to accompany her to the bank, I could not bring myself to part with my numinous treasure. Also, probably the thought that someone at home might not understand the personal power that was invested in this creation led me to take the jar with me. When we got to the bank, I soon realized that I would not be allowed to enter with my object of adoration. Being a quite obedient little boy, I left the jar outside on the front steps of the entrance. Shortly thereafter, from the other side of the tinted bank windows, I watched as a group of dirty, rag-clad, homeless, slightly older children noticed my jar and approached it slowly, as if it were a miniature Martian or an explosive device. They showed great interest in the jar, as if their psychic connection with this object resonated with my own. Inevitably, they stole my possession, like one more worthy curiosity they had encountered that day for their private hoard.

Taming the fires

Before a time when our minds have learned to operate on symbolic and philosophical lines of reasoning, before we are too aware of metaphysical thought, it is the “suchness” of things that ripples through us, filling us with magic and wonder. It is the inherent properties of an object or person, something approaching essence, that imbue our eggshell minds with their qualities. People are impressed on our minds like caricatures, painted yellow or orange in a drawing, only to be told by adults that people are not yellow or orange. In reality, we are observing them more closely, seeing the fabrics of their being, their auras. Vision through the eyes of a child is possibly the closest we can come to beholding naked creation.

Aldous Huxley compared his visions of “pure perception” to an experience of Eden. In Huxley’s “The Doors of Perception,” where he discusses this unfiltered consciousness, it is precipitated by hallucinogenic inebriation. The book’s title is based on Blake’s phrase: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear as it is, Infinite.” I have heard of childhood accounts of perceived infinity in paintings; in childhood such things are viewed from the safe and fuzzy cockpit of the child’s softened mind, and not from the sharp and hardened senses of adulthood, perched on an existential precipice with its abstract notion of the cosmos. This would explain why childhood perceptions are seen as innocuous, whereas adult visionary experiences are perceived as terrifying.

Looking back, I was always the same person unfolding from infancy as now. My obsessions with explosions and fire were no doubt spiritually and mystically rooted in a fascination with the primal elements and the origin of the universe. Fire burns and purifies; it is hot, symbolically incendiary and subversive; as a little tyke, I no doubt valued it for these reasons. As one grows, one learns to tame and regulate the metaphorical fire, and one learns the great wisdom that comes with this.

When I was about ten or eleven, I developed an intense passion for snakes. The snake is one of the oldest, primal symbols. As a symbol of life energy and immortality—for me—the snake has taken on more shadings of meaning with my immersion in metaphysics and poetry. And yet I adored my first baby ribbon snake so much, as if she were my child. I remember how magical she looked to me, curled in the crevice at the base of the rock in her aquarium. I remember trying to hide my tears in class at school, thinking about how much joy she brought me. And in her primitive reptilian brain, she could probably feel my love for her, in her little snaky way. I liked snakes for being so fiercely independent and I now think that they are much misunderstood and feared. Some men will kill a snake just for being a snake. Perhaps snakes are seen as subversive because they embody a single wave motion, with no feet or limbs; for this reason, they go against the image of the bipedal being, the boringly “noble” temple of the human body.

I don’t understand all the ramifications of the nurture versus nature argument, but I am often inclined to believe that my values were encoded in the prenatal conception of my being. My parents and the surrounding environment shaped my values to some degree, but the main thrust of my character and its inner predilections and impulses was likely rooted at conception or even perhaps pre-existentially.

Aside from explosions and fire and passion for what remains estranged, different and taboo: snakes, that is, I remember an anecdote from my toddlerhood, confirmed by my mother: I told my preschool teacher that my parents’ home was filled with bottles of liquor and cases of beer. This was not actually true. And I understand exactly why I did this, because it is the kind of thing I would do to this day. There was something tempting about shocking people by saying things that run counter to prudish sensibility, a kind of moralistic self-preservation that pleases the impish, immature, but nonetheless idealistic side of myself. Intoxication is actually vital to life and always has been. Even then I understood that; I always knew there was power and significance in strong drink, and so it inevitably held the same attraction for me. Years later, the spiritual ramifications of intoxication became clearer for me. Moreover, as an artist it is in the realm of my passion and vocation to talk about things that are difficult to access and that elicit fear in others.

As a writer and thinker, I never remain in one half of a paradigm; my job is to fuse poles (yin and yang) and to break rules; my job is the alchemy of disparate and seemingly incompatible

elements; integration without limits. There is a wisdom to this method and this intention, that has become refined over the years. Even as I am sometimes fearful and cautious, I always strive to embrace as much of the spectrum as possible. There are things which I plainly disagree on principle, such as any form of harm to another sentient being; but even this I am keen to understand and confront rather than ignore, including understanding the point of view of the aggressor. Darkness or the Jungian shadow archetype is one of the unpopular realities among common people. The same zealous spirit that bellows from the lungs of the little boy who jumps up, raising his arms on high and declaring ardently “I’m not afraid!” constitutes my own mystic passion for life and death and everything beyond it.

I’ve always been surprised at those who write only about pretty things and do not challenge their readers. I try to respect people’s primmer values, but sometimes I love crudeness for its raw reality and for its potential to purify. To me as an artist, it is simply another shade on life’s palette. My mother used to dress me up cutely when I was a little boy, and the first thing I would do when I saw a puddle was roll in it. This desire to be crude, to be stupid and messy and become the incarnation of the buffoon, to sink into degradation can also be a means of becoming more intimately acquainted with the polarities of the human experience, to become more well-rounded and come out more shiningly beautiful. From my poem: “Manic depression”:

*I’ve slipped for so long and so many times under the furthest crack in the tile of
my device and dreaming. Some call it degradation. Dallying in so many daisies’
heydays—spent like fireworks.*

New forms of mischief

Part of being attractive and charming is being comfortable with all that is “below” and making the unattractive pleasing, like a child. Many things labeled “bad” are not really such; these things are also part of what it means to be human. Nowhere but in childhood—perhaps with the exception of youth—do we see in humans this borderline between rebelliousness and the passionate desire for unconventional personal growth. And in so many deeply thinking writers, like Nietzsche and Henry Miller, we see this urge to grow and unfold, characterized by a kind of devilish tendency to subvert what is false and staid and ossified, especially what is falsely noble and pious.

I remember something from my later childhood—analogous to Huck and Tom—maybe when I was ten or so. I came back to Santiago after some years and was reunited with an old school friend, with whom I used to do mischievous things when we were younger. Now we knew we couldn’t go back to our small-time mischief, but we didn’t know to what new form of mischief to turn to. It was a funny situation: we were stuck. This mischievous drive and inspiration that is present in so many children are to me one of the most precious spirits of that period in life. My closest friends—or those with whom I feel most comfortable—have this antsy impulse like a jitterbug in their soul. We do not shirk from this tendency. But what they also share in common with me is that we have retained a good-will and innocence that bestows upon any action a freshness of spirit and attractiveness that is undeniable. I have often been one to reject rules, mores and moral codes. And I’m all the better and richer for it. By my definition, spiritual purity is not supposed to be preserved like a crystal ornament under lock and key. There is no reason why rich and manifold experience has to corrupt that which—for some people who have brilliant spirits—can never be corrupted.

One of my most unique therapists was a Spanish gentleman by the name of Mariano Betes. He has many degrees and specializes in helping people work through life-after-death experiences. He has been something of an inspiration for me—not so much as a traditional shrink, but more as a font of wisdom, emphasizing the keys to added spiritual prosperity. We had our sessions where we talked on a number of themes, some connected with childhood. As we grow older and become experienced, sometimes slightly jaded adults, we shed the ability to be inspired with details and small gestures. We’ve probably all undergone the severe intensity of childhood crushes; and perhaps the day-long elation that results from the unexpected romantic sympathies of someone we admire. It is wonderful to retrieve the capacity for intense emotional gratification stemming from symbolic gestures. Many people still preserve and cherish the ability to be excited by small artifacts and details.

One always loses or gains something with every growth process. With education comes formation and with formation comes definition. Definition is the result of repeated neural firings that have solidified into patterns; these can stultify the fresh flow of creativity. Consider Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki’s contention: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities and in the expert’s few.” Part of recovering your innocence—which, come to think of it, sounds like “in no sense”—is uncovering the spontaneity that increases the mind’s richness. No one is really fully defined or free. But there is such a thing for the artist and artful person as purifying the message. Art and writing must breathe. It is good for it to be organic, although some of those most masterful pieces of writing and music I have enjoyed most were obviously a long time in the “oven.” There is literary writing that is quite crusty, that is, dense with the resonance of myriad influences like a thousand-year-old aged wine that has taken on many subtle flavors. All of literature throbs and pulses through such writing, and still retains a delicacy and freshness that lilt and drips from its bark. An artist must purify the message, whatever form this takes, so that the intended spirit flows strongly.

I once heard a very short piano piece from a minor classical composer, interpreted by a Chinese prodigy. It was a unique experience. The piece, incredibly dense and compact, was like a smudge or smear across the musical palate. With the wondrous execution of the piece, in a brief moment of synesthesia, I envisioned a splash of ebony-grey chromatics with a lustrous, almost iridescent finish. It was as if the musician had wrenched the energy of the composition from the bunched and turgid chords—an example of the power of masterful adult experience that had transformed the childhood seed of genius into a complex instrument, the power to manipulate creativity, yet always purifying the message of the expression.

Mariano and I talked about how some people are artists in every aspect of life. We have palettes and materials at our bidding whenever we think or feel or speak or move, flirt with someone of the opposite sex—or our own sex—, talk to elders and various others, always how sharing something new. And the spectrum is infinite. But perhaps we have grown accustomed as the “experts” that the ways to do something are numbered in single digits—when in fact they are endless.

Mariano reminded me that children often feel accompanied wherever they go. He pointed out that it is as if a silent choir surrounds them wherever they roam, perhaps from outside into the house to temporarily reconvene with the adults. Perhaps it is merely some energetic projection from within themselves that they are unconsciously releasing into the atmosphere. Mariano also remarked that little girls sometimes talk to their dolls and listen to them, as if there were a psychic connection occurring between the child and that “inanimate” object. She might go so far as to tell her mother something the doll said, to which the mother’s likely response will be

something like, “Don’t be silly, darling.” But a connection of some kind does exist; it just depends on which school of thought you use to interpret it. My cousin’s daughter once told me about entities she called the “hearers” who lived in a plastic case cover she had.

No disguises

I think that in childhood we experience some of the grandest spiritual idealism and gravest disappointment. I really think that in my own childhood I can discern some of the beginnings of what would be themes of my later life as a young adult. The store-bought kit that someone got me that was supposed to turn ordinary rocks into gems was probably a wish to behold pure magic, the wish for mineral alchemy that would later become the alchemy of character development and creative fusion—one of the hardest things to achieve, yet one of the greatest to glory in. At that time, perhaps I was just beginning to realize the unimportance of mere rocks as, embittered, I threw the stones out the front door of our small house. Another reverberation of this event might have been the early adult realization that imagination, at least in this earthly life, is not a portal into hyperspace. The late philosopher Terence McKenna inspired some of us young people with hope for an apocalyptic mega-event that would set us free from all terrestrial cares; the classic modernist wishful futility and nostalgia, a kind of hankering for heavenly harmony that led to the one-dimensional, deflation of post-modernism.

There is a short story by Charles Bukowski that I love, called the “Man with Beautiful Eyes.” One of the children in the story could easily have been me. They approach a house in their semi-abandoned neighborhood and are attracted to it perhaps for that reason. Their parents warn them about going there because it is fraught with danger. The children invariably keep going back to the house and on one occasion overhear a man swearing violently at a woman. The man comes out onto the front porch unshaven, in a white tank top. He greets the children amicably and lights up a cigarette. The children are taken aback by his beautiful blue eyes. The next time the children return to the house, it has burned to the ground. Basically, the story ends with the children realizing that the man with the beautiful eyes was destroyed. They realize too, upon reflecting, that many other beautiful things would need to be destroyed as well. There is so much in this story: Myths and knowledge, the idea that beautiful, startling and powerful things often lie beyond the limit that is allowed or prescribed by parents and authorities—as in Joseph Campbell’s book *The Power of Myth*—as well as the notion that the most beautiful things are fragile and ephemeral and often rejected and destroyed. And this thirst for the vital and taboo strains of life is what drives so many children—or at least it used to. Children know what is good, what is real, and they gravitate towards it.

Children and animals have the perfect personalities. In some ways, children are closer to the animal nature. Children are more in touch with the natural flow of things. They are only too aware of the contrived behavior of young adults and older ones, and they laugh about these. Adults have the need to pretend and restate their intentions for fear of appearing strange or inadequate. But I remember that up until high school, many people were hopelessly weird. I went to an American high school, and I remember one ditzy but charming cheerleader recount in a lackadaisical tone: “People who aren’t weird, are really weird, because everyone is weird.” The innocence of not being able to disguise your true nature is characteristic of youth.

And I also remember how, in some of the most golden periods of my childhood, with some of my closest childhood friends, we were conscious and proud of our unique position in the universe. And we were keenly aware of the difference between us and adults, but never with judgment. We appreciated them for what they were. We were conscious of our closeness to

nature, of our innate coolness. In my poem “An Obscene Night with God,” I portray myself and a childhood friend as spiritual raiders of the night, radical agents in the kingdom of “pre-adolescent shivering fervor.” For me, the animals were symbols and embodiments of this authentic, gritty energy that reverberated in my heart and constituted the essential glue that kept us all together. Nature was my first ecstasy. Nature must have had the same harmonizing tendency of music, which I would later rediscover in art and intoxication and sexuality. The elemental facts of life were spelled out in the precious gel of the frog eggs dripping from my hands and the tiny efts and leopard salamanders, worth more than cornucopias of jade or precious metal. This indescribable essence bubbling from the matrix of mother-earth—what could be more real and righteous?

I recall one more anecdote from my childhood, emblematic of others. I was at a fair, talking to some young adults who were overseeing a stand full of posters and trinkets. I asked them what one of the posters was, and they replied reluctantly, as if to dampen my interest, that it was a picture of a semi-nude man. That was enough to make me run and get money to buy it, not because I was or am gay, but because a beautiful and virile human body has the same effervescence that is redolent with the source of life. As a child I intuitively understood this and valued it.

That little boy was attracted to the glory of bodies and beyond that, of being. Today, as at life’s beginning, I am enthralled by the greater being of existence and all its manifestations. It infuses me with inspiration and bardic power. The desired harmony of union with these forms, and the essence behind them all is still as relevant today as it was at my origin.