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Session texts

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September Session

Introduction

Welcome to this, the beginning of the year programme. Glad you found us! I think we may be in for even more rain over the weekend. Over the programme we will study seven main stories and their relationship to initiatory rites-of-passage. A core of you will go on to undergo the wilderness fast itself. I am going to lay some introductory ground over the next couple of hours - on both initiation and myth - and touch on our first story.

The stories we will explore over the year are thick with paradox – they are not moral allegories in the normal sense of that phrase. Their sympathies are wide, not just with the human community. They are stories of rupture. They are all initiation myths, and have the severance/threshold/return progression at their core. There is certainly heroism within them, but also trickery, compromise, and loss. They seem to originate from the tribal idea that a culture requires certain rituals, certain stories, to accommodate wildness within the wider remit of its laws and traditions, a kind of funnel back and forth between the pastoral and the prophetic. Without this funnel, the wildness goes underground, loses the sophistication of an art form of a story or dance, and re-emerges as savagery. These stories are not neat but tangled, and anything I have to say about them is a kind of informed speculation. What binds them – Norwegian, Welsh, Russian, Siberian, Irish, Romanian – is both the initiatory cycle and that they all contain an intense relationship between humans, animals and wilderness – shape shifting is key in most of them.

So, let's begin with Snowdonia, as if we were going to undertake a fast. By the time we arrive, it's usually getting dark. Caer Idris, 'the seat of Arthur', the great mountain of Welsh myth, watches down as we quickly construct a base camp - erect tents, dig a fire pit, gather wood and settle into our new, mossy home before the mist comes in. As a group of us, normally five to ten, settle around the flames drinking coffee and gazing into the stark darkness.

In three days' time these people will place themselves in a state of potential medical emergency; they will find a spot amongst the oak groves, small rivers and wide exposed mountain tops, and will alone, without a tent or fire for comfort, fast for four days and nights. As if that wasn't arduous enough, on the fourth night they will complete an all-night vigil till the sun rises on the fifth morning.

To be clear, this experience won't make your life simpler, won't make you richer, 'cure' you or turn you into a magician. It's very hard to digest, occasionally dangerous, and tends to be almost impossible to talk about. It has nothing to do with the new-age movement, or any human-centred teaching. It's four days alone in all kinds of weather, no food, no fire, little shelter and all the grief of the world in your lap. Expect to feel worse when you get back.

Relationship to the land, has, historically, often been ingrained not only with the practical concerns of agriculture, but through a ritualised dialogue with the area you came from. That relationship was the poeticised expression of the exhaustion of sustaining a life in extremely uncertain conditions. But it was never just about survival; it was about elegance, exchange and listening. Imagine that for a second. We tend to have an inherited idea of where our education comes from: from school, books, and parents. And behind them stand lots of earnest Europeans. If we are lucky we may see a Greek or two. What would happen if we said a buzzard was our teacher for a month? If we brought milk to the base of its tree, what would happen to our dreams? What kind of relationship would appear between us, the field, the weather and the animal? Why does it feel such a natural idea? The wilderness fast cuts a raw doorway through a lot of personal ideas regarding where we gather intelligence, its sources, and our relationship to the living world.

From one perspective, the idea of wilderness seems able to exist only as a human perception; if we're not in it, it's simply nature. From a purely geographical or psychological perspective this may be so, but from a romantic view, it falls short. The wild has always entailed uncertainty, a place allowing imagination to flood into it. For centuries, the edge between forest and village has been a place of dreams, fear and homage; by its very nature it abides at the edge of where we're comfortable. The irony, as we pave over any last patches of available land, is that the magnetism of the living world grows ever stronger.

The issue of initiation in the twenty first century is complicated. Passionately debated by some, but completely unheard of by most, the word 'initiation' covers a huge panorama of rituals designed to bring you into greater relationship with community, wilderness and your role in society. The specific emphasis in these sessions is based on the tradition we have come to refer to as a 'Vision Quest', the practice of extended retreat in a wild place. We find it in the religious practices of the Celts, early Christians, and Native Americans to name only three. This intensely mysterious experience is solitary in nature - a conscious break from society - but requires the generative warmth of a return to community to help grow the seeds that can come from such a testing. I believe that while the specific cultural textures of this process are being lost, it is still possible to have a direct encounter with its essence.

Much thought on initiation focuses on the journey *out* from society, into an unknown zone of danger, stealth, courage and illumination. Its transformational quality is embedded in what the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep called the "Threshold" experience (Gennep 1909). This is the place furthest from the old concepts of yourself and your limitations, where something new is birthed. I will argue that the ground of real peril in a contemporary initiation is not the Threshold, but the *return* journey. In fact, without the return, the alchemy is half undone, the spell of making unuttered. To retreat permanently to the woods is to create a marginal life out of a marginal experience. Initiation is a three-fold process, and the transformation can only be fully experienced in the integration of all aspects of that process.

The assumption in ancient society was that you had a supportive environment to return to; that many hands would ruffle your head, warm tears would splash your cloak as you danced into the next stage of your life. This

assumption has lost all ground in western culture. With this loss we find the potential initiate in a stage of unparalleled vulnerability. How does one share a vision with a culture that has forgotten that the process ever existed?

As a culture we have become adept at severing old ties to relationships and countries. We move house, change our look, even our name. I would argue that there is even a kind of addiction to the act. My own life is awash with changes of location, mad changes of career, a divorce settlement. In the Greek world this is lack of the Senex, the Saturnian old man who grips the ankle of the Peur Eternus (the boy who feels a little like god), as he gropes upwards towards the sun. I don't think we like the Senex much, at least not my generation. He's pouring through mistakes in our footnotes as we imagine writing a bestseller. That slow, agonisingly diligent quality is very different to the swift cult of the networking multi-tasker - that's more Hermes's department. Teacher training courses are now set up to keep his didactic gaze as far away from the classroom as possible. Saturn freaks us out.

We can dislocate from any number of situations, but the cultures in which initiation was birthed relied on each other for survival. It was a very different situation. The severance we experience now in our daily lives is, for the most part, very different to the intensities aroused in a tribal setting when you were wrenched out of the daily cycle of life and thrust into the forest. We will not be addressing what you could call 'village' ritual, done in groups, or specifically involving gender, but the solitary fast (although with base camp support).

Initiation opens us to the intimacy of place - specific, tangible place - and from that a love affair grows. We shouldn't live out of a sense of duty, but out of intoxication. It is crazy to presume everything ancient or tribal is an antidote to the issues of modernity, but this talk suggests strands of genius lie in the practice of initiation and myth that are vital to any conversation involving relationship to the earth.

Wildness is not defined by a ponytail, antisocial behaviour, a camping shop, learning to kayak, pointing two fingers at the values of our parents, smashing a window, climbing a mountain or doing anything the casual observer may associate with the word. Wildness understands the requirements of community and the village. It understands the shape of civilisation and honours it, though is not completely defined by it. It contains something of the biblical idea: "Be in the world but not of it".

From an indigenous perspective, neglect of ritual forms creates a kind of chaotic sickness or malaise, which invokes a very real sense of dislocation from the wider community - animals or weather patterns. These ritual forms are a kind of secret history of the world: they are medicine. To face the world without them is to walk naked into a blizzard, to enter a desert without water.

The perception of community would extend out, both into the landscape and through the stories seeping up from the burial grounds of your ancestors. The dead, the living, the four-legged's, the waterfall, the sharpened axe, the bumblebee, all were interconnected if you looked long enough.

At a certain point in your development, normally around fourteen, this perception would take on an even deeper reality as you were removed from your domestic concerns and village ties. Just at a time when the young person

thinks they have seen all that the adults have to offer, they are catapulted out of what is familiar and into what is known as “the world turned upside down” - the initiatory zone. Although the specifics vary from culture to culture, certain constants can be identified. A series of trials would be presented, often including a period of time alone in a wild place and a submersion into the secret ritual life of the tribe. This could last days or weeks, and the only people you saw were other initiates and elders, often of the same gender. The process engendered a sense of identity, self-reliance and relationship to the land.

As we move from childhood we experience a kind of leap. We know that at adolescence, the average male has up to thirty times the normal amount of testosterone coursing through a body struggling to catch up. He glimpses somewhere up ahead the capacity to bear greater responsibility, have children, to contribute to a wider community, but rarely achieves this gracefully. This second leap has always been complex, and its innate vulnerability has required the birthing canal of initiation to anchor the individual into their new, wider role.

So we see a great momentum entering at this stage, but a complexity in how it may show itself. If nothing is presented to the youth at that crucial stage, if no Arthur, no White Buffalo Woman, no Elder appears, the energy loses focus, eats disappointment and becomes self-centred, because the world it's heading towards seems dulled or greedy. Mythology, as we will see, helps us into adulthood by showing us a picture wider than our own self-absorption. It's as if adolescence is a moment when a wave is higher than usual, when some power makes it crest, peak at a point where far off views are seen, other vistas, not just the churning sea. Dreams are more vivid, possibilities endless. A healthy community catches that moment, and allows a container as the wave crashes down again.

Initiation matches the upsurge by offering something of equal magnitude, a sense of appointment in life. Mishandling this means that the wild parts of us become segregated, marginalised, or only appear when we're drunk. Wild consciousness gets limited to an AC/DC record, a survival skills workshop, a one-night stand. Rock'n'Roll holds that wildness for many of us: I love it myself, but its obsession with youth points towards boys and girls who remain uninitiated, whose perception of wildness cannot grow with time. It becomes a frozen moment, fondly enjoyed, but as unacceptable in your 'grown up' life as a wolf in kindergarten.

There is a fear of death in continually idolising youth, but it continually moves through our community regardless. Part of that heroic teenage expansion lies in drawing close to death, seeing that one day, possibly soon, there will be an end to all this. Every ram-raider, every teenage life-threatening prank, is an unconscious, archaic desire to come close to that dark wind. By the third or fourth day without food on the mountain, you start to hear death shuffling around through the trees. Initiation creates a bounded opportunity to step nearer the kingdom of death, and be called back to the living by the singing voices of the elders. An old tribal idea is that youth are meant to wrestle death or the sun won't rise in the morning – a young man's aggression is not an abstract physicality but directly connected to the churning of the sea, the great lightning storms over a meadow of wild flowers. It is replacing a universe with a cosmos. 'Universe's' etymology is to do with 'rotating, or rolled'- interesting in its

way but linguistically flat, but 'cosmos' is to do with the heavens, abundance, the display of stars and some implicit mystery that is pouring this experience of life out every second – and that you are connected to. It is a rich, embodied, scary process. It's less to do with belief and much more to do with experience.

Wilderness initiation holds that death requires a kind of courting, in much the same way you'd court a new love. You send her gifts, acknowledge the preciousness of her being, construct strange little dances to honour her. She is a constant companion, and sends you little vibrations every day in the form of minuscule endings. The fast in wilderness is a kind of nod in her direction, a leaving of golden apples at her feet, of sewing her claw marks into the hem of your dress. It opens a dialogue that should inform the rest of our lives, rather than meeting her all at once, rather abruptly, at the end.

Death in the centre of life is a major component of what we call folk religions. Religion in its etymology means 'linking-back', which by its nature implies a close listening to the traditions of those who went before. Shamanism is the name given to the root of initiation.

We have to be careful with the word shamanism. It's horribly over used. Shamanism, strictly speaking, is not a religion. It is an umbrella term used to describe a wide variety of beliefs, from tribal collectives around the world, that everything in the world is animate, alive in the way that it is. The badgers in their den, the underside of a decaying leaf, the ashes of a lightning strike, all informed the localised community of their own nature, and they perceived themselves as another kind of animal in the landscape.

What is normally considered invisible or occult (in its original sense - "unknown") e.g. the spirit realm, ancestors, entities that speak through rivers or cave walls - was in fact communicable and real. The link person between the realms is the Shaman (the word originates from the Tungus, meaning "one who is lit up"). Playing a more experiential role than a priest, a shaman holds the darker areas around the centre of the village, a kind of psychic sentry whose task is to maintain some kind of equilibrium between the wants of the people and the geographical and specific demands of the local deities.

Anthropologists may argue specifics, but in general, we can detect strong echoes of it in parts of the Western tradition. What is lost is the community understanding of shamanism: as the idea of wilderness changes with political or religious agendas, the ceremonies turn to dust and this animistic sentiment become the domain of certain intellectuals, poets and heretics.

Back before the Enlightenment we find in the roots of Welsh myth a story that contains the idea of an expanded self, a free ranging explosion into the scales of a salmon, the embers of a campfire, the eruptive bellow of a stag. It involves the wrenching from the familiar into new constellations, a different shape - witch seeing. In the Mabinogion we find the story of the birth of Taliesin. In the course of one adventure Taliesin embodies the requisite consciousness required to move through many differing incarnations, exploding the literal into a metaphysical underworld.

...The story begins with a sorceress, Ceridwen, composing a mixture, a potion, in a vast cauldron. This concoction was said to contain the essence of both Inspiration and Science, and whoever should taste three drops of it would receive illumination into the mysteries of the cosmos. Ceridwen's reason for brewing such a mixture was that her son Avagddu was said to be the most ill-favoured man in the world, of quite arresting ugliness. Ceridwen surmised that to compensate for this, Avagddu had to display this magical wisdom to make his entry into noble society - in this case, the court of King Arthur and the Round Table. A spell of such potency required brewing for a year and a day, so she put to work a man, Gwion Bach, to stir the cauldron and a blind man, Morda, to kindle the flame beneath it.

She wrapped words of allure and threat around the two so they would not cease from their task till the year and a day was up. Towards the end of this period, three drops splashed on the finger of Gwion Bach and without thinking he drew it to his mouth to quell the heat. At that very second, a great, holy seeing ruptured his mind - the future displayed itself and he saw that he must be alert to the witching skill of Ceridwen; she was connected to unearthly power. With this insight, he gathered himself and headed for his homeland. With the three drops delivered, the great cauldron split in two, for the unbridled hugeness of its power undiluted became a poison. That poison poured from the cauldron into a stream, that, when horses drank from it, killed them. So that confluence of streams was called the Poison of the Horses of Gwyneddo from that day forward.

Pursued by Ceridwen, Gwion shape-shifted into a hare, then a fish, then a bird, until finally he became a grain of wheat that Ceridwen, now incarnated as a high crested black hen, ate. Ceridwen then became pregnant and bore this magic child for nine months till his birth. Touched by his beauty, she spared his life and sent him out to sea, wrapped in a leather bag, to the mercy of god. On the 29th of April he was discovered by Elphin, another luckless son, whose assistant, gazing at the child, proclaimed "Behold a radiant brow!" and the name Taliesin - 'radiant brow' - was born...

We will work with the idea that, on one level, myth can be to do with certain impulses contained within our psyche, that we are awash with Gods. However we have to be careful with that idea – for two reasons. One is that when you link an image to an impulse there can be a tendency for the mythic image to petrify – you think you know what it is trying to tell you. You no longer need the image - you have the symptom, or pathology, or insight the story is showing you. But our imagination longs for nuance, texture and depth – what the image offers, rather than just the psychological opening. So keep a playful hand on the image, not too tight – let it keep unfolding. Secondly there is something offensive about the notion that these great figures are contained entirely within a human framework. I'm not offering a belief system, just a caution, and an openness that there are also levels to myth that are way beyond our longing for an intimate, human connection with it.

Let's look at four key images:

The Contents of the Cauldron: Discipline and Wildness. We are told that this mixture consists of both raw inspiration and the greatness of Science. The integrated potion contains both the ecstatic essence of the awen (the leap of druidic inspiration) and the logos principle (the ability to decipher, separate out and cherish clarity and rationality). I'm not setting the Greeks (Logos) against the Welsh (Awen), but they are good descriptive phrases. We have already seen, back in the Sixth Century, the Welsh belief that both great strands originated from the same cauldron, and were in fact part of the same mix, inseparable. The Bard and the Scientist and the Philosopher are caught in its froth; Descartes, Blake and Darwin are ultimately squabbling brothers from this vessel.

This hints at the multi-layered apprenticeships of the Druids, in which to denigrate one over the other was to weaken the whole. It is like some ancient prototype, or a DaVinci sketch of man, accommodating both defined thought and the ecstatic: "Swords and Wands", as the Tarot says. As we look at the pitched battles between theologians, poets and scientists over the centuries, we do well to remember this earlier, mythic illustration of an integrated mixture.

This cauldron is the very crucible of the initiatory experience. Discipline as the dance partner of wildness. As soon as you choose one entirely over the other then the initiatory experience is lost. What we could call the 'Village' offers the rational, the explicit, the 'handed down', and the 'Forest' presents the visionary, the prophetic, the 'experiential'. Initiation in its widest format – the three fold mechanism – requires an intense forging of both into one crossroads of influx. It is tempting to always associate initiation with the Forest attributes, but it actually requires the tempering and confirmation of the Village to re – inhabit Ceridwen's cauldron.

The Three Drops: From this whole, percolating mass, only three tiny drops are necessary for illumination. This cooking is a defined experience - prescribed - not just left to a random draught. We get a sense of a distilled intensity, but also boundaries, that, as we soon see, are there for a reason.

The Poison of the Horses of Gwyneddo: Once the cauldron has performed its ritual act, the accumulated power of the mixture causes the cauldron to split, and once released, its contents, on impact, becomes poison. It enters the stream of time and with this splitting we get a sense of Illumination and Science separating; and both threads become warring dragons in the river of history. What befalls those who drink from this turbulent loch? Death. So the cauldron contains both the principles of magic and science and insists on its fullness of purpose. Without the barriers of ceremony it becomes unwieldy, deadly, containing too much great spirit. Left with the legacy of Ceridwen's cauldron, we watch unfolding centuries reaping the havoc of the two warring dragons, having forgotten their shared home.

That crucial statement from Descartes: "I think therefore I am" is a breath from the science dragon. In its era, the Seventeenth Century, it represents a severing from this earlier sense of relationship to the natural world. That world lacks reason; it is the job of man to tutor the native and domesticate the wild. Nature requires handling and enlightening, not dialogue. This idea was also politically useful; both pragmatic and philosophical, creating opportunity for industrial advancement, utilitarianism and a centralised, didactic approach to religion. It says that the god energy lives only in the wine, bread and good book. As Alexander Pope said, whilst cheerily cutting himself off from the rest of the universe: "The proper study of mankind is man."

We can view the 1960s as the era when the struggle between the dragons took on an even greater intensity. The Dionysian feel of the latter half of that era invited an extraordinary body of information to surface to the general public, especially to the youth. In a minute space of time, the consciousness of nations was flooded with wild, turbulent, ecstatic ideas contained in music, philosophy, books, drugs and lifestyle. The god energy was most certainly out of the box and heading into trees, electric guitars and your bloodstream at great speed. Where once was only the Bible, Duluth or Margate, you now had access to Hendrix, India, the Tarot, Dylan, Joplin, Huxley.

Finally accessing the intuitive dragon, this generation often ignored Taliesin's pinpricks and kicked the entire cauldron over. The combination of applied social pressure (Vietnam, civil rights) and the infusion of anarchic, ecological and mythological ideas, helped create an explosive cocktail - inevitable, exploratory and without boundaries. The Age of Aquarius was upon us.

The use of lysergic acid caused previously imagined psychological limits to dissolve in minutes. It seemed possible to watch a tree breathe, create lightning from your eye, think you were seeing through walls.

A multi-dimensional landscape was suddenly tangible. The mythic stories ceased to be flat words on paper and became huge, rusty keys to direct experience. With this wrenching of 'conventional' consciousness, hundreds of thousands of people poured down the hole of initiatory experience without support of elders or much understanding of where they were going. Many returned, some didn't. This kind of wildness has a child's unsteady steps to it. As a reaction to repression and outside a ritual context, it takes on a devouring form. It's out of balance. While the pendulum swings between dragons, the third way, of Ceridwen's potion, is lost. Not much has changed.

While the quest for expansion was absolutely valid, with the cultural tensions of the era creating a much needed experience of wild possibility, the difficulty was harnessing that energy - to be like Dionysus, riding the leopard without being torn to pieces. For that first experience of wildness to be sustained, to mature, it has to have other elements in the potion nourishing it. Of itself, it becomes addictive, consuming and savage; in short, uninitiated. The Sixties created a generation with the aspirations of magicians without the elders, boundaries and community to give their apprenticeships grounding. The temptation is to try and reclaim the cauldron, but we can't remember the particulars of the spell; the aspiration is there, but not the framework. This early story gives us counsel, however,

of an implication of specifics, of distillation, of time limits - there is waiting involved, a year and a day, whilst a blind man, Morda, attends the kindling.

We could see Morda as someone alive to their inner life. Unable to expand into the visual, the energy of his mind internalises itself, sensitises itself to the percolation of the cauldron. We see parallels with the practice of Dzogchen in Tibet, in which long retreats in darkness are encouraged to access an acute inner sensitivity. Ironically, the seeming limits of stimuli open up information hidden by too much choice. The process requires a reversal of what contemporary society, in the main, tells us we should have. In the Tarot this is the Hanged Man figure, with a slice of the Hermit thrown in for good measure. To be in touch with Morda requires knowing precisely what kind of kindling the cauldron of your own illumination requires to stay bubbling for a year and a day, or a decade, or the rest of your life. To diligently feed it sympathetic fuel. Note that the Mabinogion says Morda "kindled" the fire, gave it constant attention, not chucked on a feeder log and wandered off.

Morda embodies a devotion to the life that nourishes the deepest part of yourself. So he crouches in his darkness and feeds the flames with the right mixture of hardwoods and breath. It is unglamorous work, unwitnessed, but vital to the sustenance of any great endeavour we undertake. For something to emerge in its fullness, it has to be cultivated, sustained past the point where we would rather put it down because we could buy the potion instead of creating it.

The problem is, we can't. The mix is always slightly different; the kindling that moves my flames would extinguish my neighbour's. It is personal work that requires discipline and an exchange of time and energy. To make something of worth is rarely a quick process.

We have an image of absolutely transcendental information in the story, but not before a period of time spent crouching near the ground, blind to the outer world, sustaining heat between the elemental (fire) and the created (the potion). A year and a day in a story means a long time. Also, whenever magic or the otherworld is involved, strange things happen to time. Morda is the part of us that is attentive to distant voices and is prepared to sit in dark, moist places to grow, as Yeats says, "Silver apples of the Moon." (Yeats 1992 :363)

Gwion Bach, having imbibed the prescribed mixture, effortlessly transmutes from entity to entity, any previous bounds of physicality wrenched asunder. He is large and tiny, an un-static, mercurial thing. The elemental and animal kingdoms are suddenly and immediately available to him. As an example of someone having received the correct dosage from the cauldron he is suddenly vast, not caught in the rigidity of idea, he moves at speed between forms, specifically animal forms. He could have become a giant or a tower of flame to defeat the sorceress, but he went the way of the animal powers. The story makes explicit magical relationship with them, and says that to inhabit their molecular structure requires illumination not denigration. It is a raised position.

Shape leaping informs us of the necessity for movement; in fact our life depends on it. A choice, relationship or job that felt wonderful fifteen years ago can suddenly become a prison, the shiny scales we loved are rotting and dull, the water we abide in nebulous and stagnant. Surely better to be winged, supported by invisible patterns,

closer to the sun. The instinctive self, if not totally buried, understands the moves required to achieve this, if that self is obscured by static, it will create chaos till we pay attention.

A healthy psyche listens to its animal nature, and twists in the foam when under attack, basks on a rock when the sun's out, climbs to higher branches to protect its young. As conditions change, we are fluid. So, four insights from this Welsh teaching story are:

1. The need for boundaries (three drops, no more)
2. The original complementary mix of instinct and intellect (Ceridwen's potion)
3. The need for gestation through the interior of those ingredients (Morda, the blind man)
4. The fluidity of forms that arise from it - the initiated form.

Initiation is always an attempt to reunite the two dragons, to step into the disciplined wildness of Ceridwen's mixture.

October Session

The Northern Witch and the Luminous Bride

Did you know this is the Celtic New Year? As you return to your tents this evening be aware that Dyer and his hounds will be making their way across Dartmoor from Wistman's Wood, and carriages made entirely of human bones will carry ghouls across the green lanes and desolate stretches. I hope that has you suitably relaxed.

Autumn always seems to be a time of introspection, of looking within, so it's a good time to be continuing our study of both myth and initiatory rites-of-passage. We're going to start with an old Russian fairy tale - *Ivan the Bear's Son*. I will tell it whilst relating it both to the experience of leading wilderness fasts (something many of you may undertake next summer) and how some of its motifs can appear in, say, the life of an artist. We will jump back and forth like that over these sessions. For me as a painter, the likes of Jackson Pollock, Alan Davie, Antoni Tàpies and others hold an overt mythic element to their work, so expect references to them as we go. What I mean by that is an interest in mythic themes, a trust in the power of the image, and a very contemporary sense of the relationship between the mythological and the psychological. Whilst I think it's clumsy to compare the contemporary artist to a shaman - as I will shortly talk about - the idea of opening to the unconscious is often a shared aspiration. As a preamble to the story, let's imagine you are undergoing one of these wilderness initiations, and we have struck camp up in the mountains of Wales.

The days leading up to the fast follow a specific schedule: longer and longer periods alone in the natural world, first an hour, then three, then five. We examine old hunter-gatherer stalking techniques: to use the periphery of your vision to trace the movement of animals, to sit quite still and follow the unruly buffalo procession of your thoughts. Every day the surrounding land feels less unfamiliar and more like home, its language of welcome non-verbal, but no less profound. The evenings bring our voyagers back together, gathered round the campfire. There is no better time to tell stories than when our imagination arcs out into the dark and dwells in its corners.

This process of leaving the village is a pivotal point in the old stories, a root moment in the procession towards a kind of 'perverse' wholeness that flies against the corporate. Something moves under the skin, sticks in the throat, is ill at ease with the roles that rush to cover you as you move through life. There is a fatigue in a regimented road that urges you to shoot the wheels off the cart, burn the masterpiece and head off to the travellers' camp. You must admit, as D. H. Lawrence calls them: "The three strange angels" (Lawrence 1993 :20).

Indigenous teachers have always understood that initiation in some way is a microcosm of the experience of living a human life; the very process of living requires leaving what is familiar, e.g. the womb, and venturing out into a world of uncertain outcomes. A life that is completely defined by society's requirements is only partially resonant with the wider senses of our psyche. Let's not confuse completeness with the desire to be happy and safe at all costs, no story worth its salt begins that way. Some adventurous, troublesome part of our nature has to be

activated, the part looking for god and aloneness as well as security and the warmth of the hearth. This process lifts us from the greenhorn, the unseasoned, into psychic weight and resonance.

There is no evangelical right way to do this: you could fast in an oak grove, steal a panther's whisker, drink nothing but bulls' blood for nine days, search for a golden fleece, or meditate in the burning grounds of a cemetery. We know the sequence that defines this process:

1. **Severance.** An event that causes you to abandon, or be expelled from, your daily routine. The normal frames of reference are no longer paramount in your mind - earning a living, tending your relationships, applying yourself to the life of the community. You are projected out from what is familiar, comfortable, and into a series of testing experiences that occur far from your 'everyday' life.
2. **Threshold.** The period of time spent in this crisis of awakening, or "liminal space", as Victor Turner calls it. This can be experienced, in the metaphor of myth, as a psychological state and as a physical rite-of-passage that incorporates the first two stages. There can seem little to hold onto in this process.
3. **Return.** The process of returning and integrating new knowledge with the situation you left to pursue this experience.

Picasso leaves the supper, takes to his studio, then returns at some unspecified point with new work that could only have appeared in that moment. Even in this slight example we see a whisper of this process.

It's a process we can trace in an instant: subtle metaphors we act out every day and in epic, literal journeys out into the wilderness like Thoreau's. Mythology often symbolises the beginning of this process by the arrival of an extraordinary object or experience in the initiate's life. In Russia it is a lone hunter discovering the vibrant, deep red feather of the firebird on a desolate forest trail. It could be a princess, wandering through the forest witnessing the unusual sight of a great white bear holding a wreath. That actually comes from a story we will cover soon. Such images cause a temporary loosening of the domestic ties - shaking, beguiling or alarming the initiate.

Trouble is always part of this arrival. An event has occurred that pulls our gaze from the trance of comfort, whether crisis or opportunity, and sends us out from the village gates. The greater our investment in security and status, the more savage the underworld's dogs can appear, the more baleful the moon. We always had a sense this place existed, but surely a pension plan and the cult of eternal youth could keep it away?

Ritual and myth are coded steps that can help facilitate our movement through such awakening times. These old stories remove some of the abstraction in crisis, and keep us focused on the half-concealed path, rather than complaining that we're so far from home in the first place. Liberated experience, originality, breaking shackles, and a larger sense of self and community can result from following this route. The truth is that we all undergo this

process, like it or not, but the initiate is the one who sees its alchemy and can even cherish the mistakes and confusion. The element that varies from individual to individual is how conscious we are that we're in an initiatory experience at all.

We can make a rather lazy comparison of the role of the contemporary artist with these voyagers into the underworld - that by the nature of their vocation artists are predisposed to pushing the boundaries and following strange, associative trails to the unconscious. It can be an inflationary mistake to place the shaman tag on the shoulders of many working artists. The shaman has a set of handed-down psychic tools and very real connections to pragmatic as well as magical information that will keep them alive.

It is as if thick sheets of plastic have been placed between much contemporary art and the last fifteen hundred years of creative spiritual information. As we peer at distorted forms we can vaguely make out the hunched figure of Titian but he remains muffled; Emily Dickinson seems blurry, out of focus. As we try and wipe the plastic into clarity, someone unseen is nailing a plastic roof down too, just in case some connection has been left between us and stars, air, and mercurial conversation. What we are left with is a hundred thousand magazine articles, all photocopied, some scissors and paste. When all direct resonance has been bled from the images of art, we can hold up ironic commentaries on Jung, Godfrey of Strasbourg, or Dostoevsky, and wonder to ourselves: "What was all that heat about?" The constant mantra for contemporary artists is 'play', with 'work' feeling far too heavy and macho. So play we do, cutting and pasting ourselves as far as we can into a cool, white space, with no badger skulls present.

To Romany Gypsies, the greatest curse you can aim at someone is isolation. To be bereft of your ancestors, squabbling brothers, inspirations and livestock is to be only just alive. In their view, we are constantly expanding and contracting into history, crows overhead, dead uncles. Art, in its broadest sense, is about connections, not distance. It's easy to feel safe inside the plastic, remote, abstract. But when the boat tips and hail breaks the window, where are the tools for repair? Our isolation is not to be misunderstood as the need for solitude. This is an isolation that comes from emotional distance and lack of trust for anything of worth to a previous generation.

Once communication through the infrastructure of art and culture tilts too far from the Lascaux caves, or from the words of Rimbaud, we empty our bag fully and are left vulnerable when heavy storms blow the plastic sheets away. Glibness, sound bites and witty retorts are no kind of currency when we are outside the village gates. When we talk of the descent in stories, this is an underworld detected in dreams, a moment when we brush the wing-feathers of mortality, when we sting from a push into the nettles. Traditionally, it lives outside the walled city of the intellect, in the rough places, or underneath our feet, nearer the extremes of hot or cold. The allure of such a place is the fragrance of change, a kind of uncanny freshness that can arise through disorientation. It can be a concrete experience, a metaphor, and all points in between. Its atmosphere swoops between incident, insight and dream.

In the very otherness of its shadows, however, is the possibility of fresh perceptions, to glimpse something anew, before the mind has claimed it as conquered territory. Jackson Pollock's trips to his New York Jungian analyst were an attempt to put some tools back in the bag, to claim some magician energy in the overwhelming descent of his depressions. His period of analysis was an attempt to stabilise the velocity of the descent, to bring back one of the Crone's whiskers. In this descent, many go down and don't come back.

Even the so-called success stories can end in violence - Rothko, suicide at the foot of a canvas; Pollock in a car crash. One perspective is that they were given the wrong response to their work, an affirmation (wealth and prestige), rather than a blessing (a culturally understood act of holding and honouring the visible thread of an energy whose roots are in the invisible world). Another neglected aspect is a sacred space for those ideas to be matured, brought into physical realisation.

From an indigenous perspective, offerings would be left at the site of a hunter's kill, acknowledgement of a dialogue, a relationship with the divine. If the artist believes they are the sole producer of their work, what happens to the poetry of that moment of discovery? The bungled etiquette traipses after the artistic shoplifter and will keep twisting the air around them till it gets fed, even if that creates big trouble. What is superstition to some is cause and effect to others. So let's begin the story...

...There was once a forest on the edge of the tundra, out in the snowy wilds of Russia. Only one hunter knew its paths and was not afraid of owls hooting at midnight. He and his wife had only one great grief, that they could not conceive a child. One day he caught the trail of a large bear and followed her back to her den, where, to his astonishment, he found a small boy with wild hair and glittering green eyes. When the mother bear saw this encounter, she pulled away and allowed the hunter to take the boy she had nurtured these last few years. With great joy the hunter returned to the settlement he came from, with a son at last!

But this boy, who they named Ivan 'the bear's son', didn't grow by years, months, weeks or days, but grew by hours! Before their eyes he was transformed into a being with extraordinary strength; if he played with a child, arms were broken, a head would leave its shoulders. Soon, the community gathered round the hunter, angered at the chaos ensuing from Ivan's arrival, and the havoc wreaked upon the other children. "Banish him!" they cried. So, with great sadness, the hunter informed Ivan, who was now a young man in physical appearance, that he must journey out into the world. As a gift he gave Ivan his own twenty-five pound club, and Ivan brandished it saying; "I am Ivan the bear's son, and I fear not even a witch!" Prophetic words, as we shall see. Well, Ivan wandered out into the world and whether it was a short time or a long time, he had many adventures, trials and triumphs. Somewhere down the road he fell in with three giants who were all brothers and accompanied him like an unruly gang. Their home was a hunting lodge deep in the same woods Ivan came from. The lodge was made from forty huge trees and in its centre was a huge fire that never went out. Ivan and the giants lived on the meat of elk,

enjoyed each others' company and that's where we leave them for now, snow padding down on the huge timbers of their roof. . . .

We are immediately given clues that whoever Ivan is, he is not entirely human. Some part of him has formed in conditions seen as primitive and dangerous, literally "raised by animals". Ivan belongs to that small, mythic community of feral children who survive through the fostering of wild animals. Ivan is a kind of bridge between realms; he abides in the physical shape of a boy but seems to be linked to something beyond normal conceptions of safety and boundaries. Though Ivan is not quite as literal a shape shifter as, say Taliesin (who could become a salmon or grain of wheat), the conditions surrounding his discovery by the hunter alert us to the auspicious nature of his being. That wonderful clue of the mother bear backing away indicates that metaphorically, the boy is ready for the next stage of his adventure.

Who is he? Well, we could say he is a son of Cernunnos or Shiva. Both of these gods, European and Indian in origin, are loyal to the moon, abide in the wild, and are intensely undomesticated. Robert Moore uses the wonderful phrase "appreciative consciousness" to describe the love of nature they bring. So Ivan is some immature aspect of this realm but is not entirely a god either.

For an artist, Ivan is that moment in the studio that is beyond the manipulation of our conscious ideas, when at the end of a day's work, one horse we've never seen before enters the corral, making the other sculptures look like lame donkeys, and urinates on the tiredness of our repertoire. Something true enters the room and all falls silent.

Those few moments in its presence is often all we have: that root experience, that essence, can rarely be prescriptive. The next five years of our work can be a search for that one moment when we found the wild boy. Antoni Tapies sometimes glimpses him by repetitious walking in front of the canvas, to wear out the machinations of his considered process; Pollock allowed the mercury of paint through air to be the boy's entry point, to sacrifice full manipulation of the brush. This, as well as many other techniques, illustrates the hunter's/artist's familiarity with the forest and the need to travel far from the hearth to encounter the goods he seeks.

Frequently we enter the forest to find false trails - no food this trip. Ivan symbolises a moment of discovery, both longed for and profoundly mysterious, his origins hidden in the world behind the world. The words fly off the page, the song is completed in an hour and we just don't know where it came from.

The claiming of this moment proves more difficult. To the community, Ivan's is a non-integrated energy, destructive. Like love, he grows at an ungovernable pace; his territory is marked out by rupture - legs from bodies, heads from shoulders. We can see we are witness to an essence, rather than a developed form. Ivan is a moment of polarities: wild/domestic, dismembered/nurtured, forest/village. This boy is no politician; he carries no diplomacy with him; he carries lightning. Philip Guston turns round in 1970, digs hard, follows his nose and produces work that cast him out of the village till his death. Every cadmium red eyeball, every titanium white Ku Klux Klan robe is an aberration to his expectant Abstract Expressionist audience. Ivan is quite an arrival, the real thing, it appears.

The problem arises when we expect this energy to behave itself, to submit to the consensual. In its current state it is not ready to do that, it's been bred in hard weather, slept in the rough fur of bears, eaten fish raw from the stream. A clue to the insular nature of the community is that it's only the hunter who enters the forest; our religious perspective on that environment appears to have broken down. We no longer have the sense of a village engaged in initiatory work with their youth; otherwise they would have discovered Ivan many times over, in the crooked teeth and smiling eyes of their returning adults. When the dialogue with wilderness is neglected, Ivan as Lightning will appear.

Ivan is now expelled from the village but not before receiving a gift from the hunter, the twenty-five pound club. Something of weight has been given to Ivan that he did not have in the wild, something manmade and handed down. The experience of the village is not entirely wasted then, some boon or talisman has been passed to him from the human realm. We could view this club as the father's collected knowledge, his strategies and the accumulated power of his decades as a hunter. Still, though token of knowledge it may be, it's not Ivan's knowledge, and like adolescents everywhere, he has to go out into the world to speak for his own piece of the action. We see no sign of shame in Ivan as he leaves the carnage of the village, and also no fear: "I am Ivan the bear's son and I fear not even a witch!"

In Robert Bly's work we find this stage in a youth's development characterised as being 'in the red'. According to Bly, in European mythology we find great attention paid to the colours red, black and white, with certain characteristics attributed to them. What is fascinating is that when we study Native American medicine wheel teachings that map out the process of childhood to adulthood, we notice the same set of characteristics. Childhood begins in the South, the place of heat, raw emotion - 'I want!'; the West represents the adolescent passage, hibernation, grief, lethargy - 'I feel'; and then finally the North, the place of adulthood that represents community, responsibility, eldership, -'I act!'. I want /I feel/ I act is a set of distilled essences for each of these three phases.

We can describe the temperament that Ivan shows at this time as characteristic of the red phase. In mood, its attributes include aggression, one-upmanship, the desire to win at all costs, to be visible, to dominate, to shoot ahead of the pack. In short, all characteristics we associate with the move towards individuation in society.

Michael Meade says that amongst the Gisu of Africa this phase can last twelve years, during which the initiates are painted red, decorated with the feathers of a bird, and the elders fan the flames of their boasting and prowess, shaping this display into a form that in time becomes favourable to marriage, fatherhood and a responsible place in the tribe. Without this education of the “red” temperament it remains unwieldy, ready to be inflamed in unexpected moments, un-owned. To celebrate it in its complexity and largesse over time tempers it; “red” is, after all, a season. Ungainly and in-your-face as a person in the red can seem, they must fully experience it in order to access its energy. Disapproval of the red stage is a kind of avoidance.

Ivan’s aggression and wildness has sent him out into the world to survive or die. There is no fallback plan and that creates a kind of momentum all of its own. We learn through myth that the universe celebrates this kind of risk, that its full support and genius negotiation isn’t released until you are fully committed to the great uncertainty of your undertaking. Often the odds against you look impossible, and that’s the point! Ivan steps away from the village carrying only his self-belief. Given his youth, that manifests as “giant” energy.

We could say that those three giants represent the swagger in his step that Ivan needs as a young warrior. A giant can see over people, houses, situations, and can clear a wide path. A giant is noticeable, no shrinking violet; his presence wins him the interview, impresses the father (even if they struggle with the suitor’s arrogance) and leads the locker room pep talk at half time. Mythologically, giants, who are associated with greed, capture things of subtlety (e.g. a princess) but lack the sophistication to know quite what to do with them (maybe tie them to a tree, or eat them).

There is a powerful but childlike quality to their thunderous footfall; you sense you could topple them with a well aimed missile. But it is an appropriate stance for Ivan at this point, young as he is. With the giant energy at his disposal, he establishes a reputation as an adventurer, displays a successful daring. His innate physical strength has helped him build up a ‘head of steam’ (heat is a major attribute of the “red”) that means he doesn’t just survive, but flourishes. The world responds to the vitality of such a stance. The fire burns bright enough to illuminate the path ahead and also warm the inevitable voyeurs. The problem arises in one detail. A giant, due to his scale, cannot crouch close to the ground and check the soil for nourishment; he can point, flail and destroy but what can he cultivate? When he has the riches what does he do with them? They gather dust in hidden caves. This feels like a criticism, but it’s not, only becoming problematic when the red becomes not a stage but all encompassing. The lack of introspection can be fuel to conquest at a certain point, but crippling to maturation later down the road. The red’s grip is so compelling that the world at large can be resistant to letting the individual grow beyond it.

Success too early in life can create a kind of creative paralysis that blocks the natural flow of the individual. Jean Michel Basquiat inhabited, courted and was ultimately consumed by this energy, Andy Warhol as his empty ‘father’ standing by. His giant nature was reflected both in the size of his talent and his capacity for addiction. If you are defined by a moment rather than a progression, where can that lead you? The life of an artist requires a listening, an internal perspective, that complete baptism in the red will drown if it stays too long. For one in the

red, the world is a place that needs to be conquered, wrestled, voyaged. The red initiates action but is naive to the price of such movement. Ok, let's go back into the story...

One dusk, when Ivan and the two older giants were out hunting, the younger brother was alone at the lodge, and didn't hear the sound of a huge rock being pulled aside in the nearby forest. Up from the underworld, her world, appeared Baba Yaga, the great and terrible witch of the north woods, riding a mortar and pestle, and brushing her trail with a broom stick. Smelling food, she burst into the lodge, attacked the giant, pulled a strip of flesh off his back like a strip of bacon, emptied the larder and left. This was repeated with both brothers, so Ivan waited behind the door, hoping to apprehend her. Armed with his father's club, he made a stronger show of himself, blows raining down on Baba Yaga till she beat a hasty retreat back to the rock and down to the underworld.

With Baba Yaga seemingly vanquished, the men congratulated themselves on a job well done until Ivan said: "We must go to her world and finish the job, otherwise she will come back and try again. Who will accept the honour of descending down the hole to tackle this great, powerful and terrifying witch?" Oddly enough, no one accepted the challenge and it was up to Ivan to journey into the unknown dark. He instructed the giants to hold onto the end of a rope he had thrown down the hole and to pull him up when he tugged on it, however long a time that may be...

The presence of Baba Yaga in the story indicates the beginning of an entirely new stage in Ivan's initiation, one that will require subtlety, courage and great pain if he is to survive it. Baba has encountered many young giants before; like a black hole she simply absorbs their warrior posturing deep into herself and devours them. Whatever giant energy has borne you aloft up to now, Baba is the clawed hand that pulls you down. To survive her, listening as well as action, is required.

With Baba, her form can contort into the shape of disease, a partner's adultery, an unexpected sacking, watching something you cherish disintegrate over and over again. There is no glamour in her forms, only a kind of halitosis of the psyche, rotting meat by the radiator. The reaction to these moments is normally horror, as the hum of the muses, ignored for so long, becomes the shriek of the sirens, and the ship hits the rocks. Sometimes Yaga is a surgeon fiddling with his pen, delivering a life altering prognosis, or maybe the ink in the pen that signs the lawsuit against you. She is endlessly malleable, and will always offer a bespoke experience: whatever is specifically ghastly to you is the form that she will take. Her mode is one of dislocation from previous status, a bringing to the knees. The perspective of her as wise, or providing a kind of harsh nurture is small comfort at the moment she flies into view.

The giants' refusal to follow her down into the underworld indicates the beginning of Ivan breaking from this old mode of being, 'the red.' As representatives of that mode, giants are right to suspect that if they go down, they won't come up. Ivan has further to go on his path and he knows it. In our world, Ivan could have made his fortune

by now, worked up his business and brought home the bacon. He is just painting his picket fence when the letter from the tax fraud office arrives. His call to the underworld will take him off the heat of the red's career track; he will actually disappear from view into the earth, reversing the display of his previous stage. It may be that the life/death axis of Baba forces him to do this, that only calamity can produce this willingness to enter the profound unknown.

This descent is characterised by the 'black' stage of the initiation process. When one enters the black, a kind of sobering occurs, an awareness of things lost in the scramble for power and affirmation. The stillness of a hospital bed can allow the space for a particular opening to occur, often into the deep arms of grief. There is a humanity in the black, knowledge of rupture, casualties of greed, lives burnt out by the heat of ascension. Ironically, this is often judged in modern life as 'going off the rails' and one is regarded as unstable, peripheral, 'a shadow of one's former self'.

Rather than a stage of growth, it is a dead end, one is no longer of use to the corporation. Being trapped in the red and refusing to move will result in a kind of Rolling Stones' posture, looking always backwards to when you had time on your side. In Baba's terrain, the underworld, initiation and the black, you feel the scythe pass through your bubble of immortality.

We find, in this often terrifying place, odd shoots of growth coming up through the bogs and the scorched earth. In his practice, Jung emphasised something called 'amplification', a focused exploration of specific images that arose from your life or dreams. By describing the use, look or atmosphere of the object, one revealed its resonance. This is quite different from 'free association' in which you allow your imagination to move outwards e.g. cat – pet – home - warmth; instead, amplification narrows and deepens the pursuit. We could say that the black is a kind of amplification after the expansive associations of the red.

As Ivan descends, he limits his possibilities, he leaves light behind, he follows one specific road. The endless adventures are over, as are the myriad possibilities. As Baba enters the giants' lodge, she shatters the gilded fortress of their consensual beliefs and pulls them into direct experience of the unpalatable. This is a point in our lives where we decide (or are forced) to throw the anchor down, to live in one place, have a teacher, dig in. We look around the studio and see many unfinished paintings, different languages attempted and abandoned. Meeting the black involves working by lamplight, understanding the alchemy of oil paint, filling the doorway of your hut with corpses so no happy relatives get in. I'm not saying we live here forever, but we abandon the paths of sun to pay attention to the moon-lit trail. This is a gift the descent brings.

The sheer unknown quality of the descent into the underworld involves sitting in a tense, unsettling position for an unquantified amount of time. In a way, terror is the rope on which Ivan descends, knowing that if he doesn't get closer to the source of this anguish, Baba will return. How many of us, like the giants, feel the wound, the strip across our back, but refuse to examine it because of the inevitable change that this will bring? Dying to the red is too threatening, so we stay in the paralysis of the between-space, holding the rope but refusing to go down,

wounded but refusing the harsh possibilities of the black. The refusal of the call can manifest as depression when the rope looks too awful to grasp, the grief too deep. On a subtler level it can be the voices of our community that attempt to pull us back.

To descend means for a time to become less visible, to become a nightwalker, to be the bad tooth in the village's smile. This hinterland that the giants inhabit beside the hole has a kind of greyness to it, a neither one thing or the other. As well as lacking the strength to take the downward journey, we may also inhabit this place after a moment of great inspiration: 'That play was amazing, but who am I fooling, I could never act, learn carpentry, speak Spanish, fix an engine. Best to sit between possibilities and wonder.' As we see, this moment can be subtle as well as wildly dramatic.

Snowdonia

Let's return to our initiates preparing to fast on the mountain. Just as Ivan hovers in this moment before descent, so they are similarly facing great uncertainty and fear. Sitting around the dark hole to the Underworld is traditionally experienced the night before beginning your fast. At first light you will be drenched in prayers, sage smoke and embraces, after which you take up your slender pack and water, and head off alone to your place of Initiation. We don't expect to see you alive again - at least, not in the way you left us. But if we move backwards through time now, through an uncertain night's sleep, to that sitting around the dark hole, we can eavesdrop on the preparation.

For the days leading up to this, you will have spent longer and longer sensitising to the lush, informing and strange world of nature around you. You will have been removed from all contact with civilisation, families, phones, job offers. Anyway, who gives a job to someone about to die? You will have written letters to loved ones, made peace as best you can with enemies, and set your affairs in order. Your meals will have grown smaller and smaller as your body attempts to adjust to the lack of food and your mind may be blurry with withdrawal from nicotine, alcohol or coffee. Tears will have been shed, anger felt, and a growing fear will have manifested over the coming trial. And by now it will feel like a trial. But, as with the giants, strips will have been pulled from your back in the years leading up to this, and, like Ivan, you intend to descend into the darkness to face whatever's there.

It is death to the life that has served its purpose, that is now too small, too limiting, too littered with other people's expectations, not your own. As we sit, peering into the hole that last night, I will raise the fear one last time so it takes a seat in our circle. We discuss our greatest fears for the experience to come and I will start to talk candidly about my own and others' encounters down there in the darkness. I haven't led a group yet where someone doesn't attempt to pull out at this point.

To present initiation as a psychological exercise, or an attempt to make 'good little boys and girls' is to vastly under-prepare the Initiates for the realm they are heading toward. The Underworld has medicine specifically for you, but the degree of its potency is conditional. It is uncertain, it is frightening, it is the edge.

Let's return to our story.

When Ivan got to the bottom he found a world with both a sun and moon, uninhabited except by birds flying in the sky. Having no idea where Baba was, he simply struck out in a particular direction. He walked for four days and nights, over hills, by rivers and through great forests, his only ally a small bird who seemed always to be in the surrounding trees, and to whom he fed small morsels of food when he had them.

Eventually he came to a meadow where he glimpsed an unusual sight - a hut suspended on huge chicken legs moving round and round in circles, and underneath it a beautiful garden being cultivated by the most lovely girl Ivan had ever seen. She had hair like midnight and eyes like the morning and Ivan was struck forever in love with her. It was very unexpected to find this arresting beauty in such a place.

She wasted no time and said to him: "If you have come to defeat Baba, know this: she has two jars of potion; one gives the drinker great strength, the other drains them of all vigour. She will attempt to drink from the jar on the right, to aid her fight, so swap the jars! Also, know that in her realm Baba is sixty times more powerful than in yours, so you will need all your courage. If you succeed however, I will marry you and accompany you back to your world of light."

Ivan absorbed this information, swapped the jars and hid behind the door. Soon enough he heard Baba's cackle as she swooped in on her mortar and pestle.

"I smell the blood of a Russian boy, but that can't be, he is another lifetime away from here!"

"Pity for you, old woman!" cried Ivan and leapt out of hiding, clutching his twenty-five pound club, full of the strength potion he had ingested. Even so, she put up a fearsome fight, thrashing and shrieking, the two of them flying over the treetops as he attempted to pull her from her mortar. Finally, she made for the potion, ingested the wrong one and became as weak as a newly born kitten. Ivan seized his opportunity and struck her head clean from her shoulders with his sword. At that moment her head shrieked: "Strike again! Strike again!"

Ivan replied: "A brave man only strikes once," and sheathed his sword.

From out of her hiding place the woman spoke: "It is a good thing you didn't strike twice, or Baba would have leapt back up, very much alive with her head back on her shoulders!"

The two of them left Baba's hut, and journeyed for four days until they came to the end of the giant's rope.

Tugging on it, Ivan supported the woman's weight as they slowly climbed back up.

As the giants waited, their first glimpse of the returning pair was of this ravishing beauty heading towards them out of the dark. They realised that Ivan must have rescued her, and was about to marry her, and a black cloud of desire for this woman overtook them; they had to have this jewel; they'd work out the details later. So they gathered her up, and with one slash of the axe they separated Ivan from his beloved. Back, back he fell into the dark, falling for an age before landing hard on the ground, breaking many bones. And that is where we leave Ivan for now, exhausted, despairing and in great pain, many miles from home

As Ivan descends on his rope, we are aware that something in him is ending. His response to this challenge shows wisdom, as he has voluntarily gone where many of us would do anything to avoid, Baba's Kingdom. Great swathes of giant energy won't help him now; instead, he needs subtlety and listening as his allies. Ivan is certainly lost at this point, with nothing in the way of direction to Yaga, but still he gets there.

To enter the black of Yaga's kingdom involves opening your chest and releasing a bird, one that can follow the scent better than your intellect can. Your incubating crow nature will be your guide at this point. The assembled elders we cry for in moments such as these are borne in ourselves, not externally. We get some hint of an unexpected balance in this process by the image of both the sun and the moon hanging in the sky. The traditional polarities of masculine and feminine, solar and lunar appear to have equal relevance in this realm. If the element that brought Ivan down the rope was terror, the realm it has opened up to him is surprising. It's not a fog-laden wasteland, or a cemetery of the undead, but a place that holds rivers, woods and mountains. After the rupture of Baba and the horror of descending the tunnel, we find a landscape of surprising fecundity.

This hints at an almost tantric perspective on Yaga, that to resist her is to witness the most terrifying apparition, but to walk toward her is to witness a Dakini, an angelic being. Her kingdom is spacious, holds beauty, living things, even balance. Best not to let your guard down entirely though.

Ivan's wanderings sniff out the centre of the kingdom, his bird nature leading him to the whirling magic hut, the world turned upside down, the taboo place of Baba's power. Again, surprises. Baba has a wonderful garden, tended by an extraordinarily beautiful woman. By facing overwhelming challenge, by stepping into complete uncertainty, Ivan encounters rare beauty. We remember that this is taking place underground, i.e. in the psyche. The Celts have a saying that the soul of a man is female, and the soul of a woman, male. If we follow that wisdom, we can see it in Ivan's discovery of the deepest recesses of himself.

As the legs of the hut turn, so do the faces of the underworld, sometimes grotesque, nightmarish, and then, with a spin, staggering in their depth and beauty. Our capacity to even meet the maiden can only come from openness to the descent. If we return to the rope too early, we miss her; if we refuse the call at all, we miss her; if we cannot be led by instinct, we miss her. We are a talking head, bemoaning our lot. Without the encounter in the garden, the transformative element is lost.

Honouring the process of the black weans us from the addiction to youth, the sun at its zenith. Only by entering the underworld do we peek underneath the skin, get closer to the veins, tissue and vital organs that give us life. We are forced to dwell amongst the parts of us that malfunction, get lost in heartbreak, are abandoned in the brightness of external ambition. The eyes we have longed to drown in are never found completely in the slash and conquest of the red; that eternal moment is only encountered at its deepest in this inner journey. The root origin of this love re-orientates Ivan to an awareness that he can even detect the maiden's existence. Many spend their lives looking for such an encounter in the outside world, in another being. The irony is that Ivan locates this depth at a moment of

utter vulnerability, far from his achievements in the upper world, where he is supported by his friends, an environment he can comprehend.

The initiatory experience, whilst severing us from the familiar, bestows a boon. In the space created by strangeness, in the otherness of Ivan's situation, is the capacity for him to recognise an encounter with soul, the silent guest in all descents. This is not soul as a flimsy, intangible idea but as the vehicle for Ivan to bathe in the depth of the experience, no matter how hot or deep the water. The crisis, the Yaga, has a core of beauty in it and this is what Ivan has met. Baba is insistent on this meeting and without its union will keep extending her tendrils, robbing the larder.

What's wonderful here is the quality that the maiden instructs Ivan to use: canniness. Using trickery, in other words, is the only way that Ivan can possibly hope to defeat Yaga. Here is more of the black knowledge again. Black has traded innocence for experience, and in this instance canniness is the only way to play the cards. By moving the jars, Ivan commits a magician's act; secretly altering the dynamic of the situation, and throwing the outcome, he tricks the trickster. In the outside world, we could say this is the moment you are no longer a victim, or a 'warrior for the truth', or a pious, but slightly rigid knight. Ivan throws a taste of Yaga's own medicine back at her to defeat her, the only way it can be done. Simple polarities can't work here and a kind of intuitive shadow strategy is called for.

A younger Ivan may have scoffed at the jars, or relied on brute power, but the older Ivan, deep into the experience, uses the tools the moment brings him. The part of himself that Ivan has marshalled is very old and is the element in us that can smell a bad deal, a disingenuous gesture, and is enough of a seasoned tactician to respond. What's vital here is the context, this is life and death. To some it would be an easier story if Ivan defeated Baba purely by the strength of his arm, but it is part of Baba's genius that an encounter with her offers the death of naïveté; any other response will produce annihilation. It is worth mentioning at this point that the word "witch" derives from the word wit, meaning wise. The dark witch is an encounter with a certain archaic wisdom, contained in the recesses of our own psyche. Yaga is undefeatable in the old hero mode, the polemic of conquest by sheer force. As representative of a universal force, like Coyote, she will, if killed, surely reassemble and scamper back into life.

The information given to Ivan actually facilitates an integration of Yaga energy; what at first appeared an adversary is actually a dark ally. Ivan has located a part of himself that is found underground, recognises death as being in service to life, and becomes connected to a fierce, ancient, feminine intelligence. To not only navigate the dark passage of Baba's kingdom, but to make an ally of her, is the goal of initiation. Every day without food on the mountain, every scar puncturing the skin of a young warrior, every hour spent burning the script that no longer serves, is time in the dark garden. Experienced fully, Yaga burns the initiation cycle into you so that you carry it from that moment. That which seemed external to you, the 'bad thing' is now part of your nature, the wound from which the wild roses grow.

The betrayal of the brothers is an absolutely defining moment in this story. They represent the community that the initiate returns to, and the potential greed and lack of comprehension of what the individual has experienced. One presumes 'evil' has been vanquished in the shape of Yaga's death, but it is as if one final shard accompanies them back, fills the giants and cuts the rope. These characters have stayed in their limbo state, refusing the call of growth through the underworld journey, have witnessed the shiny jewel Ivan has returned with and are filled with desire to possess it. They want the prize but refuse the work.

The giants see radiance and attempt to dislocate it from the origins of its birth, which is underground and under great pressure. Giant energy can never comprehend that something as horrifying as descent into the black (a journey they would not take) can bring a reward as sweet as this. So they take the painting, the script, the innovation, and cut the creator out of the picture. Back they fall to the garret. They represent the antithesis of genuine elders; having lacked initiation, they are unable to do anything but grab at its prizes and leave the initiate to the dogs. The residue of the community's blessing is affirmation; but if all you get is material gain for your work, then the definition of success is impoverished.

Why can fame be a killer? Because its terms are wrong. If the one receiving attention hasn't built a psychological container strong enough to handle the projections of the audience, it's like asking for water and receiving coke. That sweetness charms the eager mouth but nourishes the body not at all. The traditional response is to sink back into the community, not stay elevated in a place where you feel above it. To receive hundreds of thousands of dollars a week for one's work is an inflated response to a lack of genuine understanding of the value of that work.

If the holy wells are empty, then the returning initiate cannot speak of relationship to the invisible because that is a kind of post-modern heresy. In this scenario the buyers took the maiden, the idea, and the vision, and paid us off. If these giants also reside in us, then they are the part of us trying to second-guess how we will be received, and contort ourselves into an obligatory posture. They block the clear flow between the forest and the village, upper world and underworld, and then wrap the meat in cellophane, remove the teeth and inject it with sugar.

The characters who have persisted in the undiluted expression of the underworld experience - such as Cesar Vallejo, Phillip Guston, William Blake - are often met with some incomprehension during their lifetime. If a culture tries to block these walkways to the dark unconscious, the wyrd moon road, the reception for those who do find them will be shocking, raw and lacking in niceties.

Ironically, even as we culturally forget the form and boundaries of these initiatory roads, our cities and youth, bereft of depth and sustenance, fall into even darker waters. The grief pipe becomes the crack pipe. Baba's offering, freed from any communal perspective, grows into a devouring shadow. Without elders to help decipher the trail through, the dark passage becomes an ending in itself rather than a stage in the process. Baba's community today is scavenging dustbins, sleeping by stagnant water, having wrestled loose from the domestic but without a map to guide the uncertain new terrain. Huge psychic forces can fill the gaps created by these kinds of descent.

The soul recognises it as some semblance of the initiatory opening and reaches for it. Anything rather than the consensual lethargy of the brightly lit suburb. But without a ritual container the potion will spill all over again. Tramp consciousness is profoundly disturbing because it turns the wants of society upside down, appearing impervious to advertising, the promise of accommodation, a way up and out. It is a daily, rotting skeleton reminding us of the underworld. But when you descend without context or boundaries, you can end with a burning ground rather than a maiden. The considered wisdom is that the only difference between a shaman and a schizophrenic was that one had learnt to swim in the depths and one was drowning. Initiation teaches the strokes required to cross the deep lake, an ancient way of dancing with the broken wings, open sewers and decaying flowers with which life presents us. The ancient perspective is that these universal energies require courting too; it's no good projecting them all onto the devil. If we attempt to squeeze them back under rocks in forests, they will merely intensify in nature and become more horrifying.

Initiation, like Ivan's, brings something of Baba back to the village, creates a dialogue with her. Whole temples in India are devoted to Kali/Yaga. Not because Indians want to murder or pillage, but because they honour her role in the greater context of the gods, in the wheeling cycle of life. Let's rejoin Ivan now, back in the depths, bereft of his love, the rope cut. . . .

Whilst Ivan lay there in agony, severed from his old state, a bird from the sky, the one he had fed earlier on his travels, flew down and fed him morsels of food. It must have been a shaman bird, a magical bird, because with time this feeding caused Ivan to rise from his desperate state, to recover vigour and experience healing. We don't know quite how long this took, many weeks certainly, but there came a day when the great bird lifted Ivan on his back and flew up the hole to the upper world, his world. Recovered, he thanked the life-saving bird and made his way into the woods, looking for the beautiful woman and the three false brothers

After much wandering he found a meadow, and, tending cows there, the woman herself. She informed him that the brothers couldn't decide which one she should marry and in the interim had sent this most precious chattel out to milk cows! Not only that, they were just over in that little shed discussing the matter! Ivan went over to the shed, put his hat over his eyes and knocked at the door asking for a drink. The giants angrily rebuffed him. Then he threw off his disguise and flailed into them, venting some of that frustration in a time-honoured fashion. Thrown through the shed's walls, assailed by blows, they took to their heels and were never seen again.

Finally, Ivan and his bride were free to marry. And what a party! Three days of boasting, troubadoring, plates of venison, vats of wine from Chile sent by Pablo Neruda, lovemaking, dancing and a bardic gathering with Bob Dylan, Galway Kinnell and Chuck D, it was quite the event in their part of Russia. Johnny Cash was running the sweat lodge and Joe Strummer was seen with Joni Mitchell working through old Van Morrison numbers at the reception. If you had wandered out from the party to clear your head, you might have spotted a large female Bear in the bushes with her cubs and a good bottle of whisky. Ivan sneaked out at one point with a plate of the finest

cuts of meat and generally caught up on forest gossip. The couple had nothing they did not need and wanted nothing they did not have, and not a harsh word was spoken between them. That is, until Ivan dropped that bottle of vintage Bordeaux that was a gift from the hunter. With that shattering the first fierce words were raised, a bat flew past the window and that's where the tail of this story finds its way into the mouth of its beginning . . .

From a certain perspective, Ivan could not return to the upper world in the physical shape in which he'd left it: he was different, transformed. He descended as Apollo, a character of certainty, achievement, and swagger and returned as Dionysus, one with knowledge of the dark, transformative, nebulous power of the underworld. In his unrefined state, of course the community rejects the wild form he now inhabits. His dismemberment mirrors hundreds of accounts of shamanic initiation into the spirit world. A great illness or accident is followed by spirit beings literally pulling the shaman's form into a new and altered state. An exaggeration of the normal range of the psyche emerges, the individual is receptive to information normally hidden from us. For one not yet initiated, such a fall might kill them, but we see that Ivan's animal nature, his sensing, snuffling, tracking, flying nature is now developed enough to throw him a lifeline.

For our purposes, those feeding birds are shards of the consciousness Ivan has developed in the underworld as he digests, bit by bit, the black; he is lifted by the wings of the flying ones and literally propelled back to his world and the last stage in his initiatory process: the white. The white contains all the heat of the red, the soberness of the black, though both are finally integrated into the white's empathy.

The white is the colour of the return to community, the placing of oneself in the centre of the village. This is a simple act, but one that requires a huge and arduous journey in order to be achieved authentically. Only in the white can Ivan marry the maiden, the gift he brought back; only then can he match her. The initiatory process finds its reason for being in the final stage of this story. Inflamed by the red, brought into the black by Yaga, Ivan can finally step into a place of genuine authority in the village and in his life. In our lives this process could take two decades, and in subtler forms is repeated frequently. The wedding, of course, is an inner union, between village and forest, male and female, upper and lower world, madness and clarity. In contemporary culture, how many individuals have consummated such a marriage? We still fixate on the earlier heat of the young achiever, or we abandon our heroes if they grapple too long with Baba's skirts.

The four days out on the mountain signify a day focused on each of the four directions: North, South, East and West. Many traditions believe that the journey of a life can be traced from beginning in the East, the place of sunrise, spring and birth, through the summer childhood of the South, to the dark passage of adolescence and autumn in the West and finally through to the winter of the initiated Elder in the North. Yaga and the initiatory road abide in the West. It's where Ivan descends to the Underworld and where our initiates on the mountain are passing through to step into the new chapter of their lives. Rather like the giants, I have sat for those four days

holding the rope as initiates ventured further into the world beneath the world. I may have felt the occasional tug, but they have effectively moved further and further into spirit time.

On the last night of the fast, exhausted and pushed to the limit, they erect a small stone circle, enter it, and conduct an all-night vigil. That circle in which they struggle to stay awake, cold and emotional, becomes holy ground. It bears witness to the death and the rebirth of those initiates. Like Ivan, as they venture deeper into themselves, they experience groundswells of surprise, grief, insight and fear. Every day without food allows the bird within your chest to enter the terrain of the holy, to guide you to a marriage of the Soul.

The offering you make is not pristine, it is the heavy, strange walk of your life lifted up in all its complexities to be taken on the backs of black swans to the source of great mystery. As in the story, we find gardens of abundance in the dark wings of disorder. Something dies in that union, some un-truth withers, and we are left with the shape of something raw and tremendously powerful. A wedding does indeed take place, out there on a Welsh hillside in the middle of the night. Like Ivan, the initiates returned changed; distended and broken into new constellations - like something from the old stories.

An accord has been struck, a veil lifted. Often the conscious mind is only dimly aware of what has occurred, the psychic language of the event so far beyond everyday facility that it can take years to find the voice for it. But find the voice we must. The transformation of initiation is brought to bloom in the return, not in either the inner or outer wild. And it is in the return that we now find our greatest vulnerability, our greatest quest yet.

There is a poetical thread, William Blake said, that if grasped, will guide us through these stages, through giddy achievement, the sobriety of loss and finally into the heart, a place of service to a wider purpose than just our own predicament. There is character in exchange for safety just beyond the streetlights, scars to be boasted of. Initiation recognises this truth, holds it in ritual and gives it shape, lest too many go down that don't come back. What we notice again and again in contemporary life is the process without the context. If the culture has amnesia around this reality, then nothing is to be gained by risking it, because it's too terrifying: "Your early work was your best." "Life has dealt me a cruel hand, if it wasn't for my bad luck . . ." Without the dimension of myth, the world can seem depleted and arbitrary. With it, there is perspective, tools and the sense of an adventure to be lived. As the Chinese say: "No one becomes a good navigator on calm waters!" Indeed.

So let's take a short break for lunch. Afterwards I want you to take a walk on the land, find a quiet spot and take one image from the story - a point that has most caught your attention, and write metaphorically about it from three perspectives. They are personal, communal and global. How does that image inform your understanding about all three? I don't want to say anymore as I don't want to make it too easy for you. Write at the edge of your understanding.

December Session

The Serpent and the Bear

An implicit aspect of both rites-of-passage and initiatory myths is the hope that these trials and revelations create what we tend to call elders – men and women who help guide younger folk through their own challenges by displaying some guile and encouragement. So let's look at some more trials and revelations.

Now in the thick of winter it feels time for a winter story, and you don't get any colder than Siberia – and you thought Dartmoor was tricky! As usual we will explore the story through the main telling then some commentary and questions. After lunch we will walk the moors, carrying questions and working on some prose and poetry arising from it. Due to the cold, do not sit too long in any single place, and do not, under any circumstances, go near the river or boggy areas.

For those of you studying Joseph Beuys, examine the role of the shaman early on in this story – also the communities attempt to do the job of enchanting themselves. Beuys as we know, attracted a lot of praise and criticism for making an overt relationship to the role. In your own art practice, how could you make a similar connection without artifice? Or is the artifice an essential part of the role? We shall discuss this as we go, and it is a useful position to ponder in your studios between sessions.

I first came across this next story in a translation from the Siberian by James Riordan (Riordan 1989 :88). The story may be masculine in tone, but has proved to be a great favourite with young women as well...

There lived a Nanai tribeswoman named Vaida and her young son, Anga. A tiger had eaten Anga's father when he was a baby, so no man dwelt in his tent.

One day Vaida fell sick and, bedridden, was unable to work. The neighbours proclaimed, "It is the work of the boosiyoo; she has a bad spirit in her. We must drive it out before it finishes her." The clan gathered in the threadbare tent, blew out the lights and raised their voices to alarm the boosiyoo. In the dark they banged on iron pots, and rattled and waited like little shamans, but nothing worked. At last they summoned a real shaman. They watched him, resplendent in horned hat and dress, weave slowly over the ice towards the tent, so smoothly it seemed he was floating. He warmed his drum over the embers, then began to play, a rhythm that grew in volume as he started to swirl like a dervish around the fire. After a time his lips flecked with foam, his eyes rolled back, and his soul flew on the rhythm of the drum to the mountaintop in the western heavens where there is no day but only continual night, where the moon is but a sliver and heavy mist is always present. There he broke bread with the spirits. Some time later, his soul returned and the shaman gave his information. "She will certainly die unless someone can bring her the skin of the serpent Ogloma and the fur of the Great Bear. To find Ogloma, they must cross terrible tundras; and near Ogloma dwells an even more fearsome serpent, Simoon. She kills without mercy

anyone who approaches her. Her breath of fire would incinerate a man's arm in a second." Sobering news, but young Anga quietly took it in.

The shaman continued, "There is no one who would dare approach the land of the Great Bear. He lives in a cavern deep in the heart of a terrible mountain that is too steep to climb. Where would we find such a bold warrior to go in search of these terrible monsters?" The old women stepped back, muttered sadly and left the tent. Vaida moaned, tears hot on her cheeks, "So I shall die on this bed . . . how will you live then my son?" "Dry your eyes," said Anga, "I shall go fetch the serpent's skin and the bear's fur, worry not!" "You are too small for such a task, you will never make it, little Anga." But Anga insisted, and made ready for his journey...

This is another story that begins with a scene of crisis. We are confronted with the situation of the ailing mother, the worried young son and the deceased father, "eaten by a tiger." This last is a hard blow to the rhythm of the two of them, leaving them to scratch a life in the most challenging of conditions. The absent father suggests a boy raised primarily in the company of his mother who, judging by the boy's later actions, has done an extremely accomplished job. Although the spectre of the father, an older masculine presence, hangs over this story, we detect him most in his absence. In many ways this is a story of absence. What makes it particularly pertinent is the very contemporary sense of the boy's striking out on a journey without clear guidance.

When we delve into the Irish stories of Cuchulain, the Hound of Ulster, we find that he received his instruction in warfare from a woman, Scathach, who revealed both the roads of skilled weaponry and lovemaking to him. Another great female warrior, Aife, bore his child. We immediately detect that women are a source of developed, formidable fierceness that the male would do well to learn from. The intelligence and courage that Anga displays is testament to some clear instruction from the mother. As she ails, there is a debt to be repaid. As the raw materials of what constitutes an initiation filter into the western mindset, we may be tempted to draw quick, dogmatic definitions of the experience. Although we can say that in many cultures men and women are segregated whilst they undergo an initiatory process, that occurs partially so that they may perceive the other in a more magical and tender light on their return. The intent is not to be divisive but to drink deeply from the well of your own nature, so as to inhabit the dance of relationship with greater vigour on your return. Women instruct men and men advise woman all through our lives.

Whilst a distilled aspect of initiation is to be taught by a same-sex elder, the whole experience loses its humour if we then assume that there is no dialogue worth hearing from the other camp. The respect for each other is designed to grow organically, not stiffen into the hard ice of resentment.

I would suggest that the initiatory sequence opened up for Anga a long time before the shaman appeared and that his mother was the initiator of that period. He lived in her energy, witnessed her survival in extremis, and was equipped by her instructional legacy with the tools for survival. However, seasons move, and the relationship eventually requires a strong shift.

Somewhere above the stories intrigues, it's evident that the time was right for Anga to be given such a task. If the task had come too early, he would undoubtedly have been unequipped to attempt it. If it had come later, the sweetness we sense between the two could have congealed into the kind of resentments we see flying between mothers and teenage sons all over the world. Anga leaves at just the right time; Vaida hasn't required him to become a surrogate husband, and he isn't desperate to be rid of her.

This is the perfect moment for a traditional initiatory break, in which ritual elders call the boy from the tent in the guise of the serpent and the bear. Instead of receiving, as Anga has done for so long, the emphasis is now on giving. It feels time for Anga to either receive instruction from another source or become a more active participant in their story together. The wine is ready to leap from the bottle; keep it corked and it will sour.

Something in the ingredients of the 'cure' reveals something about the nature of the illness in the first place. First of all, a dialogue with the animal powers is required. Serpent skin and fur appear to contain some kind of healing properties for the dying feminine. When our animal nature has been sufficiently thinned out and no wildness edifies us, then the old crone in us — the one with dark eyes and weathered skin — falls into illness.

In contemporary society it is often young folk who ride great waves of creativity for a few brief years, bringing in new ideas, images and vitality. When this is literalised in physical youth rather than an inner resource, its resonance tends to be fleeting, a great cresting that lacks the depth to bring the Mother back to life. Our clue is that the youth is charged with making contact with two extraordinary forces from the wild, so that he himself will be changed and broadened. Youth in itself can't sustain change indefinitely, but as an energy open to feral tuition, it has huge possibilities. By the information we receive of the tiger and the bosiyoo, we are aware that this story is concerned with great unwieldy powers, with the Otherworld pulling on the fabric of tribal life from the very start. It is a story with a divine centre, so we move out in that direction. If we do not chance it all, the Mother will die.

Anga's father didn't slip on the ice, fall down a well or perish in a brawl; he was devoured by some kind of primeval force. This detail is important, alerting us to something mysterious happening. This creature is only half in this world; around his shoulders are mythologies, danger colours — orange and black — fear projections, and the ability to flourish in hard conditions. Something in that dangerous energy field has taken his father from him. The two great animals of the Nanai, the tiger and the bear, stand like bookends in this story. In my own work with at-risk teenagers, I have met many adolescents who grew up with no father in the tent. Sometimes, due to their brutality, it was just as well they were out of the picture. Either way, many don't grow up so able as Anga, so ready for the adventure.

Part of my job was to scour housing estates, older brother's crack dens, arcades and bars to locate them when they failed to turn up for an appointment and convince them to get in the car without any kind of physical altercation.

On two occasions I saw one of them climb out of a second floor bedroom and jump rather than engage with me. Another time, one pulled the end off the car gear stick at sixty miles an hour in an attempt to off-road the vehicle

(it almost worked). Another climbed out on a ledge over a raging river and threatened to leap if I asked about his father again.

Most of these young ones seemed to fill the space of absence with two very different feelings about the father. To some, the father became heroic, above the squalor they endured, clever to have escaped, even if that was to prison. With every personal misery they were suffering, the dream-story of life with the father was amplified. Once in awhile, the father, usually so as to apply for more government benefits, would offer them a weekend in Birmingham or wherever he happened to be. A temporary glow would come over the youth, only to be frozen into contempt upon returning to the overworked mother, livid boyfriend, turbulent home, alcoholic uncle.

The other road taken was denial of the father, loss or fear articulated as rage, perceiving him only as a monster. Either of these roads is thin and lacks balance, but that can be hard to grasp in the suffering trance they're caught in. That thin road — he/she's like THIS, and only THIS — can enable emotional movement but lacks certain paradoxical truths. In an environment that refuses the necessary reflection, we scurry for ways to transcend the absence. We can ride that animosity or fantasy for decades.

Adolescents already possess a certain sense of mythology, although they don't perceive it as such. As with Baba's children, whom I discussed in the Ivan story, in the absence of ritualised forms, adolescents' initiatory route takes a kind of shadow form. The trauma they experience instigates change but not necessarily growth. Their identities appear bulletproof with roles like "The Car Thief," "The Jailbird," "The Fighter," "King of the Estate." It's not that these young people lack identity; they have defined, handed-down stereotypes from their life experience, environment and family. They are often more established in their sense of themselves than some of the more affluent teenagers I sometimes work with. Jake, a fourteen-year old, had an unshakable sense of his own identity as hell-raiser, sex offender and bully. Caught in an almost hypnotic desire for his underworld experience, e.g., Prison, he would often be found stealing cars the same afternoon he had been in court after yet another warning. For Jake, prison was the river he had to cross to become a man like his father, to bear the same tribal scars. The street mythology was more authoritative than anything society could throw into the situation to calm it. If you've been raised by wolves, why would you listen to an old English sheepdog? Despite everything attempted to stop him, Jake escalated his misdemeanours until he was sent down.

Street perception of people and situations involves tremendous subtlety. You have to bring a kind of 'edge-seeing' into every situation, read body language, act instantly, know how to bluff and spot weakness, and get what you want. Forcing youth to the periphery of society, it creates the necessity of the intuitive. Opportunity lies in grasping it. I've always been interested how at-risk youth can often grasp the underbelly of a story quickly, the hidden motivations behind the characters' actions.

The edginess of their position means that they are often looking into situations whilst simultaneously watching their own back, learning to 'look both ways.' They are Baba's children, accelerated into experiences they are too young for and lack the blessing and support of elders to make sense/soul from. But even in the shadowy world they

inhabit, we see Yaga's intelligence at play, the survival drive, the canniness, the desire for initiatory experience. They get it, but in ways that take them too far into the burning grounds, so that a ritual cut becomes a perilous wound, for which they lack the salve that would clean it from infection.

I discussed this situation with a Lakota Crow Elder, who suddenly turned to me and said, "That (the at-risk teenagers) is where we find our leaders!" He recognised what was crying out underneath the masks and made it his work to find it, honour it and inspire its bearer towards leadership in the community.

Much has been written about the need for reintroduced rites of passage for such individuals. In my own experience, hours or afternoons in their company weren't enough. A walk or a story wasn't enough. What was needed (and rarely happened with so much health and safety red tape) was a complete removal of everything that was familiar to them, in order to walk the real initiatory road. Estate, gone. Drugs, cars and status, gone. Family, gone. They needed the Uncles with the Clay masks, ropes and blindfolds. The Aunts that lead them into the red centre of the Women's Hut. Some strong, serious ritual act needs to come in, to alert the soul that something real is happening.

The poet Timothy Young, experienced in this area, says that if you teach boys to hunt with skill and respect, some energy enters them that hones their natural ferocity into something grander and more useful. Geoffrey Canada describes running a martial arts evening in Harlem. Does he go in as lamb, or as a therapist? No, he goes in as a lion. Pacing up and down, he draws the attention towards himself and the work, towards activity and for a moment the lure of the streets is dimmer.

So we follow the archaic clues: severance from the estate, district, gang connections, sexual partners, and drugs, and follow the thin trail towards possibility and challenge. This is a true Rebel move. The marks of street life are still consensual, preordained in their way, but the way of the mountain is bespoke and uncertain. The initial response to that kind of uncertainty is anger, and many attempts to escape from the programme. Over the years we have found youths trying to hitch their way out of Snowdonia, ducking in the amusement arcades when they were meant to be fasting, with much smuggling of Class A drugs in their rucksack.

When the dust had settled, however, and no way home was apparent, slowly they began to gather round the nightly campfires. When they began to realize the intensity of the rite-of-passage they were undertaking, and the fact that it didn't seem completely 'safe,' they began to see it as a challenge, one they'd have to 'raise their game' to get through. These 'terrors of the streets' often turned out to be scared of the dark, petrified by wild animals, rigid with fear at the thought of encountering a spirit. This was a new set of obstacles, different from those they were used to. As the days progressed and their defences dropped, they started to look like children again. Suddenly we adults were the only ones with any information about the road they had elected to take. Separated from peers and intoxicants, often going through drug withdrawal symptoms, they started, slowly, to see the characters of the myths we told as being like them, standing at the edge of the unknown. They saw that, like Anga, they were stepping into a life of uncertainty, odds seemingly stacked against them.

The tent dwellers seem to have no difficulty in isolating Vaida's condition as supernatural in origin. We note that they initially try to scare off the spirit themselves, by mimicking the external appearance of a kind of shamanic exorcism. Probably having witnessed similar scenes over the years, they wail, bash metal, make noise, blow out the lights, but to no effect. Why? Because the alchemical power of the shaman, the ability to shift consciousness dramatically, comes from an internal mastery; the exterior remnants are symbolic effigies of a transformed psyche, secondary to the hard initiatory yards already travelled by the medicine person. Mimicry alone won't get the job done.

From a thousand different accounts we see that globally, the road to shaman-hood is isolating, rigorous, terrifying, marginal, drawing on the twin energies of discipline and intuition to get through alive. The Shaman is tuned into spirit-song from other planets, galaxies even. And to gain that frequency they have been broken open by ordeal, soul rendered open to the Otherworld. They are alive and dead.

The insistent message of the West is that you can have anything, be anything. The tribal perspective is different, and a role like the shaman's is held by a specific individual, not dished out with a certificate at a weekend workshop. Before long the real shaman arrives in the story to set the whole ball rolling. Recognising the rupture in the Mother and son's life as opportune, as initiator, they present the group with what I would call The Hopeless Cause: a cure so distant, hard to obtain, obscure and frightening that only someone with nothing to lose would take it on. In a sense the task requires both the testosterone and inexperience of the youth; if he lacks either, he will never take on a challenge that will almost certainly end his life.

Some interesting dynamic is at play; the mother's health, her own growth is dependent on the boy's moving away from her domain. Maybe her energy had to come back into herself rather than outwards towards the boy. What called us away from home? In our youth we can be transfixed by an idea or aspiration; to join a rock band, get to the Himalayas, to be an entrepreneur. Part of the requirement of youth is to hear that whatever we dream of won't be easy, in fact may be impossible, going against likelihood of success. The 'sure thing' is of no use to the soul hungry for initiation. We need to be faced by something hard, with uncertain outcomes, that will require every fibre of our skill. This is the scene of Anga's "appointment" with destiny; whose moment has come. Encouragement is vital, but real engagement comes when the task feels 'bigger than us.'

The road ahead for Anga seems to indicate trouble—not an elevated route up through obvious success, but an encounter with entities that kill, in a landscape quite new to him. In some stories the young initiate is adopted by wandering knights who take him to the centre of the kingdom for an encounter with the King. This isn't the case here. Anga is heading out into the badlands, with only his wits for company: no college degree, references, old boy networks or funding. In this regard he is another at-risk youth, getting educated in the severity of life early on. When we are appointed in this manner, we become familiar with a kind of constant tension in the body, looking at every opportunity from a variety of angles, feeling our way to the next morsel of food. Some of the first exercises I show teenagers are old hunter-gatherer techniques of stalking, being still, and observing what is visible on the very

edges of your vision. Most have only looked two feet ahead of them, to the play station or DVD, but it interests me how good they are at this, how quickly they learn. As Anga prepares to leave the tribe, he will need all the skill he has.

In "Ivan the Bear's Son," Ivan followed a different, more social trail. He travels as the leader of a gang, encounters a beautiful maiden, is healed by a bird, and has a huge wedding. Anga is in a more solitary position. He certainly carries experience, gained in some earlier time. He displays none of Ivan's swagger but quietly gathers his tools. Back to the story...

Anga sharpened his spear, took a large pot, slung a leather thong over his shoulder, and set off. Along the way he scraped resin from the pines and put it in the pot. His journey was indeed long, tiring and fearful, full of whole vistas and challenges he had never encountered before. By the fifth day he came to a stream, by the side of which grew a huge tree, broader and taller than all the others, blocking out both the sun and the moon with its size. All around the tree was withered and parched. "This must be the place of the serpent Simoon," thought Anga.

He set to scraping moss from the stones and when he had collected a great deal, he covered his body in the moss, tying it on with the leather thongs. He then got into the stream and allowed the moss to soak onto his body. This done, he clambered out and banged his spear against his iron pot, making a huge din. Birds flew and wild beasts scattered, so great was the din. Simoon heard the racket and slithered out of her tent. As she approached Anga, she left a rageful trail of fire over the ground. Simoon blasted Anga with jagged flame, but the wet moss kept him safe. Everything else was burnt to a crisp but Anga was safe, a wall of steam rising from him. When Simoon paused to take in breath, Anga threw his potful of pine resin into her open jaws. The resin melted, ran into her belly, and soon she was dead. From the shadows emerged a second serpent that said, "I am Ogloma. All my life I have been in fear of Simoon, for she has eaten all my children; I have been helpless. How can I reward you for this bravery?" Anga replied, "I only wish for one of your skins so I may cure my mother." Ogloma willingly gave him one of her skins and Anga went on his way...

We can understand Anga sharpening his spear, but what's going on with the resin? At this point in the story the scraping of the resin is unclear to us; we can assume the pot is for cooking and the thong for carrying, but the resin is a mystery. It serves to alert us that Anga has a plan. Whatever is up ahead, which must be unknowable to his conscious mind, Anga is gathering his tools for the road. We see that he is not a defenceless boy; if he were, this adventure would not be appropriate for him. He is not carrying a huge array of weapons and half a yurt, but has honed his preparation to the bare elements.

When the youths I work with leave base camp on the morning of their fast, they carry only a tarp, sleeping bag and water. All street bravado, phone, drugs, designer trainers and status have been cleared away from these three

elements. It's worth mentioning at this stage that out of a potential group of, say, 10 youths, only three or four will be ready to leave the tribe (read 'street gang'), and head out into the bush like Anga.

We could say that the resin scrapings from those pines is the distilled essence of all the tribal information passed down through Anga's mother and the associated elders. They are the gathered stories, the watching of tundra animals, the collecting of firewood. When we learn a craft, we are scraping resin; when we pull the entrails of failure into the light to gain insight, we are scraping resin; when we develop calluses from hours of practice on heavy strings, we are scraping resin. The power makes itself manifest as this part of the story progresses; not only does it provide life force to Anga, but when hurled at his adversary, it proves fatal.

Simoon's fatal reaction to resin proves ironic when we find that, traditionally, pine resin has been associated (when distilled into amber) as having magical healing properties for those with intestinal disorders! The story of amber is extraordinary. When a pine tree is gashed or injured, it produces resin to coagulate and fill the wound, much as blood does. For such a reparatory role, amber is a fragile material and can be crumbled off the bark. Many have speculated over the centuries about its origins; according to Ovid, the Greeks believed that amber's source was the tears shed by the sisters of Phaeton, a boy who died while driving his father's chariot too close to the sun, igniting and then causing the desiccation of the Sahara.

Such is the Greeks' love of amber, they also used it as a flavouring in the wine called Retsina. Just from this one culture we start to see associations of wounds, healing and inebriation. We can expand our associations when we realise that many instruments of the world are layered in wood varnish/resin, including violins, cellos, and grand pianos; from the sap of trees originates a substance that calls sound into life.

We know in Aboriginal culture the practice of throwing bark or leaves onto hot rocks and inhaling the vapours when ill. The lines of relationship are varied and powerful. In the old story of Harb ben Omayya and Mirdas ben Abi' Amir, the two set fire to a wild thicket to cultivate the spot, accidentally driving out Jinn (genie), who flew away in the shape of white serpents. Both men died soon afterwards. In this pre-Islamic Arabic story, we see a certain ambivalence in the association between tree, entity and medicine — an awareness that they have both healing and destruction in their tendrils. It is naive in the extreme to place too much emphasis on the natural world as exclusively benign and nurturing; it is not. It contains drowning horses, terrible poisons and death-bringing weather. We see in the Arab story the delicacy of the balance between realms: the moment you unconsciously set out to domesticate something that is bent, knotted and wild, the spirits fly away and life ends. If we think of nature as a temple, which is an image we get from tribal peoples, to start hacking down columns and overturning the altar is obviously going to stir up a hornets' nest.

I often witness in youth a certain focus in their desire to reoffend, to get sent down, to endure or deliver a beating. It's not an entirely random path, but has its own destination, even if it is a dark one. It is an unconscious echo of the initiatory route, played out with the shadow tools youth possess. In the absence of guidance, they resonate to the strong vibrations of crisis, aggression and adrenaline. They know they've been sold bullshit by the

media, so why not act as bulls? As the crime increases, they move closer to the centre of their story, things come to a head, they engineer rupture. Without the shavings present in their life, however, they take Simoon's route, incinerating all life around them.

We know we have arrived at the centre of Anga's story when we arrive at the huge tree, blocking out the sun and the moon. Whatever has been created here is obstructing the natural order of things, a deprivation of both radiance and lunar insight. This is a fearful and desolate scene. Frequently it's a moment in the story that causes young people hearing it to either get very animated or withdraw. The inversion of vitality, the sense of dread is tangible. In "Ivan the Bear's Son," we found the mother bear retreating from view, allowing Ivan to be taken, so as to move towards his destiny. To allow a child to be taken is another inversion of natural instinct, but we detect some beauty in it. This isn't that. This is a place lacking comfort, love or the sense of anything greater than its immediate surroundings. It is also the surroundings that the listening youth often say are the most familiar to them in the whole story.

In our own life, if a religious (in its original etymology, to link back.), mythological or philosophical perspective is lost, we lose our grip on the huge, jewelled ropes handed down through history. At a retreat several years ago, one young woman claimed Simoon's tree was her spinal column, the sum total of her experience and understanding.

Let's balance this with some images of World Trees. The Islamic version of paradise is a magnificent, opulent garden and at its centre is a vast and beautiful tree called Tooba, which provides shade and abundant fruits that have flavour that no mortal has ever tasted. If this isn't wonderful enough, rivers of milk, wine and honey spring from the base of this tree. We have located a divine source that channels wisdom through these rivers into the hearts of all disciples. We find in most cultures an image of a tree providing a centre point, or axis between sacred and profane, our world and the upper world. To the old Norse this tree would have been known as Yggdrasil, the World Tree, which spans nine worlds, or spheres of perception. We find its middle layer is where humans live, but that layer is surrounded by realms of the dead, and the higher heavens of Godheimr, which contains another nine sub-worlds. In this vast, ancient system, we find that the tree has three huge roots, and from them three holy springs abide. They exist in a strange accord with one another, each existing by the others' nourishment, and we are told they are the source of the damp and moist continent of Scandinavia.

Back in The Mabingion we encounter Peredur, an earlier version of Parzival, who, like Anga, quests to find a cure for someone ailing, in this case "The King of Suffering". "On the bank of the river he saw a tall tree: from roots to crown one half was aflame and the other golden with leaves." (Guest 1997 :124) We find an immediate association with Moses' burning bush, a fire that doesn't reduce everything around it to ashes, a soul fire, divine in nature. The golden leaves also symbolises the balance between spirit and flesh. All these trees indicate verticality, the upward vision as well as the immediate horizontal surroundings of our everyday life. The detail I love in the

first two illustrations though, is that nourishment for humans also comes from below, by the roots of things; when we turn our gaze down also we find wine, honey and holy water.

In our own lives, our own quests, have we ever made it to the Tree of Life? Or do we have more experience of the withered wasteland of Simoon's terrain? Do we have our pot of shavings with which to turn that arid terrain into the paradise of Tooba's shade? My shavings include five a.m. walks with my father as a child; drinking tea out of a flask, watching the sun come up in the little village of Cockington; walking the lanes home whilst he told me the Persian poem of "Sohrab and Rushtom." My shavings include watching Jajouka musicians from the Sahara conjure up such fierce magic that spontaneous dog fights erupted in the crowd. Not one of us is bereft of shavings, but many of us are unaware of the sheer tenacity required to collect them into a ball that can defeat the harsh, life-denying monster that is Simoon. We have to kindle the embers attentively, as Morda did in the "Birth of Taliesin".

It is important not to just associate shavings with success or the prize earned. The shape of you is meant to be unusual, unique, coming from the limits of Saturn as well as your lust for external validation. The descent process is just that: a descent. We're given a way through by the interpretative tools we have at our disposal; mythic imagination provides alchemy in crisis. Soul means keeping our head down, looking for water trails, drawing the debris out of our tiny streams that lead to the big springs of the World Tree. We may need a gang of us bucketing — the water may be stagnant, but we know its source lies somewhere vital. A hundred thousand poems, books and songs have been written during this process.

Back to Anga: We find him at the centre of the story (actually, there are two centres, but who says stories should entirely follow logic?), facing a devastated scene, recognising he's approaching Simoon's hot spot. We see him scraping moss off the rocks, the one bit of green left in the area, tying it to his body with thongs and soaking in the stream. With our immediate focus on moisture, we see him working in opposition to his surroundings, which are dry and arid. As a medicinal plant, moss has associations with good luck, so we see him gathering all the good luck he can find. The moss is obviously related to the pine shavings, but we still can't see to what end. With the moss twined to his body, so that he resembles nothing less than a Green Man, he allows the water to soak the moss to his skin. That water must be freezing but he endures it.

Mythology and psychology are laden with water association. A common outlook is that water is a container of emotion, of deep feeling, of memory; that it moves from one place to another, is fluid and runs from the beginning to the end of time. It is in amniotic fluid, a watery container, in which we form limbs, eyes, and a beating heart. It is the stuff of life. An old belief is that water is inherently feminine, but in it we find gods swimming around quite happily too. Mannanan Mac Lir, the Irish god of the sea, is just one example. Where we detected an ailing feminine in the tent, we find a strong, flowing force literally gluing the protective moss onto Anga. What is gripping in this story is the intelligence Anga brings to it. Courage alone won't decide the victor in a fight like this. Courage got Anga out the tent, out of the estate and the family grip but, just like Ivan, he needs canniness to defeat Simoon. Waving a spear about just won't cut it. Like those youth learning hunter-gatherer exercises, Anga has

learnt to extend his vision past what's directly in front of him. His connections to the resin of trees and the deep waters of soul turn Simoon's fire into steam, hot air. As this knowledge flies through the air from his pot, its velocity defeats the crippling bully, in fact kills the serpent right there.

Moments of alchemy exist all through this encounter; moss into armour, fire into steam, healing resin into poison. We see that in transformational points in our lives things can transmute very quickly. If, like Anga, we have followed ritual steps, and gathered our weapons carefully, it is possible to disarm, or re-see any number of difficult encounters. By attending to nature, Anga executed the very steps required to defeat this great foe. Attending to nature, as we are realising, is a double-pronged process involving both the external and internal domains.

In this story we come across two serpents, one dominant, aggressive and highly visible, and another hidden, far from view. It is worth looking for a moment at different ideas about the serpent through history. Back in the Sumerian era, we find myths of a serpent guarding another Tree of Life, the Axis Mundi, and hence seen as a protector of holy knowledge. We immediately see connections to the Garden of Eden and think of that quote in Matthew 10:16, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents." Serpents, mythologically, serve dual roles: they are holders of wisdom but at the same time devouring, ambivalent and far from the flock. This is more than just a Christian smear campaign, since versions of these two perspectives crop up all over the world. The Gnostics identified parts of our inner workings with the snake: the human medulla and the spinal cord. In Australia, medicine men, when undergoing initiation are supposed to endure a swallowing by a huge snake deity that ruptures their perceptions, pushes them into new, strange terrain.

Snakes can make us uneasy because they appear so archaic, with armour-like scales and an impossible ability to shed scars and skin. They are an ancient throwback to some other time. We've all seen footage of snakes calmly swallowing some cute creature and the reptile's neck bulging as the furry little fellow heads to his end. "Goodbye sweetness, hello dinner." Snakes are not creatures we happily make connections with, as we do with primates.

In India, serpent energy is understood to abide at the base of the spine, and certain intense yogic practices create what is known as Kundalini, an ascending of that base sensation, that libidinous power, up to the top of the head, creating an ecstatic experience. To hoard that libidity is seen as undeveloped, greedy, whereas to take the other route of tantra with it is to distil it into a spiritual potency, capable of linking heaven and earth. That practice, like Ogloma, is far from our view; in order to find her, first of all you have to defeat the land-scorching, devouring nature of Simoon. It's worth remembering that in myth, all the characters are tumbling around in our own psyche, not just in ancient civilisations. Holding this thought, we can start to look at the role of the two serpents. Simoon appears on a superficial level to be dark and Ogloma light. To interpret the story on this level only is a gross injustice to the odd swamps and many layers of its meaning. Simoon is dark in the sense of an energy unhampered, lacking boundaries; every time she opens her mouth something gets damaged. Something in her behavior has caused an inversion of the traditional World Tree, creating a desolate realm where very little grows.

Initiatory process offers the transmuting of that hostile power into something with discernment and clarity. In the stories of Finn MacCool, we notice he had a spear hidden in a ritual cloth that, once brandished, always found its deadly mark. It was not an indiscriminate, fire-breathing blaze, but a focused, specific tool, rarely used. When we throw our resin into the mouth of violence, rage, and destruction, it can cause collapse. Suddenly a hundred elders crawl down our oesophagus into our lower intestine, pressing poultices to wounds, singing incantations to inflamed areas, taking that raw energy and turning it into something with form.

I don't think this happens only once; I think Simoon rises up many times in our lives, and we need to be ready with our shavings to transmute it. I say transmute, not annihilate completely. Simoon is raw material, not to be ignored, made nice or pretended she was never around. The complexity arises in how to handle Simoon in our lives. The scaly one can go quiet for years, or only reveal herself in our most intimate relationships.

My own association with her, due to the heat and the killing, involves an absolutely savage rage. For others, it may mean a whole other set of skeletons clanking out of the closet. What is vital to understand is that this transformation is taking place on sacred ground, in the centre of an initiatory process, not in some random incident. The story informs us that we are entering the terrain of a heated and blackened psyche in a ritualised, alert manner. That terrain could be in a therapist's room or beside a still lake, but it requires some kind of container, some kind of support, in order to bear. To let Simoon course through our veins is far easier than sitting in the complex emotions which awoke the serpent in the first place. Rage is a leap out of the apparent unsteadiness of vulnerability, shame or imagined ridicule. In our lives Simoon's legacy can start to be counted by our late thirties when we start to long for some fresh part of ourselves to come with the poultice and the moss. If we don't get conscious about this, our wound becomes our character, and we wake up in our own unique prison. For me, a profoundly useful shaving in Simoon's mouth was having drumsticks thrust in my hand at eleven years old. For some ex-offenders I've worked with, learning the craft of making a beautiful oak bow and arrow, with intricate carvings and coated in varnish, has been a way of throwing a shaving into the mouth of those old patterns.

In my life, the most important step was the simple acknowledgement that Simoon exists. To vocalise without aggression this fire-breathing character is to open the vocal chords wide enough for the poultice to descend. Zip it up, deny it, and the kettle just boils on and on. Ogloma can then emerge, that wisdom-point that has been hard to locate for so long. Without the transformative harnessing of Anga's throw, Ogloma would still be hidden under a rock in the nether regions of our consciousness somewhere. For the youth fasting on the mountain, Ogloma can start to appear somewhere on the third or fourth day, though without the resin, moss thong and a mythic framework for the experience, we may never meet her. Staying too long in Simoon's country leads to a kind of cynical trance state, in which power is all, and nothing exists that isn't burnt, hurt or needing to be devoured. In a psychic climate like that, inevitably you will aspire to be the biggest critter in the valley.

The story alerts us to the fact that you have to have grounding, or shavings, to transmute savagery into the grace of wildness. If we grew up in Simoon's Kingdom, then where do we find it? The moment in the stream also

symbolises emotional literacy: it is the combination of knowledge of one's own depths (water) and the relationship to what is moist and nourishing (moss), bound together with the rope of village knowledge. To know water is to know grief, and grief can temper rage. Grief gives us the capacity to become human again, to acknowledge remorse, to feel the sadness of the world. To know water is to go deeper than the decimation of Simoon's Kingdom. The first step towards finding shavings is to enter the water — to stop flailing and start feeling.

Islam has the tradition of the nafs, the greedy part of us that gobbles up success, smoothes over failure, delights in others misfortune; Sufi teachings tell us that to lead a soulful life, we must walk another road, pay attention to things that are hard to find, work quietly and diligently, without incinerating everything in our path. In our story we also take a different route. When Ogloma is freed, she willingly gives the skin to Anga, and we feel the beginnings of hope for his mother. Some new energy is at work. . . .

After more treacherous journeying, Anga came to a towering mountain, so high your eyes would strain and go blind if you tried to see the top of it. Still, holding the image of his mother in his mind, he started climbing. Soon his hands were bleeding from the ragged outcrops, the wind lashed his thin shoulders and icy snow fell on his upturned face. All was dark. He came to a rough ledge that was the entrance to a deep, deep cavern. Slowly walking down the tunnel, he came across a bear of huge size — the King of all bears — the Great Bear. Asleep in a corner, paws wrapped around his head, the bear moaned fretfully. Anga noticed a sharp splinter buried deep in one of the paws. Compassion overriding his fear, Anga tied his rope around the splinter, strained and tugged, and finally extracted the splinter from the bear's swollen paw. With a roar of pain, the bear awoke, but when he saw Anga with the splinter, he was overcome with gratitude. "For three agonizing years I have been in pain, never being able to remove the splinter. You have saved me from my torment, how can I thank you?", "Give me your fur," said Anga, "so I can cure my mother." The Great Bear took off his fur and handed it to Anga, who set off at once back to his settlement.

This journeying time was like a flying arrow, and Anga hurtled like a young deer through forest and tundra to get to his people. He reached the tent and gave the skin of Ogloma and the fur of the Great Bear to his mother. Pressing them to her skin, she was instantly and forever cured, all the pain drained into the ground. From that day on, Anga was celebrated by the Nanai clan for his boldness, cleverness and compassion. He had found his place in the world . . .

With this hope, this snake-skin, comes a change of geography, and an ascension. All mountains are nearer the gods than we are. At Mount Kailash in the Himalayas, Buddhists pay respect by walking its base clockwise, and followers of the older religion, Bon, counter-clockwise.

Mountains puncture sky, ideas, and endurance. Hidden in their mist is the breath of the other. We know that much time had passed for Anga, carrying that snakeskin. We know trouble has been and gone during this period,

maybe twenty years. Anga could have carried Ogloma's spiritual skin through any number of situations; it probably gave him the ability to be very still, to cherish silence, to take routes around rather than through local villages, to see people's unconscious motivations, to feel clean. Meeting and carrying Ogloma's skin gives us a sense of control, of discernment. We have, after all, transmuted all those ashes and roarings into something distilled, more refined. The profundity of a spiritual experience can often leave us reluctant to return to the dusty, anarchic streets of the rinky-dink world. In our fully glowing and intensely vulnerable state, contemplating a return from the safety of the hermitage, mountaintop or ashram, can seem distinctly unappealing. How can I hold onto this wonderful feeling?

Mythologies from around the world hold to the truth that tension, squabbles, betrayals and cunning are part of the experience of our journey. The spiritual seeker within you, if identified as the sum total of your being, leads you into a place of inappropriate openness in the complexity of a world with a hundred different agendas. The world can become a place that you have ascended from, and you look pityingly down at all these other unenlightened ones, people who lack the clarity of your vision. Another pitfall is that of walking unarmoured into secular situations in which you share your revelations clumsily to strangers. Either mistake leads to an even greater distance from that first opening.

Spirituality is often associated with serenity, self-effacement and gentleness. How does this equate with encountering a being as primordial sounding as the Bear High King, with his associations of hierarchy, royalty, claws, power, fur, raw meat, magic? It doesn't sound remotely politically correct; it sounds highly dangerous, morally dubious and laced with uncertainty. When we encounter temples in Asia, we often find explicit scenes of copulating groups, mythic animals and bizarre cosmologies carved into the antechamber walls. This is to let us know that we are approaching holy ground, Waken or Taboo.

Holy isn't always a church or open meadow. It can be a zone of profound change, where sexuality, the mythic realms, dreams and the opening of soul can all occur. Those sculptural images on the temple walls are telling us this, warning us of major potencies at play. If you want to keep everything just so, nice and white, go no further.

Staring up at the mountain, Anga is looking at those Asian temple gates. For many of us, just tackling Simoon is a life's work. To move through the base material of rejection, blind rage and conquest is a massive undertaking. Surely to rest with Ogloma's skin is the final end of the spiritual quester? Well, if you view spirit as having no connection to soul then maybe. But if these realms (while not the same) are connected, then a further step needs to be taken. The soul is dragging us back into the initiatory sequence, to encounter another ruler or power.

A High King is a charged figure; he requires subjects, a court, and a kingdom. Surely that fact is grotesque in an era of equal opportunities? Not to the soul it isn't. A King or Queen is a centralised point inside the psyche which has the power to radiate outwards, make decisions, hold boundaries, enjoy three-day feasts, and draw up the gates when necessary. There exists an interdependence between them and their servants and kingdom. This is a built-in posture of the self, not an argument for external monarchies or dictatorships. In the outer world our experience of

too many Herods, Sergeant Majors and crooked politicians can make us long to negate any kind of authority whatsoever. But who will snatch up that latent crown when we make a big show of our abdication? That's right, another child-killing, imagination-crushing Herod.

The savage and distorted King is a force that anyone living today has experienced in abundance. We are far more familiar with this than a King image that is strong, decisive, cultured and fair. When that image is denigrated or entirely lost, then the psyche is adrift from ancestral anchor-points that could root it in a fertile sea bed, with the bones of captains and great ships. Without these anchor-points, we avidly hold onto our posture of abdication, using irony and wit to mask the uninitiated child, one hundred arrows in their chest and back.

Contemporary spirituality has taken steps towards the capacity to listen, cherish, and question considered wisdom. But to polarise utterly from a position of activity and authority is a mistake. This Kingdom is the place that nourishes and protects the spiritual opening Anga experienced, and integrates it into the whole. An encounter with the King or Queen moves an experience in from the margins of your psyche and strengthens it, prepares it for the arrows and boiling oil of an incendiary world. This indicates that the image of the spiritual seeker is not the most elevated of aspirations, but one of a whole wheel of energies that requires this strong centre for it to grow. We could say that even the psyche has a *Village* and a *Forest*, and that to fully nurture such openings require the 'return to the community' to bless it. Inner royalty explained in these terms is an affirmation of the vibrancy and richness available in life.

The Japanese have a phrase for those men who head up to remote, mountainous regions with religious intent. They call them Yamabushi, which translates as "One who sleeps in the mountain" or "Hidden in the mountain". Unknowingly perhaps, Anga is stepping into their terrain. In fact the High King he discovers is indeed asleep, hidden in the mountain. Myth is awash with sleeping Kings, Queens and Princesses. Sometimes sedated by a pin or a thorn, the very central figure of the kingdom is somehow asleep. As Anga steps into the deep heart of our story, he finds instead of obvious conflict a kind of unearthly quiet. The great being that abides in the center of the psyche is somewhat like Sleeping Beauty, and requires something from Anga now, a further step. So far youthful courage has been the initiator of the journey, and canniness has defeated Simoon the Serpent.

What is the final step that is needed? Compassion. At great personal risk, Anga pulls the splinter from the paw, bringing the King Bear to consciousness. It's a very beautiful touch, a chivalrous touch in fact. Entering the radiance of the King requires of us some openness. There is something so profoundly archetypal about this scene that we feel that, had Anga responded in any other way, he would have been annihilated on the spot.

Bears can carry god status in Siberia, particularly with the Nanai tribe. The bear's office of presiding over a landscape is confirmed when we realise that the name Arctic derives from the Greek *Arktos*, meaning "Bear." The whole Arctic terrain carries a sky bear overhead in The Great Bear star constellation. In earliest folklore, bears were thought of as humans clad in the furs of Bear, shape-shifters or magicians. Never hunted intensively due to

their sparse numbers, bears nonetheless were the animal that hunters regarded as Lord of the Forest, the deity that all emanated from, the slow heartbeat of the tundra.

Bear cults grew all around Asia, even amongst the Ainu, on the islands of Japan. Until recently the Ainu would capture a small cub, raise it for several years, it's rumoured, on breast milk and fine food before chaining it to a pole in the centre of the village and ritually killing it. After drinking its blood and cooking the body to eat, the Ainu would rewrap the skull in its fur and place it on a spear. Echoing veneration of the Sun King, this participation mystique was an attempt to draw closer to the symbiotic dance between nourishment, awe and sympathetic magic. Negotiators of Bear dialogue were always male, strict rules applying for female interaction with even the corpse of a bear. A woman could prepare meat, or even offer breast milk, but could never sit on a bear skin or attend the hunt. We can sense that Anga, as he makes his way down the tunnel, is entering a kind of second, masculine womb. Up until this point he has survived well on his mother's insight, learnt a Yaga-like canniness, transmuted hard energies into swifter, calmer ones. But in order to locate the very thing the shaman says Anga's mother needs, he has to enter the womb-like cave of the High Bear King.

Like a hundred thousand young men being pulled from their mother's arms by disguised and masked uncles and elders during their tribal Initiation rites, Anga is journeying into the Father's world now. This strange and terrifying journey has led him to the court of the High King. As he looks down, he sees the wound, the bleeding paw. From one perspective, this is his own wound, bleeding for the loss of his own absent father, and only the initiatory road he's on can heal it. Anga is healing himself. As when the Ainu drink from the slain bear's blood, with this act terrific force passes between the two of them. In an attempt to walk the healing road for his mother, Anga is in fact healing himself by entering new depths of his own masculinity, there to find the missing aspect or teacher.

As in the story of the Fisher King, a wound indicates a fragmented or incomplete kingdom or psyche. If the centre point is adrift, hypnotised, enchanted or asleep, then the kingdom is vulnerable to attack or neglect. As decades pass, a sleeping king can become a distant figure, a legend at best, rather than a guiding energy. When we look at our own lives, can we find the moment we fell into a dreamless slumber? I have seen both men and boys arrive at base camp with a memory of something golden in their lives but a kind of lethargy as to how to activate it in themselves, how to find their way back to the High King's lair. Many have done hard yards in the therapist's room, the yoga centre and in relationships. They have awareness of Simoon's heat, and are holding the coolness of Ogloma's skin, but feel reluctant to make this next step. Women as well have come to the mountains and begun to dream of a Great She Bear, often before their time in the woods has started (and many years before I started telling this story). Their time out there is often spent seeking a trail of forgotten honey that leads to the great, warm cave where she sleeps.

Another important aspect of our story is that this isn't a human king, it's a bear. Human Kings in myth are not always as interesting as the intrigues of court around them. They can become so archetypal that they are almost wooden. As soon as the Arthurian ('Artus' meaning bear) stories were picked up in the Norman courts, the emphasis shifted from Arthur to his Knights, and specifically the search for the Holy Grail. In the twelfth century stories, Arthur himself is almost impersonal amidst the anguish, love affairs and questing going on around him. But this centre, this bear, is from the realm of the animals.

Anga's father perished at the hands of a tiger, the other revered animal of the Nanai, and it is from the animal kingdom that healing must occur. "That which dealt the wound must heal the wound," is a cry we hear from many Scottish Selkie stories. Some principle of the wild, pouring through the river of initiation, has the capacity to provide another kind of fathering and centering for Anga. His mother's afflictions and the shaman's journey were catalysts for Anga to take the wild route to the Father of the Forest and experience this awakening. In the absence of a physical father, that thread is picked up again in the trials and process Anga has experienced. It's not as simple as saying, "It made a man of him"; this is an interior, complex and intensely mystical process.

I have seen many boys from fatherless tents come back from their fast with eyes that spoke of the High Bear King. It's as though wilderness itself can sometimes produce a kind of tone, either masculine or feminine, that reaches right into the startled hearts of the initiates. And as with Anga, it's in a moment of high vulnerability that the meeting takes place.

Weak with hunger, cried-out and cloaked by Ogloma with a skin to be re-born in, somewhere in the slow hours of the last night of the fast we find ourselves in his cave. Even a moment spent with this energy can take us into an experience of the masculine beyond the imagined rights and wrongs of our own, all too human, fathers. It can even create the capacity for forgiveness.

We sense that the image of the thorn is hugely powerful, whether felt in your own life or the life of a family member or loved one. Just to have achieved a conscious perspective of it is a huge event. As we remember, Bly suggests that grief is an appropriate response to the discovery of the thorn. The King cannot instantly spring to life when you have only just found his cave. Thorns are often inherited spells, handed down through the mercury of blood. When the true King and Queen are weak or absent in the wider psyche of a family, the chance is strong that it will stay just out of reach, or cloaked in invisibility.

A house of depression, a house of violence, a house of blandness, a house of no boundaries, a house of too much rigidity — all these contain thorns of tremendous potency. When we start to tug at such a thorn, the house begins to shake and the addiction hidden in the spell will start to arise: Who is this that dares awaken me? The complexity of the web the thorn has cast means that your loved ones would often rather you fell back into a fitful sleep than shone a candle in the cobwebbed dungeon. Awakening a Bear King can arouse a huge roar when the thorn comes out. Gather prayers, strong friends and all the soul gold you can find when you start to tug.

There is a contemporary dimension to this story, in that it doesn't fit an idealised procession of obvious mentoring figures. No Arthur or Finn, just a series of baffling and probably fatal challenges. We are left wishing for a character on the road with whom he may share a meal, a small dog to travel by his side. The initiators are from the animal powers themselves, called to push him into maturation.

This is a different style of mentoring, one that creates a pathway to and from both the masculine and animal realms that can be travelled totemically. We all need physical individuals in the world to inspire, shout at and recognise us, but initiation is designed to carve out an internal road that is tempered and awake. Once the High Bear King is awakened, he willingly gives his fur to Anga, and the healing of the mother is almost complete. Anga re-enters the tent with health for the feminine, found through his own journey into deep masculinity. Whenever faced with education authorities trying to decide whether to release their at-risk youth into the initiatory process, I warn them: don't expect model citizens, evangelists, AA counsellors or Outward Bound Instructors to necessarily return in their place. They can be even angrier, more opinionated and trouble-making when they return. But, as Michael Meade says, "They're looking for the right kind of trouble." An audience with wilderness/serpent/bear consciousness is heavy meat, a real meal. The forces aroused through Initiation have claws and fur, and we'd be ridiculous to expect anything else. It is apprenticeship to a Lightning bolt.

Initiation means taking the raw fuel of Simoon, through the spiritual passage of Ogloma, to the integrated centre of the High Bear King. Grief comes with that territory, especially for young people, and tears become the liquid that moistens the Heroes' wingtips. Many need to sit and grieve after such an experience, so terrible has been its absence. The challenge afterward is to make a clear track from the tent to the mountain, attend Simoon's ashes, plant a hundred different seeds in the scorched earth, and sing hard to bring the World Tree back to health again. So we find the qualities of courage, canniness and compassion in this story. We see that to survive its challenges, different elements were required at different times, just as in our lives: the recklessness of starting out in the first place, the wiliness of gathering resin and moss, the transformative encounter with the serpents, and finally the compassionate removal of the splinter. This is the shape-leaper's road.

That was a lot of information to take in. Grab a cup of tea and go through your notes. When in your life did you face a hopeless cause, or a black serpent or wake a High Bear King? What are the shavings you have thrown down the gullet of your own Simoon? Why not try writing a three stanza poem from the perspective of the old women, Simoon the black serpent and the wounded bear. After that write down a list of the blessings and curses handed down in your own family line.

January Session

Road of Solitude, Road of Voice

Today, rather than jumping into another enormous story, we are going to slow the train of images a little and focus on some of the constant themes that are emerging. We will go for about four hours, but being such a beautiful morning I will make sure we can get out on the moors by 1pm.

Some of you will want to draw or gather found materials to create out of some element of today's talk - there is only one condition. Being a session partially on the Trickster, I would like you to create using your weakest hand – the left hand path for most of you – see where that takes you!

Several sessions back we witnessed a disarming process mapped out for Ivan; to become the fully rounded character his fate required, he had to lose glamour, climb down a dark hole, trick a witch, experience abandonment and finally emerge with the Yaga's medicine: knowledge of the scaly underbelly of life. Can you imagine the sophistication of a community that encouraged that uncertain passage? How subtle would your thinking have to be? Can you imagine any corporation endorsing it for its leadership programs, even though indigenous cultures world wide have declared it to be the single route to real leadership?

Talk of leadership can be off-putting. There is something zealous, clear-eyed and healthy about the phrase. We suspect that large, hidden parts of the leader are hidden just out of view, like an iceberg, waiting to sink our fragile boat. The discipline required to lead can seem to homogenise, and to thin out our wild edges.

When a society has flattened its cultural references as acutely as ours has, it requires two dimensional characters to affirm its progress. When we look at initiation, we recognise that the decades of our lives pull on very different energies. To remain fixated on the flush of youth halts the organic leaping of the imagination as we age, and creates a reluctance to trust the slower, deeper currents that we sense pulling on our legs.

It's as though we're being trained by the media to shorten our creative life into tinier and tinier spans because we have only a whisker of time to be relevant. If the arches of imagination are getting daily smaller, then the kind of leaps Taliesin made appear impossible. So the prospect of expansion is retracted from the living world down into computer software, and the threads of connection only refer to the immediate landscape of the individual.

Here's some Yeats, from "Vacillation",

No longer in Lethean foliage caught
Begin the preparation for your death
And from the fortieth winter by that thought
Test every work of intellect or faith,
And everything that your own hands have wrought,
And call those works extravagance of breath
That are not suited for such men as come
Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb
W. B. Yeats, "Vacillation"
(Yeats 1989 :365)

Yeats is calling a grandiose tune with a touch of darkness at the end; we should become explorers, and in fact heighten our game as we age. No gentle falling-off after forty, but rather a narrowing and amplifying of our pursuits. That word he uses, 'tomb,' is terrifying; its finality puts our emphasis back on life rather than ideas of the beyond. Initiatory process, as we have discovered, has partially to do with drawing closer to death in order to live more fully. If you have not engaged with that truth, then anyone over the age of seventy is a creaky reminder of something you haven't even begun to face. The things we grab onto, like life rafts, are rosy glows, full blooms and houses that are only painted white. There appears to be a wilful resistance to the reality of elders because it means looking at another set of values, and beyond that — death.

The religious propensity for gazing backwards at an imagined Eden has transformed into a lust for an imagined luminous, technological future, one where ageing is associated with being 'behind the times'. Either one of these perspectives is out of balance if it detracts from the reality of the present moment. Where once was the tragedy of a lost 'golden age', we now have the supposed triumph of the 'nearly here' future.

In the myth world, Apollo is an example of a young leader that society could still just about swallow. Seen in Greece as the God of the Sun, he strides about, instructing us: "nothing in excess". His name carries associations of brightness, purity, the whiteness of swan's wings, advancement of medicines and the laying down of laws. He also rides the approval of his father Zeus, as the favourite son. A player of the lyre, his music is perceived to calm the most ferocious beast, to transform wildness into a passive and benign state. Every botched business decision, ecological crisis, messy break-up that he experiences is viewed from an enigmatic distance, where his feathers never catch in the tricky glue of emotion. He is a corporate man par excellence; lacking the terrifying swings of Zeus's temperament, he remains in control: early to bed, early to rise. His love of logic and clarity are presented to us as soon as we enter nursery or primary education as a defining way of being in the world. Universities, media

and industry are fuelled by a hundred million little versions of this energy field. When you imagine his face, what can you see? I see a kind of glowing and cheekbones.

When we think about Jung's statement: "Man doesn't become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious" (Jung 1933 :60), we become grateful that there are other gods in the Greek pantheon, and that our psyche is more free-ranging than just this one model. The question is, though, has anyone told society at large? The characteristics of a person under the thrall of Hermes will almost always be perceived as muddy, unclear and morally dubious next to the impersonal radiance of Apollo. Like a kind of mythic robocop, Apollo men are enforcers of a senatorial consciousness received from their fathers. Firmly in the Cartesian camp (as much as a god can be) they can create conditions of ecological havoc. Some gods originate from beneath the soil, but not this one. Sky men and women proliferate in leadership. Although they may possess the organisational skills, discipline and logic to succeed, we sense something terribly thin in them. It's as if their shoes are the only thing stopping them from floating several inches above the ground. They don't engage the earth somehow.

I recently gave a lecture to industry magnates on mythological thinking. As long as there were handouts and coffee, things went well. However, when we moved into the realm of grief and loss as part of the leader's lot, the room fell oppressively silent. Five minutes before, all were offering very informed perspectives on the subject, but when it turned inward, to intimate material, nothing. I was practically hounded out of the venue. For them to admit difficulty, or confusion, meant instant loss of status in the group. The branding power of potential shame was too intense to risk vulnerability. To speak openly would to appear to be 'confessing'. Interestingly, six stayed on to talk at the end of the rather fraught lecture. Given a more secure space, they freely ranged into a conversation of great depth and feeling.

Culturally, we like to assume that our artists (from a distance) are disciples of a very different god, Dionysus. What do we know of this character, and why is he associated with the creative spirit? Dionysus is another son of Zeus, but one who canters through rain-washed valleys whilst Apollo flies overhead. At first glance, Dionysus appears almost diametrically opposed to Apollo. He is associated with the inebriation of wine, the rupture of mystical experience, the timelessness of lovemaking and spasmodic, crazed, passionate outbursts.

We know that at the moment of his mother Semele's death, Zeus tore Dionysus from her womb and sewed him into his own thigh, where he grew till birth. This strange, auspicious incubation points to a kind of unexpected nurture on the part of Zeus, as if such a bizarre thunderbolt as Dionysus could not be born in a natural way. A fascinating conjecture is that the name Dionysus may mean 'Zeus Limp' — Zeus's wounded aspect manifested in this particular son.

Unlike Apollo, Dionysus is non-competitive, and in his world leads a trail redolent of both murder and ecstasy. He is dangerous, conflicted, sexy and loose. While uninterested in the clear path of responsibility, he, by his very personality, can access deeply odd emotional pathways, to have a psychic life, create music, ritual, art, and even to break new ground. His relationship to the muse sometimes offers fame as a side dish. The titillation of such a

personality for the mainstream is the acting out of all the barely visible desirous inclinations of our hidden selves. We are thrilled/horrified by Dionysian behaviour, the lack of boundaries, the outlandish music, the two-fingered salute to convention. If his talent is recognised and success arrives, the Dionysian individual can incinerate quickly. We walk past an apartment party and see Joplin, Cobain and Dean sharing drinks as the block burns.

So, we recognise two extremes. From a negative perspective, Apollo is rigid, one-dimensional, uneasy with anything fluid or subtle. On the other hand, Dionysus can appear a lunatic dervish, chaotic and lacking form. Although we can instinctively sense which side of the river we generally stand on, the truth is that most of us draw closer to one or the other at different points in our lives. Some accord simply has to be struck between these two.

Daniel Goleman talks about the necessity for 'emotional intelligence' in the workplace; beyond the practical skills of your occupation, you need to be able to sense, handle and articulate both your own and your colleagues' emotions. Goldman sees the raw nerve endings in the desire for perfection, status and success, and rather than suggesting you walk away completely and join an ashram, he proposes a palatable integration of both ends of the spectrum - I read here:

"The ancient brain centres for emotion also harbour the skills needed for managing ourselves effectively and for social adeptness."

(Goleman 1998 :6 – 11)

Disturbingly, he also notes a decline in this kind of integration: amongst young people especially, they are two horses pulling away from each other:

As children grow ever smarter in IQ, their emotional intelligence is on the decline. Perhaps the most disturbing single piece of data comes from a massive survey of parents and teachers that show the present generation of children to be more emotionally troubled than the last. On average, children are growing more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive.

Goleman seems to be telling us that these poles appear to be growing farther apart than ever, that amongst a coming generation a perpetual dislocation is emerging between logic and feeling, with neither side handling or assisting the other.

This disturbing situation turns us back to our sources: the old stories. Hidden in the folds of Apollo's wings we find a key. For three months a year, Apollo would turn his temple at Thebes over to the worship of Dionysus.

Astoundingly, these two seemingly opposite, right brain/left brain forces were honoured in the same vicinity. We know we aren't gods, but could we be a temple? James Hillman employs the phrase "divine influxes" to describe the winged forces that sweep through us, but are not purely contained by us. We need to identify our visiting gods and goddesses and build an appropriate container for their incursions. It is our very contemporary arrogance to think that we can pick and choose them. In the case of Apollo and Dionysus, each seems to mutually recognise the benefit of the other. In fact, in our discussion of age and leadership, we see that to aspire to both longevity and creativity, we will have to have both present.

Without Apollo's focus and long term direction, the purely Dionysian individual risks addiction and early death. Without Dionysus, one can feel distant from the pulsing heart of life, successful but dry.

We note that artists famed for their wild bursts of inspiration often served steady apprenticeships as draftsman or illustrators for years, Willem De Kooning and Franze Kline amongst them. To break from form, they first had to explicitly understand it. It feels fruitful for us to look at characters who have allowed Apollo's discipline to sustain their vocation for decades, honing and amplifying it. They provide a very different model from the late twenties bum out. Antoni Tapies and Cy Twombly, to name but two, are turning out some of the most vibrant work of their careers in their seventies and eighties. Their temples appear to have been built slowly, with both granite foundations and delicate little chambers ready to accommodate any peculiar bird song they may awake to. To brand them purely as Dionysus's children is too sweeping. The kind of wildness they present, the wildness of elders, is not the crazy sweep of a double-headed axe, but the lyrical footwork of the capowera dancer.

I'm suggesting now two roads towards this idea of a crossroads. They are not moderate or safe roads — they imply a kind of excess or appetite. They involve a love of performance but also profound inwardness. We are trying to find ways between the tavern and the mountain, and arguing for a state of being that includes both. Oratory does not belong only to the mouth of the sensualist, and solitude does not belong only to the ascetic.

The ability to inspire through language, to draw us into realms of excitement and wonder for centuries was a pre-requisite of leadership. We still detect this in some Iranian speakers and the wild, rousing speeches of a 1950s Che Guevara, in whom you sense character, emotion, gravitas and flamboyance. A distrust of this in the West, and desire for just the facts are noted and fought against in this passage I read by Thoreau:

I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extravagant enough, may not wander beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of what I have been convinced. I am convinced I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression . . . why level downwards our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense. The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring . . . while England

endeavours to cure the potato rot, will any not endeavour to cure the
brain rot, which prevails so much more widely and fatally?

(Thoreau 1992 :163)

What is wrong with us? We get offered a seat at a Camelot feast and we choose a motorway service sandwich. We seem to revile beauty or see it as shadowy, artificial - almost a kind of spin doctor. At least with a monosyllabic fact-repeater, we think we can take things at face value. It may not raise a reaction or even a pulse, but at least we got the company stats read out at the weekly meeting.

Here is Maxwell again: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

(Maxwell 1998 :107)

When was the last time you actually stood a few feet away from a politician or leader in a market square or hall, actually feeling their energy? The subtle dislocation of technology, the flatness of a television screen denies us this proximity, and so the psyche struggles to make up its mind. This isn't some obscure cosmic idea, this is a simple matter of our own humanity.

We can link fear of expression to a fear of nature, both of our own untapped depths and the earth itself. We know that with both, landslides, tornados and rain are possible, so we draw up a tense drawbridge, refusing to go 'in' to feeling and the expression of those emotions, or 'out' into the wild and uncertain terrain of nature. I know through working with many folks that public speaking is often their number one fear, especially the anxiety of coming 'off script' publicly. In this fear, speaking up is to risk being 'found out' in some way, of not being worthy of the position they occupy. We know from history that voice is perceived to carry the resonance of your life experience, your medicine.

This terror of flow, of letting your hands move in the air around you when you speak, of trusting animation, is to distrust the instinctive body. I am not proposing that exhilarating speech is all there is to leadership, but being frightened of it is to lack the key to ignite and inspire those who work with you. It reminds me of the endless baptism speeches of new religious converts: "If I hadn't found _____ I'd be dead or in jail." The fear of the experimental makes us relegate anything but the prescriptive route to flirtation with madness. "Surely I'd end up as some kind of satanic Allen Ginsberg, smoking crack, reading De Sade and forgetting my pension payments." Our perception of spontaneity, of wildness, can be so limited that our way of dealing with its absence is to fantasise about it as so extreme that it's dangerous. That justifies our leaving it alone 'for the good of the kids'.

We reach a point where the ascended trajectory of affirmation and gold stars simply won't do anymore, and there has to be something more, something deeper. Voice can be a vehicle for enthusiasm, literally meaning 'the breath of God'. It can lift and reorient us, point us towards more profound implications of the life we undertake. Ghandi, King, Kennedy and now Obama are all radically different bearers of that gift. It seems for those of us asking these questions, our approach to voice has to be twofold:

1. To reinhabit gesture, dynamic range and powerful articulation to bring the words into the wider body, not just the rattling brain. The anti-talking head.
2. To allow a door of listening and fluidity to open to the integrity of the moment, so speech is more than a polemic. This can be scary because it involves being able to sense the mood of a roomful of people and bring them into the dialogue.

Without metaphor, we keep mythology on the level of an infantile, flattened culture that chooses to only partially see the old stories. In politics it's about defeating Yaga, not eating fragments of her dress and teeth. Shadow myth is a stripping down to base, fearful emotion, after which one pours the affirmation of god and country onto that incendiary mix. God appears to be a mightily useful figure to invoke in a time of national outrage, despite His seeming rather abstract the rest of the time.

I would also suggest that someone needs to be speaking up for kingfishers, small English hedges and lightning storms over New Mexico, and not just in the loud shout of an ecological protest rally. Some sweetness has to come too, some beguilement, some enchantment. Ecological disaster statistics are effective, but can also bring apathy or panic as bedfellows. We need people 'with the tongue' to touch the soul as well as the adrenaline ducts. The mythology of wilderness needs to be articulated as the mythology of ourselves. That requires a certain type of education and long periods spent moving and sitting in the wild. Bashing a drum of complaint and stats can still make a shrill sound, no matter how well intentioned, and I don't think the old nature gods are overly impressed with it either. Grief has a watery quality that they seem to enjoy, in which we send clouds of feeling back to the sea. Handled well and ritually sanctioned, they seem to eat it. So speaking out goes in two directions: into the wires and lights of modern living and back into minute caves where the old heroes sleep, one ear open for a beautiful word.

Inherited suspicion can cultivate distrust of our inner King or Queen, radiant source of both passion and blessing. Robert Moore calls this the fear of the "Shadow King: the Tyrant and the Weakling". This fearful person is in thrall to something devouring, the twisted road of excess. This one shuts down small book stores, wears only grey and can't stand to negotiate. Anyone with a conscience will swear never to be that Caligula, that Herod, and will despise the robes of office and those who inhabit it. But this is only one strand. Our challenge is to find the models of health and generosity in leadership, to somehow pin those images to our breast and work from them.

In a culture of both manic abdication and usurption of power, to hold a position of genuine service is remarkable, its effects wide ranging. The Shadow Queen must be approached by way of a gradual sifting to consciousness of your own carnivorous appetites; one can't pretend she doesn't exist. You learn to catch her flapping black tongue quicker, to say, "Aha! There goes the dribble-eyed, skull-smashing Queen of my own blackness. What called her out of her cave?" Touch her arm, clean her eyes and give her a pigeon to eat.

This sense of two directions is worth pursuing. It brings us back into that druidic framework of retreat and engagement, with one naturally following the other. We think of extended periods in the forest of Caledon or the hard coasts of Anglesey, but also the reciting of tribal histories, feeding a community through a fierce winter with cycles of old stories. Here, beauty lies in the mutual interdependency, an understanding of a kind of wild introversion/extroversion that exists within us; no one is entirely one and not the other. It is no longer the function solely of a religious order to hold this internal balance. It is a rebel act, even 'practice' as the Buddhists say, to explore roads between deep quiet and expressive articulation. I say 'rebel' because both activities create anxiety for the middle road of society that demands oratory as entertainment, and soulful nourishment to be contained in a church. We know that Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha all sought wilderness at the beginning of their teaching work. Heading out into the forest indicates both independence and vulnerability. The word 'solitude' actually derives from the Latin for 'nature'.

In attempting to legitimise passion in leadership, and in our lives in general, we do well to view this wilderness reflection as a kind of possible underbelly to any form of public life. With it comes a natural joy in words, heat, animation, discourse. To emerge back into 'outer' life can be vital after a period; we think of Antonio Machado: "In my solitude I have seen many things that are not true." (Machado 1983 :46) To keep fasting after the four days and nights is to miss the point. We need to change gear again, re-approach the tension of our human neighbours.

An interesting association around these two roads is the fact that for many hundreds of years, wild remote places were often gathering spots for important meetings, which didn't all take place at the town square. On my homeland up here on Dartmoor, Crockern Tor served as the gathering point for representatives of the four moorland towns. It was another kind of liminal space, between realms, where laws and boundary issues were debated. We can only speculate at where the wind, granite and otherworldly location took these debates, but we know these established wilderness gatherings convened for centuries.

In Ramon Lull's text *Libre del ordre de cavayleria* (Keen 1984) we find a meeting place of these two roads, or disciplines. The story begins with a young squire on his way to the high king's court, where he is to become a knight. Whilst journeying through a great forest, the young man gets lost and happens upon the cell of an ancient hermit. The hermit turns out to have been a knight himself, who has spent a lifetime in service to the ideals of chivalry. As their conversation deepens, it becomes apparent that the squire has little understanding of the inner reality of knighthood, being only fixated on the external aspects of it. The hermit produces a small book detailing an extensive combination of duties that the squire ends up taking with him to court as a kind of blueprint for up-and-coming knights.

It becomes apparent in Lull's text that the knight is connected to a morality deeper than the accolades of his position. He must eschew pride, idleness, lechery and aspire to wisdom, charity and loyalty. At the top of the list is courage: "For chivalry abideth not so agreeably in no place as in noblesse of courage." (Keen 1984 :6) Any potential knight was also subjected to a review of how he had carried himself through life thus far, to determine if

the life matched the ideals. If he gets through this, then Lull insists on an all-night vigil before the day of his knighthood. We feel the attraction of this kind of thoroughness, and know that it would be possible to admire, even trust someone who had gone through this process. We can say that the hermit represents the road of solitude and the knight the road of voice; to carry both, we must abide at the crossroads. The encounter in the forest is also an encounter with service, with the knowledge that the squire is accountable to greater, more divine sources than his own ambition. It's just possible that, if practised consistently and slowly over a long period of time, this discipline could start to radiate trust back towards individuals in authority. But that trust has to be earned.

In this discussion of how to ground but also support the idea of authentic leadership, we have focused on two distinct images: one is the temple at Thebes and the other is the crossroads where we find both the road of voice and the road of solitude. At this point the simplified image of the heroic leader has to be challenged.

The image of the hero as a generic defender of cultural sanctions is actually tribalistic slander. It's a kind of Hollywood whitewashing of a much older, rawer picture. In the ancient tale of Gilgamesh, we encounter him as the regent of Ur, a champion who wanders society taking what he wants. To temper him, the gods create Enkidu, a wild man conjured from mud to stand up for the women Gilgamesh has violated. When the two meet in combat, an affinity develops between them and the champion and the hero become friends. The mundanity of applause has no weight for Enkidu and he refuses to abide by the regulations of society. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh senses the authenticity of his friend's life and falls into grief.

We could say that Enkidu rose to challenges but was not hypnotised by collective causes. He continually refers back to a psychic independence and intimacy with the divine that cannot be bought. Carrying the elemental energies of the woods with them, Enkidu's relatives emerge through the centuries: Herne the Hunter, Robin Hood, John Barleycorn. So something of the hero's independence relies on connection to wildness, to fresh, strange ideas and keeping an eye upwards towards god. The champion is the one who rolls out endlessly to battle, not the hero. The hero stories have their roots in pre-literate mother cultures like Harappa in India, Minoan Crete and the Magdalenian area of southern France - they were not wheeled out to support a patriarchal order. Sometimes, like Anga in "The Serpent and the Bear", or Cuchulain with Scathach, they undergo an initial education by a woman. One of their distinct masculine traits is their desire to achieve mastery over rather than accommodate certain obstacles, and it is here that their vulnerability lies. History possesses a sorcerer's capacity to take this root energy and attempt to separate it from its connection to nature and the feminine. It is a great achievement for bad people when we can't detect the difference between champions and heroes anymore. Actually, the old idea of a hero is someone who suffers in full view of the community, and who is alive to a certain type of pain.

Joseph Campbell's work on the hero brought a huge shipload of information to us sixty years ago, but much work must still be done to apprehend this phrase. It's appropriate now to send a thread of connection down into those slower, deeper currents I mentioned earlier. If we hope to live with some of the hero's vigour in our own lives, we'll need to anchor it. Let's look at two contemporary thinkers' approach to such grounding.

Half a century after Campbell, we notice that Robert Bly's mythological work has, in part, involved dragging the idea of hero down from the horse of logic to the road of deep feeling. For men, Bly makes this leap: "What I'm suggesting, then, is that every modern man has, lying at the bottom of his psyche, a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet. (Bly 1990 :6)

Part of Bly's intelligence lies in his ability to transmit ideas through images. That way the knowledge hits the body before the mind has a chance to filter it out to more abstract realms. "Iron John," the Grimms' fairy tale, informs us that a golden ball of energy resides in the magnetic field of the wild, or grief man. This seems peculiar in that it doesn't abide with Zeus or Thor, but in the strange, muddy radiance of the man found under the water. Temple building has to accommodate the sodden footprints of this archaic character. Iron John may scare you rigid, so that you may only be able to enter his presence for moments at a time, but he has an unexpected face. In the story's final twist, the wild man is revealed as a lord under enchantment, waiting for someone with the initiatory discipline to reach into their own psychic depths, do the work and bring him to fullness. There is nothing stuck about this story; the length of time required for the necessary movement can be long, but bubbles with alchemical change. We find here a sophisticated set of ideas, propelling us far beyond conventional motifs of masculinity.

Bly's work catches the underside of Campbell's wave, narrows the field, and holds psychology as a kind of meadow place between village and forest thinking. Bly trains his vision on an earlier, arcane, image of wildness containing the ability to not be swayed by the hold of money or god-terror. This kind of ability typically comes of receptive listening and much sacrifice, but ultimately has tremendous activity in it. The grief man has walked the road of solitude a long time before stepping out onto the road of voice. We encounter in Bly's Rilke translations these lines I'll read:

When we win it's with small things, and the triumph itself makes us
small. What is extraordinary and eternal does not want to be bent
by us . . . This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively, by
constantly greater beings.

(Rilke 1996 :77)

We are rapidly losing any association with success, rather the right kind of failures. We understand that the ability to craft sorrow into delicate expressions of life is to draw nearer an animal self, and so to be neither transcendental nor robotic. So the hero is shape shifting from cultural assumptions out into stranger forms. A second voice enters the fray, I'm quoting Daniel Deardorff:

Anyone who has perused a handful of the world's creation myths could know that the 'constant', the primordial condition, is not structured, it is, rather, undifferentiated chaos, darkness, the abysmal waters . . . Thus, the uncompromising faith in structure — as fundamental and primary to life — is revised, a revision that constitutes a radical shift from the civilised perspective: Here 'structure' and the 'aggregate phase' comprise the illusory and transitory states; liminality is the primary ground of creation . . . "The descent into hell is actually the ascent of soul" — when the heart-bird escapes, we return to our source, the original darkness, we go home.

(Deardorff 2004 :44 -55)

To Deardorff, we came from the forest and will return to the forest. He senses a kind of psychic frailty in large, gleaming buildings and insurance documents. His work is a dark arrow out from the grief man's pond towards deities in accord with this 'primordial condition', this root posture. He calls in Trickster wisdom itself, the principle of disorder, to sit in the centre of any discussion of what constitutes an authentic human being.

We know that in the form of coyote, the trickster has been around since the very beginning. The Chumash tell us that once upon a time he begged the sun to accompany him on his journeys, managing to persuade the sun to lend him his flaming torch. He let it stray onto the ground of the earth and WHOOSH! up went the brush, he almost burnt it all down till the sun managed to put it out. This is not incompetence on coyote's part, but a strange accord with inflammatory and unexpected universal forces. Coyote's movement through the worlds is both potent and fractured; we aim meanings at him that explode in sharp colours if they even come close to his energy field.

The Yurok tell us he can impregnate with merely a glance, and that things grow in dark, moist places after meeting him. He diffuses righteousness, laughs at tribalism, steals fire from the gods, and is ever-present as circumstances, cultures and weather patterns jostle with the inevitable changes of time. We know that coyote is a decentralised zone, that his life force exists in the tip of his nose and tail, not his broad central plain. We see he is elusive in texture; he is not located in a geographical location or specific point in history, but remains epistemic.

Coyote is riding a different vibration from those of us dependent on alarm clocks and year planners. He favours the rhizomic universe. The rhizome is a plant root system that grows by accretion rather than by separate or oppositional means. There is no defined centre to its structure, and it doesn't relate to any generative model. Each part remains in contact with the other by way of roots that become shoots and underground stems. We see that the rhizome is de-territorial, that it stands apart from the tree structure that fixes an order, based on radiancy and binary opposition.

Trees are organised by universal principles of hierarchy and reproduction. Preordained paths whisper information from a specific point. We could say that the tree contains the classical, village-centred, solar organised model from which we derive most of our models of state, language and society. The anthropological fixation on the World Tree as an immovable centre by which the shaman/coyote ascends or descends to objectified territories is a blurred picture. This tree, seen through the eyes of an initiate, is actually a vast rhizome, pierced through with a million branches and roots, not stratified realms but alternating degrees of intensity experienced as plateaux interconnected, riddled with gateways. So coyote or Enkidu as strange heroes are not pulled into dogmatic gestures or pursuit of the glittering prize.

So here we are: the village as solar, Olympian; the forest as lunar, rhizomic; the crossroads of authenticity stands in their tension.

We have moved from an Olympian to a rhizomic universe in several stages. Zeus eyes up coyote, and Dionysus sells the ring-side tickets. To decide there can be only one position is to miss the point. In the tension of these seemingly opposed forces is where the hero lives. The moment we fixate we lose.

Paradox is the arrow to which the seven stories of these sessions are attached. Without paradox, myth is dogma, a tribal polemic. Precisely in our thin reading of the old stories originates its current meaning as a lie, or fiction. Paradox. How do we glow with the luminosity of Asgard while holding the fractured postures of coyote? Well, it may be worth remembering that in Asgard lived a coyote in the form of Loki. When Zeus grabbed Dionysus and incubated him, the two universes drank from each other. It is the business of living to exist in this paradox. When Trickster is ignored and a mythic context dissolved, there is the possibility, as with Yaga, that he will come to represent only a rip-off, a betrayal, nothing but falsehood. This is a thin and very sad reading of the richness Trickster offers, but when he is left out of the temple, our interpretations of him become baser and baser. The farther back we the dig into history, the more bizarre sweetness and a kind of nobility we find. Coyote is also an embodiment of wisdom, not just avarice or the desire to 'get one over'.

To move past the plasticity of the 'champion', we need to handle our 'divine influxes' carefully. To carry back underworld jewels and insight from the mountain, we need to emulate both Lull's young squire and 'leaping' coyote, and so holding an inner directive that is reflective, listening and potent. It's important that we have an animal guide snuffling through the temple, a 'genial criminal' that deflates empirical one-sidedness, stagnant grandeur and too many gold chests. So, as we have seen, we are not abandoning the hero, but relating him back to his earliest roots, and acknowledging the complexity he holds. I want to close this talk with a poem by William Stafford. In it, he holds in balance the two seemingly opposite experiences of abandonment and royalty. He holds as well to the coyote idea that in our longing, false trails and feeling far from the pulpit, is hidden something luminous. He calls the elder out from the terrain of the bereft. Maybe by getting lost in the woods we can find the cell, the hermit and the book.

If you were exchanged in the cradle
and your real mother died without ever telling the story
then no one knows your name, and somewhere in the world
your father is lost and needs you but you are far away.
He can never find how true you are, how ready.
When the great wind comes and the robberies of the rain
you stand in the corner shivering. The people who go by— you wonder at their calm.

They miss the whisper that runs any day in your mind,

“Who are you really, wanderer?” —

and the answer you have to give

no matter how dark and cold the world around you is:

“Maybe I’m a king.”

(Stafford 1993 :18)

March Session

Valemon and the Wild Third Daughter

Glad to see so many of you have made it, despite the treacherous roads up onto Dartmoor this month. I don't think they can even get the grit machine up here. Many of you I know have been working on some non – literary exploration of the stories and their images since the last session. This idea of a mythography – that myths associative diversity requires many different mediums of exploration – lends itself well to painting, sculpture, or in the case of at least one of you, video work.

By the word associative I mean that something as wide in connotation as a myth benefits from many approaches. If we work only with one we limit its possibilities. The work created in your studio is a kind of out breath after all you absorb over these weekends. These sessions are a leap, and your art practice grounds those leaps. It's also another way of approaching this notion of severance, threshold and return. In a subtle way, every time you close the studio door you are severing from many other social demands on your time.

So over the year we have followed initiatory stories with a man at its centre, a youth and now a woman, in our third 'voyaging' tale. If we are feeling particularly lethargic, men will tiptoe around a 'story about women,' not realising that tremendous energies like Yaga are in us too. And women who look to find Ivan only in an external man risk severe psychic indigestion. Again, paradox rears its head. Elements of the stories having to do with the walk of a woman's or a man's life, are specific and exclusive, but to literalise them too avidly is to miss internal and magical perspectives.

Let's begin...

Once upon a time there was a King. Like many kings throughout the ages, he had three daughters, and our story is about the youngest of the three. Their castle hid a sculpted inner garden, but the youngest daughter had a taste for exploration far beyond what it offered. One day, wandering the forests around the castle, she came across a most arresting sight: she beheld a white bear lying on its back, playing with a golden wreath. The strangeness of the scene and the glow of the wreath opened a longing in her heart to possess it. She offered riches of many kinds, but the Bear said there was only one possible exchange. Not gold, not land, not status—but herself. Well, she couldn't stand the thought of not having the wreath, so she agreed to the price, high though it seemed. The white bear said he would return on the third day, which was a Thursday. Once the King was informed of the agreement, he stayed calm but called his greatest artisans to construct a golden wreath themselves so his daughter would not have to go through with the bargain. Whatever they constructed was never quite right — the bear's wreath had curlier leaves, and was not so dull. The bear's wreath was wider and twinkled with light. The daughter could not shake the vision of the first wreath from her heart. After several rejected attempts, the King and the craftsmen withdrew to come up with another plan. Something had to be done

The roots of this story can be found in "Eros and Psyche," one of the great central pillars of Greek mythology, but this version comes from Norway. It carries specific images from its earlier birthing. The story immediately drops us into a specific scene: the wanderings of the third daughter. We are not to focus immediately on the older sisters, but rather on the part of ourselves that is marginal, curious, and ready to bloom. We notice the daughter was wandering in the woods, not the clipped and sculpted gardens of the castle, when she had the encounter with the white bear. This points to two ideas: the first is that her parents, the King and Queen, may not have kept such a watchful eye (or hold) on the third daughter as to limit her to the confines of the Royal court. In some way, we can see this as potential neglect, but in a positive sense, encouraging possibility. When the iron gaze of royalty (e.g. the family traditions) is on us, it can freeze us. Secondly, the daughter may already be restless or searching for something outside the 'kingdom' — the consensual limits of the psyche.

We notice several details in the appearance of the white bear. First of all, he is lying on his back playing, not snarling or protective. There is something open and delightful about this posture, which actually encourages the daughter to stay. If we view the wreath as a symbol of the bear's status or power, he seems light with it, not bound or heavy. Growing up in the confines of a royal household, the daughter probably found that highly exciting to witness. Do you remember the first time you were entranced by something that was unlike anything you'd seen before? The bear seems to suggest a whole different way of carrying yourself. This isn't a move to abdicate power, or to drop out, but to renegotiate what it means; to find your own.

When we look at myths and fairy stories around the world we see that it is often a white animal pulling us into some kind of otherworldly trouble. In Gaelic myth, pursuing a white deer often leads to an encounter with the Sidhe, the awesome fair-folk. Something vital has been glimpsed, and we spur our horse and gallop, with or without our courtiers. We know that in Hungarian myth it was a great white stag that led the brothers Hunor and Magnor to settle in Scythia. From there, they established the Huns and the Magyars. Chasing the white deer also leads both Arthur and Finn MacColl into all kinds of deep and arcane encounters. In Arthurian myth we hear of something called the Questing Beast that abides in the forests around Camelot. Part Lion, part Serpent, part Goat, it exists only to be glimpsed, to be sought after, and cannot be captured. Arthur himself glimpsed the beast as a youth, as did King Pellinore, who spent a great part of his life in its pursuit. We see the Beast as an otherworldly opening of the soul. The quest itself serves to make an art of our longing for the thing that cannot be claimed. To be distracted from that desire is to fall into the wasteland.

This encounter between the daughter and the bear has a different slant in the sense that an exchange is offered, an accord bartered. But the price is not defined by any of the riches that the Kingdom has to offer. Jewels, crowns, any treasures of the horizontal realms are no good here. We could call this transaction **The Deal Beyond the Things of this World**. All considered affluence is cast aside for this one moment of deeper opening; Buddha leaves his palace to walk among the sick and lost, not knowing where that will lead him. On one level, we could say that

she is having an encounter with a profoundly masculine force, one not tied up with the consciousness of her own father, the King. Indeed, she is given no time to ponder or intuit; this is a moment of vajra clarity, requiring a masculine response. If you want this wreath you have to give yourself. Well? Yes or No. Something is opening up in her that requires a decision. No friend to ring or group debate, she has to make a clear move or this wonder will be gone. Maybe she has led a sheltered life, or has been so stuck in the archetype of the princess she felt frozen. We feel that the wreath is something specifically for her away from the familial gifting of the castle.

I have met many women compelled to venture into wilderness because of a glimpse of the wreath. They sought to clear a space where they could allow water to start to clean the thick layers of accumulated projections and memories of past lovers off their hide. If they glimpsed the wreath many years back and denied the call, then it is sometimes Yaga's broom of descent that sweeps them in.

To make the Deal Beyond the Things of This World is to be mad in the eyes of the buttoned-up-tight world. Somehow Blake achieved this while keeping an elegantly shod foot on the streets of nineteenth-century London. How long is it since you were "Mad as the Mist and Snow?" asks Yeats. (Yeats 1989 :380) Apparently when Shackleton advertised his trip to the South Pole in a British newspaper, he said the pay was appalling, conditions awful and chances of survival minimal. He received 5,000 replies.

Mirabai, the great female Bhakti poet of North India, made the deal when she committed her life utterly to devotion to the dark one, Krishna. When her husband died, she pulled further and further into temple life, and her immediate family did everything they could to stop her, even sending her poison as a suggestion she take her own life. She uttered the words: "I will not commit sati: I will sing the songs of Girdhar Krishna". A life force as great as hers was always going to stir up strong feeling in the Kingdom of Safety. She is a defiant, exquisite breaker of chains. When the King hears of this bargain, he initiates the frantic creating of new wreaths, but of course they don't quite fit. The daughter remembers something greater.

When we project an encounter with the masculine out onto an external man, rather than cultivate it in ourselves, we may find ourselves in relationships where the grip is just too tight, the leaves not as bright as we remember, and the whole affair just not as thrilling as the possibilities we glimpsed out there in the forest. We are attempting to obtain in the rinky-dink world what we glimpse from the otherworld. That's not to say magical blurring points can't happen, but no man or woman can be a substitute for your own wreath long-term: that ship will hit the rocks. We cannot humanly sustain the projection of something divine. If the projection remains unconscious in us, we will, simply by human disposition, carry a longing for whole other layers of experience that cannot be offered by another person, no matter how well meaning. A literalised perspective will always lead us to a bar, a party, or a nightclub, rather than the inner awakening that this story suggests.

When a serious attempt to hear a soul voice is underway, many promises will manifest from the established kingdom to hamper that process. Do you remember that moment when you finally screwed up the courage to leave

your post at the production plant and travel for a year? A promotion is offered out of the blue. Suddenly a false wreath appears.

With it comes all the justifications why it isn't faux at all — maybe if I have more money I can stay in bigger hotels when I finally travel. I could take out more insurance, be safer. Maybe this is spirit talking to me at last. But it's not spirit; it's a false wreath. When I glimpsed the wreath and the bear out on the mountain, I was offered any number of false wreaths to stay in the music business. More money, work with world musicians and 'healing the world with sound' — any number of ghastly but convincing reasons not to accept *The Deal Beyond the Things of this World*. Of course, as in the beginning of any decent adventure, we have no idea where this is going. The faux wreath isn't a full denial of the real one, but instead an imitation, a compromise, or, in the arena of relationship, it's simply looking in the wrong place. This first stage of the daughter's life, in the safety of the royal court, should not be construed as a mistake. The fact that she is healthy, sane and free to wander points to a certain success rate in her upbringing. It is the safety of a court that stabilises, establishes boundaries, gives an occasional curfew and gifts you a solid base from which to gaze over treetops at a sunset and dream: good ego work. We learn quickly how to present ourselves elegantly and opportunely, but the strength of emerging emotion at adolescence can make us more porous, so receptive to that sunset that it compels us to squint and lean forward into the last of its rays, each one pulling us away from thou shalt.

As we have discovered, initiation, in both ritual and myth, is a container for these openings. When they are absent in our lives, the ability to discern between a real and a false wreath becomes ever more vague. One hit of DMT will blow the castle doors open in seconds and precipitate a chemically engineered free-fall into a Persian garden. As we congratulate ourselves on having plunged straight into Ceridwen's cauldron, we would do well to remember our fathers turning to the whisky cabinet and gazing at sunsets through the castle gates.

... Time passed and sure enough, on Thursday the white bear appeared to claim his princess. The King's 'plan' was simply to kill the bear, and he sent in his bodyguards to dispatch the beast. Well, the bear hardly looked left or right, but batted them away like bothersome flies and headed towards the throne. The tradition of Norway at that time was that the eldest daughter must marry first, so the King allowed her to be taken-in disguise. Whisking her onto his back, the bear flew from the safety of the stone castle and out into the lush forests surrounding it. "Tell me," said the bear, "have you ever sat softer or seen more clearly than you do now?" "Yes, on my father's lap I sat more softly and from the turrets of my father's castle I saw more clearly," she replied. "Argh! You are not her!" exclaimed the bear, turning in his tracks and leaving her by the castle gates. The next Thursday he returned again, and this time a small army had assembled. Even more nonchalantly than before, the bear swatted them aside. He scooped up the second daughter and whisked her off as before. He asked the question again: "Tell me, have you ever sat more softly or seen more clearly than you do now?" "Yes, on my father's lap and from the turrets of my father's castle." "Gadzooks! betrayal!" exclaimed the bear before dropping her off at the gates. One final time he

came to collect, and by now a huge army of mercenaries, bear-catchers, priests and hair cutters waited for the bear. The hum of arrows sang like banshee wails at the bear, but he ducked underneath their flurry and made merry amongst the throng. Like a hot knife through butter, he sliced through his adversaries and made off with the third daughter. Soon they were out in the deep woods. Again he asked the same ritual questions: "Tell me, have you ever sat more softly or seen more clearly than you do now?" "Never in my life," came her reply, and the bear knew he finally was with the right woman...

The firmness of the third daughter's refusal of the father's wreaths is impressive. The family's tactics, however, are not exhausted. When the illusions fail to hold, a kind of blocking and shaming enters, carrying the eternal message: "We do not follow our longing! And if anyone was going to, it certainly would not be you!" In some way, the shamed imagination is at stake, the possibility of something wonderful beyond the village gates being deeply threatening to a fundamentalist mindset. What happens when you lose the fundamentals? The cage shakes for the whole family. Gripping the sides of the falling elevator, the father pulls tradition to his breast and invokes this rule of the first daughter marrying first. There appears to be a touch of real malice here, a twisted arrow: "I'll give one of my daughters up to the Bear, but not the one he wants." It appears that everyone loses in such a scenario.

The shaming of the imagination is a terrifying violence. It is interesting to notice the changes in a child's drawings between the ages six and nine. Although the pictures can gain in accuracy of literal image, we see again and again some freewheeling, loose limbed and curious spirit fall from the page. Possibilities get narrowed quickly, and the failure of the adult to appreciate the odder layers of the child's thinking finds expression as an attempt to get every child viewing the same rose, house, or shoe as quickly as possible.

We recall Picasso's famous quote: "Once I drew like Raphael, but it has taken me a whole lifetime to learn to draw like children." There is wisdom in the idea of learning the rules to then break them, but if that possibility is never considered, then we are caught in the trance of the consensual, and may use chemicals rather than the arts to push beyond its rigidity. Every bar full of office workers at the end of a long day comprises an attempt to blur the edges of the Father's Castle — even for an hour. If the creative muscle of the imagination is not used regularly, then we become dependent on external forces to shift our consciousness. When we amplify 'the rules' this vigorously, we create permission for many things. The tracks to the forest get concretised, and streetlights, permanently on, block out that troublesome dusk.

We are encouraged that the spell of shame seems not to enter the daughter's heart, but falls at some unspecified spot between her and her father. Some of us get caught in that unspecified spot, neither leaving completely nor committing to stay. This is why in initiation rites it must be unrelated elders who physically pull you from the grip of the family's house; it would be seen as unboundaried and foolish to attempt the break all by yourself — there is too much psychic stickiness between you and your family. What the king fails to anticipate is the encounter with

the Ritual Question, a thing bespoke. The vision in the woods is unique to each individual, a specific rapture that cannot be dished out like a panacea and have the same effect universally. Therefore when the sisters respond truthfully to the questions, “Have you ever sat more comfortably than you do now? Have you ever seen more clearly?” it’s to their credit. To lie would be to end up like the three false giants in Ivan the Bear’s Son — unable to handle the jewel from the underworld — it’s not their journey. In three or five years, maybe their answer would have been different.

The final lines of defence are the swathes of soldiers, bear catchers and hair cutters, desperate to prune both the daughter’s and the bear’s extravagance. We appreciate the fact that for several thousand years we have existed in a culture with a sharp blade and some scissors aimed at a woman’s neck and hair. We’ll do anything to stop the white bear getting through. To step into activity, to be in contact with a deeper masculinity than a bungled patriarchy, has caused this scene a thousand times over in the last hundred and fifty years. We must not fall into literalism here, but understand that to break from the Father (big F) actually involves an internal movement towards an internal masculine. When a culture polarises this profoundly, we know it is deeply unwell.

The pushes and pulls of initiatory openings are always a dance between the tacit and explicit. One of the weaknesses in contemporary spirituality is exposed when, in attempting to recreate this process consciously, ritual is created without inviting in the unexpected, playful dimension of wilderness and the wild. Then we stay firmly in the realm of ‘ideas,’ keeping our entire focus on the human and psychological dimension. It is the integrity of the soul that is at stake here. Why do you think the ritual life of indigenous cultures has always put emphasis on exertion, eloquence and a certain amount of suffering? To alert the soul that something real is going on, something serious. We can have a lovely and edifying time at a workshop or talk, but how far has the soul moved? Not one inch. In these encounters, and god knows we’ve all had them, we block the white bear from getting through, by imagining that he has. It reminds me of that old quote about “religion being the last defence against a religious experience.” Superficial, cozy, thinned out, controlled spirituality can be a way of staying in the Kingdom of Safety. We can wear all the feathers we want, attend all the prayer groups we can, turn up at a hundred ecological rallies and in our secret hearts we are Bear-Catchers and Hair-Cutters. I’m not saying the wreath and the bear represent God, but they do represent genuine spiritual movement. In Goethe’s poem ‘*The Invisible King*’ we hear a father imploring a child not to pick up the wreath, that all that is fantasy. Goethe writes:

“My boy, why is it you hide your face?”

“Dad, over there do you see the King?”

The invisible King with ermine and staff?”

“Dear boy, what you see is a rolling mist”

This denial of the imagination continues, growing more frantic through several stanzas until:

The terrified father rides wilder and wilder; the boy now groaning as he sits slumped over; In grief and fear at last the father got home. The boy lay dead in the father's arms.

(Goethre 1980 :67)

We understand that the wild third daughter is undergoing a major severance from rank, family and comfort. We doubt she knows consciously what the compulsion is towards the wreath, only that the divine moment has arrived and she must break through. The severance is the movement of a sword-swoosh through the air. In "Ivan the Bear's Son," the severance occurred through untamed wildness, in "The Serpent and the Bear," the break came through a desire to save the mother, and in this story the severance occurs because of Longing.

Because of this, when the third daughter answers the Ritual Question, she answers freely and without pressure because it IS the clearest view she has ever seen and the most comfortable seat because she is riding the fierce energy of her own destiny. The answer the soul longs for has no coercion in it: the cleanness of the answer creates a container for great movement. The Bear isn't growling, threatening divorce or a hefty lawsuit; he's simply listening. When we fall in love, we have the capacity to speak with that clarity for a while, before the complexities of relationship wade in with obstacles to sustaining that opening of the heart. The bliss the wild daughter has followed cannot remain in the shape in which she found it, but its clarity allows the break from the Father's House she needs. This is not so much the negotiation of a Yaga answer—that is a different stage—but the spark that strikes the kindling that starts the burning of the life you were born to have, not the one others attempt to create for you.

... When it seemed to the young woman they had ridden three times around the world, they finally arrived at a castle that was breathtaking to behold. She saw turrets so high they were hidden with clouds and a great drawbridge of solid oak. At the castle, she lived in comfort, with only one essential task: to see that the fire never went out. The bear was away in the woods during the day, but at night, under darkness, in the bedroom, he became a man — though she felt rather than saw his form. For three years running, she bore children from these amorous meetings, and each time the bear would steal away with the child, who was not seen again. Time passed, and, caught in a growing homesickness, she asked the bear if she could visit her family. He had no objections but responded rather cryptically that she should listen to what her father said, but not to what her mother wanted her to do. So she returned home, was met well, and soon started to fill her family in on life over in the realm of the bear. When she rather lustily informed them of the bear's nocturnal activities, her mother leaned near and said, "Surely it would be a great pity not to see this fine man! Take this candle so when he is resting you can see what kind of catch you've got!" At this her father looked up and said, "Leave it alone! It will only do harm." On her return she

did indeed wait till he was slumbering, and, ignoring her father's advice, lit the candle. The legs were toned and lean, the wrists strong, the chest broad, and as she leant in to see his face, a drop of wax landed on his breast bone. With a great roar he awoke, "One more month! If you could have held on one more month, I could have become a man all the time! I am held in the glamour of the Skull-Gnashing Great Dark Queen; she made me a bear, and now that this has happened, I have to go and marry her! One more month!" With that he fled the bedchamber, out into the dark...

After the severity of his departure, we discover the first surprise of the journey: that this strange Bear is actually a King himself, a noble. The castle the wild daughter is led to dwarfs her father's, makes it scant and lacking. We know that none of this was indicated when the daughter made her choice. As in an encounter with Faerie, certain things seem dreamlike, obscure. We find that Valemon the White Bear King becomes a man at night, that some shape shifting is at hand. Also, there is the extraordinary detail that she passes through the three pregnancies, immediately to lose the babies as Valemon makes off with them. We are in the realm of deep symbols now, a place far more archaic than the daughter's original home.

Like Ivan arriving in Yaga's kingdom, we see a tantric moment occurring. In obedience to the call of the wraith, we find in the revelation a shock: no cave of bones and damp, but rather abundance on a huge scale. Of course, the channel that has been opened between the heart and soul of the daughter will amplify the radiance of the castle tenfold. Do you remember the tiny flat you lived in when you first left home? How much you loved it? As the first place you lived in that was yours, even that was a place of huge psychic wealth, the possibility of changing shape right there, far from the pacing parents. We wonder at her luck; great forces have flown into the opening she made by leaving. We are reminded of the phenomenon of new converts to a religion being gifted with words of prophecy and healing whilst aged practitioners look glumly on. An openness to the unseen rather than any great scholarly learning is what creates the doorway. This is a kind of luck the Gods sometimes give the first timer. The difficulty arises in trying to build a strong enough container to maintain that practice without becoming so dogmatised that the Gods can no longer get through.

With all this freshness and magic abounding, we are given a clue that this is early days in the story, that maybe she is still following or dancing with this energy rather than fully integrating it. Dancing can lead to high adventure though, and whatever Valemon's castle holds must be potent, as she has three children, one after another. Still, during such an infatuation, strange things can be discounted, and the children are spirited away. Something in the daughter has freed itself in the three years since leaving her family. She has drunk deeply from the well of the Otherworld, lived close to the shimmering gaze of dawn, and escaped her shackles.

Maybe she painted in her studio for three years, listened to Billie Holiday, drank wine and paid no attention to selling work. Maybe she toured the length of South America in a travelling theatre company and never wrote home. Maybe she lived in a small Welsh fishing village and fashioned effigies to the sea waves themselves.

Whatever has been going on with her is swathed in a sense of being near the magical places. The inebriation of the hazy zones means that years can pass at lightning speed in our world and just one night in the other. This hints at accelerated experience, something rarefied, not tangled in shopping lists and the school run. One aspect of the wild daughter's strength is being drawn from the animal realm, but we see in the night-time transformations some counterforce wanting to break through, to integrate, to take human form.

What the story calls the bear is attempting to pull itself from the unconscious to the conscious, to be wedded, but if it remains in this betwixt and between state, it lacks the grind/rub of tension to be fully born. The daughter's return to the horizontal realm, the family, provides both crisis and deepening of the situation. Goodbye sweet moments with the oil paints, hello trouble, the great awakener. The advice of the mother causes us all to pull back in dismay — yet we know the applecart has to be overturned.

From interpretations of "Eros and Psyche" (and its survival into current times due to its insertion into Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*), the Raising of the Candle can be seen as a moment when we decide to drop down into darker depths: "What really is the face of my family? How is my marriage after thirty years?" It means peeling back the bandages and peering at the wound. If, in a relationship, only one of you is ready to make that journey, then the other can react like Valemon, and flee the chamber of the lovers altogether. That's the psychological layer of the story; on a mythological level, everything is behaving just so, the advice of the mother being in service to the more elemental swings of initiation that are hidden from us for now. Valemon may protest, but only on the level of a man, not in his Magician aspect.

Raising the Candle means bringing things to account. Governments, when wading through yet another political scandal, or television companies, getting caught rigging phone-ins, love the rhetoric of 'Raising the Candle' but refuse to lift the light to the face. As we mentioned, the tempo of this activity is rarely harmonious in a relationship, in which one of us normally wants to stay on the upper deck whilst the other descends into the barnacles, seaweed, and anchorless depths.

... With that, and ignoring the wild daughter's pleading, the Bear set off at speed for his appointment. She jumped on to his back and held on as he swept through the deep forests of his land. She held on through itchy thickets, through the iciest of rivers, till her fingers were blue and her clothes rags, until at one savage turn of the road she was finally flung off, landing hard on the cold ground. In seconds the Bear was gone and she was completely alone. She wandered this way and that for a long time until she came to a cottage in which she found an old woman and a young girl. The King's daughter asked if they had seen the White Bear King Valemon. "We did, but he was passing so fast you can't catch him. He's a month away." Well, she took the news as best she could and engaged in conversation with the young girl. They sat together and talked about the flowers that grew by the window, and what birds would sing early in the morning. The young girl started to play with a pair of golden scissors, and whenever she clipped the air an abundance of silk, lace, cotton and wools appeared before her.

Clothes were born in an instant, offering both warmth and style. Looking up at the old woman, the young girl said, "This poor woman's clothes are in rags. She needs the scissors more than us. Could we give them to her?" It was agreed, and the third daughter made her way further into the forest clutching the scissors. We know she spent more nights alone before she came to another cottage. Again, she met a crone and a young girl; again she asked them if they'd seen Valemon. Again, he had passed by so quickly she could never catch him. He was at least a week away. Well, she fell into talking with the young daughter about the music she most loved, the strangeness of dreams, and her favourite animals. The girl was playing with a goblet as they talked, a very magical goblet, because every drink she desired would instantly fill it. Hot toddies, fresh water, and rich berry juices could all be available in an instant. Seeing their visitor's distress, the young girl enquired whether they could give the goblet to her, so at least she had some liquid to help nourish her. The crone agreed that the third daughter needed something for her thirst and handed the goblet over. Well, more time passed in the woods for the third daughter. She finally came to yet another cottage, also with a crone and girl inside. She asked the question about Valemon and this time the response was, "Yes, we've seen him, just yesterday, but he whisked past at such speed you could never catch him." Now used to this answer, she sat on the floor with the young girl and discussed all the different ways you could plait hair and what it was like to see lightning strike an old tree. The girl produced a cloth, and when she uttered the words, "Cloth, spread thyself, and deck thyself with every good dish!" it produced legs of lamb, freshly baked bread, figs, crunchy salads, exotic chocolates and a dozen mouth watering nibbles. The young girl was touched by the tiredness of the third daughter's eyes, and asked that she might give the cloth of abundant food to the stranger. Without hesitation the crone agreed, and the third daughter went on her way, still looking, still hoping.

It seemed that forest stretched and shifted before her, so that she'd never come to the end of it. She wandered far off any regular paths, through bushes and long grass, by poison oaks, and slept under an uncertain night sky. After a great long time, she came to a vast mountain, with sheer sides, like a wall. It was very forbidding, but next to its base the third daughter found another cottage. This cottage was inhabited by numerous little children all circling around their mother, desperate for food, like chicks in a nest. They were so hungry they were sucking on warm pebbles, pretending they were apples. Dressed in rags and dehydrated, the children were a sorry sight. In no time, the third daughter had produced the scissors, goblet and cloth. Soon, the children were clothed, warm, and eating real apples, chicken, cucumber and cheese and drinking hot chocolate...

So the curious third daughter has now been discharged from the back of the energy that got her out of her father's house. Those immediate, strong decisive promptings have abandoned her. One of the esoteric meanings of being lost in the forest is to go inward, to travel down in lowering spirals to a bed of autumn leaves and be still. We start to glimpse the moon in a place like this. Whatever energy we were riding has bucked us off.

Half-way through the court case, the bright young lawyer collapses and finds herself in a hospital bed.
Inquisitive moves toward soul knowledge are never a one-time deal, and the required responses change like light

on water. What was active in the daughter now has to retreat; in order to deepen, she has to be still. The tacit can rarely be detected at speed charging through a forest, a career or relationship. The initiatory field has opened again, this time requiring we walk through another door. Fire gives way to water. We understand that the third daughter's wandering could be months without a cooked meal, a hand on the shoulder, a reason to raise her head from the sodden earth. Just when she may be thinking of lying down and becoming a willow tree, she encounters the first cottage, with its crone, child and gift. This alerts us that some work must have been done internally, that the outside world is finally starting to respond to her movement downwards.

We cannot help but notice the constellation of the crone, the mother and the maiden — the three-fold, absolutely, positively, incredibly ancient face of the Goddess. She is both in the presence and part of this archaic force. Maybe owls adorn the doorframe and a scythe of the silvered moon leans by the fire. Maybe if we sink deep enough into ourselves, it will be possible to have an audience with the bone-white, spider-spined, child/universe/elder dream- maker of all the known and unknown worlds. The cottage doorways are TEMPLE doorways for the daughter, where there are no ritual questions but everything to be won. Just don't dare suggest she is contained entirely by you, or you'll be toast.

This is the daughter's encounter with the Red, Black and White — the sequence we find in "Ivan the Bear's Son." Only this time the Red is represented by the menstruating fullness of herself, the Black by the presence of the old woman, and the White by the youth and sexual innocence of the young girl.

I have a quote here from Robert Graves,

I write of her as the White Goddess because white is her principle colour, the colour of the first member of her moon trinity . . . the New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination.

(Graves 1948 :70)

It seems that somewhere on the wyrd road of our own wanderings, if we are sufficiently lost then we will arrive at this most ancient, solitary realm. We know that in Greece this triple power was represented by Persephone as the Maiden, Demeter as the Mother and Hecate as the Crone. In the magical papyri from Greco- Roman Egypt we find the poem of "Three faced Selene" where we encounter "Hekate, many named, Mene, cleaving air just like dart-shooter Artemis, Persephone, Shooter of Deer, Night Shining, triple sounding, triple-headed, triple voiced Selene." (Betz 1989 :43) In an era in which even to have the language to comprehend a visit to the three doorways is rare, we understand why thousands of men and woman over the last thirty-five years have attempted to raise our

awareness of the Triple Goddess. Even so, to attempt to hijack her for a particular cause in the horizontal world can be naive.

On all three of the third daughter's visits, the news on Valemon is not good, but slowly shifts in time-scale. "I saw him a month ago, a week ago, three days ago, but you'll never catch him!" Each encounter is a move further along the road, but she meets continual encouragement to work harder, to sleep under hedges, to become a lover of solitude, to keep stumbling deeper into the forest of herself. Of course, something is progressing, otherwise she would never have got nearer Valemon. What are the gifts?

We could say this means she is learning how to clothe, nourish and feed the soul whilst lost in the woods. The Scissors are active but linked to the invisible; they 'drink down the moon' into this world. Iron, we know, is talismanic, associated with defence against evil. So the clothes that flow from this lunar connection would have powerful, life-giving properties tied into their hemlines, straps, gilded unicorn designs, heavy silver brooches, warm wools, delicate silks and ornate leather jerkins. We can refer back to other chapters in this book that elaborate the visual manifestation of inner vision — the cloak of bird feathers. Something is emerging that is ready to be beheld by the outside world, but speaks of the other.

The Goblet, of course, has associations with the Holy Grail, especially in one of its earlier forms, Ceridwen's cauldron. We know one Knight who found the Grail is Parzival. Parzival actually means "One who Pierces the Valley." A valley is a place between two opposite mountains. So we see that to attain the grail is to be that one who can move through the centre of the extremes of duality and not get caught in the play of the diametric poles of aversion or longing. Duality defines the temporal, noetic realm, but the aspiration of a Grail-seeker is to abide in the non-dual ground of beingness.

To be gifted with the Goblet raises our wandering in the forest from abstract misfortune to timely and vital. Like Parzival in the wastelands, the third daughter has had much stripped away. But this is soul-water she now drinks, directly from the roots of the World Tree.

The Cloth evokes Christ's feeding of the five thousand, the moment when Jesus multiplies the soul nourishment this world needs over and over. For Jesus, that was an overt show of divinity, of Christhood. In a community of the starving, he manifested both physical sustenance and relationship with his biblical ancestors. In the African story of the Genie and the Tree, we come across a gifting of another cloth, one end of which causes all it touches to become silver, and the other end of which heals all wounds. The recipient of the cloth becomes a kind of wandering alchemist and healer, fulfilling both roles in a wasteland world.

At a conference on the Iranian poet Hafez I attended recently, one of the older Persian speakers suddenly leaned forward to the audience and said, "Make your work The Face of the Beloved, and let what you create be her lashes, her mole, her lips." To do that would mean carrying all these gifts, letting the radiance of the World beyond the World shine into each cottage door you come to. Doing so requires both huge strength and the capacity for a kind of visible luminosity, an active principle that can only be born from a great stillness. We see also that it is the

third daughter's child aspect, the part of her born since leaving her father's house, that convinces the old women, the wisdom keepers, to release the gift because she's done the work.

The firebird inside the daughter is starting to flap its wings now. We sense that it has taken a long time to move through the three temple doors of the three cottages and be thus gifted. Our clearest signal that she is coming to the end of the wandering stage occurs when she arrives at the cottage of the children and the woman. From being in a state of passively receiving, she is now moving into the active stage of giving. Her suffering, seemingly random, has actually given her the capacity to provide warmth and sustenance for herself and others. We may not enter this stage till our forties or fifties in this world. The scene of the ragged children heating pebbles to pretend they are apples is particularly alarming. The absence of what is juicy and water-filled means they must chew on something teeth-breaking, rough and lacking any nourishment, with only the fantasy of sustenance to keep them going. Whole cultures chew on pebbles disguised as apples. A relationship can drag out for decades on the dim memory of that 'one summer', so many years ago. The cult of the spin doctor testifies to this kind of activity. Much pebble-heating is required on a national level to persuade a people to go to war, dangling the flimsy scent of righteousness around a core of something the body naturally resists swallowing.

That pebble-eating culture is what many of us face today. There are so many pebbles rattling around on television I'm amazed the sets don't break. The curious, wild and abundant third daughter is, by her very authenticity, opening the door to real food for that family. A deeper fall altogether occurs when we forgot what a real apple was ever like, forget its texture and vitality and settle for the hard nugget of fragrant nothingness. This is the 'event' of the New Mall being opened, the 'event' of a yet another supermarket arriving in our over-stuffed towns. . .

. . . It was revealed to the daughter that Valemon was actually up at the top of the Glass Mountain (as it was called) in the thrall of the light-devouring, many-bladed, saliva-trailing Troll Queen. But luckily the husband of the woman in the cottage was a master Blacksmith who, she claimed, could make claws fitted to the feet and hands of the King's daughter, making it possible for her to climb the mountain and then find Valemon. Well, when the blacksmith returned, he fashioned just such claws, allowing her to climb up into the sky on the side of the Glass Mountain. She travelled through the dark but kept her nerve until finally she arrived at the top. There at the summit she found a vast, spiraling castle and everywhere she looked workers scurried this way and that, doing work-like scurrying things. It turned out that there was to be a wedding in three days between the One of the Great Darkness and Valemon. Despondent at this, the daughter sat at the gates and played with her scissors, and, as expected, clothes tumbled forth like a dancing river of exotic fabrics. Well, the Troll Queen immediately sensed that some sweetness had entered her Kingdom and scurried to the very spot in a half-second, if that. Entranced by the magical scissors and frustrated at her own tailors' bungling attempts to construct a wedding dress, the Shocking Hag Woman attempted to cajole, enchant and bully the scissors away from the daughter. "You can have them on

one condition," she replied, "simply that you let me spend one night with Valemon." At this the Queen cackled, "Why certainly, a small price to pay. Now give me the shiny scissors!!"

At bedtime, the Queen fed Valemon a sleeping draught so he slept in a trance so deep that the daughter could not wake him, no matter how hard she tried. Her tears fell like rain. The next day the Queen spotted the daughter's goblet, and the daughter suggested how wonderful such a thing would be for a wedding reception — Shiraz, Merlot, brown ales from Cornwall, icy water from the Alps — imagine how impressed the guests would be! Stroking a whisker in deep thought, the Warlocked-razor-toothed one agreed, and the deal was struck for another night with Valemon. Well, she slipped him another draught and he slept right through.

This time the daughter's tears were like bullets from a gun and were accompanied by great sobs that wracked the chamber. After a sleepless night, the carpenters who were staying next door approached Valemon to ask him who was weeping in his room these last two nights. How on earth could he sleep through such waiting? Valemon immediately realized who the weeper must be. Meanwhile the Troll Queen had spied the daughter's cloth and its magical food-producing qualities, and, licking her many lips, agreed to the customary exchange of a night with Valemon for the cloth. That night Valemon held the sleeping draught under his tongue till the Grottesque Beloved was gone and then spat it out. The Queen returned suddenly, sniffed the air, and, suspecting something, produced a large needle and stuck it right through his arm. Well, he didn't even flinch, so she slumped off and let the king's daughter into the chamber. The moment they were alone, Valemon opened his eyes and the two lovers were reunited at last...

The arrival of the blacksmith tells us that something has to become iron in the daughter to survive this final stage in the journey. Traditionally, a blacksmith is associated with arcane energy, and rides the same midnight horse as the shaman and the magician, the ones who inspect the underside of the universe. A blacksmith can melt what seemed immovable, and new constellations are born. We have discovered in earlier chapters that mountains can indicate an expansion of soul knowledge. To climb an unclimbable mountain is to gain a very specific kind of strength. It appears that to combat a divinity, you must spend a great deal of time searching, hungry and close to the ground. The crucible of that slow walk forges us extended claws, visible signs of the shape-shifting of our psyche. A kind of visible plumage, like a warrior wears going into battle, the claws are both practical and serve as display.

Norwegian versions of this story hold that the Witch Queen is of Troll descent; lethal, powerful and with appetite, she is certainly a cousin of Yaga, though she is more earthbound, more caught up in the rinky-dink world. When we lose our western fixation with good/bad for a moment and move eastwards, we find a celebratory, even respectful relationship with this kind of energy, seeping under and over the polemic of opposition.

An initiating force, the Dark Queen qualifies as belonging to those Goddesses known as 'Awakeners'. In India, we have both the black yoginis and the mahavidyas drinking from the same well. When we peer over the covers at the mahavidyas we find they possess names like:

Kali: She Who is Black; The Power of Time

Chinnamasta: She Who Has Severed Her Head

Dhumavati: The Widow; She Who Abides in Smoke

Baglamukhi: The Paralyzer

Of course, she also exists in the many faces of the Triple Goddess, which means the swiftly maturing third daughter is caught in the play of a multi-layered awakening constantly on the brink of Jung's "abyss of impassioned dissolution." To think the Queen is somehow outside the pantheon is mistaken. Most of us are so hard-wired by our western upbringing to view her only as evil that the shift required to view her from a whole other perspective is normally too much for us to handle. We have a hundred freeze-framed images from The Wizard of Oz and one-dimensional fairy stories making it nearly impossible for us to see the life-giving possibility of relationship with such a force. Still, many millions east of Suez do.

Mythological thinking is not a simple morality tale; to always demand a level of intimacy or comfort is to lose the wider vista it offers. You can stay in the Father's House forever, or you can go and find your own kind of trouble. So she is divine in some way, but in a way that makes us reach for the door lock, the children and the good book. She is a force of relentless consumption, a motorway paved in a second over a meadow of rare flowers, a wave that engulfs a coastal village that is never seen again.

We hesitate at the point of making her demonic, though, for she seems more elemental than that. In some dark way she represents what Finn MacColl called "The Music of what is." She can be present in a song, an idea, a book, a ritual, a fight, a take-over bid.

We begin to understand the need for iron. We know that the wily, long-nailed, curious, wild third daughter has ascended the Glass Mountain, coming nearer to the Gods, and will therefore need wits and some kind of armour. Her obvious gifts halt and alert the Fierce Queen to something that interests her, something to be gained. We imagine her peering down through the foggy cloud breaths of dying men and spotting this small, unafraid and abundant woman.

A clue that this is an initiation story is the fact that she doesn't just scoop the daughter up, bite off her head, and take the gifts — she negotiates. This is an auspicious meeting, not a random event. As exemplified by Yaga's ritual questioning, even these elemental forces have certain turns of phrase and particular moments of cosmological obligation that they have to honour. Two great forces have met in the psychological and mythological worlds. We learn much from the detail that the Queen has a longing for a fine dress, a decent tippie

and a banquet. She is many-faced; to fixate only on the flashing eyes and grotesque weeping belly is to thin her out—never a wise thing. She is looking for a certain style, even as she eats whole Scottish clans in the 18th century, via the English Army, or wanders through a Gulag looking for bones.

Though Freud asked “What do women really want?” in the twentieth century, we see the same question being asked in the medieval folktale *The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Lady Ragnell*, which first appeared in the thirteenth century. We see the similar situation of an individual under enchantment, requiring the relationship with another to break it. Ragnell is some kind of second cousin five times removed from the Black Queen and her cohorts in India; we are interested in her clarity of her communication with Arthur — her certainty.

So we see that to meet the Hag is a move towards the articulating of real desire, not the consensual wants of an already designated kingdom. We see the inevitability of the daughter’s encounter with the Black Queen. In stating her desire so clearly for the wreath and leaving the Father’s Kingdom, she has already grown a tusk or two. We could say she is moving from the ‘niceness’ of the princess into the clear fierceness of the Hag.

A similar move for men appears in “The Devil’s Sooty Brother” by the Grimm brothers. After seven years in the underworld with a dark earth-man, the young man emerges with the clarity to state what he wants. He is able to spot a rip-off and do something about it. He gets his salary — to the last penny. His hair is washed, combed and trimmed, and his eyes are clear. Both stories seem connected with time in hidden places, where, no longer radiant, one is able to stand in front of a king ‘warts and all’ and keenly state their requirements. The fragility of an external display is secondary to the power of the deep heart. When we meet one of the many thousands of us who can’t state what they long for, it suggests we haven’t moved from the frozen princesses’ seat, but are caught in any number of inherited addictions.

Despite wanting the daughter to find Valemon, by now we are alert to the fact that everything happens in threes — three daughters, three cottages, three castles. We suspect that this new exchange may follow that same rhythm. The practical negotiation between the Dark Queen and the Daughter has a kind of charm to it. We can imagine the Holy Terror herself, swishing this way and that in front of a long mirror in her skirt. However, she has lost none of her guile; she effectively drugs Valemon not to hear the crying of his beloved, the woman who moves in the dark groves of Soul. We know that ability to move into grief carries great significance mythologically. In certain Lakota creation myths, the rivers and great lakes of America are the tears from the Creator’s eyes. Our weeping can be a meeting of inner and outer worlds, an external expression so clear in its message that it can arouse the same in others. Tears can be a vital tool in any significant ritual; they peel back the surface of expression to its tender centre. Many great forces can anaesthetise us to the tears of the soul’s opening. Years sucking on heated pebbles can do that, or a sense that to attend to the soul’s weeping would bring too much grief. Best to swallow the draught of the great Swallower of Continents and stay en-tranced.

For both men and women, lack of a real soulful life, or too much attention to the bone wearing minutia of the things of this world, can leave us feeling as if something vast is draining us, but we don’t know what. It is

fascinating to note that now the very force that pulled the daughter from the Kingdom of Safety is itself utterly dependent on her to rescue him from a life enthralled to the Dark Hoofed Queen. Valemon, on the level of an energy, left the daughter in the one place he couldn't go: the still, internal, trackless, tacit forest. In doing this, he has saved his own life.

There are many changes of the mythological stage-set occurring in this story, as one awesome force takes the lead and the others a supporting role. Now it is Valemon who finds himself in a state of enforced passivity, frozen, his only hope the abundant powers revealed through an encounter with the deep feminine.

In his slumber, Valemon appears to reach an impasse. The sleep is too strong to wake from, despite everything endured by the daughter — he cannot wake. This is where we encounter the curious figure of the Listener by the Door — the alerter to the hypnotised masculine. Jean Houston calls this the “observer self,” some part of us immune to the magnetic pulls of these contesting forces, standing outside the field of negotiation. Looking at this moment from a larger perspective, we can say this is a fragment in time that has been recurring with increasing urgency over the last eighty or so years. The fierce up-swelling of feminism could be seen as attempting just that; the men's work born out of the eighties and onwards is internal work in the masculine towards a similar, but not identical end. Both break out of a poisoned sleep into awakening, free from the great devourer.

It is interesting that we need some third component for this to occur, to avoid polarisation. It could be that on the everyday plane, myth and psychology embody that observer, that they illuminate enough complexity to diffuse the stand-off, the viciousness of all-out gender war.

Another larger interpretation is that the planet itself may be trying to awaken us from the thing that Eats And Consumes All. In this case the listener by the door is a tsunami, a flooded New Orleans — something that in the cold light of day says, “For Christ's sake; don't you hear the sobbing of your Beloved?”

The piercing of Valemon's arm is the beginning of his descent from a supernatural figure into a man. The whole story holds its breath as the ritual cut occurs, and he bears it without reaction. It is a kind of reversal of the faux-wreaths we saw at the beginning of the story. As you walk away from \$100,000 a year, the boss screams, “Yeah, and we're taking the house back too, and the company car.” In goes the needle, just as you wake up.

The Queen as initiator wants to know if he's serious; does he have sufficient courage? Physical pain is an entry point to the mortal world. We must remember that, despite the Queen's role as a foe in this tale, on a certain level she is facilitating an initiation for the wild third daughter. .

. . . They now had to find a way to defeat the Queen. The carpenter next door was roused, and he fell in with their planning: as builder of the bridge the bridal procession was to cross, he unscrewed a bolt or two, weakened a beam here and there, and waited. The Queen traditionally crossed first and as she stalked across, her foot hit the weak parts and WHOOSH! she fell, fell, fell down into the depths and was never seen again. None of her servants seemed overly aggrieved at the suggestion that a new wedding should occur, between Valemon and the King's

Daughter. This wedding took place and the newly married couple took what they could gather from the Queen's castle and made their way back to the bride's father's castle (the King) for a second wedding. On the way they stopped at the three cottages, since it had been revealed that the three girls were none other than their daughters! At the wedding, Ragnell turned up with a mandolin and sang murder ballads with Danny Deardorff; Gioia Timpanelli blew the roof off the joint with spicy Italian folk tales; Lorca, Eliade and Graves gate-crashed through a window held open by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who led the arm wrestling; Tom Waits ran the card games and Aretha Franklin led the Cossack dancing. We leave them, reunited at last, at the banqueting hall, as the Irish say, "in radiant contentment," together, in love, and surrounded by friends.

There were three castles in this story. One was the House of the Father, one was Valemons the White Bear King and the last was the Troll Queen, which, by the daughter's ingenuity, became, however briefly, her own. These three energy centres she moved through admirably, until she finally came into her own. This truth is contained in the line, "They took what they could gather from the Castle." The fact that they married there, meant that the daughter became Queen of the Glass Mountain.

We realise that despite the dash from the Father's House and the years in Valemon's abode, the two were still not married; instead they were in the circuitous dance of getting to know each other (and we know how long that can take). The masculine presence of Valemon had provided the clarity and drive to leave the Kingdom of Safety, but it was the feminine realm of the deep forests that allowed Valemon to break free from the grip of the Eternal Devourer. We recognise again, in the story of the daughter, that mixture from Ceridwen's cauldron, the binding opposites of all initiation deserving of the title: rationality and lunacy, sun and moon, masculine and feminine. This is why the marriage took so long to arrive at, instead of taking place straight after the meeting and the Wreath. As we have seen, Valemon's energy (that awoke within the daughter) led her into the outer world, but it took the descent to give that energy depth and gifting, freeing it from the hypnotism of the part of us that just wants more. The scissors, goblet and cloth clothed and fed the emerging consciousness of the initiated feminine.

We would imagine the daughter had some bones sewn into her wedding dress at that second wedding, magpies for bridesmaids and maybe a small knife in her garter in case her parents got too cloying. A woman who has become Queen of the Glass Mountain carries a ferocious sass back to the Old Kingdom, small purple flowers emerging wherever she walks. A focused, gutsy, creative (in its biggest sense) life will bear three gifting children. They may come, as Rilke says, as "a falcon, a storm or a great song." (Rilke 1993 :422) How that life looks to me or anyone else is none of our business. That's between you and the mysteries. May they lead you from an exhilarating courtship to an abiding marriage.

On the deep, moon-revelling, god-singing level of this story, we see how all the players were moving to divine winds. This great story of initiation requires a controlling Father, a lifting of the Candle, a falling in the Forest, growing Iron Tips, a terrifying Queen and a deeply thrust Needle. Finally the daughter returns to the kingdom from which she came, just as the old stories say, changed, regal, vibrant and married to her soul.

That is a huge story, a lot to absorb. We will look back again at key moments in its narrative this evening. Let's break for a drink and snack. I encourage solo work on the story this afternoon. If you are heading out past the camp entrance please take a blanket and waterproofs, it's freezing, so please be back within an hour.

May Session

The Nature of Vision

Today I'm going to talk a little about the nature of vision in initiatory practice. There will be glimpses of many little stories within it, rather than one big one.

In the old stories, there is this unrelenting emphasis on the return; that the life you lead ultimately is of use to others. Black Elk is emphatic on this point: "A man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see." (Black Elk 1980 :128) With the rupture of initiation comes the opening of compassion, awareness, to use that exhausted phrase, of inter-connectedness. Back in Ivan the Bear's Son, Ivan was unable to return to the community until experiencing betrayal and being shattered, bone-by-bone, in Baba's underworld. This signifies the need for a re-born perception, a rupture that creates a new life shape for us. The body has had the experience, but it can take awhile for the mind to catch up.

In the stories, the initiates' return is often followed by great celebrations (a huge wedding in Ivan's case), feasting and ceremony. It appears that everyone is appreciative and aware of the ordeal undergone; indeed, status in the village is only ensured after such an experience has occurred. Something is shifted in these moments, transformed, blessed; the rat carcass you've been carrying becomes a luminescent wand. The eyes support grand gestures, and wild dances of the community throw a final cloak over the shivering initiate, their rightful garment, the one they suffered for. Although what they encountered lies out there on the empty plains and far from the hearth, the community understands its impact. The rawness of the initiate's shape is collectively honed, pruned and blessed into village life.

This is vital to the psyche's perception of the process; it sweetens the charred edges of our descents and opens its flavour out into the wider heart of the village. It stops the trauma from becoming brittle, its motion transmuting fire into drinking water for everyone else.

Mircea Eliade tells us that when a Fiji king experienced his enthronement ceremony, he knew it to be "creation of the world" or "fashioning the land" (Eliade 1963 :39). In these phrases we get a sense of the relationships between sovereign ritual, the ripening of crops and the right behaviour of the seasons; they are connected. Eliade goes on to say that in India also, the installation of a king, the Rajasuya, is seen as recreating the universe. I interpret this not as human arrogance but rather an intense understanding of human/animal/ weather cycles and recognition of their interweaving. Coming back from the wild, the returning initiate is experiencing a second birth, so the welcoming committee had better be good at midwifing this new infant. The stripping away in initiation hollows out a small space for something true to enter, not conditioned by self-loathing or rampant ego. The golden touch that emerges is not delivered by a human hand, though it needs a human hand to confirm its arrival.

How do we receive such a blessing? Not in blanket praise or a barbed compliment, but in a form that is so nourishing we are actually sated, so that the ravenous self, desperate for affirmation is quenched. We spend most of our lives contorting ourselves into the shapes required in order to receive vilifying little pats on the head, possibly a raise. An elder who has worked the same hard terrain represents human beings who have integrated the experience. It appears that the ability to bless comes from the long term, generation-spanning cultivation of one's real work. For all its sophistication, contemporary culture struggles to find value in the mythological thread of our lives. As a result, the initiate's return to modernity is often a return to bafflement or disinterest in the experience. We can see this literally in individuals returning from a wilderness rite-of-passage or in our society's reluctance to bring a metaphorical perspective to hard times and crisis. A whole way of knowing has broken down, a circle has been shattered. If you don't return to a blessing but instead a harsh environment, how do you keep the experience alive?

The truth is that the journey continues on the return; there are more false giants, any number of sleeping draughts, alleys full of starving dogs. But to remain forever on the margins is a refusal of the call to vocation, refusal to develop the armour and facility to combat the lethargy we detect. The old adage that we seek initiation for the good of the community is a hard pill if we've felt rejected by the community all our lives.

Thoreau's extended movement into the wild required a conscious abdication of communal expectation. His twenties, for others a time of nest building and career, were spent moving further into the slow and dazzling tempos of the natural world. He would often use the phrase "living sincerely" to describe that. So what is Thoreau talking about when he says "live sincerely"? There is choice, responsibility and hardness in this idea. It requires a psyche that extracts itself from the loud hum of family history, peer pressure, and self-imposed need to conform. Maybe these voices never quite go away, but that's all they are: voices, rather than the ten commandments. Thoreau's sincerity involves the possibility that your life will get gnarly and only half-visible by anyone witnessing it.

Thoreau opened up some part of himself that was both receptive and disciplined to non-human dialogue. For him this required a certain turning away from the human community. There is a great deal of both lover and warrior here: lover, in the ability to be nourished so completely by snowstorms and reed beds; warrior, in the discipline of daily walks and writing. He's not smoking pot under an oak tree and then wandering back to a condo. To live sincerely also means the development of patience. If you have committed to living as honestly as you can, then the absence of artificial buoyancy means you'll probably disappear from public view for a time. Thoreau followed this movement into nature for thirteen years; Walden only appearing eight years before his death. In a culture that is as uneasy with vertical attention as ours is, its rhythms are not predisposed for this kind of process; we're not talking about a gap year between school and university.

So it is useful to take Thoreau's commitment to the experience rather than the book launch as our model. We don't detect that sense that he's planning to 'market' himself in some way. What Thoreau did have was tools: his ability as a writer, his fearsome imagination. At some point in our human development, it is helpful to us to find a way of communicating something of our soul. I don't mean stripping it down into a sound bite, but holding up its oblique and feathery shape to the community.

So there has to be a drop of external expectation and a movement towards inwardness. At some point in the future that only the gods can designate, the cradle of your psyche is tough enough to move some kind of coherent voice out into the human world. Be prepared to do a lousy job for a time, but do it anyway. The receptive and the disciplined have to make an accord with one another, a pact. Beauty can blossom in the most adverse of conditions, but personal diligence has to be there too. 'Iron spine' is a good phrase worth stealing from the Buddhists. Get up early if you have to, stop drinking (start if it helps), and have several paintings of Cronos hanging around to drag little moments of crowd-pleasing creativity into the slow, dense work that nourishes you for a lifetime. A body of wood smoke and ravens may be just strong enough for the glare of the market place. Thoreau says: "In the shade I will believe what in the sun I loved." (Thoreau 1986 :54)

One piece of advice that I give to anyone after a wilderness fast is not to make any life-changing decisions for at least a month. Take care of yourself, rest, reflect, avoid villains and find some patch of scrubland, park or copse nearby and fall in love with it. What's a villain? Potentially, anyone who you are naïve enough to blurt out your story to while it's still uncooked. You create the opportunity for someone to wander through your inner sanctum, ransack the kingdom, steal the muddy gold and leave with a smirk on their face, dumping it a mile down the road because they don't know what to do with it. Meanwhile, on the surface of things, you keep stirring your coffee, wondering why you feel so drained and why your friend can't stop grinning. In a culture addicted to the confessional, we may find it hard to hold certain information back, but that is what's required. Somewhere down the line it will be vital to communicate, but only when the roots of the experience are in half a foot of good dark soil. Don't be available to psychic voyeurs and shoplifters drawing titillation from your hard yards.

Vision implies clarity, clear views, inspiration. But visions can be terrifying, misguided, wrong. Hitler had vision and we can see where that led. Vision, from an indigenous perspective, results from seeking guidance from the expanded corners of the universe, to see with the free ranging width of the condor, or the focused attention of a digging badger. It is the clarity of Gwion Bach, the inebriated truths of Dionysus, the celestial panoramas of Black Elk. It is having the facility, the focused preparation to draw on all your sensing-nature and break from imagined limits. Big stuff, yes. The mistake is when you expect the information you receive back to be in comprehensive, perfectly formed English.

You are bathed in information, mirrors and clues from the moment you step onto the land; the challenge is how to read and develop what Gary Snyder calls "tawny grammar". I have frequently encountered muddy-faced, tearful fasters stamping into base camp after two to three days alone declaring: "Nothing has happened!" With faces like

storm clouds, they sip frantically from their water bottle, bemoaning their inability to have any kind of experience. "Every time I try and be still, a woodpecker comes and bangs away at a tree in front of me; it's odd, I keep dreaming of a man slowly pulling layers of his skin off to reveal bark and moss; last night I heard music in my grove; a young deer keeps coming at dawn and standing by my sleeping bag — so as you can see, nothing's happening." Nothing's happening? Separated from the group, strange things can appear normal. The shift in consciousness takes days, so some are barely aware it's happening.

What wilderness mirrors back at you can be gentle, rough or downright terrifying, but it informs the body before the intellect has a chance to frame it. The medicine is in the experiential; the mind is a secondary organ. The endless stretch of a day without watches, the emptying and filling of the estuary, the dead fox found under the bracken are all aspects of you mirrored back by the oracle of nature. They are both separate from you and absolutely revelatory of your life. Each initiate receives a different set of experiences, trails, signals, epiphanies that are bespoke to them. The vision is flowing, not static.

It is often in the quieter moments that we locate vision. If we are only used to our own impatient tempo, we can ride roughshod over many messages coming to us from the brush. Vision is associated with leadership, motivation and action, but the initiatory road shows us that to locate it in the first place can require incubation and openness. Mythological vision, nature vision, hunter-gatherer vision all require a slowing, a stilling, very different from a brainstorming session in the boardroom. Bushmen will slow to a trance-like state to venture into the dreamtime of the animals they wish to hunt, to both locate and arrange which of them will lay down their lives. They are clearly accessing dramatically different parts of their consciousness than those many of us are used to. But contained in the training of tribal groups worldwide is the simple attention to the subtle movements of nature, something any of us can develop.

Time spent in wilderness can be the first opening into the panoramic, multi-layered vision that traditional people have cultivated for so long. In the realisation that you are part of a seething mass of intelligence called the living world, clarity about your place in it can surface. A distant neighbour of Thoreau once saw him motionless before a pond for eight hours, watching frogs. It is often a focused gaze on small things that reveals what could emerge as a great force in our life. The peculiar nature of what catches our attention is a clue to what could come next. I had been painting for several years when I realised I was obsessed with a recurrent image: hunters leaving villages to head out into large forests. I didn't see this as metaphoric or anything else, it just was. Ten years later I find myself talking about that very thing. So allow mesmeric images to approach — the more still you are, the deeper the resonance they'll have. In quietness some power can show up, sift through the pornography of want and really bite you on the arse. An image you could spend the next five decades approaching may appear. Up on the mountain, Caer Idris becomes the teacher, dealing with hunger becomes the teacher, small animals ferreting around in the dark become the teacher.

Some of the earliest British examples we have of people entering the wild to seek vision are contained in the druidic system. As we know of the druids, the initiation of nature would be a large part of their training, lasting decades. From it a kind of divining could be developed; a cluster of hazels, the ripples on a lake, a freshly killed deer, could become revealers of mystery. In the story of Merlin, we find that he experienced an illumination in the woods, and was driven there by both grief and fasting.

Merlin's experience of the wild was raw, even terrifying, but necessary in the wider scheme of his life. In his grief, he uncovers to even greater depth the calling he was born for. A quote here from Geoffrey of Monmouth on Merlin's wild experience: "Into the forest he went, glad to lie hidden under the ash trees . . . he made use of the roots of plants and of grasses, of fruits from trees and of the black berries in the thicket. He became a man of the woods, as if dedicated to the woods." (Monmouth 1984 :144)

The druidic tradition holds the position of the ovate, which had connotations of prophecy, madness, and being on the edge of things. That inflamed perception can also be a kind of vision; it is a kind of deliberate invocation of the most mysterious elements of initiation. What emerges from the ovate is not thinned out by the language of the masses, it is a torrent, containing angular, magical trains of energy. Like a collapsing iceberg or a fox in the hen house, it is volume, action, tearing, biting, smashing; how does such an experience fall into the neat little confines of everyday language?

We hear from Geoffrey of Monmouth that the woods nourished Merlin, that a kind of food existed for him; but what sustained him was twofold: the roots, fruits and berries and his submersion in the deepest recesses of his own nature. Sometimes there's no way through it but to do it, no matter how gruelling.

On the dawning of the fifth morning, when the fasters return to base camp, eyes on stalks, weak, ecstatic, laughing, fried, angry, the last thing we get them to do is immediately talk about the experience. It can take years for such an event to fully sift through up into the conscious mind. To pretend that you fully comprehend its complexity is to watch its medicine slip through your fingers.

So when looking at the idea of vision, let's establish four elements:

1. The experience of the wilderness fast is a great deal of information from a non-human source, so its impact is not primarily to the rational, easily digested intellect.
2. To receive its message, an emptying out is required. Full up as we are with domestic concerns, job, and relationships, fasting assists us to slow down, open up, to be aware of our own emotional currents. We need to lose the distractions.
3. To go without food, company, books, watch, or phone for four days can be hard, even terrifying.
4. Don't be naïve. You are returning to a world that hasn't been where you've just been. Don't risk potential loss by trying to share the experience too early.

Finding community is a tricky thing; the main emphasis I want to make is the thought that community could live at least partially in the imagination, rather than continually forced into the literal. Our community should involve long dead poets, sharks teeth, the mist on a Scottish glen, the erotic trim of a Bedouin tent. We could reach a wider perspective on the word rather than attempting to wrestle it always into concrete solutions, petitions, finger wagging, committees, living in a tiny house of comrades arguing over who last bought the toiletries and who stole the tofu from the back of the fridge.

Communities could also be to do with reclaiming time: it seems to have a harsh, worried, pulse to many people. It is useful to reach back through it to a community of ancestors. I don't mean some vague concept, but in the work of vitalising folks down the centuries. It is naive for us to claim personal impoverishment when we are connected to the legacy of Emily Dickinson, Taliesin, Delius, Mirabai, Black Elk, Mingus, Wolfram Von Eschenbach or John Coltrane. We could find a specific soul-teacher from history and follow their lead. This will also broaden and deepen time around us, and in the same moment make us more genuinely present.

It's quite possible to completely re-experience time. A start is to regard the coming of night as a regular move into the eternal, the end of clock time till the sun rises the next day. Take questions to the night, questions that could never accomplish themselves in the agitation of daylight. Become a night walker, invite it to become an ally. What are the scents and impression that night brings? What goddesses glide through the open window? Night as a disorderly community of dreams, sudden fears and sideways epiphanies. Allow the art you make of your life to beguile the moon to wander to your bedside and start to talk. This allows us to flood into the wisdom of shadows and the indistinct blessings that midnight offers. It's a grave mistake for us to only associate wisdom with the daylight hours or 'light of knowledge'; we isolate ourselves from half the insights that twenty four hours carries. Night as an ally is to understand that it follows different deities to well mannered day: Lillith, Nyx, lusty Pan and his disgraceful fantasies – the 'luna'tics have taken over the asylum. At the same time that very hoard of impulses can cut to the marrow of all sorts of worries, and amplify all sorts of truths that we can't get near in the daylight hours. Night is the entering of a temple.

James Hillman claims that to reach back through history becomes a kind of osmosis, that you can merge into the leafy mulch of mystical texts and hard ideas, that you can become thousands of years old. This is another invitation to shape leap. So we extend community by actually retreating backwards.

Become an apprentice to the way Caravaggio handled colour and don't worry about having an original thought for at least five years. Allow yourself to feel strange and slightly magical. Compose poetry that is irritable and fiery, that runs to hundreds of lines, then learn by heart and recite to nearby jackdaws. Write letters again, and find the oldest mail box you can post them from. Decide that your lips are an altar to old Romanian goddesses and take up belly dancing. Give out library cards as birthday presents. Run a three week course from your porch on the relationship between the Aztec temples and gypsy gambling games from medieval Wales. Don't go easy on yourself.

On a year programme so centred around language, I want to talk a little about both the role of the storyteller in the context of wilderness rites-of-passage, and also a brief re-examination of both's relationship to the word culture.

Here's something interesting from Raymond Williams:

Culture had meant, primarily, the tending of natural growth, and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself.

Raymond Williams (Williams 1958 :xvi)

The role of the story teller within, or articulating from, initiatory experience, offers a contribution to Williams' "tending of natural growth", in fact amplifies the sense of culture past anthropocentric connotations, offering a perception that *includes* the wild - moonlight, visions, contact with the spirits of whales, joyful foals and the dawn star. Williams' assessment of the current associations of the word culture connotes grave damage. This assumption of culture *or* wildness (wildness is not chaos), has created a legacy we see daily writ large all around us. An association of the etymology of the word culture is *colere*, which means 'to till'. To till is to dig, to sweat, to make contact with the texture of soil, root, and worm; it is a move downwards, towards the subterranean. It seeks relationship to the information of earth, through a certain labour and discipline, that ultimately flourishes into clear wine for the wider community.

This broadened perception is also crucial for the health of the imagination: it creates a conduit for un-prescribed image to carry the myth of a person, community or country forward and into uncertain futures, rather than caught in the petrified symbology of the entirely consensual. The stories are again in movement. The desire to return to childhood is often really a desire to be connected again to the free-ranging imagination (the reality of such a return would be untenable to most). A culture of wildness would seek to engender that associative, curious consciousness in an adult, rather than a regression to childhood. To be child-like in this regard, rather than childish.

It is this very capacity that enables us to re-vision the transgressions and triumphs of our lives, to mythologize our pathologies. This is all symptomatic of the imagination in full health, rather than anchored to a tiny set of ingrained symbolic references. Oddly, it is sometimes a descent from physical lustre that creates that very imagistic freedom - Andre Gide says that illness opens doors to a reality which remains closed to the healthy point of view. So this re-seeing deepens perception, and includes attention to marginalised, abandoned, bizarre, troublesome, absurd mythic impulses that arise without permission. When the orchestrated crisis of initiation is abandoned, we are more likely to encounter such heretical visions in the throws of illness than the brightly lit

lecture hall. As the discredited, shocking image-language shuffles forward, we create accord again with the wisdom of stagnant pools, road kill and the shovel of the gravedigger. We allow the propulsions of unbidden vision to be accommodated within the wider remit of knowledge. This propulsion offers linguistic health too; there is a significant passivity in much contemporary language, a disappearance of vital, thoughtful words that matches the fast decline of certain animals, forests and stretches of wilderness. Many words are fleeing dictionaries daily.

A culture of wildness is accommodating of these raw but subtle images. It does not seek to stagnate but to stay true to its essential mythic promiscuity. If there is no move to the margins, no complicated assignation of rationality and intuition, then myth cannot truly exist. The etymology of the word 'wild' includes associations of *astray, bewildered, confused*, which indicates its very genius lies next to vulnerability and the bereft. It is a culture of inclusiveness, and suddenly the gods are implicit in conversation, symptoms of illness, fetish, relationship - we start to possess a vision-language of the deity that stands behind the impulse. This perception is polytheistic, unliteral, and connected to imagination more than belief. It offers a form of thought. The myth teller in all of us needs to till dark earth, to wander into bewilderment, to allow the cracks of sacred hallucination to broker new images of transformation and dialogue. 'Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry', wrote Auden of Yeats. Agenda and assignation are only half the task; how do we discern the myth-language being spoken through the depleted ice cap and fatigued bee?

But Poets as you say are like the holy disciples of the wild one, who
used to stroll over the fields through the whole divine night.

Friedrich Hölderlin (Hölderlin 1980 :47)

Friedrich Hölderlin is making the comparison here between the early followers of Dionysus and the poets. This is useful to us in creating valuable links between the archaic and the contemporary, so that it is possible to carry some of that older, intense consciousness into the modern world. "Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox it enters the dark hole of the head. The window is starless still; the clock ticks, the page is printed." (Hughes 1957 :14) Reading here Ted Hughes, we see he draws on fox consciousness till it possesses him, bends his writing, and suddenly the work is finished. To hold the strangeness of poetry in your mouth is an extension of the initiatory road out into the community. The poem can be about black lightning, folded linen, bitter green apples or high heels, but it requires your full attention; it opens realities, it doesn't shut them down. Call it magical awareness, psychological, mythological, creative, artistic, poetic, whatever it takes to maintain the balance of the seeming opposites, the solar village and the lunar forest. Indigenous people view this as practical as fixing a leak, practical because it shows things as they really are.

Language can become stunted, layered and lacking much otherworldly resonance. The injuries we inflict on the very vocabulary that brought us Shakespeare somehow mirror the injuries we inflict on our ability to imagine, and

on our peculiar, bespoke, longings. If our mouths can't catch and support language's delicacy, how do they birth themselves? I'm not suggesting we trot out soliloquies all day, but that we seek imaginal links between the high-end language of Yeats and the warmth of simple expression. The garden in our chest has more than one bird fluttering in its branches.

It's important not to feel ostracised by this talk of poetics. For years in my school life, I found the kind of poetry I was exposed to over-flowery or measured and impossible to relate to; there seemed to be a lack of blood to it. This however, is the fault of the education system, not poetry at large. We are each a strange container of unique experience, a castle full of erotic chambers, dust-filled cupboards of old bones, great halls with unending feasting, small towers of arcane literature, and balconies from which heartbroken lovers hurl themselves into the moat. All this is going on inside us all the time. Poetry is a divining tool that dips into these waters and dredges it to consciousness - gives it form.

Initiation invites two seemingly opposing qualities; sobriety and intoxication. There is the weight of grief, awareness of death, and growing responsibility of adulthood, but also the exuberance of relationship to wild nature and the strength of myth to guide you on your return. On the one hand it grounds you into the hard cycles of mortality, and on the other it provides an electrical current to open you to the real vitality of your life. It's said of the generosity of the great Irish hero Finn MacCall that: "If all the rivers of the world were to run pure silver and the leaves pure gold, Finn would have given them all away." Now there is an attitude worth emulating. Finn grew up in the woods, and had a poet's heart and a warrior's fist. Wildness pours from that saying. The boons received are ultimately a give-away for the whole tribe/community/country/planet.

We have to establish the nature of our gifts and find a way to make them available, not naively, with placards and sound bites, but with Yaga's canniness. We carry knowledge of a skeleton woman with us, of betrayal by false giants, of dismemberment, of being fed back to life, morsel by morsel by the smallest, wildest of birds. We have carried our knackered, leathered hearts through difficulty, hospitals, depressions, redundancies, addictions, success, and catastrophe; we are formidable.

Forty years ago it seemed that, every canyon and tundra having been explored, the only source of infinite exploration left was the self. With the frantic tilts and sways of global warming at hand, we are forced, humbled, into re-negotiating our relationship with wild nature. As individuals, we may feel vulnerable and doubtful of our ability to change anything. The seemingly overwhelming images of disaster we are confronted with can freeze us like rabbits in the headlights. As we feel our collective energy go down the psychic plughole, I am reminded of someone at a conference asking Gary Snyder why bother to save the planet. He replied with a grin: "Because it's a matter of character and a matter of style!" Finn would stand up, Boudicca would stand up, Arthur would stand up, Crazy Horse would stand up, Bridgit would stand up, Robin Hood would stand up. An adventure always has uncertain outcomes, but we're better for taking a first step. Stop looking for twigs and become the tree.

June Session

Deer Woman and the Velvet Antlered Moon

Today's gathering marks the beginning of three stories especially focused on the notion of longing, from Siberian, Irish and Romany Gypsy backgrounds. As many of you have recently gone through the vision quest up in Wales with me, you are probably well acquainted with longing - you probably longed for it to be over when you were going through it, and you probably longed to go back up on the mountain several weeks later! Such is life. So let's begin. We'll unravel this idea of longing as we go. These stories suggest that submission to the experience of longing ultimately connects us to what longs *for us*, rather than just our desire for something of our own design. Something greater awaits. I like this thought, it's rather spooky. It also relates back to the notion that the otherworld of the gods is as intensely interested in us as we are in it. Make sure to look at Ana Mendieta's sculptures on your return to see strong examples of longing crafted into ritual display.

...This is a story from when the world was as fresh as the cheek of a newborn, wild as the talons of a hawk, and tender as the wind that shakes the barley. Amongst the Chukchi of Siberia, there lived a man who had only one daughter. She was a deer woman, who kept watch over her father's herd. She kept a lonely vigil with the animals far from the camp and, when she needed food, would return riding a stocky red deer. She was remote, elegant and arresting to the eye. One night, as she was returning to camp, the red deer suddenly cried: "Look, look, mistress, the Moon Man comes!" Sure enough, from out of the sky came the Moon Man in his sledge drawn by reindeer. She knew by his determined gaze that he meant to have her for his own, and in panic asked the deer to help her. The deer raked the snow until he had scooped out a large hole. The woman dived into the hole and the deer covered her in snow until she was completely obscured. She was but a mound of crisp white snow in the freezing night. Moon Man went here and there, stalking the camp excitedly, even slowly circling the mound sniffing the air, but he never, for a second, suspected it was his beloved Deer Woman.

Bemoaning her absence, he clambered back into his sledge and rode up the singing curtain of the inky night, calling her name. As soon as he was gone, she sprang out of the hole, clambered on the deer's back and headed back to her father's yaranga at great speed. Unfortunately, no one was at home. Suspecting the Moon Man's imminent return, the red deer made suggestions.

"I will turn you into a block of stone so the Moon Man won't find you."

"He'll know it's me!"

"A hammer?"

"No good, no good!"

“A tent pole?”

“A hair on the tent flap?”

“I’ve got it! Turn me into a lamp. He’ll never suspect that!”

Deer Woman adopted the posture of a lamp. So the deer struck the ground with his hoof and suddenly the girl was a glowing, brightness-bringing lamp. In the time it takes a rock to hit a window, Moon Man turned up in camp. He searched between the tent poles, the pots and pans, every twig, every rough hair on a deer’s fur, every knot on the bed planks, and every grain of soil upon the floor. The woman was nowhere to be seen. Although the lamp was bright, Moon Man was radiant, and so he didn’t notice the lamp.

“Where is that woman? Where on all of this tumbling earth can she be?” As he returned, defeated, to his sledge, he heard the delicate peal of her laughter, like sunshine on a salmon’s back.

“Here I am! Here I am!”

He rushed back in and searched the wood piles, the reds and oranges of the fire, the worn felt of the walls; he even split the air itself into two halves and looked for her there. No luck, for she was still a lamp. As he left the tent in despair, again the laughter, and he jumped back in, searching with a renewed vigour. So intense was his search, so focused his ambition of discovery, that he withered from his previously cherubic form into an exhausted, shrivelled figure who could barely move his spindly form.

Knowing she was now safe, she appeared in her much-desired human form, threw him on his back, and bound his hands and feet.

“Ahh . . .” cried the sliver of the Moon Man. “I wished to carry you off, now I see I must be punished for my wickedness. . . I beg you, cover me with seal skins so I may be warm before I perish, for truly I am freezing.”

“What!” she cried. “You live in the harsh blackness of the night sky, which is your nomad home, so why would you need seal skins?”

At this moment his voice took on a sincere, exhausted and tearful tone: “Because of my nature I am doomed to roam the skies forever. Were you to free me, I would aid your noble people always. Free me and night will become day. Free me and I shall measure the months of the year for you. They shall be:

“Moon of the Old Buck

The Cold Udder Moon

Genuine Udder Moon

The Moon of the Waters

The Making Leaves Moon

The Moon of Warmth

The Velvet Antler’s Moon

The Moon of Love Among the Wild Deer

The Moon of the First Winter

Muscles of the Back Moon

And the Shrinking Day's Moon."

"But if I free you," Deer Woman cried, "You will regain fat, and like a walrus of the night come after me again!"

"Absolutely NOT! I shall always remember the vitality and wisdom of the Chuckchi maids. I'm done. I'll never come down from my domain again."

Well, she was convinced. When freed, he flew into the heavens and illuminated all around him. From that moment on he has served the Chukchi faithfully . . . as he does tonight. . .

So our story begins with the Deer Woman in her arresting aloneness, far from the warmth and the squabbles of the tribe. We are quickly informed that some magical relationship with the animals has opened up in her solitude.

Indeed, the deer she rides actually speaks to her, informs and assists her in the changing of shape. In many myths, a ridden, speaking animal indicates a certain power awakened in the rider — that person rides an intuition, guiding them through their life, alerting them of snares and blind allies.

The Deer Woman appears to be deeply connected to four-leggeds, human solitude, big empty spaces. We suspect she has a tail hidden somewhere, never watches the shopping channel, and lets foxes rip up the couch. We know she can lead a large herd, but also embodies a tribal connection through the relationship to her father. When we think of Georgia O'Keefe up there in the splendid isolation of Ghost Ranch making her paintings, we get an impression of this kind of character — contained but also slightly out of view, as Tom Waits puts it: "All to themselves". We know this is not the story of a defenceless girl. What leads us to such solitude is open to speculation, and the length of time spent there can make the difference between illumination and just simple hiding from humans.

The old stories rarely name these emotions, and the characters can seem elemental because of this. You don't get the quick, emotive confessional of the modern novel. So we can only speculate on the Deer Woman's time out in the open places. Was she happy? Miserable? Probably both at different times. It's worth remembering periods in our own lives of such self-sufficiency and aloneness.

What we can be sure of is that in some ways her isolation has strengthened her, made her subtle. But all seasons have to move, and here comes our big lunar initiator to crack the whole scene open.

We're going to explore the story in two ways now, from the perspective of relationship and of the moon as an initiating deity. The first point of interest is that the moon in this story is considered masculine. In European myth we normally associate the sun with the masculine — rationality, activity, thrust and vigour — with the moon connected to intuition, stillness, receptivity and mystery. It feels like a welcome change to enjoy this twist, to wrestle the moon back from the women awhile, and wrench the sun from the men.

The word moon actually derives from the German *der mond*, connected to the word “man”. This has a very different ring than the *la luna* of the Spanish, being slower, denser, less fluttery. Actually we find male moon deities in many places: Tecciztecatl of the Aztecs, Mani of the Germanic tribes, Thoth of the Egyptians, Tskuyumi of the Japanese and Rahko of the Finns are just a small selection. So this time the moon is male, and curious. Wandering his nomadic route over the heavens, he has become fixated upon this similarly “alone” woman, not sheltered by the hearth or warm in a lover’s bed. Sometimes when we see someone holding solitude elegantly, when they possess the particular qualities that make our head spin, we summon our chariots, “shine” to our fullest, learn a tap dance and go charging into their splendid isolation, not realising they may be relishing their space.

To attract a deity is no small thing. It is a shamanic labour to head out to the ice, forest or vision pit, seeking to entice a spirit: bride or husband. Whether she knows it or not, she has created enough elegance and space around her to beguile the Luna God himself, a lord of night. Many unexpected things come to us at night; many storytellers only tell in the slow time, when the fragile shell of hours breaks and the moon egg of enchantment arises. The Irish always say that the otherworld is as interested in us as we are in it, and this descent of the moon is an auspicious image of just that. Indigenous artists often understand that a huge percentage of their gift comes from “somewhere else” — the mythological, religious and cosmological realms of that otherworld region. When we start orienting ourselves towards the community of stars, night and moon, surpassing the human, the impact of that new relationship can be overwhelming.

When moon energy starts to flood our life/home/deer herd, its very force and lack of “human-centredness” can tell our instinct (the deer we ride) to start digging a hole to jump down. It can cause us to spend two days and nights without sleep working on a novel with no hope of a publisher, to forget our nephews’ names, to stop tipping waiters. It’s not about grounding, it’s about leaping.

Maybe art feeds the moon as much as it does human beings. We suspect that Jeff Koons is unfamiliar with this intensity, whereas an abundance of its light poured from the brush of Ken Kiff or William Scott. It’s a delight of teaching to have rash opinions like this. We know that Mark Rothko laid down layers of very thin paint so that hundreds of little pricks of light illumined his work — moon light. This very old artistic pursuit requires a developed inner life, a steady psyche to ground such huge invocations. Rothko’s death by suicide raises questions about his ability to sustain the vast energies he awakened. If we just stand still and soak the energy up, we’re often dead by twenty-eight, blazing and consumed by our “lunacy”.

So we can see the moon as a vertical connection in our lives, but also as something contacted through solitude, intensity of task, broadness of community — owls, mist, streams, bracken, and up into the cosmos.

It is a genius clue that when the gift comes, the Deer Woman hides. The myth world’s frequency is different from that of the human, and much tearing and thunder can commence when the two worlds square up to each other. Destiny is an awesome thing. James Hillman (Hillman 1996 :15) tells the story of the great Spanish bullfighter Manolete (1917-1947), who as a boy “clung so tightly to his mother’s apron strings that his sisters and

other children used to tease him". His clinging was an attempt to jump down the hole, to buy himself until he had developed a container strong enough to bear the gift offered. Come adolescence, he ran towards his gifting, and toward his death. Gored by the bull Islero at age thirty, he died, his funeral the largest Spain has ever seen.

It could be that Manolete sensed his destiny, the glory and the sobriety of it, and bought all the time he could before the pulse became too persistent to ignore. For others, the price of relationship to the moon is that they are unable to re-enter the village, its light grows dim around other people. An artist's studio can be seen to be an attempt to 'catch beams'. Of course, when we are overwhelmed, we attempt to return to safe ground — when the Deer Woman is confronted by the moon, she runs back to her father's tent. However, as in many initiatory stories, he's not there.

The father and the tent represent her grounding in her community, her childhood, and her humanity. The container remains, but this time she has to be the negotiator, the elder, the one with wit. Sometimes, when making a painting, I will occasionally slip into ground so new and unexpected to me that I panic and paint over it, calming myself with more 'negotiated' gestures. Like the surface of the moon, I don't recognise the landmarks, I can't see any footprints. So I try to drag the moon back into my black tent of tradition, comfort and warmth. I too will try to familiarise the otherness of the experience into something that can gradually be integrated into a body of work. Try as I might, I'm not an astronaut yet.

The Deer Woman stays safe by a kind of mimicry, an invisibility that preserves us in all sorts of situations — at school we imitate the teacher and his or her "light of knowledge", and gradually learn to hide our own peculiar, idiosyncratic opinions. If they should pop out, we would become visible and vulnerable, so better to ape what is bigger and brighter than us. This kind of activity, while potentially life-saving as we grow, can become a castrating and unconscious habit if carried into adulthood. Of course, the moon is looking for her, not an imitation of himself. But in this case, she bides her time and wears him out. Of course, there could also be a straight avoidance of intimacy in her hiding. Better to munch a lettuce leaf and practice detachment than get down into the muck of relationship and have to deal with its unwieldy shadow.

It could be said that to know the moon is to be connected to thievery. Even the moon's glow is stolen sunlight, reduced 500,000 times. Not content with stealing sunlight, the moon also has a penchant for pilfering colour. The gold of a cornfield or the crimson of a rose are quietly replaced by greys and blues, when moonlight's fingers fall on them. A lover of letters, the moon steals into books read at dusk — as we read in the gloom, words become indistinct as he scoops them up and carries them off. Night is the time of break-ins, affairs, slow time-ruptures to the agitated clock of light.

At the same time, we know that the moon replaces everything the next day, just as we left it, so he appears a cheeky thief rather than a savage robber. The moon is also a friend to lovers; his inky sky covers them as a blanket, but his light offers a slender trail to the sweetheart's door. So to draw down the moon brings a certain wiliness, a kind of cunning.

All this talk of thievery could have scared the Deer Woman: would she want her own colour, her essence, so consumed? We see a strong reaction to the bluster of the potential suitor. Can you remember being with someone who cast so much light that your own couldn't be seen? Like a hip-hop star covered in jewellery, the moon so far offers no real relationship, only adoration. The Deer Woman has been alone long enough to know that she doesn't want that.

And so it begins. She refuses calls, rain-checks dates, and has always just left the party when you arrive. This just intrigues and frustrates you more, until, like the moon, you find yourself frantic and sweating, searching under animal skins and through friends' address books trying to track her down.

Just when you are finally turning away, you hear her voice from the top floor of a crowded restaurant, and there you go, charging in amongst the tables again. Her faint voice is a tiny clue that this is a courting rather than a flat refusal. Once the moon's grandiosity is lessened, and he is wrapped in the cords of the world, when he even faces something approaching mortality, he and the Deer Woman really start to communicate. How can she trust such an energy? Surely better to stay in her glorious isolation.

But the Moon Man also offers an image of largeness, flamboyance. His arrival has broken the steady rhythm of the animals and the frost - he offers an outwards expression, to be seen. In the tangle of our own relationships, the rambunctious partner offers a challenge to our inwardness - we struggle but are attracted to this vivid display. In the myth-world, all these characters reside in us, and so we could say that the Deer Woman, solitude-loving wilderness-being, and the Moon Man, mighty, galaxy-shining, tide-altering, are trying to reach an accord with each other. The road of solitude and the road of voice have found a crossroads.

All of us sense that many types of love exist. There is that first burst when we feel immortal and beloved in the eye of our sweetheart, huge and extraordinary. It is as if this sensation is propping up some fantastical posture of our own importance. The love is really about what we are experiencing — a sense of connection, support, and ardour — still centred around the self in some way. A relationship based on this pattern seems to have roughly a three-year life span. The crunch time is the possibility of a less self-centred love emerging, one rooted in compassion.

Instead of trying to frantically draw your self-esteem from your partner, you instead, like the Deer Woman and the Moon Man, start to appreciate the other's separateness, the intense beauty that is theirs alone - that they have desires, dreams, and idiosyncrasies that are not about you. This mystery can be so daunting that we allow the other to pass out of view forever.

We have seen that in many of the old stories there is a common primeval pattern of leaving society, journeying into feral zones of trial, isolation and adventure, and then returning, bringing back some talismanic knowledge that could only be found in the heavy places. We could say that the same three orbiting energies make this story one large body:

Community – the gut, shoulders, and muscled back of hunting, raising kids, burying the dead, telling the stories of the hearth fire.

Trial – the curious heart, the tester of boundaries, the ranging eye, the one who slips away from parties.

Return – The humming soul, the magical body, the god-caller, the splitter of blackness.

The ingenuity of the human provokes the offer of twelve names from the moon: flowered barometers of the passage of time into the hard Siberian year. We can also enjoy them as a kind of love letter from the Moon Man shone down on his beloved. It would appear we each have our tundra, deer herd and watching moon. The question is: do we know how to dance with the moon? Have we created a pristine tundra for him to visit? Do we ride an animal power that can negotiate his velocity and transforms it into food to feed the whole village?

We've mentioned an artist's studio as a place to catch beams, our own wilderness place where we can attract lonely deities. Forget 'artist' as someone being tied to oil paint or video installations, and rather envision that part of yourself that is not snared in insurance documents, and loves sitting quietly alone for an anti-social amount of time. When the attention in our lives is all focused on the first body — the tribal concerns of mortgage, status, and how our peers view us— then the tundra of the nomadic heart gets smaller. That tundra literally starts to disappear before our eyes: condos appear in the woods and, one after another, the deer are stillborn.

When the tundra is gone, the Moon Man looks down and sees nothing but television static. He sees no moving herd of art, no antlered-words, no runway of strange dances and ecstatic prayer on which to land his chariot. So the mythological collapse begins and the threefold, archaic body gets thinned and stretched until only the concrete remains. With the nomadic heart tuned out, and the moon-calling woman ignored, our psychic orbits shrink, and we give ourselves permission for the most unimaginable acts. We are no longer connected to hooves, tides or night energy.

Any hunter will tell you that much of the action occurs on the periphery of your vision; bushmen will sit for hours stilling themselves to pick out the stealthy animals moving at the edge of what they can see. Neruda could do this with words, pulling a wriggling, startling metaphor from a bush of thought. In the understandable hysteria around climate change, a similar stilling is required, an arching-out of the imagination. All these stories of shape shifting are an indication of a healthy psyche, rupturing the consensual into a new constellation. Therapy can be a wonderful way to magically shrink us into our specific neurosis, dislocating our grandeur and god-juice into little childhood boxes. A useful stage perhaps, but we see Taliesin, Cuchulainn, or at least Seamus Heaney waving distress flares at this point.

Our story points towards huge events: relationship with a deity, a mythological being, but also our having the hard cunning to draw it into manageable chunks to guide the process of living. The animal self and the lunar self find an accord, an arch of imagination that creates the impossible tension called a good life. Psychology cannot contain mythic thought entirely, but provides a good meadow place between Village (everyday) and Forest (mythological) consciousness.

Solitude opens the door of longing — invisible longing, which connects to the Otherworld, which calls down the lord of the moon. A conscious spell or wish is contained in this story, for a marriage of the three energies. When we live in a society that is determined to sate longing instantly, a door to the myth-world closes. Some incubation is lost, and our messages never arrive at the tundra and the moon because the village instantly supplies the gift.

My father tells this story: as a child and aspiring musician, he walked the several miles from his house on weekends to stand at the window of a music shop, gazing at the drum kits he couldn't afford. For a long stretch, his imagination had to construct a kit out of the old sofa he would pummel for hours at a time. But some hound of tenacity was born in him, a longing for something just out of reach.

Years later, when I wanted to pick up the drums too, he engineered a similar process. From eleven onwards, I had sticks and much encouragement, but no kit of my own. I would walk the two miles from my house up to the creaky, damp old hall where his kit was and practice. After five years of this, I wandered downstairs on my sixteenth birthday and found a very elegant second-hand kit waiting there, ready to be set up. I'm still playing it, twenty years later.

Something of that yearning has sustained a long and edifying relationship for both of us with the drums, and also a shared language. The long walks we both took, the financial scrapes, the adoration of the appearance and sound of the instrument, and the calloused hands are all devotions to the court of longing.

Ok, let's take a break. After tea I would like you to wander the moors for two hours and find twelve things to be given new praise names, just like the twelve names for the moon cycles in the story. Make sure you don't just write them down - get down on your haunches and whisper them to whatever oak, river or fox hole you may find, they will be glad to hear it, I guess. Everything is in full bloom at the moment (mid summer) so maybe let your words reflect that blossoming, that grandeur.

July Session

The Birth of Ossian

Today I want to continue on the theme of longing we encountered in the 'Deer Maiden' story, and see how it looks within this old Irish story. Finn, the central character, rather like the Moon Man in the other, is not going to necessarily get what he longs for, but, again like the other story, the longing itself seems to produce other results or developments that no one could have anticipated.

For those who journeyed up to Wales with me this summer and fasted, you may want to pay attention to Finn's seven years of wandering and see if it strikes a chord. Anyway, I am already giving too much away, and so I better get started! It's a story of late summer, rather like today.

... Fading sunlight scuttled down through the heavy oaks this particular day, so many years ago, and onto the backs of the great chief Finn MacColl and his men, the Fianna. Despite the twinkles of their dusk lover, the men were in a sober mood. All day they had been hunting and found precious little game. As they reflected on this, a deep silence fell around them, the kind of silence any hunter recognises as foretelling some explosion of opportunity. Sure enough, from the bushes burst a fawn, and a furious chase commenced. Finn and his two hunting dogs, Bran and Sceolan, broke ahead of the pack, and all moods were lifted for the chase. The intention of Finn, the stride of the hounds and the surprise of the fawn were all a kind of poetry. We know that when Finn was at his wildest, he was at his most thoughtful, and as he gazed lovingly at his lightning hounds, this intensified; he'd never seen them so silent, so focused. Not a twitch of the nose, not a backward look. At the end of a steep valley, they cornered the fawn, and Finn felt some regret at the ease of the chase. He advanced toward the hounds and the fawn, spear in fist, knife in sheath, expecting a bloodbath. What he found was extraordinary - the hounds and fawn gambolling together.

When the fawn saw Finn, she approached and laid a velvet nuzzle on his hand. All the men save Finn drew back at this, as they recognised it as supernatural - that the fawn must be some magic being from the otherworld, its opening being thinnest at dusk...

This story's origins are in the Fenian cycle of Irish myth: there is also an Ulster cycle, basically concerning the deeds of Cuchulian, and a mythological and historical cycle. Stories of Finn have been cherished by the working people of Ireland, in much the same way the British have cherished Robin Hood. It's worth our getting a little background information on Finn. More marginal and playful than Arthur, Finn, like many Celtic characters, was raised entirely by women. This is a recurring theme: Arthur himself was given up by his father Uther, Cuchulain's

male parentage had no fixed character, King Bran was the son of a sea-god, Llyr (though he never appears in the stories), Parzival's father was killed in battle, and so was Finn's.

Many of the really gripping characters come from a place of lack of direct male mentoring, yet often they become wonderful mentors to younger men as they age. They live in a woman's world, often very close to nature, often in a marginal position, but with the legacy of royal blood. What does this mean? It immediately points towards a sympathetic, associative relationship towards the feminine. This relates to a juxtaposition in the Celtic psyche rather than a literal assumption that all boys should be raised completely by their mothers. It's interesting to note, however, that as these characters reach adolescence, that is when they make contact with strong, male figures, at just the age when, in some cultures, boys have been separated from the home and taken into the wild for their initiation rites.

In the last thirty years of study of rites-of-passage, a great hole has appeared in the research, and many of us have fallen into it. As we have talked about before, solely same-sex initiation rites can provoke strong feelings of impotence or betrayal from the other sex, as if their contribution to a child's upbringing has been slighted. It would seem useful for us to look at both literal initiations — scarification, fasting, separation, etc — and the vital but subtler initiations that go on all through life in the orbit of the family. I would say, as a rites-of-passage guide, that there comes a point when this all has to be distilled into a specific, literal and mysterious act, carried out by an elder of the same gender, as in the wilderness retreat at adolescence. However, I regard this event as a culmination of a series of initiatory educations already experienced in childhood, often by someone of the other gender. These are connected processes.

In this way, I see the childhoods of these storied characters not as a celebration of absent fathers, but as one of a series of steps towards a coherent masculinity. I enjoy these associations deeply; they seem to make all the men canner, nobler, and brighter than the kind of warrior-fodder raised in an all male universe. I see it not as a call towards matriarchy, but towards balance.

The absent father is such a contemporary, much-discussed phenomenon, it is interesting to detect this theme in the old stories as well. The heroes are helped by the fertile imagination inherent in their childhood; thus the absence doesn't paralyse but invokes aspiration. Longing can be present (we'll touch on this theme later), actually giving the individual stride for the road rather than a sated slump. As it happens, Merlin's father was meant to be the devil, so it's as well they didn't spend too much time together. These childhoods equip the heroes for listening, wandering, and stillness, as well as startling displays of combat. We could say this growing time intertwines the goddess around the heart of the god.

There is a lovely old saying about Finn, that he was such a great warrior that he could rescue an army, but such a deep poet that it took an army to rescue him from the scrapes he got himself into. Perhaps because of Finn's time in the woods, his adventures have a propensity for the supernatural — psychic doorways frequently open for him

that remain closed for others. It is a beautiful image of a leader, a warrior and a poet, reminding us of that Gaelic saying: "Never give a sword to a man who can't dance".

In the old stories, hunting has to do with running toward god, adventure and the unknown: piercing the veil, drawing down the moon. This is not trapping but trailing, pursuing some sweet and distant thing until you are deliciously lost.

I've spoken about the questing beast of Arthurian myth — part lion, part serpent, part goat — a creature sometimes glimpsed at dusk or dawn in the forests surrounding Camelot. Once glimpsed, the beast creates such longing in the beholder that they can spend years or decades in pursuit of it. The catch is this: it has no life other than to be glimpsed. That is its purpose. Something in its beguilement serves to crack open desire in us for what I called 'the deal beyond the things of this world' — something that offers no financial or secular reward, only contact with the vertical world. So whether the Fianna or the Knights of the Round Table, such an elevated position instigates this movement towards the otherworld, an opening of the psyche. This movement is not just about jousting and treasure. That's the way of the soldier, not the warrior. I take this slight detour just to open up the significance of the hunt in this story, and as we have seen, note that it is a familiar motif. It's a lovely detail that when the men fall to brooding and silence — introspection — that is when the fawn breaks from the scrub. They say animals sense the mood of humans, and it may be that this one was waiting for the bluster and spear-shaking to die down before it made its appearance. In a very practical way, we all know what it feels like to jostle mentally for an idea or perspective on a difficult situation - we pace and bang our thought-shields but nothing comes. Then, just as we turn away, a fawn leaps from the brush and we have an insight.

I'm making a quick jump here, suggesting that the forest contains all those mercurial and unwieldy thoughts that stay far from the regular hours of our daily lives. So on one level, to hunt is to push past the considered road and onto the spindly trails of the unexpected, to make nimble leopards the navigator of your body for a while. Hunting in the old way means to show a willingness and curiosity about possibilities other than just the consensual. As soon as we take the literalness out of the statement, the image can fly. In poetry, the forest comes clearer when we move from fact to metaphor.

That lovely description of Finn, the hounds and the fawn as a kind of singing poetry makes us think of one, larger expanded body, shape shifting for a moment. Finn doesn't quite know what he's got yet, but the signs are auspicious enough to save its life, whatever it is.

. . . . It was agreed that the fawn must live, in fact be a talisman of the Fianna, so they returned with her triumphantly to the fort of Almu. That night, as Finn was preparing for his bed, a knock came to his chamber door. Answering it, he beheld a woman of high beauty and gentle nobility. Finn, as they say, was struck forever in love with her.

She spoke: “I am that very fawn you saved today, and my name is Sadb. A magician of the Tuatha De Danaan, called the Dark Man of the Sidhe, changed me into a deer because I refused his hand in marriage — although I am from Faerie, I had my heart set on a human, one whose extraordinary feats attracted attention even in the otherworld.”

At this Finn felt his heart sink and tighten, but he grimaced: “Go on.”

She replied: “Even in my deer-state, I believed that if I could find this man, he would give refuge, even dismantle the dark man’s power, so I could regain the deep curves and brightening eyes of my womanhood.” (It was abundantly obvious that this had occurred.)

“And that man, Finn MacColl, is you.”

The tightening of Finn’s heart was wrestled to the ground and in its place sprung a Persian garden, with small blue birds shooting around mischievous branches of long forgotten, ruby-laden trees, singing ghazals! Sadb received both Finn’s protection and love. From that moment, you would have needed some kind of mechanical device to pry them apart. Finn would follow her steps, trying to catch the scent where her hair had been only moments before, and he grew so giddy with her eyes that he had to carry a sheepskin with him to lie on in case he grew faint. He stopped giving orders, barely picked at his food, and stopped attending hunts. Most worryingly, the old ones say, he stopped listening to the mutterings of magicians and the fancies of strange young poets. Truly, he found all nourishment in the epic contours of her face, and the honeyed web of her body. It was an all-or-nothing love, and we are all a little envious to this day...

Sadb blew the lid off Finn’s world: his heart became an aching meadow, lightning became his groin, and steam blew from his ears. A goddess stood behind the woman who stood behind the fawn, and Finn got the full voltage of all three. Who else could rattle a chief? Sadb carried not the impersonal fire-starter of Eros or the expansive insight of Agape, but brought *amor*.

This is no arranged marriage between tribes, or a grope after a feast: this is love in the way we celebrate it today. A love affair, no matter how powerful, is not quite the same thing as a marriage — that requires a whole other kind of glue. C. S. Lewis said something like: “Falling in love is the spark that lights the engine of loving”. For Finn and Sadb, this wasn’t a step they would be able to take. Sadb took Finn the warrior, in his brightness and youth, and opened the door to Finn as a lover. But what of Sadb as deer woman?

The power of a shape shifter in the old world was very real. In Old Icelandic we come across the phrase *hamrammr* meaning ‘shape strong’, or *hamhleypa*, which means ‘shape leaper’, both words referring to the ability to move into animal form and back. There is also an association with anger, that to be in a dangerous fury was to come ‘out of his shape’ — *hamslauss*. Our associations with Sadb and the deer are of sweetness, not rage, but we remember that it was a dark magician who changed her shape. Sadb inaugurates a metamorphosis of the heart, but not of the skin for Finn.

. . . . Well, Finn may have stopped, but the world did not. Danes started to pour down across the North Sea and into Dublin Bay. Finn staggered out of his chambers and took to arms. He was like an unholy dervish on the field, doubly-raged for being disturbed from his beloved's gaze and the fact that his sweet Ireland was under attack. He employed no mercy. The battle was the Fianna's and a feast prepared. As the first boar was roasting merrily, in the shadows Finn prepared his chariot to leave. The men were horrified, for what good is a feast without Finn? But Finn was not for persuading, and off he went. As he hurtled back toward his fort, his eyes become hawk-like, scanning the walls for a sign of Sadb. Nothing.

As he drew closer still, his soul became an arrow and flew fifty yards ahead of his body looking for her radiance. Nothing. Finally, in a panic, he leapt from his chariot and ran the remaining mile himself. Where could she be?

When entering the fort, people leapt behind other people to avoid his thunder-gaze and the curls of icy confusion pouring from his nostrils. Grabbing his man servant, the oddly named Cronan the Buzzer, he heard the awful tale: "My Lord, someone, or some thing, that resembled you, right down to the hounds and chariot, appeared on the horizon line, blowing your horn, the Dord Fianna. Sadb, elated, ran out the gates to greet you. We suspected that you couldn't have returned from battle so quickly, but couldn't stop her, she was travelling like a heart-wind. 'I want to greet the father of my unborn child,' she said."

At this, Finn groaned, and put his head in his hands. "Go on," he said weakly.

"As she approached you, it was as if the air itself grew hazy and your arms extended a great blackness from under your coat, and, producing a thin hazel wand, you gently touched her on the arm. It must have been the Dark Man of the Sidhe, because suddenly a small fawn was standing there. We ran as fast as we could, but by the time we got there, the plain was empty — no magician, no Sadb, no hounds. Just us, alone and terrified in the long grass."

Finn beat his chest as if trying to rip open the heart that lived in it. He collided with walls, ate bricks and dust, made a ship of infinite sorrow and sailed its black sails over the edge of despair. He staggered back to his chambers. Behind them was a secret door that led to a small room filled with crow feathers. In them he lay down. For a day and a night he was not seen...

The image of the lover 'that was only lent' is an old and tragic one belonging to the Irish. It is rare to find a 'happily ever after' in their mythic cycles; as in the Russian and African, there is always an acknowledgement of the grief of life, the difficulty of being here. It would appear that loving deeply brought a price with it, a shadow-bride for Finn.

That great heart expansion, so huge he "stopped listening to the mutterings of magicians and the fancies of strange young poets", had an equally vast contraction attached to it. All that was gold in him turns to crow feathers. The all-consuming nature of the love between Finn and Sadb causes huge structural tremors in the

kingdom. Finn no longer attends feasts, wants to fight, compose poetry or any of the things that bind him and his court in the intricacies of a shared life.

In love, have we not all felt like Finn and Sadb? We stop calling our friends, neglect our study, let the garden grow wild, and focus every fibre of our attention on this new beloved. Of course, the irony is that as we do this, we unconsciously start to apply so much pressure to this fragile birth that it begins to turn in our hand, until one day a dark man with a hazel wand takes it all away.

The story suggests that this was Finn's first journey to the garden of the lovers — he hadn't negotiated its steps before. Finally, the accumulation of our neglect means that we have to rise to meet the battles of the day, put on our armour and attack our personal Danes. For a moment, space appears in the cramped confines of the lovers' chamber — all that inward focus has to arch outward. If the kingdom surrounding the chamber hasn't been attended to, fed, and charmed, it's possible that the chamber could collapse, the spell broken by a lack of roots in the larger world. In some impossible way, the intensity of love has to be wrestled into an accord with the larger psyche/community. We know this love has origins in the otherworld, the place of Faerie, making an accord doubly difficult. But some inexperience has left a door open to the magician; maybe the love isn't anchored enough in this world, so that it seems to hover between the two.

Maybe much first love hovers in this betwixt place. It's wildly tempered and sensitive to storms. As an initiation story, this heart-wrenching tale has an awful lot of trickster in it, dark trickster at that. As long as we are attempting to fight against the current of the story, or are looking for a happy ending, we lose its hard education. Had Finn returned to Sadb and to his inebriation, who knows the consequences for the wider kingdom? If we think of all of these characters abiding in our psyche, we see that Finn is indulging the lover, whilst ignoring the king and the magician. The king, (or chief in his case) has weakened his boundaries, which allows invasion. His shutting down of the magician capacity means that he has become naive to the consequences of his behaviour. So he has neglected his role of provider as king, and lacks the overview a magician would command - love has robbed him of a strategy. Our greatest authority on the four powers of the king/queen, warrior, magician and lover is Robert Moore. A well functioning psyche in both male and female is seen to draw on all four main energies, often at different times. The five virtues of a warrior, or knight of the medieval era, were temperance, courage, love, loyalty and courtesy. A quick way to pull the whole kingdom down is to let one of these reign - in total control - over the others. Joseph Campbell loved to talk about the difference between *amor* and *roma* - *amor* is all-consuming passion and *roma* the regulations and duty of the day, loyalty to the status quo. The troubadours would have backed Finn all the way in his headlong jump into the ocean of feeling, freeing himself from the shackles of responsibility.

Through the warring divinities of the psyche, we learn peculiar dance steps in the seemingly random lurches that life swings us through. Lewis Hyde describes the trickster as "the archetype that attacks all archetypes" (Hyde 1998 :14). Could we be seeing the four-legged waltz of coyote in the delicate steps of Sadb? Finn certainly does.

As I mentioned in an earlier story, initiation is often about leaps, not grounding; ideally that comes later. In the development of Finn, it would appear he has to take a step downwards, into heartbreak. The shaping of him, the authenticity of him as a leader, requires it. What is admirable is that Finn stays alive to the dark aspect of the experience. He accepts the pain invoked by staying connected to Sadb, rather than drowning himself in booze and floozies. The dark man and Sadb cause Finn's previous securities to be wrenched asunder, in a kind of shadowy double act - his love for Sadb pulls him way past the boundaries and role of his position, and the grief of her departure contracts or diminishes his stature as all-conquering warrior. From this perspective both the dark man and Sadb act as initiatory teachers for Finn. Many Irish stories make clear the complexities and tragedies of love, rather than reducing it to a simplistic notion. In the story of Angus mac Og, or Angus the Young, he dreams a holy dream of a beautiful woman, literally luminous. When Angus awakes, the 'questing beast' in him is roused, and he casts aside all the trappings of this world to go in pursuit of this radiant woman.

Angus's home was the Sidhe (it actually means hill) of Newgrange, the megalithic tomb. In a short leap over to Wales, we find the hero Pwyll as he encounters a goddess in the form of a woman, Rhiannon. Yet again, she appeared in dreams and he found himself riding wildly to catch up, night after night. At some point he gave up his frantic pursuit and used the sincere and elegant love-speech any knight should possess, and she slowed her pace. His sword became a flower of playful metaphor, and her curiosity grew until they became husband and wife. In the cases of Finn, Angus, and Pwyll, the move from the warrior into the lover is an essential part of courting the feminine. However, chaos ensues when we act this out as a completely literal event, rather than an opening of the soul.

If our own relationship with the divine is unclear, we will focus entirely on the lips, lashes and eyes of our sweetheart as ends in themselves. Immediately a whole world starts to implode behind the shoulders of our lover, a congestion appears, energy that should be passing through them to the myth world congeals and gets stuck when the lovers lack the education to be aware of this delicate thread. The Guatemalans warn us that women have the toe bone and tooth of a divine being, but that's all!

When this inflamed concentration fails, a kind of anti-tantric calamity of longing will curdle inevitably into disappointment. Our eyes fall downwards, and we move into the arena of disbelief. With this thin reading of love, our only hope is to start scanning the bars again, looking for a whiff of oestrous.

When the lover is the dominating energy, we remain enthralled but also passive. We sense Campbell's 'bliss', but lack the warrior facility to build a container for it. We frequently and quietly attach a small grey carriage to our partner's life force and hop on, looking bemused as their world starts to buckle under the extra weight. Pwyll leaps from his horse and attempts to snuggle under the cloak of his archaic goddess. Not a good move.

Finn never quite got to this point, but the signs were not encouraging. Rather than a warning against love, this story seems to be about placing it in a wide and magical context — suggesting both the spiritual and the pragmatic

concerns of handling a life. Someone wiser than I will argue that they are the same thing, but the story appears to be about integration of the gods and goddesses with the mundane details of the everyday.

In a sense, love is always tricking us into growth, always pulling the kingdom apart, risking invasion, slaying invaders, courting devastation. We need the explosion in order to rebuild a greater psyche but not to get addicted to dynamite for its own sake. The legacy of the troubadours is a good one, but only when it carries coyote bones with it. When romance gets thinned, when too many stories promise 'happily ever after', our hunter's bag comes up short. As readers of the Inuit tale "Skeleton Woman" know, sooner or later you will be chased across the ice of love by a woman with clacking bones and bloodied hair, snared up in your fishing net of *amor*. If you haven't been wetted by loneliness and hung up by memory, then you will keep running on the thinning waters of ideals and never face your legacy. We would do well to furnish our reading with indigenous, tribal stories of relationship in tandem with the great romances of Europe.

We remember that Sadb had a hoof in three worlds: the human, the sidhe, the animal. This is a primordial rather than angelic pattern, its tone ancient, pre-Christian. As an energy heading towards Finn, it was taking no prisoners. And just in case that didn't work, a touch of flattery: "We've heard of his feats even in the otherworld", was enough to take the legs out from under him.

The trickster turns dark in any number of Celtic stories: when Merlin is imprisoned in a tree by Nimue, or when Arthur is cuckolded by Lancelot and Guinevere — a triumph of emotion over protocol, you could say. This crackling interference between key players is where most of the stories exist, after some initial opening of the heart. The complex message has to remain intertwined with the blossoming adventure — as with coyote stealing fire, they grab the smouldering branch of our affections and scamper off into the darkness, sparks asunder. We would do well to heed their warning! An obscure English word for trickster is *guizer*, which also means 'fool'. Fools for love, indeed, most of us.

... Over the next seven years, Finn explored every forest, beach, moor, traveller camp, and magical well. Even the foam from the Irish Sea he split asunder for word of her. He was a heavy streak of grief, buckled in on himself, riding a tear-horse. His mourning was absolute; no lover visited the orbit of his great, desperate search. One dusk, rather like the one that began this story, he found himself out hunting with all his Fianna, something that still could lift his spirits for a minute or two. They were on the side of Ben Bulbin in Sligo, when a great commotion came from a group of hounds just up ahead. The men raced forth and found a young boy, naked, with golden hair that fell to his waist. The hounds had actually formed a circle to protect him. The moment the boy spied Finn, he walked over and placed his young hand in Finn's.

They say that, in that moment, it was as if all the grief washed out of Finn, and an equal amount of joy washed in. In a place of deep knowing, Finn knew that this was the son Sadb had been carrying, this was his boy! Covering him in his own cloak, and raining hugs, kisses, and affection on the boy, Finn gathered him up and took him back

to the fort. Surrounded by food, drink and candle light, Finn saw his beloved's features echoed in his son's face and felt a kind of painful healing occur. Of course, the lad couldn't speak Irish, but as he learned, he gradually started to tell of his experiences. He had been raised in lonely places — heavy woods, rocky outcrops — and had lived on berries and spring water. His mother had been a doe, and had done all she could to nurture him. One day a dark man had come to her, speaking gently and then with anger before raising a thin hazel wand and touching her with it. From that moment onwards, she was without power to do anything but follow him about. When the boy's mother had gone, he fainted with fear and grief, and when he awoke he wandered for a great period before the hounds caught his scent and Finn found him.

With this, Finn named his son Ossian, which means "little deer". Ossian grew to be a great warrior, but an even greater poet, in fact, the greatest the Fianna ever had. Ossian had many more adventures, and he even ventured back into the otherworld. He returned finally to this one, and, as an ancient old man, regaled St Patrick with tales of the brave Fianna. Steely-eyed Patrick of the many conversions was compelled to inquire of Finn, despite his dreadful pagan beliefs.

Fully informed by Ossian, Patrick asked if he would like to be baptised. "Will Finn be in heaven?" asked Ossian. When he found the answer to be no, he frowned: "Ungenerous is your god," and refused. Finn didn't stay in hell for long though, but that's a different story. For now, let's leave Finn and Ossian, just met, together in the settling dusk, heading back to the feasting hall and a night of songs...

For seven years, Finn wanders. The incubation of his grief is moistened by the longing to see his beloved again. This isn't the kind of longing for something you half-suspect you will get, but instead the awful, desperate loneliness for something that you know you won't see again. This is a longing that carves itself into the bones of the body with a bill-hook, that reveals its legacy on your face. This isn't fuelled by hope or possible manipulations to achieve it, this is a kingdom all to itself.

As we have discussed in other stories, stages of growth in myth can sometimes be symbolised by colours. In European myths, we sometimes noticed a sequence of red, black and white. We remember in the journey to becoming an adult we can see the passage of red: hot bloodedness, passion, flamboyance, early success; through to black: awareness of mortality, illness, introversion, grief; and finally to white: empathy, community, the willingness to belong, the elder.

Applying this progression here, we can say that Finn has been plunged into the black from the heady days of the red. A characteristic of the black is having no clear idea how long it will last, for the black requires a surrender, a losing sight of shore. In this wandering, we locate Finn, who takes his adoration of the feminine from a physical lover down into the painful, internal waters of time with the Goddess with a capital G.

The sensations attached to his searching are all attached to the sensing, tacit, grief world: we are witnessing a wretched crawl into the underworld. In other myths, both Orpheus and Theseus failed to achieve what they sought

down there, it almost killed Parzival; Dionysus was the only one to complete the journey well. We are reminded that the Celts regard the soul of a man as female, and that of a woman as male. So Finn's shattering experience could be seen as a dark opportunity to do some work with his soul. In doing this, he takes an authentic step toward wholeness. The projection of Sadb hovers in the air in front of him; he courts it, weeps over it, and then takes it to a small moist cave and eats it.

This handling of longing becomes a kind of dive towards an opening up of the great female soul — she responds to this kind of language and attention. Attendants at her temple over the years have included DH Lawrence, Hafez, Robert Creeley and Wolfram Von Eschenbach. Sometimes for a man's growth, the best thing a woman can do is leave. How he manages that next seven years is the great leveller.

And then, suddenly, comes another hunt and another gift from the otherworld, a son - a living legacy of Finn's union with Sadb. It's interesting to note that Finn is only presented with a son after his seven years of wandering. Thus, it's a tempered father whom Ossian meets. Finn never regains the physical touch of what he has longed for; there is no marriage, only absence and memory. But something has been cultivated in that period, some deep internal ground remorselessly tilled, until this unexpected flowering appears...

For some of us, the loss of Sadb is the loss of youth: "And little enough you cared for her when she was yours," says another story from the Fenian cycle. That loss leads to identification with some part of us that is grizzled, dark, wandering. It is the very fate that ensures Finn as a hero rather than just a "defender," a culturally sanctioned holder of borders. It is an encounter with the magpie brother of Parzival, or Gilgamesh meeting Enkidu.

It's an extraordinary idea that to find an authentic centre, we have to wander lonely beaches and sleep under hedges, longing for something we know is lost. That we place in us a small, cultivated altar to the bird that flew away. The story tells us that as long as we deny the sorrow road and neglect the chamber of crow-feathers, we refuse the possibility that the god contained in the experience will speak back to us. We exchange the currency of longing for the malignancy of disappointment.

Longing pushes the imagination outward — toward deeper inflexions of insight, peculiar creative leaps — while disappointment is a diminishment, a closing, a reduction. We deny the incubation of longing by refusing to grieve, and anticipating this, we never fully invest anyway. This leads to the great sense of numbness we hear of in modern life. We touch with a gloved hand, our passions become hobbies, and we keep an eye fixed always on the door. If some feeling should come through, it carries the distortion of possession; we grab in order to be fed rather than to feed, and are startled when another relationship crumbles in our hands.

We are left, of course, wondering about Sadb. Did she ever escape? Where is she? The stories are shy on the matter. Maybe some grizzled Seancahi outside Galway can tell you, but I can't. To wander in with sugar-coated scissors to warm up the ending would require more gall than I have.

Years can pass in our own lives between an event that caused us to both love and lose, and the slow birthing of insight that one day (seven years perhaps?) causes us to saunter through the groves of difficult remembering and

snuffle out the seed we carry on into the rest of our lives. But some parenting is required; the other disciplines of the Queen or Magician have to come into play to help it grow into the bespoke shape it wants to become. Initiatory experiences often unfold this way: to find the child, we have to search the beaches, forests, and hidden caves, raking over the elusive ground of longing inside ourselves. And suddenly, when we least expect it, a child with long, tangled curls stares up at us, saying: "What took you so long?"

Let's break for lunch. When I blow the conch let's gather by the fire and then head out for a couple of hours onto the moor. I'm going to ask you to write about the difference between want, desire and longing. However, don't write a word until you have had at least an hour being buffeted by the winds and views. How does longing reveal itself in nature? Is it purely a human emotion?

August Session

The Red King and the Witch

We're going to look at an old Romanian Gypsy story today – specifically staying with this theme of longing we encountered in The Deer Woman and Birth of Ossian stories.

It's a painful and rather contemporary story in its way, specifically in the sense that the main character Peter, avoids the very sense of longing that these other two stories embrace. I know of no other story that, like this one, takes place over a million years. So let's peer into the story river one last time...

...The Red King strode out and bought ten ducats' worth of magical food. He cooked it all up and put it in a chest, all for himself. He locked the chest, and posted guards to keep people away. However, come morning, the platter of food was partially eaten. Some force had broken in, and the guards were none the wiser. The king offered half his kingdom to anyone who could guard effectively against the night-time thief. Well, wanting to keep the wealth in the family, his three sons all volunteered immediately. The eldest went first, and sat up alone in the chamber. At a certain point he felt a warm, sleepy breeze come in, and he laid his head down on a pillow. When he awoke at dawn, more food was gone. The second brother stood watch, and the same thing occurred: the breeze, the slumber, head to the pillow, the missing food. Finally, it was the third and youngest brother's turn. He brought with him four needles and stuck them into the pillow. When the breeze came and his head nodded, the needles pricked him awake, and it was then he saw a dreadful sight. His little sister, a baby, floated up from her cradle in a far-off chamber, entered the room and began to change shape. Her hands became whirring axes, steam poured from her ears, her skin was grey, her eyes rolled back, and she glided in as another terrible form entirely, to the chest where the she-beast feasted on the food. The brother hid in terror and prayed for the dawn.

In the morning the King asked him what he had seen.

"More than I could ever tell - what did I not see? Give me a horse and money, for I am away to marry."

Armed with a horse and the several bags of ducats, he went to the border of the city and buried the money, putting up a stone cross to mark the site. This done, he headed out into the forests and great mountains of the kingdom, keen to get as far from his dark sister as possible...

So our story begins with a Red King buying food - an imperial energy has found some kind of nourishment, something of value, but rather than share it with his loved ones or the wider kingdom beyond, he chooses to hoard it in a chest, hidden away. There is something of the dragon in this man — the one that has caves of virgins and jewels, more than he could ever know what to do with. Of course, such a position creates anxiety, and so the Red King charges his three sons (after their persuasion), one by one, to stand watch.

The older son is the more connected to the king's beliefs, position, and values. Still, even with all the determination the first two sons can muster, when the 'warm, sleepy breeze' comes, they fall asleep. While they sleep, we are introduced to an image of true horror. The baby daughter grows fangs and axe-hands and floats to the chest, a witch amongst us. Since we reel back in shock from this image, we are tempted immediately to frame her as villain, rather than look at the deeper implications of this change.

If the king was willing to loosen his grip on the food, to offer some generosity, would the baby change into this form? What is the baby? When a king, country, or president swells up with a righteous, devouring presence (maybe procuring oil), we could call that 'in the red'. Some equally turbulent energy cannot help but be born elsewhere in the world, honed into a radical, terrible form by the seriousness of the original abuse.

Both the king and the witch in our story point towards a deadening of the imagination, the battlefield rather than the debate hall. The sons embody a series of steps from the considered strategies and pressures of king, or family, to the subtle intuitions of a free thinker.

We could think of the baby as some marginal, undernourished part of us, a part rarely brought to consciousness, or given an audience with the king. Its ways remain unblessed, unfed, and unheard by the great, momentum-fixed ego centre. If some accord is not met, the dialogue abandoned, then it remains in an undeveloped state, where it can turn black and start to grow fangs.

One way the chest gets robbed is if we let our own greed cause a collapse in our outer world. A lover leaves, fraud is detected in our business dealings, and our lies are uncovered. Our hoarding makes us frail rather than powerful; we deny growth until some unknown energy (or baby daughter) becomes a seed of undoing and the whole kingdom starts to wobble. On a larger scale, we glimpse hoarding kings and gnashing babies constantly: terrorism acts out the whirling baby, and the world of multi-nationals squats over the chest, flailing machine-gun fire into the shadows. As long as we stay, like the first two brothers, in the thrall of the devouring king, we remain blind to the nature of the robber.

The third brother is unencumbered with the knotted relationships between the elder two brothers and the king. More psychic space exists around him, and a great deal less expectation. The four pins he sticks in the pillow could be seen as the parts of us that are wary of the over-eating of excessive praise, duty, or anything else that creates lethargy and drowsiness. We could say that there is an undeveloped side to the older brothers that has been kept frozen by their relationship to the Red King. Red, as we know, has associations with fire, passions, and strong displays of aggression; but it can lack empathy and introversion. This very lack of maturity, this sense of cloudy inheritance, is what dulls the two older brothers to subtlety and makes them open to spells.

So far, so good for the younger brother. We celebrate use of the pins, his resistance to slumber. But his reaction to the witch is less encouraging, although understandable. He demands money from his father, sets off to marry, and, more than anything, out run death. Whatever he witnessed in the dark of that chamber, reeked of a starving decay. Maybe any other response would be inhuman, and would also deny us our adventures. The planting of the

money indicates that one day the youngest brother plans to come home, that there is some unstated strategy to his movements.

The edge of the city is a crossroads, a place where rationality and dream compete for primacy. In many cultures which have experienced deprivation and hunger (and which one hasn't?), folk tales often carry images of hoarded food, or treasure waiting to be unearthed. Suffering and the unconscious collude with such potent images. Some impacted inheritance has been taken from the father's world and buried in the unconscious ground of the psyche. Leaving our families in our youth, we often don't even realise we've buried anything. It can take half a century for us to unearth the chest of legacy and peer inside. That legacy can be terrible or sweet, but it is rarely what we imagined it to be, way back then, as we hurriedly covered it in soil and ran for the midnight bus out of town. Ok, back to the story...

... For eight years the youngest brother travelled, crossing huge distances, until he came to the Queen of All The Birds That Fly. When she asked him where he was going, he replied that he was off to marry, in a place that held neither old age nor death. Looking about, the queen replied that there was no death or old age in this place.

"How so?" replied Peter (for that was his name).

"Well...when I have whittled away all the wood in the forest, then death and old age will come and take me."

"I see," said Peter. Then he saddled up and kept on moving, knowing that if he stayed, death and old age would one morning find him.

Eight more years passed, and he found himself at a palace made of copper. A maiden appeared, who kissed him and told him she had waited a long time for him. He slept in the stable with his horse, and in the morning the maiden asked the same question of where he was going and he gave the same reply: "Where there is neither death nor old age." She looked around and said: "When the mountains and forests are levelled, death will come."

"This is no place for me," he said, and galloped off into the morning light...

When a story mentions "eight years of travelling", we understand that this is spread out over a long frame of time, bound up in the walk of a life. Even taking eight as a literal number means that Peter is now a young man as opposed to a boy. His journey has taken him to the Queen of All The Birds That Fly. So this is a feathery, airy, winged place — is he not a bird in flight? The tarot associates air with the mental realm, and with the sword of discernment, clarity, and remoteness. Maybe in our world he's working as a computer consultant in a high, steel-lined tower for a big corporation, never visiting his parents back in Birmingham. We know the lure and relief in our twenties of meeting people who are nothing like our family, nothing like those we came from, who don't activate the 'old pain'. Even in this place of light and air, Peter doesn't hear the answer he longs for. "When I have whittled all the wood of this forest, then death will come." Even the Queen of All The Birds That Fly has a connection to the earth, to death.

Hearing this, Peter heads out again; the 'flying boy' flutters off towards the horizon. Another eight years go by, and he comes across a very different scene: a copper palace and a maiden who says she's been waiting for him. Copper carries some interesting associations; it is an essential nutrient to all plants, animals, and humans. It is found mainly in the bloodstream. We also know that too much of it can be dangerous — studies show that schizophrenics often have heightened levels of copper in their system. It is a wonderful conductor of heat, and a building material. So I will say that copper amplifies warmth, travels through the vital organs of living things, and can provide shelter, but that it can also reside at the edge of madness. The maiden offers warmth and relationship, intimacy, which Peter refuses.

For the maiden as well as the queen, to love is to sing out to death as well as life, to make an accord, something the youngest brother is just not ready to do. In his thirties now, perhaps, he would rather stay in the bars after work than go home to the one woman and the immensity and confusion of the love she offers. In the Tarot, she would be a princess of hearts, close to the imagination, dreams, longing, and tenderness. She also has an eye toward the dark one and says: "When the mountains and forest are levelled, then death will come." No deal then. To learn to refuse can be a good thing, depending on the motivating energy behind the refusal. A musician may refuse a raise because it means more time at the office away from their instrument; some writers may sense they are wedded to words and choose to honour that relationship rather than a physical one. But if fear is what causes our horse to gallop from the scene, then we find ourselves in quite a different situation.

... After a time, the horse spoke to his rider: "Master, whip me four times and yourself twice, for we are coming to the Plain of Regret. This place will pull you down, and me with you. So spur me, push me, and tarry not."

They came to a hut, and in that hut was a small boy, who looked no older than ten. He told Peter that he was the Wind, and that neither death nor old age lived here.

"Never will I leave this place," said Peter.

A hundred years passed, and he grew no older. The boy one day ventured out to the Mountains of Gold and Silver and returned with much plunder. He recommended that Peter go there too, but that he avoid the Mountain of Regret and the Valley of Grief. But something in Peter made him strike out to those very mountains, and there he met Grief. Grief cast him down, and his tears made all the waterfalls of the world. A great longing arose in him to see his family again. He returned to the hut and told the Wind he had to return to his father.

"Don't go, they're all dead! A million years have passed in their time. Where once was your father's palace is now a field of melons. I should know, I went by it only an hour ago..."

Peter's horse warns him to avoid regret, to keep going forward, not to look back. Maybe the Red King had been feeding the horse rotten sugar to cause him to spout such advice. As we saw in the story Birth of Ossian, the horse can be a powerful but survival-oriented part of us. At times a lifesaver, at others it lacks openness and subtlety.

This event indicates that backward glances are starting to occur for Peter, doubts about his attempt to outrun death and old age. So he embarks on another period of wandering, and this time an elemental appears, the Wind itself in the person of a young boy. Finally Peter gets his desired answer: "There is no death or old age here". And so there he stays, for a hundred years. He is almost beyond the human realm now, at the furthest outpost, mixing with deities. He has fluttered past the mind and the heart, avoided all attempts to be grounded into life, and now enjoys his reward.

This longing for immortality is a very old one for humans. We think of Native American stories in which the Sorcerer's heart lives under a rock; sorcerers have huge power but somewhere have lost the connection to their humanity. Carlos Castaneda's work sometimes brushes up against this disconnection. Many gurus, theologians, and meditators live here. It is a place of faux-safety, sheltered from the crashing rocks and droughts of normal life. In the years I lived outside, it was easy to feel pristine and clean, but my lumbering shadow lived in community — that's where I really had to get down and work.

We can say that much of western culture has an immortality complex; nature disturbs us because we see things crumble and die — a car park is a far more affirming talisman of our want, its generic permanence reassuring us. The confluence of red king and witch energies continually square up for a fight between the starving and the bloated. The story indicates that the only way to move this dynamic, to break this internal pattern, is to step into the realm of deep feeling.

The Wind, like the horse, warns Peter of the Mountains of Regret and Valleys of Grief, and tells him to stay fixated on the mountains of gold and silver, but this time it doesn't work. Of course, we know when a character in a story tells you not to do something that there is a secret expectation of: "Do it!" The Wind, and the hut, offer initiatory elements, or stabilisers for Peter's journey. By suggesting that he seek gold, they begin the process of getting him moving. He travels to the mountains, and suddenly all the turbulent sadness of life pours into him, everything he has been trying to outrun. Only when he wishes to return does the Wind reveal that a million years have passed since he left the kingdom.

There will come a day when we deliberately and consciously enter the valley of grief, no matter what the horse of self-preservation tell us. When we do, difficult feelings can emerge and refuse to leave. Our task is to make a home for them, allow them to rustle under our skin and become part of our walk in this world. The grief is personal to us, but also common to all. There is a price for ascending so high that we live with a god.

A challenge for us is to be active through grief, to find leadership through regret, to be an authentic king and queen of many colours. I think this is a crucial challenge for the road ahead. Grief needs the container of initiation to provide this alchemy, this leadership. The great soul work done by the women's and men's movements would, I imagine, very much concur with this step. To get in touch with our grief is a profound move, but we need teachers and leaders who can organise themselves around it, rather than drown in it.

... Well, Peter left anyway, and on his return stopped at the copper palace. Doing so, he found the maiden whittling the last stick. As he knocked on her door, she dropped the stick and died. He buried her and kept going till he met the Queen of All The Birds That Fly. She was amazed at his youthful appearance. As he spoke to her, he noticed that the great forests had gone, only one little branch remaining, which she held. She broke the branch and died, right there in front of him. When he got to his father's palace, all was as the Wind had said; there was no sign that the Red King had ever been there...

On his return, Peter is given a chance to revisit his missed opportunities, at the very moment that they fall to the ground, or wither on the vine. We are reminded of a phrase in the old Russian story *The Maiden Tzar*, which says: "There is a goddess who doesn't love you anymore." I consider this one of the most important mythological ideas of recent years. Somehow I feel relieved when I hear these words — they pull me up sharp against my own sloth and abuse, and remind me that consequences exist. Some opportunities, if not seized, fall away forever: the boat sails away.

It's so tempting to mutter platitudes to excuse any number of indulgences and fear-bound avoidance, but why should we believe that it's always fine, that gods/goddesses love us? How dare we say that? In our world, the maiden has married another man, had kids and gone to live in Denver. When the queen of all the birds sacked you for your flighty temperament, it made you hard to trust. Sometimes doors close and do not open again. You can sit there as long as you want visualizing a different scenario, meditating for success, but it's done, over. Cronos has arrived with a bag of tools, nails, and a heavy oak door.

It's a strange detail that on Peter's return, the copper woman is whittling the stick, and the queen of all the birds is holding the last branch — both doing what the other was meant to do at the end of their time. Maybe they are two sides of the same face, two rivers of the feminine trying to turn the man's canoe back to the bay of life. . . .

...The only thing Peter recognised was his father's well, and so he went toward it. When he did, his sister, the witch, emerged to devour him, shrieking that she had waited long for his return. But Peter had some magic left and made a gesture in the air, and the witch sister fell down dead. As Peter wandered the ruin, he met an old man with a beard down to his belt. The old man was greatly shocked at Peter's tale, and in an effort to convince him, Peter took him to the edge of the city where he had buried the money. Where was once the stone cross, there was now only a sliver of rock sticking up a palm's width from the ground. It took Peter two days of digging to get the chest out. When he finally opened it, what did he find? Death and Old Age groaning, having been cooped up all this time. Seeing Peter, they muttered to themselves, and one laid a hold of him from behind and one from the front. With this, they entered his body and he died, right there and then, like a falling tree. The old man buried him well, planted a cross, took the horse and the money, and stepped out into the brightening morning...

The only energy still active is the witch; she has outlived everything including the king, and she waits by the well of remembrance for him. No tribal elders skip out to meet him, and he is met with no roasted meat or musicians, just this great, dark, un-owned force. *Atanajuat*, the Inuit film, well dramatises how these family spirits get passed down. In our time, the well of remembrance may exist in a therapist's room, or a confessional, or in a wilderness where we fast. The stories say it can take almost a lifetime to be ready to drink from it. A well is a place where we draw sustenance from what lives in the dark, below us. Often a family will have one or two members who crouch by such an opening, only half-seen by the others. Without these figures in the half-light, the water can pour into the bucket, and the family imbibe a poisoned stream. The story says to all bucketers: "Expect an attack from a witch."

Peter's magical signing finishes off the witch - in this story, anyway - and he and an old man unearth his box. What treasures are inside? Death and Old Age, the two figures he had spent a lifetime trying to out run. When they lay their inevitable hands on him, the race is run. If Peter had been willing to befriend them earlier, things could have been different. He'd not have lost all fear, but placed them into relationship with his life. His running lost him the maiden of the copper palace, the possibility of warmth, love, a family, and the chance to grow old with his people. By admitting to our mortality, we unlock something precious that gives everything else greater resonance.

Only two days ago, at the funeral of my uncle, I witnessed evidence of this. As we looked down the six-foot clay drop to his coffin, I saw in an instant a man who'd never run from death and old age — as a result, all they claimed was his shell — his essence was somewhere else, beyond even the hut of the Wind. The two hundred and fifty who came to the funeral also carry some energy between them from him, something shared, generous, and unafraid. The more we try and run, the greater the plunder for death and old age. When they got to my uncle, they found little to munch on, Bryan never hoarded his treasure.

As we experience climate change, it feels as though we are peering into the unknown chest, with death and old age reaching out, clutching ice caps. The witch is the long shadow of that inheritance, spitting Kuwait, the Cold War, 9/11, the relentless pursuit of oil at us. To run from death is to run from forest knowledge, from the rhythms of the land itself. This is the legacy of Descartes, spun into whirling permission for all kinds of abuse.

When we lose relationship with the tacit forces of nature, we begin our run from the things of the living world. The shadow king refuses nourishment to his wider family of ocean and eagle eggs, and that refusal returns as an earthquake or a decimating flood, or as a furious, axe-handed baby. The detail of its being a baby hints at an elemental, raw energy, something that cannot be easily negotiated. Starving the kingdom includes starving all the animals and natural resources in it, and robbing them. Ultimately, our actions will take us back to the well of remembrance, where our legacy awaits.

Besides a great deal of caution in this tale, there are deeper inflections I can't fathom. To run from an abuse, or the grubby complexity of family, is an instinctive response, but the story urges a journey home, a reconciling with the very things that set us off in the first place; it urges us not to try, as the third son did, to outrun the things of life itself.

To stop running is to enter the field of longing, to be fragile, to incarnate fully. Our longing is like Blake's 'golden string', a barometer, a psychic timepiece that connects us to feeling, memory and landscape. Its tenderness creates an inarguable accountability, a 'still, small voice' that feeds the kingdom, and that welcomes the baby daughter but still knows what to shoot and what to feed, a nest of strange compassion. Stepping beyond the Red King and the Witch, we enter the moment when *want* becomes *longing* — the want of immortality opens into the longing for relationship and intimacy.

We must gather our inner kingdom — our one-eyed hags, our bright heroes, our drowned magicians, our sleeping queen, our depressed artists, our accountants, and our ecstasies — and prepare a feast. Not for peace or any simplistic notion, but to get all the troublemakers under one roof. If we peer at them for a moment or two, they start to look like a family. And that one there, serving the drinks, dressed in white, first on the dance floor? That's Death. Death in service to life.

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