

Love Song to Gaia

No creature ever falls short of its own completion. Wherever it stands it never fails to cover the ground.

— Dogen Zenji

I woke up early this morning and walked to the nearby creek. Down a dirt road and through a strand of willows, a small brown spider, spunky, hairy, landed on the tawny hair of my left arm. "Good morning, Grandmother," I smiled and tried to wend my way through the thick willows without disturbing her. I thought momentarily of the Hopi stories about Spider Woman, who nests behind the ears of the young men so they don't lose the thread of the old wisdom as they venture far from what they know. And damned if the spider didn't climb right up my arm over my shoulder to the hollow behind my ear.

It began sprinkling shortly after I laid a few wildflowers on a stone in the creek, and then the rain ran wild. So I took shelter under this small cement bridge, dry and ecstatic in the sound of thunder. My body, more naked than the day I was born, wants only to sing and dance for the spirits, for this morning I emerge into the light of day after seven long years in that underworld that lies beneath the Afro-European village. Yes, I know that few are aware that such a village exists, slavery and colonialism having driven all of us a little mad. And because Christianity in Europe and then Africa has declared this place of initiation the domain of devils and demons, few remember the Greek Hades, the Celtic Land of Fairie, the Bantu mpemba, kalunga, kumfi da n

for what it is, and fewer yet go willingly to sit in the circle of the ancestors.

I want to sing out a few crazy ideas for I am a man of strange tastes and find ideas to be actually beautiful, sometimes stunning like fireflies lighting a dark path, flashing, disappearing and flashing again. Ideas melt quickly from concept to story, from story to music. I want to leave the reader with a little music, a little utterly unreasonable hope.

Buddy Bolden was mad. Everybody knew it. A barber in Slaughter, Louisiana, fond of the bottle and fast women, cornets extraordinaire, he and his band brought jazz to the world in the 1890s. Not a single wax disc of his music survives, and in 1907 he snapped altogether and spent the last twenty-four years of his life in East Louisiana State Hospital.

While Bolden was playing Funky Butt Blues in dives around New Orleans, Henri Poi care was having troubles of his own on the other side of the ocean in France. Poi care, the grandfather of

Chaos theory, was a mathematician working hard on equations that would explain the strange behavior of Heavenly Bodies. Much to his distress, Poi care discovered that planets do not orbit within the elegant ellipses that classical math had claimed about. Darkness is in fact frightening. It can swallow us up and for all our ambition to conquer the natural world, nobody will ever own the forest at night.

As I write this, I hear a stirring in the nearby bushes—a possum I figure. It's been seventy million years since night lemurs crawled through the forests of Madagascar—the last nocturnal ancestor of the human species, placing me, I guess, in remote relationship to the creatures who are now emerging: possum, child of the earth; raccoon, nighthawk and lion. A glint of red eyes now reflected from my lamp—who are you?

Bantu people live by the cycle of darkness and light. The sun that sets in the world of the living simultaneously rises in the world of the dead. The ancestors begin awakening when living things begin to cast their long shadows in the evening, and it is said that midnight is noon in the village of the spirits. Ngoma ceremonies happen at night because out of the dark the spirits come to possess their children, to dance with them, to convey their wisdom.

Last week Deena and I found the fresh spoor of a lion a couple of miles upstream from my little sanctuary. Am I afraid? Yes. And yet the mystery of the lion moving through the forest at night supersedes fear. As Jay Salter, who lives in lion country in the north coast of California likes to tell me, one learns the meaning of humility when one realizes that one's not at the top of the food chain.

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Augustine Kandemwa and I stepped in the edge between worlds very early on in our friendship. He was initiating me into the ngoma of the water spirits, and as it turned out, I was initiating him though it was fully a week before I knew it. He asked me to work on certain things that were troubling him; so not a small part of my first initiation was deeply involved in serving his spirits.

A few days into this, I had the following dream that still perplexes and astonishes me. In retrospect, I realize that this dream was the moment we stepped into the mystery of sacred twinship.

In my dream Augustine was telling me a dream about hunting. An ordinary morning in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe—we'd always tell each other our dreams to see what was up with the spirits, and so I dreamt Augustine was doing so!

As he told me his dream, I entered into it with him as I

sometimes do when 'work with people. It is a profound thing to be accompanied by another in the landscape of your dream, and as a healer, I've found it far more effective than dream

interpretation. Where does the dream lead? That is the question. As Augustine told his dream, I followed him in it past mud houses at the edge of a village. He was carrying a gun, and it was clear that together we were entering the bush to hunt. I told him to close his eyes, to let the forest for him be dark. He did so without hesitation and continued walking firmly as if he could see in the dark. It was me who felt uncertain. How was I to proceed with working on his dream? And yet Augustine walked forward with confidence as I have often seen him, confidence undiminished by the lack of sight.

I relaxed and followed him, trusting him. It was an honor to teach him this non-Bantu way of working with dreams, which he swiftly became skilled in even in this first lesson. Even before I woke up from this dream within a dream, there was no way to define who was leading whom.

Ngangas pay close attention to their dreams because often there are messages that indicate what ritual work to do with someone you're healing or initiating. That afternoon I worked with the dream Augustine told me in my dream, which is to say we entered again the circumstance of the dream. I followed Augustine up a dirt road. "My feet have eyes," he said, and "Oh, I know this well. I have been here before in my dreams. I know a sacred place near here. Follow me."

I had him close his eyes as we left the village behind, and as in his dream/my dream, he walked with great solidity and presence. It was hard to keep up with him.

We came to a river, and he said, "We must wash off the scent of the village, or we will frighten the animals." We prayed in the water, and before we moved on, he laid his gun down. "I won't be needing this," he said.

By this point we were quite out of time. We hunkered in the bushes along a game trail, for how long I cannot say—minutes, an hour, a day, a year. Augustine had gone completely silent, and then I heard him snoring thinly. When I returned to the house of the spirits an hour later, he was still deeply asleep. When he woke up, he looked for me, happy as a clam. "Everything turned into water," he tells me, "a whole world of blue water, but I didn't meet any animals except only fish."

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Strange to go to sleep under a bridge but stranger still to wake up under it at 4:00 A.M. Before I light the kerosene lamp, I could well have been encamped along an underground stream.

An odd dream. I hear African drumming, not "dream drumming" but as if it were actually coming from the meadow down river. I recognize the beat from the ngoma of the water spirits and people singing to Maria in the Ndebele language. The drumming makes me restless so it's hard to sleep. I am unaware that I'm in fact asleep.

Then I see a simple image: a wooden bowl with the Hebrew name of God in it inscribed on a piece of paper. As I wipe the sleep from my eyes, I recall that I have this bowl with me, a gift from my friend Susan Shumba and her husband Ezekiel. I remember also that "shumba" is Shona for lion.

Borders, boundaries and edges. The boundaries between human and animal, Europe and Africa, night and day, dream and waking, sound and silence and always the edge of the river; the otherness of other people, other cultures, other species-various ways of knowing. And the radical otherness of oneself. Let's be honest. Who really ever recognized his or her face in the mirror? And failing that, who remembers that face that one bore before birth?

We live in a dreadful time. The earth is being destroyed, nothing less; and we are all playing a role in destroying it. Those cultures that are on most intimate terms with this planet are being decimated. Traditional ways of knowing are being unraveled by those of us who live in the overdeveloped world, among them the medicine ways of the Shona and Ndebele people who have made me into a healer of sorts. Under this cold bridge at 4:00 A.M., I am willing to do damn near anything to call forth those who might accompany Augustine and me in this vital work of protecting, celebrating and encouraging otherness wherever it is threatened. I will plead, harangue, talk tenderly or with fury, with humor or with grief, politely or impolitely because everything is at stake. Everything.

In *Dreaming the End of the World*, I became aware that apocalyptic dreams could be divided into two categories that were best understood as two legitimate ways of understanding the present moment in history. In some dreams the end of the world was near, and the dreamer would often act like a crafty animal that would do whatever might be necessary to prevent this. In other dreams apocalypse had already happened. The bomb had dropped, the flood had come, the meteor had ravaged the earth. These dreams are entirely different. In the ruins compassion is born, and the dreamer is involved intending to the wounded, building community, making new meanings in the ashes of a destroyed world. My political and spiritual praxis recognizes both these realities as simultaneously true: The world

must be saved; the world is already destroyed. In either case, one's own soul is at stake if one refuses to act-tenderly, reflectively, skillfully, receptively-on behalf of the world.

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Let me offer one final metaphor for the edge between worlds, something to ponder for those of us who live in the belly of God. This is a gift from Henri Poincare', several generations removed. Poincare' is sometimes called the grandfather of Chaos Theory, but his mathematical lineage also spawned Complexity, the

study of how systems—natural systems and cultures, for example—spontaneously organize themselves, find shape. The Afro-European world that Augustine and I practice as ngangas within is such a complex system, emerging quite on its own by way of initiation, dialogue and generosity.

"Complex systems," writes M. Mitchell Woldrop, "have somehow acquired the ability to bring order and chaos into a special kind of balance. This balance point, often called the edge of chaos, is where the components of a system never quite lock into place and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either. The edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life.... The edge of chaos is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive and alive."

For us non-mathematicians it might be easiest to imagine order as ice, molecules frozen into unchanging relation to each other, and chaos as the roiling turbulence of boiling water. The edge of chaos is the fractal zone between: no simple boundary but in every respect a lively, interactive world like the edge between two ecosystems or between day and night.

Mathematically speaking, there is a very good reason why this edge has the same structure as landscape boundaries: the edge between order and chaos is where life is. The biosphere itself lives on the edge, being unable to tolerate either too much order or too much randomness. It is here that otherness proliferates; it is here, planet earth, that otherness comes into relationship with otherness. This is true of all living beings, of cultures, of the strange configurations of the soul and, as far as I'm concerned, the spirit worlds that make use of Augustine and me as ngangas. All beings yearn for the edge for it is where we meet each other and where we feel most alive. Furthermore, each being that we meet invites us to the edge simply because of the fact of their otherness. Invites us to the long migration, to the edge of chaos that will without question take centuries to complete from this impoverished place of greed and hunger. The journey is arduous

and necessary, but the point will come when even the metaphor of "journey" is shed. For the edge of chaos is exactly where one is at this very moment, was never elsewhere and only awaits the opening of the eyes.

The sun is rising. It is time to scribble the name of God on a piece of paper and put it in this wooden bowl to place in the river and say thank you.

Thank you.