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INTRODUCING THE IMAGINAL

SO WHERE DO I begin to tell the story? How to introduce you to my neighborhood? It is all too easy when exploring topics as inherently elusive as the imaginal to hide out in mental maneuvers. Is the imaginal the same as the Platonic "intelligible universe?" The Hindu subtle levels of consciousness, or the bardo realms of Tibetan Buddhism? Maybe yes, maybe no, but in any case that's not what I'm about here. If there's one thing I've learned from these two-and-a-half decades of imaginal bushwhacking, it's that the imaginal realm is entered only through the heart. How you get there is where you'll arrive. And so by whatever route our exploration leads us, it will need to stay close to the heart.

Fortunately, that is not really so difficult with the imaginal realm, for the heart really is its native ground. And when all the intellectual abstractions have been stripped away, and it is allowed to speak in its own native tongue, what it speaks of, with surprising simplicity and directness, is beauty, hope, and a mysteriously deeper order of coherence and aliveness flowing through this earthly terrain connecting it to the infinite wellsprings of cosmic creativity and abundance. Instead of the isolation and anomie so often conveyed in our postmodern cosmological roadmaps (where we are simply an insignificant

planet in an insignificant galaxy in a random “big bang” among a ceaseless cacophony of big bangs), it speaks of the preciousness of our human particularity and the exigency of our human contribution (tiny though it may be) to that vast, dynamic web of cosmic interbeing, which can be seen, in toto, as the heart of God. It calls us to a renewed sense of dignity, accountability, belongingness, cosmic intimacy, and love. That is why I am writing this book, and for no other reason. Our hearts get this language already. With only a bit of a shove—and perhaps a slightly new roadmap—our heads may be able to get it too. Pray to God, while there is still time.

So perhaps “where to begin” in a more heartfelt way might be with that striking image furnished by Jesus himself: “In my Father’s house are many mansions.” Picture the imaginal realm as one such mansion, belonging mostly to the Western spiritual tradition and deeply related to the Western experience of the heart of God. It is perhaps not a high mansion and certainly not a universal one (since many spiritual traditions seem to get on perfectly well without it). But within its own domain, i.e., the Western mystical and esoteric tradition, it is a pivotal one. Something important happens here.

Please don’t think of it as a *place*. I know it’s nearly impossible for the Western mind not to go there. We did the same thing with heaven and hell, didn’t we? Turned them into miniature planets, complete with fiery furnaces or pearly gates. But a realm is not fundamentally a place; it is more like a set of governing conventions that make possible a certain kind of manifestation. In our own earth realm we are subject to many such governing conventions (we call them “laws”). Gravity holds our feet to the ground. Time flows in one direction only. We cannot walk through walls, be in two places at once, or wish ourselves ten pounds lighter. There are a lot of laws (forty-eight of them, Gurdjieff postulated), making our earth

plane a fairly dense and determinate place. There are other realms that are lighter and a few that are denser. We will meet some of these in due course. For now it's important to keep reminding ourselves that from a metaphysical perspective, realm has less to do with physical location than with density. In fact, virtually all spiritual teachers in all traditions have insisted that the "higher" (i.e., less dense) realms are not somewhere else but within—already coiled inside us as subtler and yet more intensely alive bandwidths of experience and perception. The reason we do not typically notice them is that the laws governing any realm are generally too coarse to allow the penetration of those finer vibrations emanating from the next realm "up" into its normal sphere of operations. As St. Paul reminds us, we do indeed "see through a glass darkly."

But why do we call it "imaginal?" I admit that the whole issue is problematic. The term itself has its immediate provenance in Islamic mysticism, where it denotes a subtle and fluid "intermediate" realm suspended midway between form and formlessness. But the idea itself—or archetype, actually—is a mainstay of the Western tradition of *sophia perennis*, or "perennial wisdom," with roots going all the way back to Plato.¹ Within this wider tradition it is typically understood to be a boundary zone separating the denser causality of our earth plane from the finer causalities that lie "above" us in the angelic and logocic worlds. Put more simply, it sits on the dividing line between the visible and invisible worlds—or, according to the older, pre-Einsteinian metaphysics, between the "spiritual" and "material" worlds.

It is called "imaginal" because, while it is invisible to the physical eye, it is still clearly perceptible through the eye of the heart, which is in fact what the word *imagination* specifically implies in its original Islamic context: *direct perception through the eye of the heart, not through mental reflection or fantasy*. Of //

course, in the modern West we now view the interior landscape through the filter of Wordsworthian romanticism and hear the word *imagination* as suggesting something personal, subjective, illusory, or "made up"—which is of course exactly the opposite of what the term is actually intended to convey.

I know this causes a lot of unnecessary confusion, but once you get used to the real metaphysical meaning of the term, it sheds a lot of light not only on the Islamic mystical tradition but on the Christian mystical tradition as well. I am quite certain, for example, that this direct noetic seeing is what St. Paul had in mind by the term *faith* (as in "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"). But in our own diminished age even faith has now gone dark and tends to be understood as a "blind" leap into the dark rather than a luminous perception of the invisible golden thread. Small wonder that the imaginal has all but dropped off the contemporary metaphysical roadmap.

I spoke of the imaginal realm a few paragraphs ago as a "boundary realm," but it is actually more of a confluence, for the word *boundary* suggests a separation while what is really at stake in this realm is an active flowing together. "Where the two seas meet" is a beautiful Sufi metaphor to convey the essence of what actually goes on here. The imaginal is a meeting ground, a kind of cosmic intertidal zone—and as in all intertidal zones, nourishment and metamorphosis furnish the principal order of business here. In this realm the fruits of our human striving—both conscious and unconscious—are offered up to the whole. From this realm, in turn, we receive blessing, inspiration, guidance, and vivifying force, which are ours to share and bestow here below. Like a Sufi dervish, we receive and bestow, receive and bestow, as we turn and are turned within the greater cosmic dance.

In its traditional metaphysical positioning this connective

work of the imaginal realm does not come immediately to the fore because of the strong underlying metaphysical bias toward "substance ontology," i.e., the assumption that matter and spirit are qualitatively different items, distinct and fundamentally irreconcilable in nature. Viewed through this lens, the imaginal and "material" realms perch on either side of a fundamental ontological divide—or as they say here in Maine, "You can't get there from here." But in a post-Einsteinian era it is no longer possible to think that way; the old metaphysical maps must be redrawn to a new baseline in which *energy*, not substance, is the coin of the realm.

Esotericist Valentin Tomberg is thinking along these lines in his *Meditations on the Tarot* when he invites us to reimagine the Great Chain of Being as a single energetic continuum:

Modern science has come to understand that matter is only condensed energy. . . . Sooner or later science will discover that what it calls "energy" is only condensed psychic force—which discovery will lead in the end to the establishment of the fact that psychic force is the "condensation," pure and simple, of consciousness, i.e., spirit.²

"Psychic force" here refers to the subtler energies that science does not yet know how to measure but that have demonstrable effect in the physical world—for example, the energies of attention, will, prayer, and love. It is the transmission of these energies that furnishes the supreme business of the imaginal world. In this updated and much more dynamic revisioning, the imaginal can be roughly situated at the junction between the "psychic energy" and "physical energy" bandwidths, where its pivotal positioning in the transmission chain comes much more into focus.

At the risk of overloading the circuits in this very preliminary

introduction, I would add that the Jesuit mystic and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is describing essentially these same two energetic bandwidths with his terms radial energy and tangential energy.³ The latter is the physical energy that keeps our world chugging along on its axis; the former is the finer and more purposeful energy that draws the world forward toward its evolutionary destiny. Radial energy is released and generated specifically through the interplay with tangential energy, and it is for Teilhard explicitly counterentropic. This is a very good point to remember, even at this early stage.

Impressionistically, the imaginal penetrates this denser world in much the same way as the fragrance of perfume penetrates an entire room, subtly enlivening and harmonizing. My favorite image to begin to access this admittedly mind-bending notion still comes by way of a striking vignette in Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, in which she recounts how she once came upon a beautiful snake moving through the grass, its skin glistening with subtle, variegated colors. She raved so much about that snakeskin that one of her house servants killed the snake, skinned it, and made it into a belt for her. But to her dismay, the once glistening skin was now merely dull and gray, because all along the beauty had lain not in the physical skin, but in the quality of the aliveness. The imaginal is that quality of aliveness moving through this realm, interpenetrating, cohering, filling things with the fragrance of implicit meaning whose lines do not converge in this world alone but at a point beyond. As the Gospel of Thomas describes it:

I am the light shining upon all things,
 I am the sum of everything, for from me
 Everything has come, and toward me
 Everything returns. Pick up a stone and there I am,
 Split a piece of wood and you will find me there.⁴

Experientially, received within one's own quiet subjectivity, it appears as an allusive aliveness, a meaning presenting itself in "glimpses and visions," a foretaste—or aftertaste—of a reality half-forgotten but still strangely familiar, of an intensity and beauty and coherence that seems to match the actual pattern of our hearts if only we could stand to live there.

Is It Real?

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the word *imaginal* does not mean "imaginary." That unfortunate but all-too-understandable confusion was created by Henry Corbin, the noted Islamic scholar, when he introduced the term *mundus imaginalis* to name that intermediate, invisible realm of causality that figures so prominently in mystical Islamic cosmology. But in so doing, Corbin was drawing on a highly technical and quintessentially Islamic notion of imagination as itself being one of those higher and more subtle energies, possessing will, objectivity, and creative agency. To our modern Western ears, the word *imaginal* may indeed seem to suggest some private or subjective inner landscape, "make believe" or fanciful by nature. But while it is typically associated with the world of dreams, visions, and prophecy, i.e., a more subtle form, the imaginal is always understood within traditional metaphysics to be objectively real and in fact comprising "an ontological reality entirely superior to that of mere possibility."⁵ It designates a sphere that is not less real but more real than our so-called "objective reality" and whose generative energy can (and does) change the course of events in this world. Small though it may appear to be, it is mighty, as those who try to swim against it will readily attest.

Walter Wink, one of the few contemporary mainstream Christian theologians who have been bold enough to venture