

LETTER XVII

The Star, Arcanum of Growth

Spiritual Exercise: The Nonduality of Hope



Now, the spiritual exercise of the seventeenth Arcanum is that of the endeavour to see together—“to contemplate”—the essence of biological growth (the agent of growth) and the essence of spiritual growth (hope), in order to find, or rather re-find, their analogy, their intrinsic kinship and, lastly, their fundamental identity. (page 472)

The light which flows above consciousness and the instinctive drive which flows beneath consciousness are fundamentally the same thing—separated in order to act according to two different modes—namely water, which is the principle of growth and evolution, both biological and spiritual. (page 473)

Angelic inspiration and the agent of growth have this in common that they flow... in a continuous way. (page 465)

The unity of hope, creativity and tradition is the agent of growth. (page 487)

From the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree, to Paul on the Road to Damascus, to Thomas Merton on the busy streetcorner — our spiritual heritage has plenty

of stories of people who receive enlightenment or an epiphany in some sort of sudden, shocking, awe-inspiring manner.

But our author suggests that the Star represents a different approach to spirituality — the evolutionary model of slow and steady growth, rather than the sudden, ego-shattering breakthrough experience. I like to think it's like comparing being awakened gradually by the coming of the dawn — the slow but irresistible emergence of the morning light — as opposed to the sudden, aggressive, blaring intrusion of an alarm clock (it's no pun to say that's an *alarming* way to be awakened!).

We all know that there are some times when the alarm clock is a blessing — just this week I had an early morning eye doctor appointment, and I relied on clock on my phone to wake me up before dawn so I could make it on time. But I suspect most people would agree that, on an ideal morning, it's far more pleasant to let the sun

slowly seduce us out of our slumber with the golden rays of morning light, than to be jolted awake by the harsh buzz of a machine.

So why, then, do we persist with this idea that true “enlightenment” comes suddenly and shockingly, rather than slowly and organically?

I think there’s a simple bit of psychology at work here. Jarring as it may be, a sudden blast of spiritual insight is dramatic and *noteworthy*. Most of us know — or perhaps have been — a person whose life was a mess, and who needed to be hit by the proverbial cosmic two-by-four in order to make the necessary changes in order to clean up our mess, and successfully reorient our lives toward God, toward heaven, toward love.

But the person who gradually makes slow but steady changes in their lives, to evolve, over time, into a more truly God-centered, mystical, contemplative consciousness and behavior, has every bit as much a real and meaningful “enlightenment” as the one with the dramatic, can’t-miss-it transformation. But since such slow-but-steady transformations aren’t as dramatic, as obvious, it’s easier to miss or ignore them. And unfortunately, that’s what so many of us do.

Our author, steeped as he is in both esoteric and contemplative wisdom, sees through this problem. He has recognized that Arcanum XVII, the Star, represents the mystery of growth — both material and spiritual. Both forms of growth represent a transformational *flow* — we do not shift childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood in one dramatic moment of mind-blowing change; rather the physical growth that marks the move from one age of life to the next happens over time. Puberty is not a one-off event, like graduation. We “go through” stages of growth or change, like puberty or menopause. Therefore, it only makes sense to say that we also can “go through” mystical awakening, spiritual enlightenment, or a contemplative epiphany.

When you think about it, even figures like the Buddha or Merton had their mind-blowing experiences of sudden transformation as the *culmination* of years of slow and steady spiritual progress. In this sense, the Buddha’s enlightenment or Merton’s epiphany were like quantum leaps: yes, they were sudden and remarkable transformations, but they came at the end of a long process of slow and steady preparation: in other words, slow and steady growth.

Our author notes that growth represents a unity of “hope, creativity and tradition.” Tradition anchors us in our relationship with the past: with ancestors, foremothers

and forefathers, and the saints, mystics and other wisdomkeepers of the past. Creativity, meanwhile, is the process by which we meet and embrace the future, consciously creating changes in our lives and our environments in order to make the future a better place (hopefully) than the present. Of course, all spiritual traditions remind us that as powerful as the foundation of the past or the invitation of the future might be, life is always lived entirely in the present moment. And so hope is the energy — the great virtue — that brings the stability of tradition and the innovation of creativity together.

Hope, as we know, is one of the three “theological virtues” along with faith and love. We also see that our author equates hope specifically with spiritual growth (page 472), which leads to our spiritual exercise for this Arcanum. In the author’s words, “the spiritual exercise of the seventeenth Arcanum is that of the endeavour to see together — “to contemplate” — the essence of biological growth (the agent of growth) and the essence of spiritual growth (hope), in order to find, or rather re-find, their analogy, their intrinsic kinship and, lastly, their fundamental identity.” To try to state that a bit more simply: our invitation with this exercise is to contemplate *both* physical and spiritual growth, to these these two dimensions of growth “together” which means learning to recognize their *kinship* and ultimately their *identity*. What does this mean? Our author is challenging us to move into a *nondual awareness* when it comes to our understanding of human growth and development. In other words: it is tempting to think of spiritual growth and material growth as somehow unrelated to each other. There’s a level on which this makes sense; after all, we can grow spiritually throughout the entirety of our lives, even after our physical growth slows down and is replaced by the decline that is a normal part of getting old. An older adult may find their body is becoming feeble or ill, but spiritually they continue to grow, to blossom, to mature, a process that can continue literally to the point of death.

What our author is challenging us to see, however, is that physical and spiritual growth are *not* different, but rather are best understood as two dimensions or sides of a fundamentally unified dynamic. In other words, the energies of hope, tradition/stability, and creativity/innovation, that shape physical growth are identical to the same energies that fuel our spiritual growth. It’s one dynamic of growth and development, even though it may manifest in our lives as two different expressions or types of growth. After all, matter is trapped energy; in a similar way, physical growth is simply a slower, denser manifestation of the same energies of growth that impel us to grow spiritually.

With this in mind, let’s move into our spiritual exercise.

Exercise: The Nonduality of Hope

Julian of Norwich famously said “the fullness of joy is to behold God in all.” Likewise, Ignatius of Loyola wrote in one of his letters that we “should practice the seeking of God’s presence in all things.” But how *do* we “behold God in all” or “find God in all things”? There’s no one-size-fits-all answer to that question, but I believe we learn to see the divine presence just like we learn to see hidden patterns in a magic eye painting: it’s a question of trusting our capacity to see, and giving ourselves permission to see what we truly believe is present.

This same dynamic is at play in this exercise, where we give ourselves permission to see that the energy of growth is at play in all people’s lives and in all circumstances, even though granted in some people and in some situations the energy of growth might be slowed down to the tiniest trickle — but it’s always there, somehow.

We can close our eyes and imagine a baby or a child, growing rapidly: getting taller, stronger, transitioning from infant to youth to adult. We can also close our eyes and imagine the powerful spiritual growth that takes place in so many lives: in the hard work of recovery from addiction, the slow but persevering commitment to overcoming selfishness and learning to live for God rather than just for oneself, the hopeful transformation that occurs when a person learns to be fully authentic and true to themselves, even if this means charting a course in life that takes us away from the limiting but familiar constraints of our family or community of origin.

There are many ways we grow, both physically and spiritually. This exercise begins by acknowledging all the ways we experience growth in our own lives, and/or in the lives of those we love. As we imagine all the many ways we (and others) grow, we begin to *contemplate* how all these many ways of growing represent, ultimately, one unified, nondual energy: the energy of hope, the energy of optimism, the energy that places trust in both God and the promise of the future. We also contemplate how growth represents a marriage between what has come before (“tradition”) and what is newly possible (“creativity”). In this marriage, like all sacred marriages, “the two become one flesh,” and so we contemplate that in hope, tradition and creativity are woven together in an integral whole.

So this spiritual exercise is an exercise of *meditation*— even meditation that culminates in a *contemplation* of nondual hope. As feels comfortable for you, visualize this process of meditative contemplation as an expression of *prayer*. This is more than just imagining possibilities (although that could be part of it). This is a prayerful response to the many ways we are called to grow, learning to trust that all growth originates in

the heart of God, and is manifested in our lives as an expression of hope: hope for God's love, for God's call, for God's invitation into union and oneness with God.

You can pair this exercise with other forms of prayer, such as liturgical prayer or centering prayer. Pray in whatever way makes sense to you and nurtures you. But as you contemplate the essential nondual unity of all growth, notice how this meditation invites you — no matter how old or sick or suffering you might be — to hope and trust that you, as a child of God, will always be invited into deeper growth. We grow because we are creatures of hope. And we hope because we are invited by the God who created us and loves us, to always grow. As we more fully settle into an embodied knowing of this spiritual truth, we are empowered to be living expressions of hope, beacons of hope for others as well.

Truly, the Star invites us to contemplate the unity of growth and hope, so that we can be living icons of hope for others.