

Seeing from Above and Below

Bill Isaacs: In 1922 T.S. Eliot wrote the epic poem *The Waste Land*, arguably one of the most influential pieces of writing of the 20th century. The 1920's reputedly were a period of roaring accomplishments but were in actuality a mix of swirling heights and looming shadows of what was to come. A young Eliot (he was 33 at the time) wrote a remarkable poem that described the mood of decay and the spiritual ills of modern Europe. It narrates the difficulties even as it seeks to find a way out of them. I think it's useful to think of this now because the age in which Eliot wrote has its echoes in our time. People today are feeling a similar kind of angst, of coming challenge, replete with modern words to describe it, like "[climate anxiety](#)" and the "[polycrisis](#)," a condition of systemic disease where everything collapses together in a tangled mess of troubles.

The poem begins:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee

The idea that we are trapped between memory and desire, between what we've known and what we long for, a state where there appears to be no resolution, only "a heap of broken images where the sun beats, and the dead tree gives no shelter" names eloquently the anxiety felt by many people then, and now. Human beings are trapped in their past, or in their dreams of the future.

One image that runs through *The Waste Land* comes from the Grail myth—that of the wounded Fisher King. The Fisher King spends his days fishing by a lake. The land around him is desolate and infertile. He's wounded in the groin, which is a kind of ancient euphemism for sexual wounding. The myth is telling us here that human beings have somehow had their generativity wounded, and so the land and all that is in it suffers. The wound arises out of an attempt to establish an independent kingdom, independent of life, where the habit is to try to steal creative energy and in so doing, forgetting to whom or to what it belongs. The Grail Myth later tells the tale of a knight, Perceval, whose mission is to heal the land, but in the end, he forgets to ask the crucial question, "Whom does the grail serve?" Our collective amnesia causes

us to suffer and the land—which includes our collective experience as well as the physical earth around us—becomes desolate. This was what Eliot recognized, and what seems to resonate again [now](#).

Eliot could see. This ability to sense what is emerging was also present in Winston Churchill. In 1924 he [wrote](#), “Certain somber facts emerge solid, inexorable, like the shapes of mountains from drifting mist. Mankind has never been in this position before. Without having improved appreciably in virtue or enjoying wiser guidance, it has got into its hands for the first time the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination.” This awareness, which predates nuclear arms by two decades, illustrates the prescience of true leadership. Seeing the pattern of what is to come (which is not the same as predicting events) can allow a statesman to act even as others dither—something Churchill did remarkably well in the years leading up to WWII. And it enables poets to evoke an awareness of the longing for freedom and catalyze the quest to recover it. With seeing comes responsibility. We could ask ourselves the question, What do we see? And what therefore is our role to play?

The other image that runs through *The Waste Land* is that of Tiresias, the blind seer, who is, according to Eliot, “the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.” According to Ovid in the *Metamorphosis*, written 800 years before Christ, Tiresias was wounded by the gods because he took the wrong side of an argument about sexuality. Tiresias had once encountered copulating snakes, struck them apart, and as punishment was turned into and lived as a woman. He later found another set of snakes, struck them apart again, and was then turned back into a man. Later he was asked by the gods—who saw him as a fair judge, seeing both sides—who had more pleasure in loving, men or women? He answered, women. One goddess didn't like that answer, and blinded him, but then another as compensation for this gave him the gift of seeing the future. Tiresias in other words knew both poles of sexuality, but also got caught in the polarization that can arise between them. He came to embody both dimensions, was blinded through their conflicting energies, and then emerged with the gift that transcends blindness.

This is a complex but powerful metaphor for both the challenge of holding the intensity of generative energy and the transcendent sight that is available on the other side of the fires of it. We can come in other words to see well beyond the surface of things. This is what is necessary for healing the infertility of the land. We must restore sight. To do so however we must move beyond the conditioning and polarities which we have all inherited, which are extensive. The conditioning is quite antithetical to life. Human beings operate exactly

backwards to creative function in many respects. We separate when we could know unity. We constantly endeavor to be independent, and in so doing we discover that we're enslaved.

One critical and somewhat surprising dimension of perception is that our here and now immediate experience gives us a tangible window into the whole, into larger unfolding cycles. We can know the whole through our experience of the parts, through the portal we immediately have before us in this present moment. Perception is in this sense holographic. It is easy to fall into the lethargy that says the experience of going to the grocery store isn't terribly exalted. But that would be a limited view. The whole is always unfolding in its totality through the parts, something we may feel or intuit at first. However, it is not easy nor necessary to sustain an imagined large cosmic view at all times. But one can carry a perception of the factors before us that allows us to feel the larger flow and translate what's immediately occurring around us in accurate and restorative terms. Sitting here today, reading this, for instance, we are humanity listening consciously to the flow of Life. Sometimes the best people can do is sense coming trouble. That's their gift (not always felt as such) and their opportunity. Others have other possibilities, and can sense emerging potential, and then provide an opportunity for healing.

One way we see is through language. There are some beautiful and untranslatable words in languages other than English that can give us a sense for the wider range of essences hidden behind the forms of things. One is the word *sehnsucht*, which is German for an intense internal longing or yearning for someone or something. Another is *hygge*, which is Danish for coziness, contentment and wellbeing. *Yugen*, in Japanese means "a profound mysterious sense of the beauty of the universe too deep for words." Also Japanese, *komorebi*, means the sunlight that filters through the trees. And then finally *mitakya oyasin*, is Lakota Sioux for "all my relations," the sense of the wholeness and interrelatedness of all creation. Perception through language activates vision, and points to the vast invisible world behind the appearance of things. What do you see?

There are two directions of vision that we could consider; two places from which to see. One is from the bottom up. We can rise out of and through the conditioning which we experience and with which we are surrounded. People make attempts to be "above it all," to live beyond their reactions and emotional disturbance. Often however this is more of a theoretical or conceptual stance where the effort is to override uncomfortable experience instead of transforming the burdens and conditioning that generated the discomfort. People with some spiritual training seem particularly vulnerable to this trap. They attempt to blot out suffering with thoughts that stimulate satisfying feelings. But that is very different from doing

the underlying work required to genuinely heal, and so be free, from whatever it is that's rising up. This work requires *vision*, to see from the bottom up, to perceive from a place of centeredness, from being, and from this place to bring healing into disturbed memories and emotional reactions. One need not condemn or reject whatever it is that's present. Instead we must witness it as it is. The focus from this vantage point is on what needs to be liberated in me, whether a local disturbance, an inner discomfort, or a need for a repair.

This last week I had an experience that illustrates this. I facilitated a retreat of a group of sixty leaders of a global institution in a meeting near Washington, DC. The participants represented all the countries of the world. We were there for three days, having conversations about global instability, the challenges facing the planet and the nature of their responsibilities with regard to this. We had a useful strategic dialogue. However, at bottom this session was really all about their connecting with each other in a genuine way. It was not as I told them about agreeing, only understanding, and listening, which is always necessary for anything significant to happen. And something did happen among them.

Standing in front of these people I had to set aside and work with parts of me that kept saying, "How am I going to manage all this? This is a lot." Many of them were tired. A few had just returned from Davos, Switzerland where they had been having it out with other global and political leaders. Most felt the underlying tensions of the conflicts in the world that had begun to leak into their everyday meetings. They together held some of the most intense geopolitical conflicts in the world today. I had to have a talk with that part of me. I told it, "It's all right. I've got this," which it really wanted to know. It realized it could come along for the ride, so to speak, and that I would handle things. This part of me realized it didn't know what to do, but it trusted me to know what to do. It was a little daunted but happy to be there. I could have chosen to be identified with that part, but I did not. I also knew—because I and my team had spent time with each of these people in advance of this gathering—that this sentiment, this part, was not just in me. I could sense that the feeling of being unsettled by the complexity of the situation was also present in the people in the room. In an outer sense they have big jobs, but they are also human beings who were actively wondering how to handle this situation, and more, how to get something productive to come of it. To see all this and allow it to be okay is seeing from the bottom up, and then extending something stabilizing out into the field. This allowed a place of relaxation to arise among everyone. It also brought creative pressure to bear to quiet these factors, so we didn't just get buffeted by disturbed thoughts and feelings.

There is another angle of seeing, another stance from which to function, in addition to the one that brings healing to the conditioning within and around us. This is seeing from the top down, from the perception of stature, from the perception of the vastness of Being. Oddly when seeing from this place the word “vast” doesn't quite apply. If we think of our place in the scheme of things as our “home among the stars,” then our particular home is in this solar system, which is itself a star. We are on the earth, and to the degree we experience this, we realize we are in a city in a star. Perhaps many of the dimensions of that city are yet invisible, are not yet in form, but they are present. And the functionality at these levels of things is very much present too. From this place of being, from this place of stature, it's easy to see the relative insignificance of what human beings have constructed in their artificial bubble in the midst of the cosmic ocean. It looks very impressive from one level, looking up, but it doesn't really amount to much in fact. Much of what human beings create vanishes generation after generation. It just dissipates. That is in marked contrast to the lines of force and creative flow that are ever pulsing and present at these other larger ranges. There are, in other words, awesome and extensive resources surrounding, informing and potentially flowing into human experience. These are always available. Awareness of this reality tends to get obliterated because of our involvement in the so-called significance of things, the crisis of the day, the conditioning in which we are enmeshed.

At various times in history there have been calls to rise up to recall a larger experience of identity, to see from this level. One example can be found in the Book of Job (38:1-9). There is a so-called divine examination in these verses, one that asks human beings a demanding set of questions, beginning with this one: “Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” In other words, do you have perception from above, from the place of Being? Are you aware of a range of function and identity through which flowed the creation of the earth itself?

I had the thought that we might perhaps take a slightly revised divine examination; a few new questions for a new era. So take out your pens, your blue books. And no Chat-GPT, no looking up, no cheating. Here are a few questions: “Which cycles in the larger order of things are you currently stewarding? Which cycles are unfolding directly through you? Which require letting and which require letting go? Which require only encompassment and awareness? How well are you holding these cycles? Is there room for improvement? What specific healing action is required for the ones that are closest to you? What factors remain to be healed in you, to let you be in position to provide stewardship at the next level of responsibility to which you are called?”

We are always being called to the next level of responsibility. That doesn't stop at any age and stage or in any condition, ever. Where are we standing as we lay the foundations of a new world? Because that is in fact what is happening and what is needed. It is not any longer a mystery, but it is a responsibility, an exciting one, a thrilling one. So, these two processes, the top down and the bottom up, fuse in a holographic experience here and now. Both are present. We hold both in each moment.

Doing this requires attention to the way experience unfolds through time. We may experience initially an awakening process, a rising up to the point of having understanding in the first place. This is a process that is moving in an accelerated way in many people now. Part of this involves perceiving the level of crisis that is upon us. You have to lift your head up to notice. It's not hard to miss, and some are avoiding it assiduously. However, greater awareness of difficulty is in fact a kind of awakening, a wonderful beginning. This is also a place where people get stuck. We need to learn to detach from the emotional trauma associated with what seems to be coming. This is seeing, and healing, from the bottom up. As we do it, we begin to have a place to stand that isn't so involved in the turmoil, even as it gets more challenging.

Then a second range of experience can open, one which we've been referring to here as operating from the top down, which involves stewarding the pattern of life from this awakened place. There are many people, for instance, who have come up through different routes, through different spiritual practices, to discover this awareness within themselves. That is a wonderful step, but what is needed is to operationalize this awareness, to come to function from that place individually and collectively. The discovery of wholeness and the possibility of healing is just the start. Next, we have to do something about the fact that the land has been infertile and decaying. We have to bring into our lives the generativity that has been lost, and then the land begins to heal around us. We begin to be in position to reconstitute the earth because the factors that have been long hidden start to be available in form, perhaps subtle form at first.

This part of the journey is unknown ground for all of us. We have not been here before collectively, but we're very actively in it now. There is something to discover. What does it mean to reconstitute the land immediately here, to heal it? Without doubt that implies changes in our mental models of what we're doing. Obviously, part of the reconstituting process is releasing our idea of what we thought we were doing, because everything is now very different. This isn't a cause for insecurity, it is a cause for curiosity. It's very exciting. We are moving out of the known into the unknown. We are on the precipice of allowing the recreative process to

accelerate. Holding the question, listening for the changes that are meant to unfold without prejudice or preconceived labels, is a big part of what's needed. The Fisher King says,

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

Our answer to his melancholy question is that we can do better than this. We are here to regenerate the land because we begin to see, to perceive the pattern of perspective that has order within it. That was never lost. More and more people will no doubt sense very directly the overhang of difficulty. That has been the culminating impact of all these centuries of living out of sync with life. We move from the wasteland to the new land. We enter the new land because we create it. We allow it to take form in us. And while people may see giants and difficulties, we have confidence in the immensity of the power that is bringing all this about. Where there is no vision, the people perish. And when there is vision, the people live. We bring generative vision from above and below, and with it comes life abundant.

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Pre-Service Music

1. *Années de pèlerinage I, S. 160: No. 2, Au lac de Wallenstadt*

Composed by Franz Liszt and performed by Leon McCawley

2. *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*

Composed by Cyrillus Kreek and performed by Vox Clamantis

3. *4 Pieces for Violin and Piano from "Much Ado About Nothing": Scene in the Garden*

Composed by Erich Wolfgang Korngold and performed by Svetlin Roussev & Yeol Eum Son

Concluding Music

Fugitive Visions of Mozart: III. Allegro (Live)

Composed by Valentin Silvestrov and performed by Johannes Moser, Vadim Gluzman & Andrei Korobeinikov