

The Realm of Purpose Least Realized But Most Essential in Our Time of Radical, Global Change

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...There is only one life
you can call your own
and a thousand others
you can call by any name you want.

Hold to the truth you make
every day with your own body,
don't turn your face away.

Hold to your own truth
at the center of the image
you were born with.

Those who do not understand
their destiny will never understand
the friends they have made
nor the work they have chosen

nor the one life that waits
beyond all the others....

~ David Whyte

Everyone yearns for — and needs — a purpose that can be embodied, a meaning that can be lived. Our mortality demands it of us. Our love for our own life, for all living things, and for community pours itself into the world, like a prayer, through our deepest purpose. But what we mean by and experience as “purpose” depends on our stage of life and our depth of psychospiritual development. In the contemporary Western world, when people speak about personal life purpose, most everyone means a mix of social, vocational, political, and/or religious goals or intentions. A much smaller group means a desire to awaken to the divine, nondual, or the universal.

But there's a third variety of purpose that is very rarely considered, that has no place or presence in mainstream Western consciousness, that is completely absent from contemporary maps of human life, even among specialists who study and write about purpose and human development,

including those who write about and guide “integral” development. And yet this is the single most essential realm of purpose, especially in our current critical and liminal moment in the unfolding of the world’s story.

The near absence of attention to this most essential realm of purpose is not a coincidence or an oversight. For millennia, Western civilization, among others, has shaped itself in ways that suppress access to this realm. Today this realm of purpose is rarely experienced — or even consciously recognized as a possibility. Our educational, media, and religious systems and our mainstream parenting practices are shaped in ways that divert us from this vital domain of human experience. This suppression of human development has become a necessity for Western civilization in its current form; it would simply not be sustainable otherwise. Conversely, widespread access to this realm of purpose would be the single most potent factor in the termination of Western society in its present life-destroying iteration — and in the creation of a just, life-enhancing, and deeply imaginative culture with its roots in the genuine achievements of the Western tradition.

The lack of access to this particular realm of purpose is our single greatest human deficit at this time. The diversity of life on Earth is now being extensively diminished precisely because of this deficit — and has been for hundreds if not thousands of years. Additionally, as beat poet Diane di Prima writes, “men die everyday for the lack of it.”¹

It is also not a coincidence that most societies and traditions that have treasured and preserved this now-rare realm of purpose have been wiped out or culturally disrupted over the past few millennia. This realm of purpose is the single greatest threat to the consumer-conformist-imperial-dominator mind, to its business as usual, as manifested not only in the contemporary West but in all egocentric societies now prevalent across the globe. If we are to survive the twenty-first century — if robust life on Earth of *any* sort is to survive — there are many things we must do in the short-term (like save from extinction as many species and habitats as we can, reverse global warming, create true and universally just democracies and biocracies, and abolish nuclear weapons) but, in the long term, the single most important measure is the reshaping of all human cultures so as to support every child to grow in a way that enables the uncovering and embodiment of this particular, now exceedingly rare, realm of purpose.

The central fact that explains why this sphere of purpose is so seldom attained is this: In order to access it, what is required is a level or stage of

¹ Diane di Prima, from “Rant,” in *Pieces of a Song: Selected Poems*, (San Francisco: City Lights, 1990).

human development rarely achieved in contemporary cultures — again, not a coincidence — despite the fact that this stage of development, in a healthy and mature Western culture, would be commonplace among 15-year-olds. No special training or preparation would be necessary. More on this below.

I hesitate to name this realm of purpose due to the likelihood you'll think I'm referring to something I'm not. I have often called it "soul purpose" but this misleads most everyone because I mean something by "soul" that almost no one else does in the contemporary Western world, including those writing about purpose and soul. Better phrases would be "mythopoetic identity" or "unique psycho-ecological niche" but, to be coherent, these phrases require careful unpacking and elaboration.

But before we do that, let's review some of the other, more commonly addressed and accessed realms of purpose.

Realms of Purpose through the Lifespan

As a child, I didn't think much about purpose. You probably didn't either. It's not what children *should* be thinking about. But if you had asked me what I most wanted, I probably would have said I wanted to please my parents, play with my friends, do well in school, ride my bike, and mess around outside, especially in the forests that surrounded my New England hometown.

As a heterosexual teenager, girls and sex became my foremost interest, although sports, fast cars, and playing the electric organ in rock bands became primary purposes, too. Doing well in school and being liked by my peers remained vital.

In college, much of this was still true, but by then my conscious purpose leaned more toward the exploration of nonordinary consciousness (through experiential as well as scholarly channels) and, more generally, spirituality as accessed by Buddhism, yoga, and other non-Western practices; the co-creation of a primary romantic relationship; martial arts; political activism and cultural change; the exploration of the western half of the US especially by motorcycle (road trips!) and of wilderness anywhere I could find it; and the need and opportunity to choose a career.

During graduate school (psychology at CU Boulder), followed by my first university research and teaching position, and then a post-doctoral internship, my earlier strands of purpose continued (the common developmental pattern of "transcend and include"), but my primary

conscious trajectory was to develop the skills of a research and clinical psychologist, establish a body of work of my own, make a living, and contribute something of value to society.

Although the specifics vary from one person to the next, the underlying pattern in my life into early “adulthood” is common in contemporary societies: We derive our primary meaning and purpose — if we experience them at all — through our social, vocational, political, and spiritual (or religious) pursuits. Most of these realms of experience are what I think of as “middleworld” purposes, namely those rooted in our everyday social and cultural life. A smaller subset consists of “upperworld” purposes, the desire to ascend or transcend, to experience “enlightenment” or “bliss,” or to “awaken” to divine, nondual, or unity consciousness. All my examples above, from childhood through early professional life, are instances of middleworld or upperworld purposes.

But there’s another realm of meaning and purpose that awaits beyond these, a deeper realm that, as human participants in the Earth community, we long for, whether or not we have a conscious connection to it, a spiritual realm entirely neglected by the mainstream world as well as by virtually all spiritual and psychotherapeutic traditions, but a realm essential to growing whole, becoming fully human, and experiencing fulfillment.

Despite a decade of explorations in psychology and spirituality, it wasn’t until my late twenties that I had a first conscious clue that this realm of purpose even existed. It was entirely overlooked in the psychologies I studied, despite my focus on the humanistic and transpersonal. It was never considered in any of the eastern spiritualities I read about and practiced, including Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Kundalini Yoga, Sufism, and Taoism. There was hardly an allusion to it during the summer 1973 program I attended in Berkeley on “Human Consciousness: Exploration, Maps, and Models” (co-sponsored by Esalen Institute and the Association of Transpersonal Psychology), nor during my three summers, 1974 - 1976, as a student at the spiritually oriented, Buddhist inclined Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado.

Most every spiritual teacher with whom I studied in those years (and since) used the word “soul” at least occasionally and often extensively — and, among them, they meant quite a wide variety of things — but not one was referring to the realm of psyche I have since associated with soul nor of the deeper realm of purpose I am addressing here.

Breakthrough: The Underworld Passage

Before finding anyone who had written about or guided others into this realm, I stumbled into it experientially — in 1980 during my first vision fast in the Colorado Rockies. This was a solo, self-guided ceremony conducted in a contemporary Western manner, not in imitation of Native American people or other indigenous traditions.² But my discovery might have been made through any one of a number of other practices or ceremonies, or even sparked by seemingly random life events. What's important here is what was discovered, not how I discovered it.

What I discovered, in addition to my first glimpse of soul, was that the entire framework of purpose, meaning, and identity that I had been raised with and had been living within — and that most people in the contemporary Western world live within their entire lives — was no longer applicable or particularly relevant to me. It was over, done, bankrupt. Like a capsized swimmer in uncharted whitewater, I was navigating a life passage that relatively few people undergo in the contemporary world, into a realm of experience about which I had no previous knowledge. I had embarked upon the descent to soul, the underworld journey into the *mysterium tremendum* at the core of the human psyche.

In the course of healthy human development, we are each meant to reach this breakpoint, this crisis, this divide beyond which we're no longer able to decisively define ourselves in terms of social or romantic relationships, or in terms of a job or career, a creative or artistic project, a political affiliation, a theory or philosophical perspective, a religious or ethnic membership, or a transcendental spiritual goal. We are propelled — compelled! — toward an underworld self-definition, a soul-infused experience of meaning and purpose and identity. True for all humans, this is our evolutionary birthright, a necessary passage on the way from psychological adolescence to true adulthood. (By "psychological adolescence," I don't mean an age range, but a developmental stage that most Western people never grow beyond.)

The mainstream currents of our contemporary cultures neither assert nor deny the existence of an underworld identity; it has simply disappeared from awareness. Even middleworld purpose has become difficult to attain. It's increasingly common for people to find themselves marooned in a world of restless emptiness with a sense of not truly or deeply belonging to anything — or with an unrelenting numbness or depression, a sense of lurching

² Although a solo experience, my first vision fast was elegantly, wisely, and invaluablely supported, through correspondence and written materials, by Steven Foster and Meredith Little, founders of the School of Lost Borders. I recount the story of this fast in the preface to *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*.

through life or just going through the motions. From age four until our mid-teens, middleworld purpose is all we need. But beyond our teen years, middleworld purpose alone never deeply satisfies. Even if you add upperworld purpose, there still remains a thunderous void.

This passage from a middleworld social-vocational-political-religious scaffolding of self-definition (and/or one of the universal, one-size-fits-all, upperworld identities) to a unique, soul-derived, underworld framework is a categorical shift in orientation. It's not a shift from one cultural definition to another. It's not a progression from one career to the next, from one romance to another, from being an addict to being a professional success, from being a mid-westerner to being a Californian, from being born into a Jewish family to becoming a Buddhist. Nor is it a shift from middleworld specifics to upperworld universality. And it's not a shift we can simply choose or make happen. It is, rather, the involuntary demise of our entire comprehension of the nature of meaning or purpose, of the ways we understood ourselves and the world through childhood and psychological adolescence, and an abduction into the depths of the psyche and the mysteries of the world toward encounters that will eventually enable us to identify "the one life we can call our own." A psychologically risky journey of many months or years, it makes a possible a personal transformation that can happen only after we reach a developmental stage that few in the West ever reach.

An Underworld and Ecological Conception of Soul

What do I mean, then, by "soul" and how does this help us understand why the uncovering of what I call soul purpose has become so uncommon in the contemporary world? For an answer, we'll need to cross a threshold into a domain of discourse and experience that in the materialist precincts of the West would be considered "mystical." Otherwise you might dismiss my perspective simply because it's unfamiliar or perhaps feels dubious at first. So let's begin by reviewing how commonplace the "mystical" is in the lives and existence of *other*-than-human beings. Then, perhaps, you'll find it less surprising, esoteric, or mysterious that such extraordinary and astonishing realities apply to us humans as well.

What Every Flower, Frog, and Fox is Born With

The mysteries to which I refer here concern, in their essence, ecological place or niche — the fact that the young of all species are *born with* an understanding of their place in the world. By "place," I don't simply mean geographical location or habitat. Rather, I mean a creature's ecological niche

— its function, role, or “profession” within its community or ecosystem.³ The young of all species, in other words, already know at birth how to be members of their species. This innate knowledge includes basic-yet-vital items such as how to move around, what to eat and not eat, how to avoid predators, and how and when to mate and with whom. But by far the most important knowledge they are born with is *how to contribute to the world their unique skill or offering*. They, in other words, are born with what we might call ecological purpose, an implicit knowledge or apprehension of their place or niche in a wildly complex and differentiated world of multiple habitats and countless species. They are born with all the capacities they need to serve the world in a way no other creature can — including how they can further develop or co-evolve their own niche — and they do not have to be taught or shown “the one life they can call their own”; this knowledge and capacity is inborn. They do not have to go through an initiation process to uncover it. Although birds and mammals learn a lot of behavioral specifics from their parents and primary social group, most of the capacities that enable them to function as members of their species are innate. The newborn of species *other* than birds and mammals — 95% of all species — receive minimal to no parenting beyond being conceived and birthed. They are born with all they need to know to have a good chance of survival, to be who they are, and to provide the “ecological functions” only they can.

This is entirely natural and ordinary, but it is also utterly astounding and miraculous, even mystical. The common-but-misguided Western philosophical impulse to try to explain this in terms of genetics misses the most essential point. Genetics might be one piece of *how* this knowledge is transmitted (part of the “mechanism”), but the method of transmission is categorically and conceptually distinct from *what* is transmitted, and the unfathomable mystery remains that this knowledge and know-how exist and are transmitted at all.

You might say we humans, too, are born with a version of such capacities: for example, our precious innocence enables us to inspire other humans to provide the love, nourishment, and basic shelter we need; or, more mysteriously, our capacity to easily acquire human language. But it seems other species are born with a far greater innate understanding of their place in the world. And, as far as we can tell, they never have identity crises. The fact that we do, and regularly, says something significant about us as a species or about our contemporary cultures, or both.

³ “The ecological niche of an organism depends not only on where it lives but also on what it does. ... By analogy, it may be said that the habitat is the organism’s ‘address’, and the niche is its ‘profession’ biologically speaking.” Eugene P. Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, 3rd Edition (W. B. Saunders, 1971), p. 234.

Many examples of the innate knowledge and know-how possessed by other species are absolutely staggering. For example, consider the annual migration of monarch butterflies: They fly immense distances from their summer habitats in the eastern U.S. and Canada to their winter homes in Mexico, or from the Rocky Mountains to southern California. They manage this long and wildly complex navigation even though *it takes four generations to complete a single migration*. Furthermore, they arrive at the very same trees their great-great-grandparents tenanted the year before. None of them learn how to do this from other butterflies. They are *born* with the knowledge of how to migrate thousands of miles, through countless habitats and weather systems, and end up in precisely the one spot that is theirs, something akin to finding a needle in a haystack. This is downright mystical. And, as it turns out, this sort of miracle is entirely commonplace on Earth.

Given that such mysteries are demonstrably true for other species, how could we doubt something comparable is true for us? In the contemporary world, we tend to believe that everything important that we know we learned from others — parents, other family members, teachers, books, the internet, and so on. And indeed we've learned quite a bit this way. But we, too, like all other species, are born with certain innate knowledge of our unique place in the world, of our ecological niche, of what has been called our destiny or our genius. The problem is that this knowledge is not conscious when we're born because, after all, we're not conscious of *anything* in our first couple years. And by the time our conscious self-awareness develops — somewhere between our third and fourth birthdays — we are more than busy with other things to be conscious of, like the enchantment of the other-than-human world or how to be a member-in-good-standing of a particular family and peer group and a particular culture or ethnic or religious group. Learning these things is the natural priority throughout our childhood and early teen years. But — and here's the rub for us humans — by the time our conscious knowledge of self and world is established in our mid teens, we have strayed a long way from our deeper, innate, unconscious knowledge of self and world, which is now obscured, buried, unremembered. It's still there within us, but we can't access it and we might not even know it exists. Consequently, as soon as our basic cultural and ecological education is complete, it comes time to "remember" the knowledge we were born with: our particular, destined place in the world, our original personal instructions for this lifetime. All healthy cultures provide initiatory processes (much more extensive and categorically different

than a rite of passage⁴) to help their youth uncover just that. In the Western world, these initiatory processes were forgotten and lost millennia ago.

Uniqueness and Differentiation

Some people assume that individual members of other species do not have unique gifts or destinies, that whatever uniqueness there is exists on the species level, not the individual level. One flower or frog or fox, they might say, has exactly the same ecological place, niche, role, or function as any other individual of their species, more or less. If so, why would it be any different for us?

But one thing we know about evolution is that life grows ever more complex, diversified, and differentiated. This is a universal principle. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry put it this way:

In the universe, to be is to be different. To be is to be a unique manifestation of existence. The more thoroughly we investigate any one thing ... the more we discover its uniqueness. ... Ultimately each thing remains as baffling as ever, no matter how profound our understanding. ... The universe comes to us, each being and each moment announcing its thrilling news: I am fresh.⁵

As time unfolds, as life on Earth evolves, speciation accelerates. Intra-species differentiation increases as well. From four billion years ago until less than a billion years ago, there were only single-cell organisms on Earth, although innumerable kinds of them. Now, in addition to countless species of bacteria and microbes, there are millions of complex, multi-cellular species and untold variations within species. Among mammalian species, there are a variety of social roles within any family or extended group. While our own innate human capacities seem minimal at birth, compared to other species — we're born, after all, remarkably vulnerable and helpless — we make up for that by possessing perhaps the greatest intra-species differentiation, something that becomes increasingly evident as get older. Even within the

⁴ A rite of passage usually lasts a day or two at the most; it marks, celebrates, and supports, but doesn't cause, the transition from one stage of life to the next. An initiatory process, in contrast, takes place over many months or years; includes a variety of ceremonies, rituals, practices, and mentorships; and, if all goes well, results in (causes) a psychospiritual transformation, such as the passage into true, initiated adulthood — which then deserves to be celebrated and supported with a rite of passage. Initiatory practices, in other words, take place during life stages and support developmental progress during that stage. Rites of passage, on the other hand, take place during the transition from one stage to the next and support those transitions.

⁵ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 74 – 75.

same culture, even within the same family, there ends up being an absolutely astonishing degree of variation among us in talents, personal style, taste, personality, values, personal goals, and even gender embodiment.

But our individual uniqueness is not only on the social-personality-vocational-gender level. It is also, and more importantly, on the soul or ecological level. We're each born with distinct and differentiated destinies, our own unique ecological place or niche in the world, our own particular genius. This is a very old idea woven into the myths and sacred stories of all cultures. It is most likely true for all species to some degree, but it appears to be comparatively truer for us. For good or for ill.

Whether for us or any other species, the unique ecological niche for each individual creature is specific to its particular place in a particular environment. The niche of a specific fox, for example, has everything to do with the precise swath of forest in which she roams; with her relationship, for example, to the pattern of birds nests in those climbable trees and the location of rabbit warrens and rodent tunnels, as well as with her relationship to other foxes in her pack. But her individual niche is not simply or primarily a matter of how she "makes a living." It is also about how she uniquely participates in and enhances life in her forest and about the effects and influences only she can have on the local habitat and the other species there.

All this is true for us humans as well: we each have a unique set of relationships and potentials within both our local and global communities.

Soul: Your Place in the Greater Web of Life

Here's the most important thing I know to emphasize about underworld or soul purpose: This knowledge of what it is to be fully and uniquely yourself, of the gift you were *born* to bring into this world, can never be identified or described in any social, vocational, political, religious, or other cultural terms. No one is born to have a particular job or role in a particular human community. Rather, like all other species, we're each born to take a specific place within the *Earth* community, to fill a unique ecological niche in the greater web of life, to provide a suite of unique ecological functions. And *that* place is what I mean by soul, and occupying *that* psycho-ecological niche and providing *those* functions is what I mean by soul purpose. *This* is the realm of purpose nearly absent from contemporary discussions and most all contemporary practices and methods for uncovering and embodying purpose. And it is the most essential of these realms, especially in this time of radical, global change.

Soul and Mythopoetic Identity

Because knowledge of our place in the greater web of life is something we're born with, it is necessarily pre-cultural and pre-linguistic. As a consequence, our unique place in the world can't be identified, described, understood, or experienced in conventional cultural terms or in the direct denotative way we specify a middleworld identity. But if we can't refer to our soul's place as that of a physician, pianist, priest, president, or parent, or even more generically as a healer, artist, or leader, then how can it be done?

Here's an additional way to appreciate the difficulty: We humans possess a special realm or veneer of consciousness — our ego's conscious self-awareness — that rides on top of the more extensive consciousness we have in common with all other species.⁶ Our human ego is both a great boon and a great barrier. For example, because each individual ego, unlike the soul, is a child of culture and language, we at first — in our childhood and teen years — come to understand our place culturally and linguistically, which is to say in terms of social, vocational, and religious roles. This is unavoidable, entirely necessary, and a good thing. But we're also born with an entirely different kind of knowledge, a felt-sense about our ecological place or niche in the world, knowledge that exists only within the deeper realm of consciousness that all species share, knowledge that is not linguistic but imaginal, knowledge that an immature, egocentric ego cannot access.

So the question becomes: how do we discover what this is, this innate, imagery-based, and mysterious knowledge about our ecological place in the world? How do we discover what it is when it exists at a deeper level than the ego-consciousness that dominates our experience and sense of self by the time we're in our early teens? And how do we linguistically identify it to ourselves and others once we experience it consciously?

In a word: metaphor.

When it comes to identifying soul, we can only point to it or allude to it using metaphor — in the manner of poetry or myth. We can linguistically understand our souls only indirectly, only mythopoetically. Not coincidentally, this is precisely how we learn about our souls in the first

⁶ In many spiritual circles, the ego is thought to be the primary problem, public enemy #1, something to rid oneself of. But without an ego, we're not human. The actual problem is not egos but *immature* egos (egocentric egos), by far the most common type of ego in the Western world today. The goal is not to get rid of the ego but to mature and deepen it, and deepen it by rooting it in the underworld of soul.

place: We discover (or remember) our innate place, our true home, our soul's purpose, when the world mirrors it to us by way of nature-based metaphors, human archetypes, or other mythic or poetic images or symbols. We don't choose these metaphors or figure them out. Rather, we're shown them in a moment of numinous vision or mystical revelation. They are shown to us by ... by what? "Mystery" is as good a way as any to name our benefactor, our guide, our initiator.

Soul is a child of nature, not of culture and language.

What I mean by "soul," then, is something mystical but not upperworld mystical and not any more mystical than monarch migrations. It corresponds to what poet David Whyte refers to as "the largest conversation you can have with the world," a conversation you were born to have and that only you can have and that the world *needs* you to have for it to be whole. The seed or catalyst for this conversation has existed within you from birth or conception in the form of what Whyte calls "the truth you make everyday with your own body" or "the truth at the center of the image you were born with." Take a moment to consider that these two sorts of truths — which to the Western mind seem so strange, mystical, and improbable — really do exist, and for everyone. These truths, these images, these conversations — and the niches, roles, functions, identities, meanings, and purposes associated with them — are not cultural or even merely human; rather, you were born with them, and they are ecological and mythopoetic, which is to say clothed and communicated in the metaphors, symbols, images, dreams, and archetypes of the wild world and of our own wild minds. As Diane di Prima reminds us:

... you have a poetics: you step into the world
like a suit of readymade clothes ...⁷

This is actually true of all creatures, not just humans: every being has its own innate poetics. And there's no better way than poetry to identify a unique ecological niche. Try describing the niche of a fox, for example. You can point to some of the primary relationships she has with other species in a particular habitat and perhaps the way her uncommon cunning allows her to carry out her distinctive calling, but her niche is something more than that and categorically different. Her niche is the sum of all the relationships she has with everything else on Earth, if not the whole universe, something we can't even get close to fully describing. The best way to understand a fox's niche is to live for several years as a native in her neighborhood while offering your daily reverent attention to her wanderings and ways. Then

⁷ From "Rant," in *Pieces of a Song*, *ibid.*

you'll know something of her niche but still not be able to describe it precisely or systematically. Your best option, really, for portraying her niche would be to recite fox stories, preferably outside at night around a fire or in the dark beneath blazing stars. Or fox poetry. Or vixen myth. And that of course is precisely how nature-based people have always done it.

It's no different when it comes to linguistically portraying a human's soul.

Through the journey of soul initiation, we come to understand that we each were born as something like a poem, as a unique dance, as a story in conversation with other stories, as an essential and utterly singular episode in the unfolding story of Earth, of Cosmos. As Gary Snyder writes,

The world is made of stories. Good stories are hard to come by, and a good story that you can honestly call your own is an incredible gift. These stories are part of a bigger story that connects us all.⁸

A Few Sketches of Soul

Some examples might be helpful, even though it's impossible to communicate the numinosity of the human soul in a few words. Much better would be an intricate story or poem, something there's not space here to include. (The single best way to understand a person's soul purpose is to live in community with them and experience them in action.) That said, I'll offer here a few linguistic sketches with the hope this will at least convey a feeling for the difference between a social-vocational identity and a soul identity.

There are a great number of people whose mystical encounters with soul I've had the pleasure and privilege to learn about and to witness the embodiment of. The following are four exceedingly brief word portraits that embody the wild mysteries of such encounters and how they've been communicated mythopoetically, each of these examples being mere intimations of the genius and destiny of these four individuals:

- the overseer who guides others into the oceanic depths of the psyche
- the one with a sparkling heart who walks the path of the bear
- she who generates perception-expanding images and identity-destabilizing questions
- the one who dances the earth and dreams song to feed the longing

Despite being so brief, you can sense how these soul-infused identities and purposes contrast with middleworld cultural roles. These are not job

⁸ Gary Snyder, *Back on the Fire* (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2007), p. 160.

descriptions you'll ever see advertised. They are not the kinds of recommendations you'll get from a vocational guidance counselor. They are of the dreamtime or the mythic. And they are the kinds of purposes utterly core to our deepest, innate human identities.

Another example: The preface to *Soulcraft* recounts my own story of how I received, on my first vision fast at age 30, an initial glimpse of my soul identity or ecological role as the one who weaves cocoons of transformation.

Three more: Malidoma Somé, the West African elder and teacher, identifies his destiny, his place in the world, as "he who makes friends with the enemy/ stranger," something revealed to him (by Mystery) as a young man during a month-long initiation process.⁹

Joanna Macy, the North American eco-philosopher, spiritual activist, Buddhist scholar, and Earth elder, experienced a life-shifting numinous image during a meditation session in the early weeks of her Buddhist practice, while living in India, at age 37:

To my inner eye appeared a bridge, slightly arching, made of stone. I could see the separate rocks of which it was built, and I wanted to be one of them. Just one, that was enough, if only I could be part of that bridge between the thoughtworlds of East and West, connecting the insights of the *Buddha Dharma* with the modern Western mind. What my role might be — at the podium of a college classroom? at a desk in a library tower? — was less clear to me than the conviction possessing me now: I would be a stone in the building of that bridge.¹⁰

Irish poet William Butler Yeats, in his mid twenties, discovered that his destiny or soul-calling was to

... pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.¹¹

In *Soulcraft* and *Nature and the Human Soul*, you'll find much more elaborate accounts of soul encounters and identities.¹²

⁹ Malidoma Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit* (New York: Arkana, 1994).

¹⁰ Joanna Macy, *Widening Circles* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2000), p. 106.

¹¹ From "The Song of Wandering Aengus" in Richard J. Finneran, ed., *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 59–60.

Soul Purpose vs. Delivery System

Soul images, like these, do not tell the person *how* to embody their souls — what practices, projects, procedures, professions, arts, tools, or crafts to use, or in which settings to work. Rather, they inform the person *what* it is they are doing whenever they are doing their soul work. Their soul images reveal the deepest significance of their work and of their existence. Their conscious understanding of their soul's purpose allows them to assess to what degree their everyday actions are successful embodiments of their soul — and to make corrections as needed. These soul images are like navigational tools. They are the human equivalent of what allows monarch butterflies to migrate from New England to Mexico. The what is much deeper and more essential than the how. The how is in service to the what. The what — the soul image — is given *to us*, by Mystery. The how is determined, fashioned, and implemented *by us*, by our mature egos.

The what is what I call soul purpose. The how is what I call the delivery system for soul. The what might also be called a vision, and the how might be called a task:

A vision without a task is just a dream.
A task without a vision is just a job.
A vision with a task can change the world.¹³

The what — the soul image, the navigational aid, the vision — might also be understood, metaphorically, as what William Stafford called the “thread you follow”:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost. ...¹⁴

¹² Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* (Novato: New World Library, 2003); Bill Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World* (Novato: New World Library, 2008).

¹³ Source unknown, although attributed to a variety of people including Chief Seattle, Winston Churchill, and Anonymous.

¹⁴ William Stafford, “The Way It Is,” in *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998), p. 42.

Underworld Purpose vs. Middleworld Purpose — and the Sacred Marriage

Social or middleworld purpose is a perspective on personal meaning that is psychologically adolescent — again, referring here to a developmental stage, not an age range. (By calling it “adolescent,” I intend no criticism or diminishment. Acquiring middleworld purpose is an essential early stage in human development.) Middleworld purpose defines us in terms of our social roles, our job descriptions, or the intended outcomes of our creative projects. Although a social or vocational perspective on purpose is necessary, appropriate, and healthy in psychological adolescence, it does not derive from the depths of the psyche or go to the depths of the world and is not enough to build a fulfilling life upon.

After being initiated into our underworld, soul, or ecological purpose, there is no longer what we might have earlier called a middleworld purpose. Now we have a middleworld *delivery system* for our true (soul) purpose. Our social roles and vocational endeavors are means to an end. Following my soul initiation, for example, I have been in the roles of psychologist, vision fast guide, author, and soulcraft facilitator, among others, but none of these social-vocational roles constitute my purpose. Rather, they have been, for me, delivery systems for the weaving of cocoons. (This essay is also an effort at cocoon weaving.) Yeats delivered his silver and golden apples with the vehicles of poetry, theater, and metaphysics. Malidoma Somé befriends the “enemy/stranger” by interpreting African indigenous wisdom for Western people through writing, speaking, community rituals, workshops, and trainings. In addition to writing and speaking, Joanna Macy embodies that stone in her imaginal bridge between the East and the West through the delivery systems of Buddhist scholarship, systems thinking, Buddhism-infused activism, and a theory and methodology for personal and social change she calls the Work That Reconnects.

From the perspective of our middleworld lives, the soul is a dream. From the underworld perspective of our soul’s purpose, our middleworld lives — when disconnected from our souls — are illusions or phantasms, or drudgery.

But our middleworld lives are not incidental to the soul. Far from it. The healthy, mature, middleworld ego is our means for making real our soul’s underworld desires. This is why there’s an ancient pancultural belief in a love affair between the soul and the ego; when they come together in partnership, this is the Sacred Marriage. Each has what the other lacks and longs for and is deeply allured by: The soul knows our true, destined place in the world, holds the knowledge of what is truly worth doing in our lives. But the soul has no means — no head or hands — to manifest that purpose. It is the healthy, mature ego that can fashion things and accomplish things in the

material middleworld. The soul is captivated by this strategic capacity of the ego's to manifest, especially when accomplished artfully. The ego, in turn, is moonstruck by the soul's visions and passions. The mature ego wants, more than anything in life, to make real the dreams the soul has been weaving since before our birth — this is the deepest love-making. And it is life-making. The soul wants, more than anything, to be partnered with an ego with that vast desire and that elegant and artful set of reality-shaping skills. How absolutely romantic!

Upperworld and Underworld: Two Realms of the Spiritual or Transpersonal

In the Western world, the spiritual has been largely identified with the upperworld of God, Spirit, transcendence, enlightenment, or nondual consciousness. But the underworld of soul is equally spiritual, equally mystical, and equally essential to human development. Spirit and soul are both spiritual in the sense of being numinous (of the sacred or holy) and transpersonal (beyond the personal, beyond the realm of the ego's conscious self-awareness). The upperworld is the universal transpersonal, while the underworld is the unique transpersonal. While upperworld spiritualities focus on transcendence, the underworld journey provides for what cultural historian Thomas Berry called "inscendence," which he defined as "a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive resources."¹⁵ The underworld and upperworld are the two complimentary realms of the spiritual. Either alone is incomplete.

In the mainstream Western world, most religious organizations operate primarily in the middleworld of personal healing, charity, community, and morality, some in a mature and life-enhancing way, some not. In the relatively rare instances when religious people in the West truly approach the spiritual or transpersonal, it's virtually always upperworld, as is also the case in the East. But the upperworld alone is an incomplete spirituality; it celebrates oneness, how everything is interconnected, how we are all part of God or Spirit, but does not help us find our unique transpersonal role, the role that makes possible our greatest service to the world as well as our

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), pp. 207–8. Berry saw inscendence as essential to human survival at this time: "We must go far beyond any transformation of contemporary culture. ... None of our existing cultures can deal with this situation out of its own resources. We must invent, or reinvent, a sustainable human culture by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive resources. Our cultural resources have lost their integrity. They cannot be trusted. What is needed is not transcendence but 'inscendence'."

deepest fulfillment. Conversely, the underworld alone is incomplete. Without Spirit, soul can become too heavy and self-centered. Without soul, Spirit can become ungrounded and too otherworldly.¹⁶

Upperworld development in no way implies or requires underworld development. And vice versa. You can be an enlightened Zen master and not have a clue about your soul purpose — probably true of *most* Zen masters. And you can be a soul-initiated adult and never have had an experience of nondual consciousness.

But the universal and unique transpersonal are inextricably interwoven whether or not we've consciously experienced either one or their interconnectedness. In just two thirteenth-century sentences, Rumi — the Persian Sufi mystic — managed to sew together the upperworld and underworld or, better, showed how we can never have one without the other:

God picks up the reed flute world and blows.
Each note is a need coming through one of us,
a passion, a longing-pain. ...¹⁷

The soul of anything — human, flower, frog, or fox — is a unique, God-originated passion or longing-pain pouring through one of us creatures.

Moltings: Radical Shifts in Middleworld Purpose

There is one type of change in life purpose that might be mistaken as a shift from middleworld to underworld purpose, from egocentric to soulcentric, but is actually a transition from one middleworld purpose to another. I think of this type of change, which can be quite profound, as a "molting," a metaphor borrowed from the lifecycle of moths and butterflies. The caterpillar is the larval or adolescent phase in the order of Lepidoptera. Caterpillars shed their skin several times, each time growing a larger one. Each of these sheddings is a molting. We can imagine that losing one's skin and growing a new one is a radical experience. But it does not hold a candle to the life change that occurs during the chrysalis stage when the caterpillar's body totally dissolves within the cocoon, enabling it's cells to be reshaped into the adult form of a moth or butterfly. We can imagine that the

¹⁶ For more on the relationship between underworld (soul) and upperworld (Spirit) and the three realms of human development, see chapter 2 of *Soulcraft* (ibid.), which can also be found online at http://www.natureandthehumansoul.com/newbook/chapter2_sc.htm.

¹⁷ Jelaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), p.103.

transition from earth-crawling caterpillar to winged butterfly is that much more profound than from one caterpillar incarnation to another.

Likewise, humans often go through a series of moltings — shifts from one social, vocational, political, religious, or spiritual role to another. This might, for example, be a transition from high school to college or to work, or from single to married or the reverse, or from a job in advertising to a career as a psychotherapist, or from living in Louisiana to a life in L.A., or from being a closet gay to one who is out, or from being Christian to being Hindu. Some moltings are quite earth-shaking, and involve extreme shifts in worldview, such as with religious or spiritual “awakenings.”

For example, I read about a woman who, in her late twenties, had what she called a “complete emotional breakdown.” She was in a dysfunctional relationship, living in a bad neighborhood, with an office job she hated. She became depressed, anxious, and desperate, and began using drugs and alcohol to dull the pain. Then she got fired. After a week or so of despair, she heard about a weeklong Buddhist meditation retreat in the desert. She packed up, left behind the life she had been living, and went to the retreat. During that week, she grieved wildly, learned to meditate, and was introduced to the Buddha dharma. By the end of the retreat, she made a vow to follow the Buddha’s teachings. Clearly, this was a radical shift in worldview, lifestyle, and purpose that made all the difference in her life. (She eventually became a Buddhist teacher herself.) But it isn’t a shift to underworld or upperworld purpose. It’s a middleworld molting. Saying this is not in any way to diminish its significance, but rather to contrast it with an underworld or chrysalis passage, which shifts us not from one lifestyle or cultural identity to another, but from an identity rooted in the middleworld of culture to an underworld identity that is ecological and mythopoetic, an entirely different category of personal transformation.

Human moltings are major shifts or awakenings that occur before the start of the journey of soul initiation.

Contemporary Challenges in Uncovering Even Middleworld Purpose

Psychological early adolescence is a life stage reached by most everyone at puberty, but in the contemporary world only a small minority, perhaps ten to fifteen percent, ever mature beyond this stage due to the difficulties of completing its developmental task. That task is to fashion a social presence that is authentic and at the same time accepted by one’s peer group. For an early adolescent (of any age), “purpose” is whatever might achieve that dual goal. But that goal, as simple as it might sound, is extraordinarily elusive in

the egocentric and pathological environment of contemporary Western culture.

The challenges of reaching that goal are largely due to the all-too-common failures with the tasks of the two stages of childhood, especially with the nature-oriented tasks of childhood.¹⁸ For example, it's hard to be authentic when you have trouble being present to yourself and others. Cultivating the capacity for sustained presence is the nature-oriented task of early childhood (a task that must be addressed by the parents and other family members of the young child). Presence is a prerequisite for true empathy and compassion — including self-compassion. Empathy for others and compassion for oneself have become rare achievements, and they are both essential for achieving authenticity.

Authenticity is also much more difficult when you don't feel at home in the more-than-human world (that is, the more extensive and differentiated world that includes our human world as a subset). Learning the enchantment of the larger world that enables the human village to exist at all is the nature-oriented developmental task of middle childhood. Nature connection is the evolutionary and psychological foundation for feeling at home in any other context, including your peer group.

All challenges in human development stem from the cultural disconnect from the greater Earth community. Conversely, our single greatest collective need now is for what I call eco-awakening — the somatic experience of being fully at home in the more-than-human world. Our second greatest need is the cultivation of personal authenticity and heartfelt social belonging.

Because psychological authenticity and social belonging have become so rare, they are perhaps the greatest and most pervasive longings in the Western world today. Witness the explosive growth and addictive qualities of social media such as Facebook. Being liked (or even "liked") and being authentic is what most people mean when they say they yearn for greater meaning and purpose in their lives or for the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the world. These are core middleworld desires and purposes. People want to feel more real and more a part of a real world, in greater communion with the web of life. They want their lives to make a difference. This, indeed, is the ultimate goal of the journey of soul initiation, but the necessary foundation for the soul journey is an achieved middleworld experience of *psychological* belonging (to yourself), *social* belonging (to a

¹⁸ See *Nature and the Human Soul*, *ibid.*, chapters 4 and 5; or "A Brief Introduction to the Eco-Soulcentric Developmental Wheel," a link to which you can find under "What's New" on <http://www.animas.org>.

peer group), and *ecological* belonging (to the more-than-human world), the latter being eco-awakening. The eventual achievement of a soul-infused belonging to the world is built upon this prior three-legged middleworld foundation of belonging.

It seems what most people mean when they say they want more “soul” in their lives is actually this sense of psychological and social belonging. A smaller group also means greater *ecological* belonging. A group smaller yet mean the kind of mystical, underworld belonging to the world implied by the way I use the word *soul* in these pages. For yet others, “to experience soul” means to merge with the upperworld realm of Spirit or the divine.

The Journey of Soul Initiation

Although the descent to soul has largely been forgotten in mainstream Western culture¹⁹, there is nothing more essential in the world today. The experiential encounter with soul is the key element in the initiatory journey that culminates in true adulthood. And true adults — visionary artisans — are the generators of the most creative and effective actions in defense of all life and in the renaissance and evolution of generative human cultures.

But the encounter with soul is not a weekend workshop, a handful of imagery journeys, several entheogenic experiences, an occasional piece of dreamwork, or a vision fast. It is not something that can be achieved by simply using certain techniques or practices. It is a hazardous odyssey unfolding over many months or years. The risks to the Wanderer’s sanity are great. It’s a time of worry and distress for her family, too, and can be at least a temporary loss for her community. To reach the depths of soul requires extreme consciousness-shifting measures, practices, ceremonies, and/or circumstances.

¹⁹ I say “largely forgotten” rather than “entirely forgotten” because what I think of as “soul” and the “descent to soul” are actually found in many places in Western culture, hidden in plain sight, but very rarely recognized as such. Although not articulated in terms of psycho-ecological niche, something like an underworld conception of soul can nonetheless be detected in such Western habitats as the cycles of Greek and Arthurian legends, the sacred mythologies of the Celtic-speaking peoples, the work of authors and artists from Dante to DH Lawrence, or the stanzas of Romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth, as well as my favorite resources of Rumi, Blake, Goethe, Rilke, Yeats, Hesse, Jung, Eliot, Hopkins, Hillman, Stafford, Thomas Berry, Jean Houston, James Hollis, Mary Oliver, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Michael Meade, and David Whyte.

The techniques and methods for the descent to soul are numerous but mostly unknown or forgotten in the contemporary mainstream West. I explore many of them in my books.

Whatever set of methods you use, they are your means to precipitate, quicken, and navigate the journey of soul initiation. It's entirely possible — and most always preferable — to undergo the journey in a contemporary manner, one that doesn't adopt or appropriate methods from another culture. Furthermore, no particular belief or faith in the journey itself is required, only a willingness to embark. Since 1980, the guides of Animas Valley Institute have woven together and cultivated a contemporary, Western, nature-based approach to the journey — a set of practices, ceremonies, principles, maps, and models.²⁰

One of the most essential things we've learned, however, is that in order to encounter your soul, you need something more than a method. As noted earlier, what must come first is the attainment of a stage of personal development that makes possible such an encounter. Until then, you can use any practices or rituals you'd like, but they will not result in soul encounter. The stage in question is absent from virtually all contemporary developmental models (including the models offered as comprehensive or integral) and is rarely attained in the Western world precisely because of its danger to contemporary society. This is the stage I have called the Cocoon, the stage in which we most fully embody the archetype of the Wanderer who constantly crosses borders into the mysteries of nature and psyche and who hones the tools and skills of what I call soulcraft. Reaching that stage requires the wholing of the ego, self-healing, and attending to the most incomplete developmental tasks of childhood and early adolescence. I explore a great variety of practices for this preparatory work in *Wild Mind* and also in *Nature and the Human Soul*.

Harvesting the fruit of the journey of soul initiation and feeding the world with its bounty plays out over the rest of your life. When you first receive a vision, you won't know what it means or what to do with it. It takes months or years of living it into the world before you truly understand it. The vision is "only" the seed for a conversation you can begin with the world. That conversation itself is what enables you, eventually, to consciously understand your soul's place in the world and how best to embody it. Furthermore, as you embody your soul's place, you're actually modifying

²⁰ See Bill Plotkin, *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche* (Novato: New World Library, 2013); *Soulcraft*, *ibid.*; *Nature and the Human Soul*, *ibid.*; www.animas.org; www.wildmindbook.com; www.natureandthehumansoul.com. Or see "The Story of Animas," a link to which you can find under "What's New" on <http://www.animas.org>.

and co-evolving your ecological niche. You are changing the world, not just yourself. You are co-imagining, co-creating, and co-evolving hand-in-hand with the land, the waters, the Earth community. This is how human and Gaian evolution unfolds.²¹

Cooperating Creatively and Consciously with Evolution

We might wonder: Why do we humans need to go through an initiatory process to discover our destined place in the more-than-human world when, as far as we can tell, other species do not? This question brings us right to the heart of the matter, touched on earlier: We humans possess a power that other species — again, as far as we know — do not possess, or at least not in the way or to a degree that we do. This power is our form or mode of consciousness, our capacity for conscious self-awareness, our outlandish ability to be aware that we are aware. This ability is both our greatest strength and our greatest liability, and is perhaps the best candidate for what makes us distinctively human. It enables us, for example, to imagine possible futures to a degree or in a way that other species cannot and to manifest those possibilities, for good or for ill.²² On the other hand, it renders us distinctively liable to suffer identity crises. And it creates a special zone of self-consciousness, the ego, that takes control of our waking lives so that we end up choosing and acting way more from this limited zone than from our larger psyche — until, that is, we've been initiated into our soul lives, "the one life that waits/ beyond all the others."

The existence of the ego is what makes us human but it also can be a catastrophic problem for us and for the rest of the Earth community if the ego is not carefully developed and matured. This is one of the most essential services a healthy culture provides: assuring that their children develop healthy, effective, life-enhancing egos. When this is done well by a human community, their youth, by their mid-teens, are psychospiritually prepared to embark upon the journey of soul initiation; they are ready to remember why they were born, the singular gift they possess for the web of life. Other species don't require this because they don't have egos that can get in the way of their full participation in the world. From day one, they're able to act and live in accordance with the place they were born to take.

²¹ For this and other ecological and eco-cultural perspectives incorporated in this paper, I am grateful for the help of Kevin Fetherston, Ph.D., riparian forest ecologist, Nate Bacon, M.A., cultural ecologist and wildlife tracker, and Julian Norris, Ph.D., ecopsychologist and leadership coach.

²² Geneen Marie Haugen, "Awakening Planetary Imagination: A Theory and Practice" (PhD dissertation, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, 2015).

We, on the other hand, have this exceptional capacity to become *consciously* aware of our unique place in the world, an egoic capacity that bestows us with an immense power of creativity. This is nothing less than the power to consciously cooperate with evolution. But, if we don't undergo the initiatory process and uncover our soul's purpose — distinct from our adolescent ego's purpose — then this special human capacity gives us, instead, the power to destroy the world, whether we intend to or not. Creation or Mystery has taken a great risk by sparking our species into being, perhaps an ultimate gamble. As of the early twenty-first century, there's no telling which way it will go. Again, Diane di Prima (echoing John Keats):

... the war of the worlds hangs here, right now, in the balance
it is a war for this world, to keep it
a vale of soul-making ...²³

We can see, then, that there is so much at stake within this topic of purpose, within this underworld realm of soul. A human with no purpose at all is a tragedy, a wasted life. A human with only an ego-level, psychologically adolescent purpose might realize some happiness and fulfillment, might in a variety of invaluable ways serve his or her community and the greater web of life, but could also end up being the worst kind of affliction: If he or she operates from a damaged ego and also "rises" to a position of significant economic, political, or military power, there's no limit to how much havoc s/he can wreak — as we've seen throughout history and especially in the twentieth century, and now, most flagrantly, in early 2017. But an initiated person, a true adult, whose ego is in service to soul, not to itself, whose conscious purpose is fully aligned with his or her soul's purpose, with his or her ecological niche in the web of life, this person possesses the power to enhance life in never-before-seen ways, to cooperate creatively with evolution, to participate — wildly and imaginatively — in the great work of our time.

Over the past few hundred years, Western culture has rediscovered and extended the possibilities of individual human development — an invaluable achievement — but so far this has been limited to the middleworld and upperworld realms of development. If we can now add the rediscovery and re-embracing of the underworld of soul, the West could accomplish something unprecedented in human history — something that might be necessary, as well, if we are to survive: the creation of a widespread, soul-infused culture in which full human development is culturally supported and

²³ From "Rant," in *Pieces of a Song*, *ibid.*

prioritized, a resilient culture with a built-in, effective resistance to the more destructive potentials of the human species.

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