

~ Pastoral Symphony ~



Copyright 1996 - Oil on Canvas - 30 x 48 inches

## Encounter

The music began and, suddenly, I was overwhelmed by an irresistible force. The world, the cosmos, and myself, all dissolved into the formless presence that embraced me, caressed me, *crushed* me. There was no preparation, no defense, no escape. All thoughts and perceptions of my existence vanished. I knew nothing - not where I was, not who I was, not *that* I was. In those moments, Jonathon Earl Bowser no longer existed. I was consumed by something that was utterly unbearable - simultaneously both torment and rapture. A doorway had opened, through which my humanity fled, and something *other* entered.

What was it that happened to me? What force knocks a 14-year old boy to the floor, coiled and gasping, racked by sobs of violent anguish? And how could it be that in that moment of profound suffering, I could yet laugh with joy and even more profound ecstasy? This very private experience (and embarrassing to reveal here, I assure you: somebody I know might read this) occurred only once in my life, and the memory of it - astonishingly potent to this day - still fills my imagination. There is no going back; forever after I know the stable foundation of the world is an illusion that can endlessly fall away beneath you once you see that it is not really there...

I am aware that this music leaves many people entirely affected. But there are other doorways for other people - perhaps one private door for every individual that has ever lived. I have read that upon entering the Sistine Chapel some people suddenly faint, as though some sort of neurological overload had compelled their minds to briefly shut down before restarting. What *kind* of experience is this?

## Revelation?

We generally think of a *revelation* as something significant; a formerly mysterious aspect of the world becomes suddenly

clear in the mind. But it is much more than merely learning an interesting fact we did not know; it is an acquisition of keen understanding that we did not previously possess, a comprehension of something not universally known that subsequently changes one's way of viewing life and existence. It *feels* like a *personal communication with Truth*. We, each of us, exist at the center of a sphere of perception upon which flickers our sensations of the world. Just beyond that opaque veneer of self-projected illusion is the unknown. Sometimes, when the dirt on the inside of that sphere is wiped away, by inspiration or concentrated thought, when it is made transparent to the transcendence beyond, the burning light of that mystery shines through.

Of course, we usually think of revelation in *religious* terms: the revealed truth is the *Word of God*. Religious experience is not well regarded by science. Nor should it be; skepticism is required for no other reason than our recorded history, where there is an overwhelming preponderance of coniving charlatans in this curious arena of human experience. Modern neurology has been even less kind to the notion of supernatural communication. Detailed experiments involving the superior parietal lobe have provided an entirely naturalistic explanation for divine seizure. We can *impose* religious encounters in the laboratory.

That is indeed intriguing, and quite possibly helps explain the otherwise inexplicable experience of a few solitary men who may have wandered around in the open expanse of the burning desert for too long. But just because there is a region of the brain that corresponds to a certain kind of experience does not invalidate the legitimacy - or reality - of that experience. No one is suggesting that because there is a region of the brain that corresponds to our *visual* perceptions, that somehow those perceptions do not correspond to any real phenomena out in the exterior world. No one is suggesting that because we can manipulate the visual center of the brain and alter the normal function of vision, that therefore what we perceive visually is only the mere product

of brain activity. That there is a region of the brain that seems to be responsible for sensing the presence of the divine may very well indicate that such apprehensions are entirely internal; and it may also mean that such sensory apparatus has evolved in response to real phenomena immanent in the world. This particular *sixth* sense - if it exists - seems rather undeveloped in most of us. How are we to know if it is leading us astray? Everybody believes that the data we gather with our other five senses corresponds to a real world. How can we know if these comparatively rare perceptions of something numinous do not *also* correspond to a real presence out in the world as it actually is? To what other authority can we direct our inquiries? Fortunately, spirituality is not the only method by which we might, as Blake entreated, “cleanse the windows of perception.”

### The Four World-Views

Once upon a time there were four inquisitive blind men: a *theologian* (exoteric mythological mind), a *scientist* (exoteric logical mind), a *philosopher* (esoteric logical mind), and an *artist* (esoteric mythological mind). They were wandering along a country road when they came across an elephant that, of course, they could not see. The theologian, feeling the ear, said (too loudly), “*It seems like a bat!*” The philosopher, feeling the leg, said (too abstrusely), “*It seems like a tree.*” The scientist, feeling the trunk, said (too concretely), “*It seems like a snake.*” The artist, walking around the mysterious object, said (too poetically), “*It seems noble...*” (but the other three ignored him because artists *never* have anything useful to say).

There are many ways to see the world, many ways to assemble in the mind a coherent model of our surroundings to, in some small way, understand it. And understanding is always better than ignorance. There are four fundamental ways in which we can see the world and seek to understand it: science, philosophy, religion, and art. What do these four distinct disciplines offer us?

The focus of science and philosophy is directed almost entirely *into* the world. Science (and its operational language, mathematics) examines the materials and processes of nature, seeking to provide a mechanistic, cause-and-effect description of how it does the things it does. Many early seekers of knowledge preferred to *think* about nature and intuit its secrets based solely upon some model in the mind. It has, of course, turned out to be much more effective to actually *observe* the world to see how it works. The *data-gathering* ethos of science has collected vast libraries of information about the phenomenal universe and discovered amazing secrets about how things work; this knowledge has given humanity real power to affect and even control our world.

The *data-processing* ethos of philosophy hopes to assemble the data provided by scientists into usable and helpful strategies. The scientist says, “These are the facts of the world”; the philosopher says, “Then this is what we should do about it.” In many ways, what the philosopher seeks to accomplish is less tangible than the “experiment and observe” technique used by the scientist. But a mathematically-based logic determines (one hopes) the direction of their thought: “It has been observed that *A* is beneficial to *B*, and that *B* is beneficial to *C*; it has *not* been observed that *A* is beneficial to *C*, but we know, logically, that this must be true and should act accordingly.” The relation between *A* and *C* is, of course, often complex and much more difficult to discern than in this simple syllogism. The philosopher organizes the discoveries of science into systems of action, and determines the proper method and extent of their deployment in our service.

Science and philosophy, however powerful and effective they may be at describing and exploiting nature and natural processes, entirely misses some significant aspects of our existence here...like *our existence here*. Our experience of ourselves as somehow separate and distinct from the environment in which we live is (it seems) a unique phenomenon in nature. There is a cause-and-effect part of us in

flesh and bone, to be sure, but our most *human* aspect is emphatically *not* cause-and-effect. We, our interior selves that experience this place entirely from behind the impenetrable window of our eyes, are something *other*, ontological castaways marooned in a cosmic machine, and seized by the mesmerizing mystery, the beauty and horror, of being.

The focus of religion and art is directed almost entirely *beyond* the world, to questions of origin and meaning - things that are of no concern to science and philosophy whatsoever (although occasionally entertained by practitioners of such disciplines). Artists are the data-gatherers of the *noumenal* world. The intoxicating allure of a woman's body, the inspiring mania of a man's ambition, the brutal power and pitiless resolve of the predator, the nourishing bounty of the earth in flower, its terrifying fury in storm, the joy and misery of life and death, the hope and despair of struggle and defeat: these are the essential experiences we have here, the simple but highly variable parameters that define the challenges we face and the triumphs we seek. Mechanistic, cause-and-effect descriptions of human experience are not meaningful to us; mathematics is of no use in the quest for meaning and purpose. But, just as the phenomena-watchers devised a useful mathematical language appropriate to their *logical* work, so too did the noumena-watchers invent a special operational language appropriate to their *mythological* work. We call it poetry, and have used this enigmatic language on countless occasions through long ages of man to tell great stories of great lives. But these stories are not about *other* lives: *the mythological kingdom is a place where we discover the poetry of our own lives.*

The problem with poetry, however, is that only poets understand it (the incomprehensibility problem encountered by all special languages, it seems). And that's why we have religion, the data-processors of the noumenal world, assembling the observations of poets (painters, writers, musicians, visionaries) into useful systems of thought for the benefit of the greater Community of Man. Notwith-

standing the fact that some theologians (and philosophers too) can metastasize a profound observation into a cancerous system of thought, this forth form of interpreting the world is clearly important. There can be no civilization without extensive constraints on our behavior, and no way to impose such constraints (which must be voluntary to function over the long term) without some cognitive framework within which the average person can comprehend a greater purpose in the world than mere satiation of the primal appetites nature gave us. As French theologian Henri de Lubac observed: "It is not true...that man cannot organize the world without God. What is true is that, without God, he can only organize it against man."

It is a competitive world, with only finite attention (and resources, which invariably follows our fickle attention) available for each of our many endeavors. We should not be too surprised by the frequent and acrimonious tension expressed between these Four World-Views upon the public stage. But, in the honesty of our own thoughts to ourselves, it is important to understand that these four perspectives are all interdependent and, more importantly, limited. One view cannot claim an understanding of the whole picture, anymore than a one-legged table can claim to stand. Only a four-legged table is a useful one.

And so these are the four disciplines by which we approach the enigmas of the world. It's not that these disparate descriptions are inaccurate, but their incompleteness reveals little of the true nature of the enigma - Kant's "thing in itself", what Hindus call Atman, the Truth beyond the illusion. These four methods of exploration are rather like the Four Elements: it is only in a miraculous union that they might achieve Quintessence. All religions, all science, all philosophy, and all art, are merely shallow interpretations of the same infinitely deep mystery of existence. The repetition of patterns - in nature and natural laws, in mathematics and the forms of logic, in the poetic reverence by which we find silent communion with these mysterious things, and in

our sacred books that hope to extend that personal resonance with the world to an interconnecting unity among men - is evidence of an ineffable presence. The universal motifs are Beacons of Divinity, and Einstein, Plato, Beethoven, and Buddha all perceived the same revelatory light; they simply communicated their experiences in different languages. (But perhaps only someone with an “esoteric mythological mind” would think so.)

### The Final Word?

If this line of thinking is valid, then another interesting aspect of revelation is, well, revealed. Einstein saw something new in the universe, something that Newton did not explain, and great schools of science evolved from that seminal idea. Einstein certainly did not imagine black holes, although it did not take long for clever scientists like Schwarzschild and Chandrasekhar to realize there were some interesting and unexpected implications within general relativity. The original revelation was stunning; the larger truth continues to emerge and is even more startling. Einstein himself did not see the whole picture.

Picasso saw something new in art. I don't know if he ever described it as such, to himself or anyone else, but his revelation might have come in the form of a question: What does the psyche look like? And, at an even more primal level, what does *instinct* look like? These are interesting questions, and, despite my unfavorable opinions of modern art in general, he found interesting visual answers to them. Previous artists had sought to depict tormenting situations; Picasso depicted torment – and many other subjective experiences that cannot easily be defined. I also do not know what he thought of the modern art genie's adventures once he had released it from the bottle. But he - a rogue and scoundrel it's true, and yet a master craftsman in his youth - must surely have at least raised an eyebrow to see urine and feces elevated to the same status as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Picasso saw a

wide new world of creative opportunity, but he did not see all of it.

The English philosopher-poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge correctly observed that “everyone is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian,” and Plato and Aristotle did indeed do an impressive job of defining the basic parameters of philosophical debate: Do we aspire to a subjective ideal or do we accept an objective reality? Is it conservative stoic discipline or liberal epicurean sensuality that will guide us to the answers we seek? Philosophy remains an exercise in extolling the virtues of one or the other; after 2400 years of scrutiny and analysis, refinement and elaboration, these basic forms of thought from the classical world are still sufficient to express the range of human experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One might have thought that by now, surely, we should know all the implications of such well worn systems...that have inevitably lead to Auschwitz and the Gulag. Monty Python was right: no one expects the Spanish Inquisition.

Which brings me to Mohammed – or Moses, or St. Paul, or Joseph Smith, or L. Ron Hubbard, or any other man who has staggered out of the desert with the Word of God in his hand and a maniacal ambition to deliver it to the world (Lao Tzu, who had no such ambitions, left *his* book, the *Tao Te Ching*, with a lonely frontier guard on his way *into* the desert – the emptiness of Tibet, whereupon he vanished from all knowledge). In a cave in Mt. Hira on the outskirts of Mecca, a contemplative wanderer encountered a divine message that there was to be, in addition to the two other Books of God (the Tora of the Jews and the Gospels of the Christians), a third Book: the Koran – the final, complete, and emphatically *non-revisable* set of instructions for Mankind, as dictated by God (or his proxy, the archangel Gabriel), word by unalterable word, to Mohammed. Such events are so rare, and the power of the messages so profound, that one is inclined to say that *something* mysterious and amazing is afoot. But Mohammed himself said the message was like “the reverberation of bells” and one is also inclined to say that interpreting “bells”

does involve significant risk of errors in translation. When these divine bells of the desert ring of unknown things, of the deep ocean of night and the Cloak of Orion flaring wide to expose its luminous heart to the envious cosmos, what do these denizens of the dunes hear? And what would Mohammed now say if he could see the celestial wonders we lesser souls have beheld? *Nobody* gets a view of the world entire; the elephant is just too big for one blind man's hands. The modern world needs a new prophet to interpret the Bells of Discovery now reverberating through the lofty vaults of our Cathedrals of Science.

### Touching the Conductor

**W**hat distinguishes complex revelations from the simple encounters many ordinary people experience is the Herculean will (or is it reckless abandon?) needed to maintain a mental grasp of the moment. Only then can an aspect of that infinitely-faceted Jewel be integrated into one's identity, thereby allowing the experience to be *shared*: as science, philosophy, art, or spiritual insight. When I saw that exquisite flame, I held back, struggling to hold onto a sense of self threatened (or so I thought) by an overwhelming assault; some rare individuals, it seems, are able to abandon the security of the ego and release their grasp over that ravaging chasm of oblivion. What would that be like, to leap off the world into the glory of the Divine Fire and seize hold of the terrifying Infinite, *refusing* to let go?

The paradoxes and enigmas of existence are a relentless contradiction to every belief, every assertion, every confidence, every certainty. We are here by virtue of forces beyond our control, beyond our knowing. Galley slave or Alexander, we are all simply along for the ride - driver and destination unknown. And yet, in a sudden, fleeting moment of illumination, I was touched by *another*. A silent and unseen Will ferries us across the river, the Conductor of a cosmic symphony calls from yonder shore

with the melody of an inscrutable promise...

*Beethoven's Sixth Symphony* (the first 14 tones of which are seen here as bluebird-notes fluttering upon a musical staff of light) remains one of the more exquisite human expressions of Absolute Beatitude and Eternal Perfection. This painting is my interpretation of that same Truth that dwells within and beyond the universe: the Mother Goddess as the Conductor of the Symphony of Nature.



