
PETER MURNANE

ARCHWAYS
TO THE
INFINITE

My journey towards
the transcendent



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‘There is another world,’ Yeats claims, ‘but it is within this one.’ This personal and luminously honest account of the over fifty-year-long journey of a Dominican priest looks beyond the curtain of our stories searching for the evidence of that hidden world.

Peter Murnan’s search takes us to the writings of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, the social activism of Dorothy Day among Manhattan’s homeless and of his colleagues’ antiwar protests in New Zealand – even to his love of hitchhiking and as he cycles 2000 kms to the centre of Australia.

—Monsignor Tony Doherty

This delightful, wise book is not just another memoir but a pilgrimage searching for the sacred. It traces both a personal and universal journey from birth to death. This journey demands courage to be and freedom to let go.

On the way it presents both the pain of violence and the healing power of love. The trail moves through myth and metaphor, synchronicity and intuition in its search for truth. It identifies the totally interconnected nature of matter and spirit. Love is the motive force and unifying principle of life.

‘The wonder is that we do not have to find Infinity. With ultimate care for all that it has made, it will find us.’

—Dr Anna Holmes, author and medical practitioner

Much like Augustine’s Confessions, Murnane’s fascinating memoir is a blend of gripping autobiography and theology. His life is recounted in searing honesty and fascinating epithets, never ceasing to hold interest. But it is also the raw material for his reflections on the depths of human existence, and never remote. A scintillating and engaging read from cover to cover.

—Dr Mike Riddell, New Zealand writer and film-maker

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

Rondo Alla Turca

First glimpse through the archway

On an evening in early summer, towards the end of my fourteenth year, my family set out for a suburban town hall about eleven kilometres from our home. It was rare that we went out together as a family but tonight the town hall was the venue for the end-of-year *Speech Night* of the college that my brothers and I attended.

Our journey was by bus to the train on which we would travel for six stations, and then by tram to the Malvern town hall. As we waited awkwardly at the bus stop at the corner of our street, I imagined that I could see from high above the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, the families of the hundreds of boys in our school setting out from their homes and gradually converging on the same building. If they could each carry some kind of special light, I could watch those lights converge on the town hall, slowly forming a solid mass of brightness. My imagining was oddly prophetic. Fifty years later, as I recall that night, almost every person carries a cell phone by which they *can* be tracked to within centimetres of their position on Earth by the watching eyes of spy satellites that feed into giant ‘security’ networks.

I did not see our school as a place of radiance, or a shining example of community. My life there was generally lonely, often boring and sometimes painful. But on that night, the first *Speech Night* we had attended, I was to find a door that gave me access to an unexpected and entirely new dimension.

Among the hundreds of families following their converging paths, we passed through the doors of the town hall. With all the other pupils I was directed to the upper gallery. We talked excitedly, less concerned than usual about the stern gaze of the brothers who were

our teachers, stationed at strategic positions to supervise us. Some boys called out or waved to friends; others tried to locate their parents and siblings in the main auditorium below.

I was excited by the buzz of hundreds of voices talking at once, but I scarcely knew what to expect of the evening. My childish understanding was bemused by the way life flowed in a big institution and I was content to wait for commands and then follow all the others in obeying.

Like any large auditorium the hall was filled with row after row of seats facing the empty stage, over which towered a huge arch painted with faded gold trim. It was not round like a rainbow, but had a flattened top between its curved corners. A short distance behind the arch was a giant picture of a landscape painted on canvas that was just a little cracked and shabby. It tried to make us believe that through the arch there was a stone-paved terrace with a stone railing supported on low pillars like fat bottles, in a style I had heard called 'classical'. Beyond the painted terrace was a painted landscape, sunlit and fading into a bluish haze of distant hills. On the real stage the only object was a shiny black grand piano, which seemed to have been left there by accident.

The night began with uninteresting speeches, then gymnastic displays by young boys in white shorts and singlets vaulting over a padded wooden box called a horse. Then the bigger, more muscular boys rubbed resin on their hands and dared to swing high on horizontal bars fixed to the stage with wire stays. Choirs of boys then sang songs that had been popular long before they were born, and recited poems whose words were difficult to distinguish amid the dozens of voices trying to speak in unison. It was then that I experienced something that had never happened to me before.

A familiar name was announced, and a small boy walked alone onto the empty stage. I knew him as an uninteresting lad from the class below my own. He wore short trousers and the familiar school blazer, which I had always considered garish with its gold pyjama-stripes on

royal blue. Walking across the wide stage, he sat down at the grand piano and without delay began to make it pour out beautiful sounds.

My mind was still wrestling to make sense of the title that had just been announced for the piece: *Rondo alla turca*,¹ but I was forced to put that aside for later consideration, for from the piano's open lid such sounds were coming that I had never imagined possible. While his small hands flew back and forth on the keyboard and the piano was filling the hall with beautiful patterns of sound that astonished me more and more, my eyes wandered to the canvas back-drop that towered above him. As I gazed into it, the sunlight seemed to have taken on a stronger brightness and the dull terrace had become interesting and inviting. I next felt myself *within* the sunny green landscape, travelling by canoe up the blue river that curved into the misty distance. In the next instant, as happens in dreams, I was walking towards the buildings at the foot of the hills, knowing that there were people there whom it would be wonderful to meet.

The waves of delightful sound continued to roll over me, and I became an adult, alone and free in a distant, sunny land. At fourteen I had no idea of what an adult might do, but I was now allowed to do whatever it was. In school I was often rebuked for my childish behaviour or punished for breaking some rule I had never been told about. In my first weeks at the school, when I was not yet twelve years old, the Brother-Principal had caught me and a companion running in an area we did not know was out-of-bounds. The next day, before the whole school assembly, he punished us with six cuts of a stiff leather strap on our stinging hands. Four cuts was the routine punishment for talking in class or failing to complete our homework.

Here, I forgot all that. In this land within the music it did not matter that my family struggled for lack of money; that my parents, having both left school when they were fourteen, did not understand the new subjects I was learning: Latin, French, Algebra, Geometry; or that our home was so far from the school that my few friends hardly ever came to visit.

Everyone was clapping. The music had stopped, and I was suddenly back in my seat looking down on the distant stage where beneath that huge arch the small boy was bowing in front of the piano. I glanced carefully around me, wondering whether anyone else among all these people had also just come back from travelling deep into the green landscape through the arch.

For a long time I wondered how that music could have moved me so deeply when nothing had touched me physically. Its invisible force did far more to me than anything else that night or during the whole previous year. The Speech Night came to an end after a man in a suit had made a dull speech and the Brother who was School Principal had given out prizes. One by one a long line of boys crossed the stage to receive a book for being best in their class or subject, or a silver cup for winning in some sport. I went up to receive my book, but the prize was not nearly as important to me as what I had already discovered that evening and would never forget. After that, the crowds of schoolboys and their families flooded from the hall, and as we climbed into the tram to begin our long journey homewards I was just as uncomfortable as ever that my classmates might see me with the rest of my family. But now I carried a new secret: I had passed through that strange archway into a new land, deeper and richer than the ordinary world around me.



Little Anthony Fenelon playing Mozart, and a tatty painted backdrop, had let me pass through the veil that conceals more of Reality than we can normally cope with. Without understanding what was happening, I entered into a world transcending my familiar senses; a doorway to the infinite. The experience startled me and left me puzzling what to do about it. As family life went on around me I began to wonder whether life through the archway or on this side was more real.

On our way to the speech night I had imagined the families gathering to a focus at the town hall and then afterwards dispersing. My childhood up to that time, like a hidden root-system nourishing a plant-stem, had brought me to a readiness for some new experience. From that night's point of convergence, my mind began to stretch wider and higher, spreading towards the light.

My experience was not unique or even unusual. It is a common way for romantic adolescents to find and enter more deeply into reality. We seem to have a readiness, some innate power or curiosity to find and pass through such archways on a wide range of occasions. While some persons seem more ready than others to do this, perhaps we are all to some degree afraid or unwilling to step through these entrances that lead ... who knows where? We soon learn that they are not always beneficial; that some lead us into difficulty and pain. They scare us ... *humankind cannot bear very much reality.*²

Through the millennia of the human journey, many people have tried to describe finding these openings, which seem to hint that we are made for something beyond the present. Some have wondered if there is even some ultimate proscenium arch beyond all our imagining, through which we might pass, if we only had the courage. Perhaps our ancient habit of myth-making and storytelling grew out of memories of the hints of such things. Is death such a doorway, through which we pass to find the meaning of our lives unveiled; or is it simply the fall of the curtain? What *was* the shadowy hint I had received from 'Mozart's rondo' and my trip into the landscape though the arch?

The proscenium arch is far more than an ornamental plaster-stucco frame for the theatre stage. It marks the entrance to the worlds created by every storyteller, playwright and artist; the place of awe, leading to make-believe. The following chapters will explore some aspects of journeys to which the proscenium arch can lead us.

The Fourth Wall

The Proscenium Arch, origins and analogies

Somewhere in ancient Greece, in the early days of theatre, the manager of a certain *theatron* decided to improve things by putting up a tent behind the open area where the actors performed. It would provide a convenient place where the actors could prepare, out of sight, before they emerged onto the stage. It would give more dramatic impact to the performances and might even increase ticket sales. It was the kind of idea that other theatres would soon copy. This tent behind the stage – called a *skene* – evolved into a permanent structure, a slender building of three storeys, providing a backdrop on which to hang ‘scenery’. It developed windows and balconies as additional places for the actors to perform. The stage in front of it evolved into a narrow, raised platform where most of the performance took place. It came to be called the *proskenion*.

The acting space itself was still in full view of the audience, and remained so into the Roman era, but after medieval times theatre stages became deeper and were framed as if in a great doorway. What we now call the proscenium arch can be seen in a 1560 engraving of a performance in Siena, and the oldest surviving arch is in Parma’s *Teatro Farnese*, built in 1615. Both of these are rectangular, but later prosceniums would be given a more rounded shape, nearer to a true arch.

If our familiar proscenium arch was not present in the most ancient places of drama, or has disappeared from post-modern theatres which might have a projecting ‘thrust’ stage or no stage at all, this does not remove the unseen ‘fourth wall’ that separates the actors from the spectators. The story itself is another threshold separating the ‘real world’ of the audience from the ‘imaginary world’ of the stage.

Those who have stories to tell have often used theatrical effects to enhance them. Long before the development of the proscenium arch, eons before ancient Greek engineers were building theatres to seat thousands on a semi-circular slope so that everyone had a good view of the stage and could hear the actors' words, the Australian Aborigines were marking out bora rings for their corroborees in which they could tell and dance their stories.

Whether in the open air or in elaborate theatres, the storyteller or script writer takes care to delineate the other time and place to which they are taking us. All they need do is to intone 'Once upon a time ...' and we set aside the present moment and willingly enter their world of fable. Homer may have begun the Iliad or Odyssey with a more solemn opening, but no matter how we are invited to pass through the barrier that the proscenium represents, when we do so we enter realms beyond the everyday world. It is not necessary to build an archway, or even to have a stage, for listeners to understand that the storyteller's words are offering a reality different from the present place and time.



The proscenium spans the stage of a theatre, but it also exists in many other times and places as an invisible doorway that frames our entry into the realm of story. We constantly create images 'in our head', using our remarkable power to make internal pictures of things gleaned from our senses or created by recombining fragments from them. We seem to summon up such pictures before every action: before climbing a ladder to put a box on a crowded shelf, we *imagine* the box against the space available among the other objects. When playing tennis or golf, before we hit the ball we *picture* the spot where we want it to land, and try subtly to adjust the force and direction of our muscles' effort. In all of life's processes, we appear to predict, to *imagine* what the next instant may bring.

When going on a journey, before starting out we summon up some image of where we are going and why; a name on a map; an image of a street or house; a person we want to see; and then begin to picture what we need to do to make our journey successful. In speaking, writing or playing music we also seem, however infinitesimally, to ‘sound out’ the sentence we want to speak or write, or the notes we are about to play. For the beginner learning to read or play music this trial-and-error is painfully obvious, but for the practised speaker or musician the interval between image and action has become so small that it is no longer noticed and may have disappeared altogether. When we learn how to combine these pictures-in-our-head of that which does not yet exist, stories are born. When we attempt to share with others our combinations of pictures, we create proscenium archways into these other, unreal worlds, which let us share with others the realms which we have devised.

This power of ours to create images of what is not there must surely be as innate as sight and speech, for even very young children can distinguish ‘make believe’ from real, just as kittens do when they carefully hold back their claws in play. It is a source of wonder how a child learns so early to comprehend the pictures that others present to it; to step across the threshold of story and recognise different levels of ‘really true’. Even before it is two years old, a child will create little play-stories with its dolls, putting them through situations from its own life: feeding them with a spoon, toilet-training them, pretending to be their parent. This is not mere mimicry. The child-playwright is quite capable of innovating, creating novel interactions, even inventing for their little drama new characters who might be invisible to an onlooker. Children enjoy such make-believe games and know – by what instinct? – the difference between a parent pretending to be a monster and the parent who *is* a monster. To the first they react with squeals of delight, but if threatened by the other they will scream in terror.

Our desire to leave the here-and-now by stepping through a proscenium seems to be intrinsic and insatiable. Not only do we

create stories in many kinds of medium; we sometimes take delight in mocking those stories in spoofs or send-ups, thereby constructing a second proscenium beyond the original arch so that the new author and audience can laugh at finding in the original new levels of meaning – or the non-meaning of absurdity.



Merely changing place can take us through a kind of proscenium, into a different story. When in teenage years I first put on a glass face-mask and slipped beneath the clear summer waters of Melbourne's Port Philip Bay, it was as if I had travelled to another planet. In those days before colour television or spectacular nature documentaries, I had never seen the underwater world in film or photograph. I was awed that the sea's surface was a rippling mirror overhead and that breaking waves could be viewed from the inside, in confusing three-dimensional negative. Linked to the surface by a snorkel, among fluid-moving kelp I became an unnoticed neighbour to fish, squid, stingrays and even small sharks.

Half a lifetime later, one night after sunset I sat in a crowded mud-brick hut at a village celebration in northern Pakistan. The large room was packed with local people, materially very poor. I was one of a few Europeans whom they had welcomed into their midst. A large part of the evening was taken up by a storyteller, such as could once be found in every culture before mass media began to delete them from society. He played a portable harmonium and kept the people spellbound with stories which he chanted in Urdu, of which I understood not two words. I was told that some were myths from long ago and some were stories about local events as recent as a visit from the Seventh Day Adventist missionaries, which the listeners evidently found quite amusing. I felt privileged to be there, witnessing an ancient and universal ritual, the re-telling of past events so that people could share them again, even for the hundredth time.



The stories we wish to tell others may be re-worked effigies of things we have seen and wish to convey to others, or constructed entirely from our own imagination. Whichever they are, our storytelling is doomed to remain confined in our own mental world unless we have found an adequate medium, a set of symbols to represent effectively the ideas we have conceived.

One hot summer evening, with a storm pending, our living room was full of adults gathered for some serious occasion. Suddenly my little brother rushed into the room, bursting with excitement. At that time he was perhaps four years old, and our parents were already concerned that he was slow in learning speech and other skills because at birth he had suffered some damage to his head. When his noisy entrance had startled the adults into attention, he took a stand and bravely blurted out his news: 'There's stuff in the sky doing this ...!' At which point his childish vocabulary failed him and he had to resort to sign language, but in such a way that the impact he made was recounted in family legend for years afterwards.

He stood before the hushed adults, squeezing his eyes shut as tight as he could, then opening them widely again in succession as rapidly as he could manage. Each time he opened his eyes, he poked out his tongue. He was attempting to mime, with a measure of theatrical genius, the distant flashes of sheet lightning which he had never before seen. His silent narration prodded the solemn adults into laughter, just before they were startled by loud claps of thunder announcing the approaching storm.

We can be thankful that we don't often need now to revert to signs, unless we have reached the limit of our vocabulary in a foreign land, or like my little brother, cannot find adequate words to describe the unfamiliar. Nor do we need to draw pictures to express our meaning, for after millennia of language development we have turned the original sketches into stripped-down pictographs, as in China, or replaced

them with a rich variety of alphabets. To tell stories, our various cultures have replaced carved or painted hieroglyphs with thousands of languages with vocabularies of millions of words: interconnected sound-symbols that let us depict with amazing precision whatever is in our mind. Pictures still have their own uses: paintings share the artists' vision; photographs record and remind; comic strips and cartoons entertain and bill-boards try to persuade us. We have even long since learned to bring pictures to life, viewing them through the prosceniums of cinema and television.



Thinking about language, Aristotle concluded, around 350 BCE, that our senses tell us what is really 'out there'. From what they deliver we form thought-concepts that accurately relate to the real world, and then find words to express these. A thousand years later St Thomas Aquinas built on Aristotle's realism: agreeing that our thoughts and words are *proportional* – analogous – to the things 'out there'. No doubt this accurately describes what happens when we perceive things, but – the philosophers went on – not every reality has a single, simple label.

We have invented rich varieties of words that compete to describe the *same* thing: when we say *clothes* and *raiment*; *whole* and *complete*; *troops* and *soldiers*; *children* and *offspring*, we are expressing almost the same idea with in each pair of labels.

Conversely, it happens in any language that the same word has come to stand for several quite different things: we say *pen* to describe an enclosure for pigs and a thing we write with. This nominal identity is quite accidental: each use of *pen* represents quite a different reality and we use the word equivocally. It is different again when we use the same word to mean things that *are* connected, as when we say that a *person* is peaceful, that certain kinds of *behaviour* are peaceful, and the *atmosphere* in a house is peaceful. The fine difference between these uses might not at first be obvious, but looking closer we easily see that

behaviour, person and house are quite diverse, and that when we use the same word to describe them we are linking quite different ideas by this analogy.

One kind of analogy is metaphor. As our languages developed, this invention – another subtle doorway – extended almost to infinity our power to shape narratives and communicate them to others. Metaphor – the Greek word meant the ‘carrying-over’ of one concept to another – employs the mental picture of one thing to transfuse extra life into our effort to describe another. When a storyteller uses a metaphor he or she transfers an idea to another part of our mental world where it isn’t normally found. We say that a person is *lost* for words; a house is *crying out* for a coat of paint; a nation is *born*; a plane *limped* home on one engine; their marriage was a *prison*; he *racked* his brains; health-care has become a political *football*; the land was *blanketed* with snow; my mind was *flooded* with new information; he was *sitting on* 120 kph; education is the *key* to success; when I saw it, my heart *turned to ice*.

People who like to argue about these things sometimes say that metaphor is an inferior kind of analogy because it merely *attributes* qualities to things it describes, and that this is distinct from the three meanings of the word *peaceful* as used above. When we use a metaphor, we might seem merely to *pretend* that an object has the characteristics which the metaphor attributes to it, but this is a little unfair. When, for example, we describe musical notes as being metaphorically ranged on a *scale* – from the Latin *scala*, which means ladder – aren’t we using a link between the two ideas that has lain within them since the beginning of the world – or at least since the invention of ladders? Or when we say that we were *lost for words*, surely we are not just ‘attributing’ this quality to ourselves? Aren’t there times when speech fails us, and we feel as if we are in a dense jungle, with no idea in which direction we should walk? If I use the metaphorical expression ‘I was taken aback by his rudeness’, I am saying that he left me feeling very much like a sailing ship which until now had been driven before

a fair wind which suddenly shifted to dead ahead, causing the sails to flap and the masts to shudder, and jarring the vessel so severely that it almost broke apart.³

When we transfer the meanings of words we change their original, literal signification, but in doing so we point out instructive and entertaining likenesses that lie hidden in our much-connected world. Is not metaphor a *doorway* which opens up new territories of thought by pointing out similarities previously hidden, and deepens our view of things by revealing their hidden links with other parts of the universe?

Like the ship taken aback, many of the metaphors we use have lost much of their momentum because neither user nor listener knows what they originally meant. They have become just a string of words that we have heard others using, which have worn a track in our brain. We miss now the shocking contrast of the original metaphor: what was once a daring mental leap falls flat because it no longer surprises the listeners with sudden insight.

Metaphors can have great power and beauty because the reality-content of everything is far greater than is expressed in its well-worn name and our blasé image of it. Henry James called this power of analogy to reveal the nature of things a ‘tremendous force’.⁴ Similarly, in visual art, Van Gogh’s profound paintings might seem to distort what you or I would normally see as a sunflower, a starry night or a person’s face, but they show us aspects of the world that we might never have found for ourselves. A saying attributed to him describes every metaphor: that there is a truth truer than literal meaning.



When our ability to make and read images turns back to the past, we call it memory. From among the countless sensations that our senses receive and process each day, we recall small fragments or even elaborate structures many years later. There is evidence that we store

away every detail our senses deliver to our brain, and if hypnotised could retrieve an image of the face of every person we have ever talked with.

This gift of looking backwards through the archways of time lets us do more than simply preserve and retell our own stories. We can learn from those past experiences by comparing them with our present situation. Even as children we did this, growing in competence and confidence. We can modify the effect the past has had on us by looking back with increased knowledge to understand *why* harmful events happened, and the *motives* of people who did them. We can correct our own mistakes and forgive others the harm they have done. With this increasing control, the choices of our heart give us to some degree the power to travel back through time.

Memory is our treasure-house of experience. By reflecting on its contents we can find more of the meaning we may have missed in what happened around us. It stores all our experiences, but is notoriously fallible, for we can find ourselves combining pictures that did not originally belong together or that others remember differently. We can invent stories of what did not actually happen. Unless carefully checked our memory can lead us hopelessly astray. As we rummage there, trying to be creative, we may accidentally pull out words that are inappropriate or ill-matching, sometimes inventing delightful malapropisms and sometimes sheer nonsense. *Illiterate him from your memory!*; alcoholics *unanimous*; a vast *suppository* of information; having one spouse is called *monotony*.

Such linguistic weakness may fortuitously be a source of wisdom. When we half-understand what we are trying to say, we might actually succeed in wrenching nonsense into sense, revealing hidden meanings that conceal enlightening truth. A mayor of Chicago once solemnly announced that ‘The police are not here to create disorder, they’re here to *preserve* disorder.’

Children, as they struggle to master language and express themselves are especially prone to recall and mix words inaccurately.

One inspired child has delighted generations by mistaking the line from a hymn: *Kept by Thy tender care/Gladly the cross-eyed bear ...* At age twelve the author Sylvia Wright misheard an old Scottish ballad that lamented:

They hae slain the Earl o' Moray, and laid him on the green,
 as
*They hae slain the Earl o' Moray, and **Lady Mondegreen***

thereby increasing the romance and pathos of the old song, as well as providing a name – *mondegreens* – for an entire category of misused words. Another child, hearing the 23rd Psalm, found little comfort in being promised the abstract gifts of *goodness and mercy*, even if they come from God. She found it much more consoling to believe that:

*Surely **Good Mrs. Murphy** shall follow me all the days of my life.*



We can picture storytellers at the dawn of human development learning to manipulate their listeners by tales woven from their own imaginations and memories: stories peopled by characters good and evil; monsters, tricksters and gods. But these tales were not wholly ‘made up’. They emerged from the forces and conflicts in the storyteller’s own heart and found echoes in the hearts of their hearers. Does this suggest that when story-smiths in any culture reach deep into the unconscious and depict realms beyond ordinary experience, they are stirring up our natural longing for – or innate horror of – realms at other levels of reality, beyond what our senses have so far shown us?

The more memorable stories from diverse ancient cultures became congealed into myths. These have surprised modern researchers by the common elements that constantly recur among them. Myths are not

false stories, as Post-Enlightenment ‘scientific’ minds tended to think, but are deeply true. Cinderella; Jack and The Bean Stalk and Little Red Riding-hood are only a few of the hundreds expressing the fears and joys that move hearts in any place and era. Their non-existent characters seem to re-present the divine, the desired and the diabolical within ourselves. Perhaps the nature of myth was best summed up in the perceptive answer given by a little boy to his teacher: ‘A myth is something that is true on the inside, but not true on the outside.’⁵ From their source in the unconscious, myths may bring forth truths deeply embedded within us, gently couched in metaphorical terms. Scholars like Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell have concluded that myths are ancient attempts to express deep truths about life’s origin and purpose, or to explain suffering and fate, which we hardly understand and could never express in literal terms.

David Tacey argues that religious stories, indeed all religious language, *must* be metaphorical, for it tries to tell of things that transcend the senses and so can never be put directly into words.⁶ Those who would insist that such stories are literally true are on a road that leads to absurdity and the destruction of belief. Accepting their metaphorical nature might lessen the conflict between those who consider themselves believers, agnostics or atheists ... and the conflict between those elements in the heart of each one of us.

The fundamental stories of Judaism and Christianity – to look no further – were at first composed by oral storytellers at a time when people lived by myth and would not have expected a literal, historical or scientific account such as modern authors might claim to write. Early believers, in every faith, would have received their myths as stories ‘true on the inside’, revealing the mysterious Transcendent; but not necessarily ‘true on the outside’, in the miraculous details with which they were adorned. When 19th century biblical scholars began to rediscover this, many religious apologists, already threatened by the advances in the sciences achieved during the Enlightenment, strove vainly to insist that the biblical stories were wholly and literally true.

This inevitably led to a further – unnecessary – parting of the ways, by which faith became separated from reason, and religion split further from science.



When we fall asleep, our image-making powers, imagination and memory can range freely. Dreams are partly memories of what we were doing during the previous day, but at deeper levels they are doorways leading into the mysterious depths of our unconscious. Among many other functions, dreams provide a pathway by which significant memories from our earlier life can return to be ‘digested’. As our body has a natural urge to heal, so does our psyche, and it brings into our sleeping consciousness situations from the past that have not yet been healed. These can keep returning in bizarre forms which niggle at us repeatedly until we find their key, after which that portion of our life falls into place like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s I had a recurring dream about a strange object: a small, compact black box about seven centimetres by twelve centimetres and about three deep. The upper half of its front side was a screen on which I could see moving patterns of coloured light, vaguely concentric in shape, whose centre receded into the distance as the sides of a tunnel recede when viewed from the back of a moving train. In the dream I knew that the small device was capable of many functions, although I had no idea what these might be.

What was I dreaming about? Some twenty years later I saw similar coloured patterns on the screen of my laptop computer, a display that could run while music was playing. But my dream began about five years before the first personal computers came on the market, and many more years before lap-tops had coloured screens. The thing in my dreams resembled a modern smartphone, though considerably thicker, but I did not see a smartphone until about thirty years after first dreaming about the strange object.

The dream had been recurring occasionally for perhaps ten years when I found myself taking part in a workshop to study dream interpretation. As participants we were invited to recall a recurring dream we had experienced, then lie back comfortably and allow ourselves to fall into a half-sleep. We were asked, if possible, to speak aloud about what came before our minds, while a partner sitting beside us could gently question us to develop the thread of the dream. In a semi-doze I chose to 're-enter' that dream, and realised suddenly that the device resembled the first transistor radio I ever saw. My father had brought it home in the late 1950s, but quite soon I selfishly borrowed it for an evening to show off to my friends. It did not of course have a screen showing coloured patterns, but in my revisited dream I also saw my father wearing his usual hat. In its band was the end of a peacock feather with its beautiful unblinking 'eye', whose shape and rich colours resembled the moving coloured pattern on the device that I had often dreamed of.

Seeing how I had unconsciously combined these images in the dream helped me towards resolving aspects of my relationship with my father. In my teenage years he was often away from home, sometimes working at a second job, with the result that as I approached adulthood I had little time to get to know him. Soon after the transistor radio incident I moved out of home, and less than two years later he was dead.

Evidently dreams can be a doorway leading to deep and entangled memories in our unconscious, offering us opportunities to re-enter and heal them. Does my repeated experience of *that* particular dream also suggest, weirdly, that dreams may to some extent have access to the future? How otherwise could I dream often of that portable device whose functioning puzzled me because the device did not yet exist, and wouldn't until about twenty years later? From what source beyond time did I receive an image of a compact mobile device with a coloured screen? Was it from some 'collective unconscious' that is not confined by our time-flow; or from the influence of minds or spirits of people who are alive but no longer in the dimension that we call 'now'?

Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung began to find that just as people of many cultures share similar myths, so they also share symbols which persistently turn up in their dreams. Jung called these archetypes. But by what mechanism are they shared across cultures? To propose that they are 'in our DNA' does not seem sufficient: thoughts are surely much more than any chemical structure in our neurones. Nor is it enough to say that we all have a propensity to construct our inner world in a similar way, similar to the innate structure that some suggest we have in our brain as a basis for language. The archetypes we share seem to show that we are more than a material mechanism, and that images, symbols and myths are an essential part of our functioning. The 'scientific mind' is obliged to take account of this evidence that we live within a realm of story whose depth and boundaries are as yet unknown to us.