



Cynthia Bourgeault's Blog Series: Exploring Jean Gebser

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Introduction: AN INVITATION TO BEGIN THE HEALING WORK

Well, the oasis of grace miraculously opened, and now it's time to roll up our collective sleeves and get on with the healing work! I know that my own first assignment has something to do with helping to expose—and hopefully defuse—some of the reactivity and sanctimoniousness that boils just below the surface in my immediate peer group, the spiritual liberal intelligentsia.

Sometimes a book simply falls off the bookshelf when the time is right. In this case, it wasn't the bookshelf, but my nightstand, where for the past year this modest, aqua-covered text had been slowly inching its way down in my pile of unread books. To whomever the now-unremembered giver may have been, THANK YOU! It has definitely proved to be the right book for the task now at hand.

The book is called *Seeing Through the World* by Jeremy Johnson and is a brilliant introduction to the teaching of Jean Gebser, a name you may not even have heard of. As I devoured the book in a single weekend (fortunately, it's short), I could feel my world once again gently rocking on its foundations, always a good sign that a book has really hit home. I knew instantly I had a tiger by the tail.

I shared my enthusiasm during our small Wisdom gathering at Claymont in late October, and about half that group are now also up to their eyeballs in Johnson, with similar shifting of their mental tectonic plates. I could see that Gebser—through the brilliant eyes of Jeremy Johnson—was handing me exactly the tools to see where I'd been pinned for so long now, both personally and culturally.

Jean Gebser (1905–1973) was a German–Swiss philosopher, mystic, and early scholar of the origin of consciousness. If his name rings a bell, it is probably because of his seminal influence on Ken Wilber, whose highly popular



evolutionary models of consciousness have set the cognitive baseline for so much of our contemporary spiritual understanding. What I had not realized until reading Johnson, is that what Wilber has given us is actually a MERCATOR PROJECTION of Gebser: a two-dimensional version of a three-dimensional teaching. In this flattening, significant distortion has entered, and this undetected distortion has itself contributed significantly to some of the anguish and polarization we now find ourselves caught in.

I bit the bullet this past weekend and ordered Gebser's original text, *The Ever-Present Origin*. (In English, not the original German; at least that much I let myself off the hook.) Still, I know the ways of these twentieth century European cultural philosophers, and I quake at the task before me when the book finally arrives; I hope my mind is still up for this! But Jeremy Johnson's overview has given me some solid handholds, and from what I can deduce so far through my recent explorations of imaginal causality I have already been traversing some of the same ground as Gebser. I'll report back on that in due course. Meanwhile, what I intend to work with in this next series of blogs will follow something of this trajectory. I think:

1) First of all, I want to make a pass through three foundational pieces of the Gebser model:

1) Structures of consciousness (as opposed to STAGES of consciousness); 2) the intrinsically divisive/splintering proclivities of the late (deteriorating) mental structures of consciousness; 3) Integral understood not as non-dual but as APERSPECTIVAL seeing: the capacity to draw on and simultaneously integrate all former structures of consciousness (not just points of view).

2) Then I will attempt to sidle back and explore what light each of these tenets have to shed upon the place we're now culturally pinned and how these subtle Gordian knots might be disentangled.

If you're up for joining this exploration, I encourage you to buy Jeremy Johnson's book and explore it firsthand. It's easily available online. We'll see where this initial pass goes. I may later try to develop this as a more formal



online course. But for now, I think we need some of these tools on deck, even in a preliminary stage of development, to begin to really tackle that portion of the national healing that falls on our own particular shoulders

Lesson 1: STAGES VERSUS STRUCTURES

If you've cut your teeth on the Ken Wilber roadmaps, the Gebser terrain will at first look reassuringly familiar. The familiar levels of consciousness are all right there, even designated by their familiar names: the archaic, magic, mythic, mental, and integral. Nor is this surprising, since Wilber explicitly acknowledges Gebser as the primary source of his model.

There is one crucial difference, however. In Wilber, these are stages of consciousness. In Gebser, they are STRUCTURES of consciousness.

Perhaps the significance of this nuance escapes you. (It certainly escaped me initially.) But on this nuance, actually, all else turns.

Stages EVOLVE. They are like steps on a ladder, building sequentially one upon the other in a journey that leads onward and upward.

Structures UNFOLD. They are like sections of a jigsaw puzzle or rooms in an art museum, gradually filling in to reveal the big picture (which already implicitly exists.)

This means that stages are essentially developmental. The earlier stage is folded into the next, in the process losing much of its distinctive character. The earlier stage lays the groundwork for what emerges next.

The inverse way of stating this is that the earlier stage represents a more immature expression of what is to follow.

It is not so in the world of unfolding. As you wander through an art museum, each room retains its essential character and wholeness; it weaves its own



magic and adds its own distinctive fragrance to the mix. There are the medieval iconographers, the ornate baroque sculptures, surrealists, impressionists, cubists, each one of them retaining their own identity—“unconfused, immutable, undivided” (in the words of the Council of Chalcedon, describing the two natures of Christ). While these artistic eras did emerge at specific points in historical time, they do not replace one another or cancel out each other’s unique identity. Rather, they complement and deepen one another, like interwoven threads in an unfolding tapestry. And at certain times a certain room will speak to you more than the others. The cubists may be further along on the evolutionary timeline, but today it is the medieval icons that are calling to you.

Even at best it’s not easy to grasp the difference between developing and unfolding. The difficulty is further compounded, however, by the pronounced psychological bent of the models we’re more used to (Wilber’s, and following in his footsteps, Thomas Keating), which draw an explicit correlation between structures of consciousness and stages of childhood development. Thus, the “magic” structure corresponds to the consciousness of a toddler, “mythic” to a child, and “mental” to an emerging young adult. Viewed through this lens, the implication becomes well-nigh inescapable that these earlier stages are also “lower”—i.e., immature, more primitive— expressions of full adult consciousness. They are developmental phases to be passed through—“transcended and included,” perhaps— but certainly not lingered in. As Jeremy Johnson comments, Wilber’s roadmap, brilliant though it may be “still retains a perspectival linearity that reduces the previous structures (the magic and mythic especially) to a state of mere infantilism...[His] developmental solution necessitates a strictly linear view of consciousness emergence, saving the transpersonal for the higher stages while still reducing the so-called “lower” stages to a childlike fantasy rather than a true and now lost mode of participation.” (79)

“As it stands,” Johnson adds, “this perspectival synthesis is incompatible with Gebser’s thinking.”



And you can imagine where things might be headed when this undetected linear bias starts to get projected out on whole groups of people deemed to be at a “lower” evolutionary level.

To enter the world of Gebser, the first and most important shift required is to recognize that we are indeed talking about structures of consciousness, not stages. Forget “onward and upward.” Each of these five structures is indeed an authentic mode of participation in the world,” and if they are not, perhaps, fully equal partners, they are at least fully entitled partners. Each is as qualitatively real as the other, and each adds its particular strengths and giftednesses to the whole. They are not so much steps on a ladder as planets in orbit around the sun, which is their central point of reference, the seat of their original and continuously in-breaking arising. Gebser calls this sun “The Ever-Present Origin.” I will have much more to say about it in subsequent posts.

The muting or repression of any of these structures leads to an impoverishment of the whole; this is true both individually and across the broad sweep of cultural history. While these structures may emerge into manifestation at certain points along a historical timeline, they are not created by that timeline nor determined by events preceding them in the sequence. Their point of reference is the Origin, which is outside of linear time altogether and intersects with the linear timeline by a completely different set of ordering principles. They are, one might say, timeless fractals of the whole, each bearing the living water of that original fontal outpouring in their own unique pail. They are ever-present and ever-available “at the depths,” even those that have not yet emerged into full conscious articulation on the linear timeline.

The “final” structure, then— the true Integral in Gebser’s world map—may in fact be not so much a new structure itself as a capacity to hold all the other structures simultaneously, in what Teilhard de Chardin once famously called “a paroxysm of harmonized complexity.” It is not so much a new window on the world as the capacity to see from a deeper dimension which transcends both linear and dialectical thinking and can deeply, feelingfully encompass both jagged particularity and the unitive oneness flowing through it, holding all things in relationship to their source.



This new dimension will be the subject of my next posting. But for the moment, take a deep breath. Can you feel a little more spaciousness opening up in the picture, a little more forgiveness?

Lesson 2: UNPERSPECTIVAL, PERSPECTIVAL, APERSPECTIVAL

Gebser's cultural home base was the world of art. He was a personal friend of Pablo Picasso's, and examples culled from art history dot the landscape of his *THE EVER-PRESENT ORIGIN*, illustrating almost every significant point he makes. So it's not surprising that his master interpretive lens, perspective, should itself derive from the domain of art.

Yes, perspective. Just like you learned in elementary school art. When you first began drawing pictures, probably as a preschooler, Mommy and Daddy and your big sister were always bigger, no matter where they appeared in your picture, because that's what they WERE! Then someone taught you about foreground and background, and you learned how to make things at the back of the picture smaller to show that they were farther away. You learned to turn your house at a slight angle on the page so that you could show two sides of it at once. You may or may not have consciously realized that you were learning how to proportion the various bits and pieces in relation to a hypothetical point on the horizon. But your drawings got more orderly, and they began to convey a sense of depth.

That's exactly what we're talking about here. Perspective. But now applied as an organizing principle for the field of consciousness.

According to Gebser, the five structures of consciousness we met up with in my last post—archaic, magic, mythic, mental, and integral—can be grouped into three larger categories (three worlds, as he calls them): unperspectival, perspectival, and aperspectival. While the nomenclature may at first feel intimidating, it's actually quite easy to master if you keep your elementary school art days in mind. Unperspectival is how you drew before you learned



about foreground and background, when everything was all just jumbled onto the drawing sheet. Perspectival is the drawing sheet once you've learned to arrange it in relationship to that hypothetical point on the horizon. And aperspectival is what ensues once you've learned to convey several perspectives simultaneously, as in some of Picasso's surrealist artwork where he simultaneously shows you the front side and back side of a person. (Head up: in Gebser the prefix "a" always conveys the meaning of "free from." Thus an aperspectival view is one that is free from captivity to a single central point of reference.)

The Unperspectival World embraces the archaic, magic, and mythic structures.

The Perspectival World hosts the mental structure.

The Aperspectival World is the still-emerging integral structure.

Each of these three perspectives is properly called a world because it comprises an entire gestalt, an entire womb of meaning in which we live and move and make our connections. Each has its own distinctive fragrance, ambience, tincture. Each is an authentic pathway of participation, an authentic mode of encountering the cosmos, God, and our own selfhood. Each has its brilliant strengths and its glaring weaknesses. Compositely, they evoke "the width and length and height and depth" of our collective human journey into consciousness.

I am aware that I am walking the razor's edge as I choose my words here, trying to escape the gravitational field of perspectival consciousness that would lock this all back into the evolutionary timeline. It is true, of course, that these three worlds broadly demarcate the three major epochs of Western human cultural history: ancient, medieval, and modern. But it's always been a bit dicey to try to hold these timelines too tightly or to limit structures of consciousness to specific historical eras. We have stunning exemplars of the mental structure breaking through in ancient Greece and Israel, and the mythic still lives among us today in much of the American heartlands. Gebser's model deftly sidesteps these all-too-familiar cul de sacs by reminding us that the "worlds" (and the



structures they encompass) are phenomenological, not developmental. While they appear to join the flow of linear time at specific entry points, they have in fact always been present and must continue to be present, for they are part of the ontology of the Whole.

Gebser's visually oriented presentation allows him to make one additional very important point. From a visual standpoint, perspective is really a matter of dimensionality, and dimensionality is in turn a function of DEGREE OF SEPARATION. Gebser builds on this insight to draw powerful correlations between the emergence of perspective within the structures of consciousness and the emergence of the egoic—i.e., individual—selfhood so foundational to our modern self-understanding.

In the unperspectival world everything exists in guileless immediacy (remember preschooler art?) There is relatively little separation between viewer and viewed, the external world mirroring a self-structure that is still fluid and permeable. This is the world of "original participation" (as philosopher Owen Barfield once famously described it) where the cosmos is at its most numinous and communicative, and the sense of belonging is as oceanic as the sea itself.

As we enter the perspectival world, the double-edged sword begins to fall. The same growing capacity for abstraction that makes possible the perception of proportion and depth also—by the same measure — increases our sense of separation. We stand more on the outside, our attention fixed on that hypothetical point on the horizon which organizes our canvas and maintains the illusion of depth within a flat plane. Order is maintained, but at the cost of a necessary distancing and a strict adherence to the artifice that makes the illusion possible in the first place. Deception enters riding on the back of that abstractive power, as "original participation" gives way to a growing sense of dislocation and exile. That is essentially our modern world: "oscillating," writes Jeremy Johnson (p. 58) "between a powerlessness to control the forces unleashed by the perspectival world on the one hand, and a total self-intoxicating power on the other"—in a word, "between anxiety and delight."



It is my own observation here (rather than either Jeremy's or Gebser's) that the perspectival contains an inherently deceptive aspect since it is intentionally creating a sleight of hand, the illusion of three-dimensionality within a two-dimensional plane. But if I have not wandered too far off the mark, the observation gives me some strong additional leverage for emphasizing why resolutions to the perspectival crisis can never emerge from within the perspectival structure itself, and why the much-hyped "integral emergence" cannot simply be a new, improved version of our old mental habits—not even a vastly increased "paradox tolerance." We need to get out of Flatland altogether.

For me, that is what apersepectival is essentially all about. It is an authentic transposition of consciousness from a two-dimensional plane to a sphere. Within that sphere, inner and outer world come back together again, and a sense of authentic belongingness returns. Numinosity returns as well: the felt-sense of a cosmos directly infused with the vivifying presence of Origin. Selfhood once again becomes fluid and interpenetrating even as presence becomes more centered and intensified.

The perspectival is at best a foreshadowing and at worst a mental simulacrum of authentic apersepectival three-dimensionality. The real deal can indeed be attained; in fact, it is now breaking in upon us whether we like it or not! But the cost of admission is not cheap: it entails the overhaul not only of our fundamental attitudes, but of our entire neurophysiology of perception.

I hope to circle back to this point in due course. For now, the most important thing to keep in mind is that in the Gebserian system PERSPECTIVE IS NOT SIMPLY A POINT OF VIEW; IT IS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WORLD OF SEEING, unfolding according to its own protocols: its own core values and ways of making connections. To truly take in another's perspective is not simply to take in another's "position" and arrange the pieces dialectically on a mental chessboard. Rather, it is profoundly to take in another world and allow that world to touch our hearts and wash over us deeply until it, too, becomes our own. It is to listen in a whole new dimension. And I believe Gebser would argue that this dimension only truly opens up with the inbreaking of the apersepectival structure.



Lesson 3: THE VIEW FROM THE PERISCOPE...

Gebser's brilliant unpacking of the structures of consciousness in terms of PERSPECTIVE (as it is understood in the art world rather than in philosophy) gives us a powerful new visual tool with which to begin to see where we're pinned. In art, perspective is a technique for creating the illusion of depth and space on a two-dimensional plane. It works by establishing an arbitrary "vanishing point" on the horizon, then arranging all the elements on the canvas on a hypothetical line leading back to it. Instantly the size of the objects relative to one another on the canvas comes into correct proportion, and a sense of realism is established.

As I ponder this striking visual metaphor, I am struck by how this same basic configuration seems to apply to that other organizing convention of the mental structure of consciousness, TIME. In perspectival time the "vanishing point" would be that arbitrary "consummatum est" (whether you construe that to be your own death, the Armageddon, the Omega Point, or simply the end of some process you're currently involved in). The line leading back to it is linear time, and what in a painting takes shape as "background" and "foreground" finds its temporal equivalent in "past," "present," and "future." The perspectival world marches to the drumbeat of linear time, and against that incessant drumbeat all our Prospero's castles rise and fall.

I know it may at first sound a bit like apples and oranges to compare the visual/perspectival and the temporal/perspectival. But if you consult your gut, I'll bet that you'll recognize their similarity; it's the same, familiar sense of constriction. Whether in visual or temporal mode, perspectival consciousness is always playing against an endpoint—finding itself somewhere on a line leading back to a point, knowing at some level that it's all a trompe l'oeil, yet enthralled by the ordering power conveyed by that trompe l'oeil. The set-up may be an artifice, but the fruits are hard to deny.

The pervasive subliminal pressure of that invisible line converging on a distant point explains some of the more hypnotic blind spots of the mental structure of consciousness. It's why it's so hard to hang onto the distinction between



“evolving” and “unfolding.” It’s why we naturally group things in threes— “beginning, middle, end,” “thesis, antithesis, synthesis.” In perspectival seeing things fall naturally into stages and sequences, and the relationship between objects tends to take on a hierarchical (Gebser calls it “pyramidal”) character as they are assigned their respective rank and value on the perspectival line. Time tends to become spatialized, with “earlier” morphing into “lower” and “later” morphing into “higher.” That is why, in all sincerity and with no intent to cause harm, many people under the sway of the mental structure of consciousness will state categorically that the mythic and magic stages of consciousness (since they appear “earlier” on the historical timeline) are “less evolved.” How could it be otherwise? “Structures of consciousness” collapse inevitably into “stages of consciousness;” they can’t escape the gravitational field. The artist’s prerogative to assign order and proportion becomes the moralist’s duty to impose value and judgment, and it all happens so fast that we don’t even see how we’ve been blindsided.

The real problem, of course, is that we forget that we are seeing through a periscope. What appears to our eyes to be “the real world” is in fact the world as projected through a powerful perspectival ruse that does indeed convey tremendous ordering and synthesizing power, but only within the limits of its governing conventions. Take away the vanishing point on the horizon, and the whole ruse collapses.

Perspectival thinking is by nature sectored thinking; the validity of the proportions and the illusion of three-dimensionality are legitimate only within the cone of perception it generates, and in order to create that cone in first place, certain things must be excluded a priori from the picture. In single point perspective you can only show two sides of the house; when you try to show three, you have exceeded the terms of the convention. If the sides don’t naturally fall along the same line of sight, you can’t force them together. It breaks the rules; your license expires.

Gebser stresses this point in a hard-hitting paragraph which Jeremy Johnson quotes in full. I believe it is worth quoting in full yet again since it speaks so



forcefully to what is so rarely named but can only be seen as “perspectival arrogance.”

“Perspectival vision and thought confine us within spatial limitations...The positive result is a concretion of man and space; the negative result is the restriction of man to a limited segment, where he perceives only one sector of reality. Like Petrarch, who separated landscape from land, man separates from the whole only that part which his view or thinking can encompass, and forgets those sectors that lie adjacent, beyond, or even behind...Man, himself a part of the world, endows his sector of awareness with primacy; but he is, of course, only able to see the partial view. The sector is given prominence over the circle; the part outweighs the whole. As the whole cannot be approached from a perspectival attitude to the world, we merely superimpose the character of wholeness onto the sector, the result being the familiar 'totality.'”

I will have more to say about the totalizing proclivities of perspectival seeing in my next post; I believe it is one of most insidious and virulent contributors to our contemporary cultural impasse. For now, PERSPECTIVAL HUMILITY (if you want to call it that) begins with accepting the givens we Flatlanders must abide within. Those of us who still mostly inhabit the mental structures of consciousness can no more wish ourselves (or proclaim) ourselves into aperspectival consciousness than we can flap our wings and fly. But we CAN wield this extraordinary tool responsibly and indeed courteously PROVIDED we remember that the license to arrange, synthesize, and assign rank and value is valid only within the sector of consciousness that has immediately given rise to it. Above all, it must never be used to colonize or tyrannize another structure of consciousness. To do so constitutes an unpardonable offense against the Whole.

Lesson 4: THE PERSPECTIVAL MAINSPRING

All structures of consciousness have their center of gravity, a core value or “moral mainspring” around which all else is ordered. Often unstated and even



unrecognized, it nonetheless establishes the yardstick by which value is measured and priorities are assigned within that structure.

In the mental structure of consciousness the skew is definitely toward THE INDIVIDUAL.

This orientation should come as no surprise; it is essentially built right into the hardwiring of this structure of perception itself. Perspectival consciousness comes into being part and parcel with the establishment of a perceiver, the artist who stands outside of his or her canvas and orchestrates the entire artifice from a perch slightly beyond it. It bursts upon the world stage joined at the hip with the capacity for self-reflective consciousness, the ability to stand outside of oneself and look back upon oneself and upon the world as if in third person. This slightly removed viewing platform is the ego, the crowning achievement of the mental structure of consciousness, and Western Civilization has ridden to glory on its back.

By “ego” I am not referring here to what religious folks are all too quick to demonize as “sinful self-will.” I am using the term in its phenomenological sense, to denote a fundamental structure of perception and the sense of selfhood emerging from that structure. For Jung (the first to really develop this usage), consciousness was unthinkable without an egoic structure to mediate it; in Jungian psychology “ego” does not equate to “sinful self-will” but to the fundamental vehicle of conscious agency. It is in this broader and more forgiving way that Gebser, too, approaches the meteoric rise of egoic selfhood within the mental structure of consciousness. Only when the ego becomes “hypertrophied”—overgrown and barricaded (as opposed to merely bounded) is there cause for concern.

We all know the strengths and weaknesses of the beast: on the upside, tremendous powers of abstraction, synthesis, and mastery. On the downside, objectification, alienation from the whole, and that chronic, background anxiety caused by having removed oneself from the world in order to perceive it. I have maintained that there is a chronic EXISTENTIAL DISTRUST as well, resting on those two shadow features of ALIENATION from the whole (I don’t believe that



we can directly experience belongingness in this structure of consciousness; it overpowers the operating system) and that pervasive sense of TRICKERY built right into the perspectival artifice (“What if it’s all just a ruse?”) Small wonder that the “hermeneutic of suspicion” and post-modern angst should reach their zenith in present times, as we slide toward what Gebser calls the “deficient” phase of the mental structure of consciousness, the twilight of its cultural hegemony.

But the individual self remains its crowning achievement, and as obedient children of this structure, we still walk mostly in its light. When this powerful new unfolding of the Ever-Present Origin first swept onto the stage of Western history with the dawn of the Renaissance (and note that “renaissance” is by no means a value-neutral term!) we saw—and celebrated—the sweeping away of the “superstition” and “feudalism” of the medieval Catholic Church before a rising tide of free-thinking, self-empowered human beings. Galileo, Leonardo da Vinci, Copernicus, Martin Luther: what’s not to love? The individual had asserted himself (still “himself” at that point, but the axe was already to the root). As we rolled on into the Enlightenment, more and more of the ancient collective institutions that had once defined the building blocks of ordered society in the mythic structure of consciousness—caste, gender, slavery—fell by the wayside before the compelling image of the emergent individual, fully endowed with “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In the two centuries since the founding of our American democracy these “inalienable rights” have been gradually (often grudgingly) more widely extended—to white free men, then to slaves, then to women, then to people of “non-traditional” (by the old rules) gender orientations, and now to people of color. None of these breakthroughs comes without considerable social upheaval, but the overall direction has been steady, based on our prevailing perspectival consensus that the individual is the fundamental building block of a well-ordered society, and that individual rights are synonymous with human rights and are to be protected at all costs. That is the “moral mainspring,” the fundamental priority as viewed through the perspectival structure of consciousness.

Not saying it’s not true....BUT...if we are serious about traveling down the path that Gebser opens before us...



It would seem to me that PERSPECTIVAL HUMILITY begins by acknowledging this leaning as an inbuilt bias of perspectival consciousness, not an eternal and unassailable truth, let alone the measure of our human “evolutionary progress.” We need to relax our stranglehold on the values themselves, at least long enough to begin to look directly at the filter we’ve been looking through.

And I’ll bet that not many of you are willing to go there just yet. But only by taking that risk, I wager, will we begin to make room for the inbreaking aperspectival structure, where the resolution we’ve all been yearning for actually lies in wait for us.

Lesson 5: THE DEFICIENT MENTAL STRUCTURE

Structures of consciousness have their own life cycles. When a new structure bursts definitively onto the stage of history, it is typically at its most vital and creative, filled with powerful constellating energy and psychic force. It will quickly establish itself as the new culturally dominant structure. When the structure enters its deficient mode (typically toward the end of its era of cultural hegemony), it tends to become stale and increasingly rigid, fixated around its own worse habits.

In Gebser’s analysis, the turbulent social upheavals that erupted full force in the early twentieth century and have continued more or less unbroken right into our own times can be attributed in large part to the phase of the cycle now playing out: the mental structure of consciousness in its deficient mode. The good news is that this turmoil is in fact a birth canal, and the contractions we are collectively anguishing through are indeed the birth pangs of the rising aperspectival structure making its presence powerfully known. The bad news is that labor is bloody hell.

When the mental structure becomes deficient, it displays two signature—seemingly contrary—tendencies: it TOTALIZES, then it SPLINTERS.



We started to explore Gebser's understanding of "totalizing" a couple of posts ago. What this means, essentially, is that the perspectival viewing platform is by definition a SECTORED reality; by its own governing convention, it can only let you see a part of the picture. When the mental structure enters deficient mode, this inherent limitation is forgotten (or overridden) and the partial view begins to mistake itself for the whole. Paradigms multiply, sometimes dizzyingly, along with the telltale siren call toward meta-synthesis: a "grand theory of everything" that engulfs all paradigms, all components, all "quadrants" in a single comprehensive overlay. The naming and articulating goes on compulsively and at breakneck speed as if, in some sort of magical reversion, we've allowed ourselves to believe that by correctly framing the situation, we have everything under control.

Of course, it's a bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic even as the dark waters reach up to engulf us. Because that's what the mental structure really is: simply a deck on the great ship of Being. The frenzied mental manipulation of reality remains at the mental plane, firmly imprisoned within the perspectival seeing that gave rise to it in the first place. What is needed, says Gebser, is not synthesis but SYNTAXIS: a whole new way of seeing, from a place far deeper within us.

As perspectival unease continues to build (remember "paradigm malaise" from Thomas Kuhn's iconic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions?*), we see an increasing proclivity to objectify, quantify, and commodify, and a sharp increase in categorical thinking and the use of pseudo-scientific predicative capacities applied across whole blocks of people. There is a growing willingness to sacrifice the person to the paradigm, disallowing for individual variations in favor of paradigm consistency. The temperature of moralism and judgmentalism rises steadily as the embattled mental structure collapses toward a "universal intolerance" (as Gebser bluntly names it.)

In one of his most piercing analyses, Jeremy Johnson comments perceptively on the underlying psychic anguish driving the increasingly intransigent cultural acting out:



“On a perspectival plane, the event horizon is the end point for the eye that perceives it. If the spatial self—the waking ego—in a material world is all that we are, then of course we are terrified by the thought of it coming to an end. ‘The deeper and farther we extend our view into space, the narrower is our sector of the visual pyramid,’ Gebser writes, speaking of a ‘universal intolerance’ beginning to manifest itself in the twentieth century. ‘He sees only a vanishing point lost in the misty distance...and he feels obliged to defend his point fanatically, lest he lose his world entirely.’” (Seeing Through the World, p. 55)

From here, the initially puzzling morphing of totalizing synthesis into splintering is not hard to follow. The perspectival world is already founded on the principle of segmentation, the deliberate cordoning off of a smaller subset of the whole in which the rules can be made to hold sway. Under stress, the same principle is simply extended more insistently: if you can’t bend the whole world to your point of view, simply create a smaller world! Hence the emergence of silos, identity politics, political correctness, and “the post-truth world” as under the banner of “co-exist!” the overwhelmed mental structure of consciousness abdicates its fundamental responsibility to make moral sense of the world. “The endgame of perspectival consciousness in its deficient phase is infinite fragmentation,” writes Jeremy Johnson—“and therefore the shattering of space itself.” (p. 54) That “space” is our formerly ordered and coherent universe.

Johnson rightly takes Ken Wilber to task for coining the phrase “aperspectival madness” to describe the postmodern condition “where all views are correct and no views are wrong.” For Gebser this phrase would be an oxymoron if not an outright insult, because the aperspectival is irreducibly about COHERENCE, not about madness. Whatever “Integral” may imply vis a vis a structure of consciousness (and we will venture into that terrain shortly), aperspectival does not—repeat, DOES NOT—equate to an intellectual laissez-faire in which a broad-minded (or indifferent) tolerance for other points of view equates to the attainment of an enlightened “nondual” state. Quite to the contrary, according to Jeremy, “...the so-called postmodern age in many respects is merely the perspectival age wrought to its outermost limit: the atomization of all



perspectives into their own world–spaces and the utter success of ratio to divide the world up, not into organic difference, but a shattered aggregate of points of view.” (54)

Been there, done that. With shattered hearts and perhaps authentic remorse of conscience, we must prepare to leave the battlefield behind and find our way, once again, toward that ever–present wellspring which even now is flowing powerfully beneath the wreckage as the world stage readies itself to receive the new unfolding. A blessed Thanksgiving, one and all!

Lesson 6: THE MYTHIC AND MAGIC STRUCTURES: "YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN..."

I know that a number of you, in growing awareness of the of the blind spots and shadow elements in the mental structure of consciousness, have been casting a fond glance toward indigenous cultures, which do seem to offer counterbalancing strengths in precisely the areas where the mental structure is weakest: a deeper connection to the natural world, a more organic sense of belonging, and a greater awareness of the evocative power of ritual and the numinous. Your intuition is fundamentally correct, for part of the tragic hubris of the mental structure is its disdain for structures “less evolved” than its own and its conviction that it has “transcended and included” all previous developmental stages, bearing uniquely on its own shoulders “the axis and the arrow of evolution.”

Still, one must proceed cautiously with this mythic turn. It has been attempted twice already during the past century, and both times it has arrived at a dead end.

The first attempt got underway between the two world wars and gave birth to the movement known as Traditionalism. Under the guiding inspiration of the brilliant French metaphysician Rene Guenon (1886–1951), it immediately attracted some of the brighter minds of the early twentieth century and has continued to exert a significant (though mostly subterranean) influence on the



intellectual current of our times. In addition to Guenon himself, some of the most prominent names associated with this movement include Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, Titus Burkhardt, Marco Pallis, and in a somewhat less “hardline” form Huston Smith. Thomas Merton was also attracted to many aspects of this teaching, and it is no longer a secret that he was being actively courted by a Traditionalist circle at the time of his death. Many of you in our own Wisdom circle will have met some of these teachings through my former colleague Lynn Bauman, a student of both Schuon and Nasr.

The Traditionalist tagline is perfectly encapsulated in the title of Mark Sedgwick’s groundbreaking study of this movement: “Against the Modern World.” To Guenon and his followers, the perspectival turn (as Gebser calls it, not Guenon himself) represented a disastrous mistake: a tragic spiritual profligacy and perversion of the true path of Wisdom. That ancient path still remains, guarded in diasporas of traditional cultures and religious lineages, but regaining the right path required a strict renunciation of modernism and a return to the thought styles, artistic genres, spiritual practices and in some cases even dietary habits of those surviving traditional cultures which had not succumbed to the siren call of modernity.

You will recognize a Traditionalist teaching when you hear one because it will inevitably begin with some variation of the theme, “We can all see that the modern world is going to hell in a hand basket,” then usually proceed to introduce the notion of the Kali Yuga, the famous “Dark Cycle” of Sanskrit provenance, which our own age is then claimed to manifestly fulfill. There is a great deal of emphasis on authentic lineage transmission (as opposed to humanly-concocted religions) and an explicit orientation toward the past. The journey back to truth swims upstream in the river of time until one finally arrives at the headwaters “in the beginning...”

The conceptual flaw in this stance, from a Gebserian standpoint, is that IT **FUNDAMENTALLY MISLOCATES ORIGIN**. “In the beginning” is not on a linear timeline. Origin is outside of linear time and “springs forth” (the literal meaning of the German word URSPRUNG) onto the world screen in the present, amid the



cultural and consciousness structures currently prevailing. It cannot be found in the attempt to recreate earlier conditions as we project them in our own minds (another perspectival trap). At very best, such a misconstrued effort can only land us in the “deficient” stage of the structure we are trying to replicate: for the magic structure, in sorcery; for the mythic structure in psychic solipsism. The road we have traveled on our collective human journey toward consciousness cannot be undone—nor was there a wrong turn. Even the anguish of the deficient mental structure at the end of its vital lifespan has not been for naught, for in conferring on consciousness a whole new “world” of consciousness (the perspectival), it has laid the necessary structural groundwork for the emergence of the next unfolding.

The second “mythic revival” is of more recent vintage, roughly contemporaneous (and for good reason) with what we popularly call “the self-realization movement.” Its headwaters lie primarily in C.G. Jung and his game-changing discovery of the close correlation between the mythical as outer cultural form and as inner archetype. Gebser was onto this as well: he recognized the mythical structure as intrinsically tied to the emergence into human consciousness of the notion of the soul. But he also recognized—only too clearly—that when dealing with a structure as inherently fluid as the mythical, one has to keep a firm grip on the “yang.” He never permitted his construction of the mythical structure of consciousness to stray too far from its concrete historical and cultural underpinnings. Once that tether is cut, the mythic structure of consciousness can flow all too easily into a privatized and significantly gentrified interior landscape, where its primary purpose is to furnish the language, symbols, images, for our personal soul-work.

That was the coup de grace delivered by Joseph Campbell in his iconic *THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES* which catapulted him to fame, launched *Parabola Magazine*, and catalyzed a lively revival of interest in traditional cultures, crafts, artistic genres, and rituals—albeit mostly among the intellectual elite, and this time with aesthetic rather than Traditionalist dogmatic concerns predominating. The mythical structure of consciousness reemerged as a fertile garden for cultivating “the rose within.” And thus it has mostly remained. In contemporary evolutionary models (such as Ken Wilber’s



and Thomas Keating's), it has now lost virtually all connection to historical time and place and become merely the name for a developmental stage in individual human evolution.

Perspectival nostalgia in mythic drag.

Just as Origin cannot be sought through a backward turn, Gebser insists, neither can it be sought through an inward turn. Yin and yang must be held in careful balance because it is on the playing field of our collective cultural journey—history in all messiness, violence, and shadow stuff—that every structure of consciousness has emerged into manifestation; and it is the very mass and weight of that full collective experience that creates the depth and staying power to call forth the new structure of consciousness. It cannot be born until it can be BORNE.

This time-tested cultural pattern is particularly true of the still-dawning Integral structure, which will add yet another dimension to the weight and heft of manifest reality and demand that we meet Origin there, in that new dimension we can as yet barely apprehend. In this dark and distinctly paschal season of Advent 2020, I swear I sometimes sense it drawing near, as if on angel wings, to see whether the human heart has yet grown deep enough, stable enough, and courageous enough to endure the weight of both the individual and collective suffering that is the necessary price conscious emergence.

Lesson 7: WHAT INTEGRAL IS NOT

Sometimes I wish we could all just declare a temporary moratorium on the term "Integral!!!" What Gebser intended when he chose that name for his emerging fifth structure of consciousness is challenging enough to wrap one's mind around in the first place. But when his already elusive notion gets repackaged and progressively distorted in a series of popular contemporary misinterpretations, all grandly proclaiming themselves to be "integral," then we have little choice but to begin by draining the swamp.



So okay, folks... here's what Gebser's Integral is NOT:

It's not about political or social inclusiveness. It does not equate to "tolerance," "broadmindedness," or affirmative action. (This is all still synthesis, solidly ensconced within the perspectival modus operandi)

It is not about "soul work," self-awareness as we typically understand it, or "integrating the shadow."

It is not "non-duality," "a higher state of consciousness," "self-realization," or "enlightenment." In that sense, it has nothing to do with spirituality whatsoever.

It is not the top tier of the evolutionary pyramid (what part of "perspectival" do you still not understand?)

It is not "living in the now." It does not negate the past and future, but radically re-perceives them.

It does not require the suppression of the mental structure of consciousness, simply the release from its hegemony.

It is not an "it" at all—neither a "state" nor a "stage" of development—but rather, a new integrating capacity that allows all other structures of consciousness to come into a dynamic, harmonious balance.

The integral wild goose chase that's so muddled much of contemporary spirituality got underway in earnest in the early 1980s with Ken Wilber's ambitious effort to "complete" Gebser's roadmap. In Gebser, there are five structures of consciousness, five only. In his groundbreaking 1981 work *Up from Eden*, Wilber, at the time a fervent Buddhist, added a "third tier" to Gebser's map consisting of attained states borrowed mostly from the Asian traditions and culminating in "Nondual." His nomenclature has substantially morphed over the years, but his staunch identification of the top rung on this evolutionary ladder with "the ever-present Nondual awareness" (Integral



Spirituality, 74) has held firm — this rung, in turn, accessed through a basically Buddhist transformational technology grounded in the Four Noble truths, the renunciation of suffering, the dissolution of the mirage of ego, and the attainment of a permanent “Nondual” enlightenment.

Apart from the word “Nondual” word itself—which is foreign to Gebser’s vocabulary—Wilber’s original description of “the ever-present awareness” is but a hair’s breadth away from Gebser’s “ever present origin.” But as Wilber’s original teaching got reified in the hands of some of his influential popularizing followers, this hair’s breadth widened to a river, and the “nondual” piece found a comfortable new berth in the Christian contemplative reawakening now firmly entwined with quasi-Buddhist platitudes of “letting go of the mind,” “living in the now,” and “everything belongs.” It’s all part of that amiable “Nondual lite” mélange that grew up in the 1990s (been there, done that!) and has so profoundly set its stamp on an original and much more subtle understanding of the Christian contemplative vision.

In any case, this “nouveau-Integral” map” is radically incompatible with Gebser’s subtle and rigorously Western mode of thinking. What he envisions as “integral” is by his own testimony “not an expansion of consciousness, but an intensification of consciousness.” And the quintessential expression of this intensification does not lie in the “laying down” of ego, the cancellation of particularity, or the collapse of past and future into an amorphous present, but in the Original Presence shining through the whole intricate artifice like light pouring through a stained glass window. To be sure, Gebser has little use for the “hypertrophied ego,” but the Integral selfhood he envisions is still very much a personal selfhood—only one operating at an immensely higher candlepower.

Gebser betrays his Western roots as well in his adamant insistence that the emergence of EVERY new structure of consciousness comes at the price of personal suffering. “Pain is the ground of motion,” Jacob Boehme once famously quipped, and Gebser proves himself to be a loyal son of this cardinal Western orientation point. True, there is “stupid suffering”—useless and unconscious—which does little more than add to the cosmic pain body. But suffering in and of



itself is the precondition for all evolutionary emergence, and the enlightened spiritual stance is not to eliminate it, but to increase one's capacity to bear it consciously. Gebser speaks to this with poignant brevity when he writes on page 71: "The demand of consciousness emergence [is] to be able to endure suffering."

In one of his most revealing passages in *The Ever Present Origin* he further expands (90): "The identical deed that prompts Christ to accept suffering via his conscious ego leads, in Buddhism, to the negation of suffering and to the dissolution of the ego, which, when transformed, returns to the original state of immaterial Nirvana. In Buddhism the suspension of sorrow and the Ego is held in esteem; and this suspension of sorrow and suffering is realized by turning away from the world. In Christianity, the goal is to accept the ego, and the acceptance of sorrow and suffering is to be achieved by loving the world. Thus, the perilous and difficult path along which the West must proceed is here prefigured." Without wanting to adjudicate in this perennial metaphysical dispute, I would say at very least that it defines and frames Gebser's quintessentially Western approach to the question of conscious integration.

Whatever else Integral is for Gebser, it is far more closely mirrored in Teilhard's "paroxysm of harmonized complexity" (*The Human Phenomenon*, p. 186) than in any attempt to corral it within a monadic Oneness, whether temporally ("the eternal present"), spatially (the top rung on the evolutionary ladder) or metaphysically (Nonduality). Neither the gestalt nor the complexity of Gebser's thinking allow for its easy recapturing in popularized Westernized Asian models, and all contemporary approaches stepping off from this starting point will likely wind up marching around in circles.

Lesson 8: INTEGRAL AS THEOTOKOS: A WESTERN TAKE ON ORIGIN

Gebser names his book *The Ever Present Origin*, and Origin is indeed the center point around which everything else in his in his magisterial teaching revolves. But his vision of Origin is unique, to say the least, and highly elusive to our habitual perspectival modes of thinking. It comes closer to my own notion of



“chiastic epicenter” as I unpack it in Eye of the Heart than to its usual mental/rational placement as the beginning point on a horizontal timeline (or even as what lies just “behind” that beginning point.)

The first and most important thing to keep in mind about Origin—according-to-Jean-Gebser is that it does NOT mean “in the beginning.” In Gebser’s native German the word for origin is Ursprung, which literally means “sprung forth.” The concept is verb-based, not noun-based; it designates not a primordial state, but a primordial action. It is not “cosmic inflation” (the current scientific buzzword for the cosmic “steady state” apart from local irruptions into physical manifestation), the zero point field, or “ground luminosity.” These are all terms with which it would otherwise have strong resonance, but The feeling tone is off. As Raimon Panikkar puts it in Christophany (p. 116): “I am one with the source insofar as I, too, act like a source, by making all I have received flow again.” Source is as source does.

Heads up, however: It is not even “The Big Bang,” because it did not happen just once, in a single cataclysmic cosmic event. The essence of Gebser’s notion of Origin is not even that it has sprung forth but that it springs forth—into time, over and over again and now at an accelerating pace announcing the dawn of a new, fourth, age in human civilization. Origin is not to be found at the headwaters of “the river of time” but at every point along its course. Again and again it irrupts into time, breaks into that illusion of flowing linearity with its direct immediacy and newness. It flows to us not from the past, but from “the future” (i.e., that which is not yet manifest in time), jostling everything out of its linear entropy into a new intensification of the present moment.

It is terribly important to get this fundamental orientation right; otherwise you will be rowing backwards. You cannot find Origin by emulating earlier spiritual cultures (the mistake made by Traditionalism). Nor can you find it by flinging your heart wide open to “the future” understood as the next stop on the temporal subway line (the mistake made by Teilhard in his goofier moments and by many of the neo-Teilhardians following in his footsteps). If it is to be found anywhere, it is to be found HERE AND NOW, standing right in the crosshairs of “the intersection of the timeless with time.”



It is true that this universally emerging fifth structure of consciousness (which Gebser names the Integral) bears the stigmata of Origin in a particularly intense way— perhaps more so than any of the previous structures. But this is not because it is “higher” on an evolutionary hierarchy of consciousness, but because it is deeper and sturdier in its capaciousness. A new dimension has awakened in the field of conscious perceptivity: no longer the illusion of depth created by that perspectival sleight-of-hand, but an authentic “fourth dimension” of perspectivity that allows one to see “in, through, and around” all the surfaces of this world, one’s true “perspectival horizon point” now located squarely in the bullseye of what Gebser calls originary presence. Finally one moves off of the canvas, out of flatland, into a truly global capacity to “hold all things in unity” without muddying their colors or their distinctive voices. It is not so much a new structure of consciousness, as a new candlepower of consciousness, a light through which—as in the beloved Logion 77 in the Gospel of Thomas— all can now finally be seen:

I am the light shining in all things

I am the sum of everything,

For from me everything has come and toward me everything unfolds.

Split a piece of wood and there I am.

Pick up a stone and you will find me there.

The attained Integral structure of consciousness is a recapitulation and intensification of all other structures, which allows Origin to be approached— touched and even embraced—“without turning into a grease spot,” as Thomas Keating once famously said.

I am introducing Thomas Keating's name deliberately here because toward the end of his long life— and particularly in his extraordinary final poetic sequence, *The Secret Embrace*— this contemporary Christian mystic was hot on the trail of Origin and gives us probably the best and most Gebserian-resonant evocation



of it in words as simple and universal as Gebser's are technical and complex. In one of his final essays Thomas speaks directly about what living out of that Originary epicenter actually feels like:

“The presence of God should become a kind of fourth dimension to all of life. Our three-dimensional world is not the real world because the most important dimension is missing: namely, that from which everything that exists is emerging and returning in each microcosmic moment of time.” (quoted in *When Spirit Leaps: Navigating the Process of Spiritual Awakening*, by Bonnie L. Greenwell).

Keating refers to this junction point between infinite transcendence and creative immanence as “the Secret Embrace.” To live here is to live in the direct seeing into (a.k.a., “seeing through”) the dance between formlessness and form out of which everything pours forth into existence, tumbling downstream into form. If this is not a dead ringer for Gebser's “Origin,” it's about as close as I think we Christian mystics can get, even down to the correct Gebserian placement of the term “fourth dimension.” It is being able to “ware” consciously the dance of time and timelessness right at the heart-of-the arising itself, the ever present springing forth of the new into the old. The capacity of consciousness that can allow you to do that is also the capacity that can hold the complementary perspectives of each of the structures not on a flattened linear map, but in the pure spherical wonder of the divine delight in Becoming.

It's just here that my emphasis in the last email on the “Western” underpinnings of Gebserian thought will hold us in good stead. The goal here is not to dissolve the Ursprung in a final realization of the illusory nature of all form and time, but rather to stand in it with all the strength of one's being and integrated ego strength (the true fruit of the mental structure of consciousness), so that one can shape and give “voice” to the mysterious yearning of the divine heart to take form, which would otherwise overwhelm with its sheer life force any finite womb in which it yearned to gestate. Its supreme Western symbol is the Theotokos, the radiant fullness of divinity taking form and shelter in the sturdy presence of a tempered and capacious



human vessel. This is Integral consciousness from an Western perspective, and I believe it is where Gebser's own deepest instincts are infallibly leading him.

Lesson 9: THE BATON HAS BEEN PASSED. NOW CAN WE NOW RUN WITH IT?

No, dear friends, I didn't send you off on a wild goose chase to immerse yourself in 450 pages of some of the most dense and intellectually challenging prose ever crafted on this planet. That was not my intention when I launched this deep dive into *The Ever Present Origin* late last fall. My concern was—and remains—entirely practical: to help us find our way to a broader vision that might allow us to see more clearly where our nation—and more broadly, evolutionary consciousness itself—seems to have gotten hung up, and to help set things back on course.

Gebser's brilliant unpacking of the five structures of consciousness, together with his helpful delineation of how each structure moves from "efficient" to "deficient" expressions, help us to see more objectively where we're pinned and to chart a course of practical action in some perhaps unexpected directions.

The following post is a first effort in that direction, offered in deep gratitude for the profound work that those of you in the Wisdom community—joined by praying, caring, sincere people all over the planet—have contributed to pulling things back from the brink of madness. We now have a little running room, thanks be to God, and we need to use it well.

From a Gebserian analysis, it seems clear to me that the Donald Trump phenomenon represents an upwelling (I'd almost be inclined to say a "projectile vomiting") of the deficient magic and mythical structures of consciousness. Because these have been so badly repressed in the prevailing mental structure of consciousness which calls the cultural shots (itself well into the final throes of its deficient stage, locked in compulsive measuring, labeling, and splitting patterns), it is virtually inevitable that these repressed structures, which are needed for overall balance and the structural strength to actually HANDLE the



impending arrival of the Integral structure of consciousness, will instead express themselves in malignant ways.

Gebser makes clear that the cliché “transcend and include” is a mistake. The “earlier” structures do not simply roll over and fold into the onward and upward movement of consciousness. They must each speak with their own voices, in a bell rack sturdy enough to let them all resound.

You see it in the pictures, catch it in the sound clips: the animal-magnetism that Trump still exerts in his sheer testosteronized bravado and his battle cries “Make America Great again! “No more bullshit!” Pure magical vital energy: black magic, for sure, but the Shiva energy flowing through it is intoxicating when you’ve lived too long in fifty shades of grey. Look at the bare-chested Jake Angeli (a.k.a. “QAnon shaman”) carrying the flag on a spear at the head of the Capitol assault charge. Look at QAnon itself: a desperate, epic attempt to reconnect with mythical/Armageddon consciousness, a mythology large enough to die for. This is a violent upsurge of magical-mythical run amok, seeking any outlet for its pent-up fury, like the flood-cresting Mississippi overflowing its banks.

Seventy years ago when Gebser wrote EPO, he was staring at exactly the same phenomenon in the ashes of Hitler and the Third Reich. One wonders, sadly, has so little changed? I think something HAS changed, and the extent and stability of this change is starting to unfold. Thanks be to God, we did not collectively go over the waterfall. SOME third force has begun to accumulate in our collective national psyche. And that, I dare to believe, is the real fruit that has been slowly accruing in one particular stream during these seventy years: the growing stabilizing force and tempering presence of the contemplative awakening.

It is clear to me, however—again from a Gebserian point of view— that we have still not really addressed the SOURCE of the problem. The evolutionary current bearing the full unveiling of the next structure of consciousness has gotten hung up because we are not yet addressing the real cause of the impasse, which in my opinion is our failure to till the ground for this new unfolding by



stabilizing and integrating these earlier structures. NOT ONLY PRIVATELY, as “interior work,” but CULTURALLY, as legitimate and cherished expressions of the road we have collectively come, the ground we have collectively tilled.

In a way, the present integral evolutionary movement (whether in straight-up Gebserian or Wilber version) has inadvertently made the situation worse by exacerbating the disjunction between the structures of consciousness. Many of the folks I know who perhaps a little too glibly announce themselves as “Integral thinkers” are primarily concerned with this coming New: either as a pathway of personal self-realization (I talked about this a couple of posts ago), or in dazzling meta-visions of a new utopian era, decades if not centuries beyond what our planet can yet bear. Whatever the language, the vibration emerging from this quarter is still rousingly “Drop off the booster rocket, and let’s put the new ship in orbit.”

Sorry. We get there with the booster rocket still intact, or we don’t get there at all.

So I want to begin here from a different starting point. While the inner work of us Wisdom and contemplative/evolutionary folks may be to tend our own conscious emergence, I believe that the cultural work we must undertake together is to help REPAIR and HEAL the traditional structures we’ve inhabited so that they can become healthy vessels of the repressed mythical and magical (and for that matter, mental!) structures. My wager is that when this imbalance is corrected, the full emergence of the Integral (so clearly already waiting in the wings) will be its own unstoppable force. We don’t need to race on up to the front of the train in order to reach the station first; we have to make sure that the passengers in all the train cars are well tended and still hooked up as the station in fact rushes to meet the train.

Practically, that might look like a step backwards: back to things we thought we’d outgrown. Patriotism. A personal God. Prayer. Mystery. A second look at the Roman Catholic Church. I am prepared for the hot coals about to rain down upon my head. But my aim idea here is not a nostalgic recreation of bygone times, but a more intense inquiry into their enduring value, following Gebser’s



phenomenological approach. What is a healthy expression of the magical in our own era? What is a healthy expression of the mythical? The mental? I believe if we can begin to think in these terms, and to listen to the values being expressed in each of these structures rather than reacting blindly to the presenting agendas, we may be able to find our way to contemporary, healthy and integrated expressions of these structures, harmonized in the light of the already dawning Integral. And that will be our own mature contribution as a contemplative movement now come of age: the contribution of an authentic third force that just might bust up the logjam and set the river of conscious evolution free and flowing once again.

Lesson 10: THE HORSE, THE CARRIAGE, AND THE DRIVER: A GURDJIEFFIAN SLANT ON A GEBSERIAN CONUNDRUM

In my last post I invited us all to begin thinking more specifically in terms of the gifts and strengths contributed to the whole by the magic and mythic structures of consciousness. By now we've been working in Gebser long enough to see how that popular Wilber cliché, "transcend and include," in fact merely muddies the waters. The "more primitive" structures of consciousness are not simply folded into the new structure like eggs in a cake batter. Rather, like rooms in a museum, they continue to stand in their own integrity, each with its own center of gravity and way of making connections. They are all needed to create that "paroxysm of harmonized complexity" through which the Integral light can shine.

This is true on both the micro-and macro-level. It is true in the healing of our own souls, and it is even more true in the healing of our culture. For Gebser, the individual and cultural expressions of evolutionary consciousness are joined at the hip. The outer world is not simply a gateway or metaphor for our inner journey. If anything, the flow is in the opposite direction. Conscious evolution is measured in Gebserian scale by the great movements sweeping across the face of cultural history. What we do here and now, at this crucial turning point, with the cultural institutions entrusted to our stewardship is of paramount importance to how the next chapter of the story will unfold.



So what are the great gifts of these two “earlier” structures of consciousness? As I reflect on Gebser, Jeremy Johnson, and my own seven-decade trek across this terrain (the last three years perhaps more eye-opening than all the rest put together), here is my own short list:

From the magic:

1. Vital energy: a powerful, kinesthetic connection to the life force flowing through all things.
2. A shapeshifting capacity that allows the observer to easily change places with the observed and hence perceive all things from the inside (because “inside” and “outside” do not yet firmly exist in the much more fluid magical consciousness.) In this liminal zone of exchange, stones speak, trees give away their secrets freely, and the great earth spirits draw close to nurture and animate.
3. Because of the above, a belly-centered sense of belonging and interbeing; a kinesthetic numinosity which allows the world to be directly SENSED as holy, not “reflected upon” as holy.
4. A capacity to enter into that deep, non-dimensional “place where there’s no space or time” (to quote Leon Russell); to enter “mindlessness”—and there reconverge as nearly as possible in created form with that fetal archaic consciousness which is not only our personal but the primordial womb.

From the mythic:

1. “soul:” the headwaters of the river of self-reflective consciousness. The beginning of story.
2. A deep sense of nobility, heroism, and virtue.
3. The capacity for devotion, covenant, and love (the beginning of “God”; it is in mythic consciousness that Yahweh—“I am who I am”—first announces himself to the Israelite people.



4. The capacity to respond to a call from motives beyond mere security and survival: to harness the extraordinary creative strength and self-sacrificial capacities of soul.

5. A capacity to find one's rhythm and ground in the deeper, recurrent rhythms of the great polarities: the seasons, the play of light and dark, rise and fall of tides; opposites expressed not as oppositional, but as simply the fluctuations of a single sine wave.

I believe, by the way, that the mental has great gifts as well, though not the ones we usually look to it for. The speed of processing, calculating, positing, structuring, imagining, world-building speak for themselves. But my own take, strangely, is that what the mental contributes is BACKBONE. Gurdjieff would call it "holly the denying," second force. Evolution goes "chordate" with the emergence of the mental structure; there is something there which can and does push back. By the very force of our separated consciousness, we can hold our own against the sheer siren call of the Mystery hurtling toward us, singing us back into oneness. We have become, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, wounded but worthy opponents. And this is a painful but absolutely necessary wounding if the next structure of consciousness is to appear, because diaphaneity is impossible if it instantly incinerates the structure it is shining through.

From Gurdjieff comes another interesting insight. You can say, roughly, that the magic structure corresponds to the moving center (notice how often I used the word "kinesthetic?"), the mythic to the emotional center, and the mental to the intellectual center. And if you permit that analogy, the next step brings an even more interesting insight. Only when the three lower centers are balanced and in communication, Gurdjieff teaches, is it possible for the New Arising (a.k.a., "Conscious Man") to emerge on this prepared foundation. The bread-and-butter work of conscious transformation in the Gurdjieffian system lies in the careful tending and strengthening of the three lower centers (paying particular care to centers that are weak or neglected in oneself) so that a balanced, prepared undercarriage is in readiness. Then and then only will the higher stage be able to emerge.



Now it seems to me that this is a very good clue as to where our attention needs to be, not only personally but even more, culturally. We need to tend, balance and consciously connect those three lower structures we have been entrusted with: the magic, mythic, and mental.

Gurdjieff often conveyed this teaching in the form of a metaphor about a horse (emotional center), carriage (moving center), driver (intellectual center) and owner (“Real I, or conscious human being.”) At the present moment, he said, the carriage is disrepair, the horse’s reins have vanished, the driver is at the pub, and the owner is nowhere to be seen.

It’s not a long stretch to apply this to our own North American cultural landscape, January 31, 2021. The magic structure is missing its brakes; the mythic structure, having cut the cord with the mental, has wandered off into the poppy fields; the driver is at the pub of choice, gulping down the home brew in fiercely loyal draughts; and the Owner—the emergent Integral— is huddling in a corner, frantically texting Uber rather than risking his life to such a contraption. We can and must do better.

I ask us all: how do we begin to help restore the carriage and horse: the sturdy —albeit perhaps “antiquated” magical and mythical institutions of our culture so dismissively cast aside, even in our own lifetime, by a street-smart driver who’s sure she knows what is best? What are these structures, anyway? Where do we locate them? If the values they represent (as per my list above) are crucial to the emergence of the Integral—and even in the event that they can be gently disentangled from the cultural institutions that have borne them for so long and revived in other ways, by no means a foregone conclusion—how do we find the heart and the forgiveness for this work? How do we sober up from our smug dismissiveness, pick up the currying brush, and start again with the work that must be done, for the sake of the whole, for the sake of the future?



Lesson 11: THE FACES OF TIME

Whatever you may take Gebser's Integral structure of consciousness to be, its most striking characteristic is that it entails a radically different approach to time. Time presents in a strikingly different way in Integral. Gebser rightly describes it as a "fourth dimension," and the capacity to grasp what he is laying before us here is frustratingly commensurate with our own attained capacity to begin to think, perceive, and connect the dots according to the conventions of this new language of temporicity.

For most well-educated Westerners, this will be the toughest nut to crack in the journey to the heart of Ever Present Origin. We are used to thinking of time as a duration, metronomically flowing from the past to the future. Even though we know theoretically that Einstein totally up-ended that illusion in his theory of relativity, in the practical, commonsense world we mostly inhabit time still seems to flow steadily and to present itself as an objective backdrop against which we play out our lives, order our datebooks, and construct the narrative of ourselves. It conveys a reassuring sense of continuity, and its functional indispensability in maintaining the fabric of a well-ordered society is so obvious that it's all too easy to look the other way and make Einstein the exception rather than the rule.

Time-as-duration is the foundational convention of perspectival consciousness; it's the invisible electric fence that holds all things within its limits.

To escape from this habituated mode of thinking into a new and wider field of consciousness is frustratingly difficult, because ultimately it's not a matter of will, sincerity, or even merit; it's a new developmental capacity that unfolds within an individual (and a rising cultural age) according to its own inscrutable "time"table. An infant will walk when she's ready, and as most parents eventually learn, you can't push the river. Trying to describe four-dimensional time to those (most all of us) who have not yet developmentally accessed it is like trying to describe three-dimensionality to the plane-dwellers of Flatland. We don't yet have the capacity to grasp it.



That's why I admit to cringing and shying away whenever I hear the term "Integral" being bandied about. I know I am about to encounter a terrain replete with pretentious-sounding neologisms and hyped scenarios of a glorious future. Gebser himself succumbs a bit to this temptation, allowing us to tarry too long in the illusion that a new vocabulary alone ("synareisis," "diaphaneity," "waring," etc.) is going to get us to the truth of the experience. I can almost hear e.e. cummings clucking his tongue at these "great words, writhing overmuch, stand[ing] helpless before the spirit at bay." The poets get it. They always get it. Nothing is fully realized ("concretized" in Gebser's term) until it can be expressed simply, in words already in everyday cultural use. Fortunately poets are well represented in *The Ever Present Origin*, and it is through Rilke and T.S. Eliot that one really begins to taste the extraordinary banquet Gebser is laying before us.

In the newly emerging Integral structure (again, arriving on its own developmental schedule), time will function in a different way: no longer as a duration, but as an intensification, revealing a whole new depth and dimensionality to what was previously perceived merely as a flat surface. Within this additional depth and coherence, *Origin* can finally present itself as what it truly has been all along—immediate, originary presence—not because "God finally decides to "show up," but because our vehicle of perception has matured enough to "bear the beams of love" without being fried alive. T.S. Eliot speaks of this movingly when he writes in his *Four Quartets*:

Old men ought to be explorers. Here and there does not matter.

We must be still and still moving into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion..."

In my own book *Eye of the Heart*, I describe as one of the chief characteristics of imaginal perception that time no longer functions as a duration but as a volume. Cut free from the perspectival metronome, it expands and contracts to fill the "amount" of space needed to accomplish its intentions. The heart-fidelity of a lifetime can be compressed into a single glance exchanged across a banquet table, as I try to illustrate using the iconic movie *Babette's Feast*. That



film is really a deep dive direct into the living heart of Integral temporicity, and its portrayal of the intense, all-suffusing presence of love consummated in a nanosecond of durational time gives you some sense of what this “originary presence” is really all about once it gets out of the head. I have not yet attempted a systematic correlation between Imaginal causality and the Integral structure of consciousness (I wrote *Eye of the Heart* well before my full-on encounter with Gebser), but the resonances are definitely intriguing.

For me the most useful starting point for beginning to get a sense of this new mode of temporicity comes in a single brief comment (EPO, p. 285) where Gebser lists several presentational formats of time:

“as clock time, natural time, cosmic or sidereal time, biological duration, rhythm, meter; as mutation, duration, relativity; as vital dynamics, psychic energy [‘soul’ and ‘the unconscious’], and as mental dividing.”

I invite you to stay with that list for a while; it’s a fabulous starting point for learning to concretize time in a different way. See if you can sense your way into each of these presenting modes. What does sidereal time feel like when you allow it to penetrate your being with its sheer massiveness, like a mountain range pressing down on you? How does “natural time” come alive in you when you throw away your watch and set your rhythms according to the movements of sun and stars? How are rhythm and meter expressions of time, and how are they different from each other? As you begin to “represent” these possibilities to yourself (as Gurdjieff would call it)—i.e., experience them in yourself through sensation rather than visualization—you begin to get some sense for the range and suppleness of time. The emerging new structure of consciousness becomes something already strangely familiar: no longer a star on the distant horizon, but a quickening aliveness stirring in the womb of your consciousness, whose essence you already intuitively know.

I would add to that list one more temporic: pulse. It’s like meter in a way, but held deeper in your body, in soundless sensation. There you become one with the fundamental dynamism itself, “the root of the root” of the arising. It’s the way deaf people learn to become fabulous drummers.



I would have to say as well that this is the lesson I carry the most deeply in my being from my madcap odyssey with my cruising buddy, Johnny the Greek, a couple of seasons ago. I was a Western perspectival poster child; he lived mostly in the magic structure. I heard meter, he heard pulse. He taught me how to slow-dance to a jig by attuning to the pulse instead of just bouncing up and down to the top rhythm. At sea, when the wind was screaming and all hell was breaking loose in a 60-knot gale, he simply tuned out the bouncing surface rhythm and hunkered down in the deep, steady pulse of the sea. He sailed on through the storms, unflappable, simply attending to what needed to be attended to in its proper temporality, his sea-anchor planted in the root spaciousness. It's a lesson I will cherish all my life; I believe the Sufi whirling dervishes have discovered the same truth. It is not even the "still point in the turning world." It is the wellspring of the turning.

Lesson 12: FURTHER TO TIME

There are two other things you should know about Gebser's "aperspectival" time: it is non-exclusionary, and it is purposive.

Linear or perspectival time, the time we're used to, is exclusionary. Its linear, unidirectional flow provides sequencing and causality. Things that happen earlier cause things that happen later, not the other way around. To choose to do one thing often means choosing NOT to do something else. If you decide to become a monk, you can't marry the girl of your dreams. If you're an artist painting a full-on portrait of somebody's face, you can't simultaneously show their back. As the medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* laments, "God never gives us two moments at once."

It is not so in aperspectival time. Here everything that is qualitatively in a moment can and does display simultaneously, as time "irrupts" into the present from a greater coherence beyond it, where seeming opposites or dissonances are harmonized in a more capacious whole. This is the "intensification" that Gebser speaks of. All our possible "courses over history" which in perspectival time can only be lived partially and sequentially, are instantly available in any



moment of direct encounter with the “originary” whole. They simply shape-shift from quantitative to qualitative and present themselves as a “timeless” direct encounter with the purposive epicenter from which our lives arise and around which they in fact orbit like planets around a sun.

While his notion admittedly boggles the mind, the heart seems to get it. This is exactly what General Löwenhielm was talking about in his extraordinary love-toast to his beloved across the banquet table that furnishes the moving climax in the movie *Babette’s Feast*:

"Man in his weakness and shortsightedness believes that he must make choices in life. He trembles at the risk he takes. We do know fear. But no, our choice is of no importance. There comes a time when our eyes are opened, and we come to realize that that mercy is infinite. We need only await. It with confidence and receive it with gratitude. Mercy imposes no conditions.

And lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us. And everything rejected has also been granted. Yes, we get back even what we rejected. For mercy and truth are met together. Justice and peace have embraced."

Pondering this speech in my own book *Mystical Hope* back in 2000 I wrote:

"If only we could understand this more deeply. If only we could see and trust that all our ways of getting there—our courses over time—our good deeds, our evil deeds, our regrets, our compulsive choosings and the fallout from these choosings our things done and paths never actualized—are quietly held in an exquisite fullness that simply poises in itself, then pours itself out in a single glance of the heart. If we could glimpse that even for an instant, then perhaps we would be able to sense the immensity of love that seeks to meet us at the crossroads of the Now, when we yield ourselves into it."

That passage was written more than twenty years before I ever bumped into Gebser’s notion of Originary Presence. But it’s still been my primary experiential access route to what I construe Gebser to be hinting at in his description of Origin: not as the linear starting point but as the causal epicenter



from which time irrupts into the stale procession of linearity and bedazzles it with wholeness and a felt-sense coherence. We usually interpret these brief inrushes of that other intensity as merely mystical or “peak” experiences, but the long arc of evolution suggests that they can and will become a steady state of being once our consciousness, moral compass, and nervous system have all matured to a degree that we can stand living steadily at that degree of direct causal intensity. That is Integral Emergence in a nutshell.

Meanwhile, in this new aperspectival configuration, time has a more fluid, shapeshifting quality, serving more frequently as the vehicle of “presentation” (bringing all things into the present moment) than as the docent of linearity. Time flows both forwards and backwards out of that causal epicenter as we learn that events theoretically in the “future” (i.e., not yet downloaded onto the horizontal timeline) can and do physically impact events in the “past.” My teacher Rafe always told me that he worked every day to liberate his parents, both long dead, from the cumulative anguish of their lives. Higher consciousness alters the flow of time— by exposing the illusion of “flow!”

Meanwhile, it slips around behind the “front” of that artist's portrait and displays the back side as well. This is what Gebser means by the “concretization” of time and why he makes so much of some of Picasso’s expressionist paintings which display mutually exclusive perspectives at the same time. Perspective be damned! If the front and back sides of something do in fact simultaneously exist, then they can be simultaneously portrayed. Period. The “time” it would have taken to walk around to the back side and paint it from its “proper” perspective is instead recaptured in the simultaneity itself. Time is now functioning not as perspectival distancing but as aperspectival convergence.

Another way of saying this would be that time is no longer passive but active, no longer a backdrop but an additive force. In that sense, it would be fair to call it purposive—which is actually what our brilliantly precocious author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* does in his fourth chapter when he describes time as a function of will, each moment arising as an “urge” or “spark” of the divine will. While normally these urges arise sequentially, the author teaches—“because



God does not wish to reverse the ordered course of his creation”—they can configure in other ways as well: most strikingly as a stirring or intensification of desire—“and it is wonderful to count the number of stirrings that may appear within one hour in a soul that is disposed to this work,” he marvels.

Aperspectival time thus demonstrates interiority, consciousness, and spontaneity, those three characteristics which, according to Teilhard de Chardin (H. P. p.25) announce the definitive presence of conscious intelligence at work. It is no longer inert, mechanical; it is active, purposive, creative, unpredictable. For all of these reasons. It would not be inaccurate to say—again in Teilhardian terms— that it belongs to the realm of the personal. And while the importance of this final suggestion may be lost on those of you unfamiliar with Teilhardian thought, it may just hold the missing piece to why this long-awaited Integral Emergence has been so frustratingly slow in arriving.

Lesson 13: GO BEYOND THE MIND

When I say that the ability to access and sustain the Integral structure of consciousness is developmental, I mean just that: it is fundamentally a question of physiology, rather than of moral virtue or mystical yearning. We cannot think, pray, meditate, or conceptualize our way to it. It is fundamentally a matter of preparing the entire body to receive it. To embody it.

The Abkhazian-born Kebzeh teacher Murat Yagan once commented: “Spiritual practice is fundamentally about strengthening the nervous system.” I believe he is 100% correct here, and that the failure to recognize the full implications of his observation has been the largest single impediment to would-be-integralists trying to till the inner ground for this emergent new structure of consciousness. As in the classic case of the word “repentance” (metanoia in the original Greek, noia being “mind” and meta being “greater than” or “beyond”), what’s actually being asked for here is not to “think differently,” but to “go beyond the mind.”



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If you look at Gebser's description of Integral, by far the most common word he uses to describe it is “intensification”—specifically, “an intensification of Ordinary presence.” Intensification means the voltage gets turned up. And where do you suppose it gets turned up? In the body, of course: in our physical, incarnate, all-too-fragile skin and bones, increasingly invited to “bear the beams of love”—the heart of the heart of the inscrutable divine yearning to be known, to become transparent in finitude.

There is no chance whatsoever that this new mutation will NOT arrive. It presses toward us, both individually and culturally, with that proverbial “force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” But like a glacier, it advances and recedes—individually across the course of a lifetime, culturally across the course of even thousands of years—as the undercarriage is prepared, both individually and culturally, to manifest it, not simply dissolve in it.

The place where the Integral movement has repeatedly gotten thrown back on itself, I believe, is by the unchallenged assumption that the access route to this new structure of consciousness lies through the mind. This miscalculation, in turn, gets compounded in our all too automatic misidentification of the mind with the brain. We know better at one level, but we fall into that habit repeatedly. When a word like *nous*, for example (which technically designates an organ of higher spiritual knowing centered in the heart) gets translated as “the higher mind” or “higher intellect,” then we are delivered back straightway into the straits of confusion, and the wild goose chase begins once again. I cannot comment specifically on how this stands in the Asian traditions, but I do know that the Dalai Lama's prestigious Mind and Life Institute and its cutting-edge inquiries into neuro-meditation are still principally preoccupied with the neurology of the brain. While maverick think tanks like the HeartMath Institute have long been pushing for a more comprehensive neurophysiology of “mindfulness,” their science itself somewhat still lacks the rigor required for full standing in the academic research community.



Gebser himself fell prey to this habitual conflation of mind and brain. He looks for signs of the emergence in the intellectual culture of the time. He sees marvelous artistic innovations (primarily visual and musical.) He does not consult mysticism, dance, or religion. While at one point in EPO he actively entertains the idea that the ability to run the Integral program depends on an upgrade of the physiological operating system, he immediately confines his thinking to a further evolution of the brain and explores scientific data in this area only. It's a wonderful yet frustrating example of "so close, and yet...."

He touches this "so close and yet so far" note even more poignantly when he comes right up to the hem of as he briefly ponders Pascal's theology of "the logic of the heart" (EPO, p. 405). But at the last moment he averts his gaze and goes skittering off on another intellectual fox chase in the direction of Pascal's comments on "ennui" and "divertissement." Damn!!!! If only he had known....

But of course, a Western-trained, classically exoteric Christian of his era couldn't be expected to know. These things were simply not taught in the mainstream Church, neither Catholic nor Protestant. The tradition lay sequestered in cloistered monasteries, veiled in nuptial metaphors. Or it lay intentionally concealed within the esoteric tradition, veiled in pseudo-cultic formats of which Gebser was rightly wary.

But a bona fide, rigorous teaching on Prayer of the Heart does in fact exist both in mystical Christianity and mystical Islam (Sufism.) And beyond even this treasury of Western Mystical teachings on Prayer of the Heart, there is Gurdjieff's still more comprehensive teaching on a fully embodied ("three-centered") awareness, which, when fully awakened and stabilized in a person permits him or her to perceive and be in a manner curiously congruent with what Gebser seems to be calling for in his tantalizingly obscure descriptions of this imminent Integral mutation.

When Gebser completed *The Ever Present Origin* in 1950, these practices were for all intents and purposes unavailable; The Church's contemplative treasure house was still, as Thomas Keating wryly observed, "Christianity's best kept secret." Thankfully, that is no longer the case today. As the contemplative



awakening of the 1970s and 1980s brought these practices into the spiritual mainstream, and as the Enneagram of Personality movement “outed” Gurdjieff from his esoteric foxhole and brought renewed attention to his teaching, the ground was being slowly prepared to “put legs” on Gebser’s sublime vision and carry it from the head down into the heart—and the feet—and from there, out into the world.

It is time now, seven decades later, to begin to connect the dots.

Lesson 14: ENSTASY

In all honesty it must be stated that what little Gebser knew of Gurdjieff he spoke of most disparagingly. In his entire 562–page tome, his comments are confined to a single sweeping back–of–the hand aimed primarily at Gurdjieff’s chief interlocutor, P.D. Ouspensky:

“{Ouspensky’s] interpretation [of the fourth dimension]...is surely the most bizarre possible form of mythical–mental deficiency. It is further confused by his emphasis on “ecstasy,” and the author’s devotion to the magical attitude of his shaman–like teacher, George Gurdjieff, “master” of the “School of Fontainebleau.” (EPO, p. 351)

If only Gebser had looked further! While he indeed may be correct in his assessment of Ouspensky’s partial seduction by “ecstasy,” he fails to distinguish that this issue was in fact one of the chief breaking points between Gurdjieff himself and his celebrated pupil. Had Gebser encountered this “shaman–like teacher” first hand, he might well have recognized that, decidedly *au contraire*, it was Gurdjieff rejection of ecstasy that forges a solid common ground between these two G’s and leads me to the perhaps outrageous proposition I will shortly be setting forth: that the Gurdjieff teaching, particularly in its practical disciplines, offers the most compatible and effective overall methodology for “installing” the Integral structure of consciousness as one’s default operating system.



The term “ecstasy” comes from the Greek *ec-stasis*, “standing outside of oneself.” Its opposite is “ENSTASY,” a term I first encountered in Valentin Tomberg’s profound discussion of the subject in *Meditations on the Tarot* (pp. 309–311). It means centering in oneself: becoming fiercely, alertly coiled within one’s own “I Am” presence, such that one becomes a center of gravitation in one’s own right. (Incidentally, I believe that Teilhard is pointing toward this same quality when he speaks of centration.) Rather than seeking to transcend or outrun that core sense of personal selfhood in order to dissolve in the infinite, one instead hunkers down in that very self-center and within its finite lineaments encounters in concentrated form that same infinite plenitude of being. Rather than the drop dissolving in the ocean, the ocean fully instantiates in the drop.

What part of intensification do you not understand? This is the bush that burns but is not consumed. This the theotokos, an image I introduced a few posts ago as the icon par excellence of Gebserian enstasy: Originary Presence shining forth diaphanously from a finite womb.

What makes Gebser’s vision so uniquely compelling— and so quintessentially Western— is his insistence that the Integral structure of consciousness is by nature enstatic rather than ecstatic—and hence, that the way to get there is along a path that deepens intensification rather than simply dissolving boundaries. As he states unequivocally (EPO, 131): “Everything depends on an intensification, not an expansion or extension of consciousness.” And this, in turn, depends on the continued maturation of a conscious self-center (Gebser calls it a “conscious ego”) that can cognize, receive, and bear forth this luminous presence without being immolated by it.

In one of his most pointed discussions of this point he writes:

“The identical deed that prompts Christ to accept suffering via his conscious ego, leads, in Buddhism, to the negation of suffering and the dissolution of the ego, which, transformed, returns to the original state of immaterial Nirvana. In Buddhism, the suspension of sorrow and suffering is to be achieved by turning away from the world. For Christianity the goal is to accept the ego, and the



acceptance of sorrow and suffering is to be achieved by loving the world. Thus, the perilous and difficult path which the West must follow is here prefigured.....” (EPO, p. 90)

And in perhaps the boldest comment in his book, slipped in nearly undetected on page 138, he writes:

“It is the originary presence that has itself attained consciousness because one of its bearers, man, has undergone the spatio-temporally conditioned unfolding of consciousness...”.

!!!!!!

If truth be told, however, it may be an oversimplification to divide the field so tidily between East and West. There is ecstasy enough to go around in the West as well: plenty of siren calls to lay down the burden of conscious selfhood and dissolve into the infinite, often cloaked in the lofty language of “surrender” and “not my will but thine be done, O Lord.” Teilhard struggled against that siren call all his life. And I confess that I still ride the edge of it often in Centering Prayer, where it takes an intentional exercise of presence not to simply float off into the infinite. It is so much easier, more intoxicating, to “lose oneself”—particularly if this “self” has already been straw-manned as “sinful self-will” and its surrender equated with the threshold of sanctity.

And yes, I admit it’s sometimes a burden—even an imposition—to shift gears into the Gurdjieff practices, where all escape routes are cut off by the implacable demand for continuously renewed presence. Gurdjieff’s “contemplation-like” exercises are hard work, particularly compared to the gentle relaxation of contemplative prayer or charismatic devotion, and the burden of my conscious selfhood often weighs heavily on me, like a snail shell I am somehow obliged to carry always with me on my back. But that’s Gurdjieff for you: it’s enstasy all the way. It’s his signature energy, the most striking hallmark of his Fourth Way path.



This enstatic center of gravity in the Gurdjieff teaching is perhaps best captured in a celebrated exchange between Gurdjieff and his student Olgivanna Lloyd-Wright. When Olgivanna told him that she had a feeling of going out of herself when she gazed at the majestic mountains, Gurdjieff said to her words to the effect of: "Never allow that. Always maintain yourself." The emphasis throughout the Work—in the exercises, the movements, the teaching, the practical work, the overall rhythm of the day—is to strengthen a capacity known as “doubled” (or “divided” attention), grounded in a fully embodied centrifugal presence, that will allow one to be simultaneously present to multiple demands unfolding in a single instance of “now.”

In other words, The Gurdjieff Work is for all intents and purposes boot camp for that rigorous intensification of presence that is both prerequisite and first fruit of the emerging Integral structure of consciousness. It delivers the practical training package that gradually deepens the capacity to stay put and deliver the goods in the face of the extraordinary invitation that Gebser lays before us.

Ecstasy is the metaphysical tie-rod that holds these “two G’s” together, and why I believe the fit is actually better than with many of the excellent embodiment practices that several of you have brought forward, principally from the Asian traditions, in response to my earlier post. It is the common—and yes, perhaps intrinsically Western— understanding of the aim, of finitude itself, of the holy necessity of constraint, that gives these two superficially incongruous teachings a deep and dynamic resonance: a path one can actually begin to walk... toward a destination one can actually begin to grasp.

Lesson 15: THREE-CENTERED AWARENESS

After a long hiatus, I am finally back on my task of exploring the surprisingly fruitful interconnections between the work of Jean Gebser and G.I. Gurdjieff. While neither man officially acknowledged the other’s teaching (nor in the case of Gurdjieff, had likely even heard of it!), their respective takes on the conscious evolution of humanity are more in sync than you might initially suspect, and the rich Gurdjieffian repertory of consciousness-transforming practices offers itself



as a powerful and by-and-large overlooked resource for “putting legs” on Gebser’s intuitively brilliant but highly cerebralized vision of evolutionary emergence.

Today’s topic, three-centered awareness, is a good starting point.

According to Gebser, one of the chief hallmarks of the rising Integral structure of consciousness is that it will feature a whole new method of verition, as he calls it—i.e., of verifying to ourselves what we know. This system will be totally unlike the weary dialectics of the mental structure of consciousness and will feature not only a new depth of consciousness (Gebser calls it a “fourth dimension”), but also a more energized and in fact transmissory presence. It will reveal itself, as Gebser repeatedly emphasizes, as “not an expansion but an intensification of consciousness.”

But alas, trying to describe a fourth dimension to those as yet accustomed to thinking only in three is roughly the same impasse (but one dimension down) so brilliantly exposed by Edwin Abbot in his classic sci-fi allegory *Flatland*, where a pilgrim returning from the world of solid geometry tries in vain to explain this new “third” dimension to his fellow plane-dwellers. You simply can’t visualize a dimension that has not yet been activated in you. And so it is predictably at this point that Gebser becomes his most frustratingly cerebral, flooding us in a downpour of neologisms (like “awaring,” “systasis,” “synaresis,” “aperspectival,” “the achronon”) which may bedazzle us with intellectual catnip, but in the end seem to land somewhere in the ballpark of “sounding gongs or clashing cymbals.” As the poet e.e. cummings once poignantly put it: “great words, writhing overmuch, stand[ing] helplessly before the spirit at bay.”

This is exactly where Gurdjieff’s foundational teaching of three-centered awareness can come to our assistance. Gurdjieff’s own take on the mechanics of conscious perception offers a concrete, and I believe remarkably serviceable, starting point for beginning to picture this new dimension of consciousness. But even more importantly, for beginning to work with it.



According to Gurdjieff, human consciousness is uniquely distinguished by its “three centered awareness.” By this he means that consciousness does not reside merely in the mental faculty alone (a misassumption made by nearly all phenomenologists, Gebser included), but rests on a tripod of three distinct systems of perception which he calls “intellectual center,” “moving center,” and “emotional center.” The intellectual center is headquartered in the brain and is concerned mainly with the weighing, comparing, and strategic application of cognitive data. The moving center, dispersed throughout the body but centralized in the spine, is about “intelligence in motion”—i.e., perceiving the world through sensation, gesture, rhythm, and movement. The emotional center (not to be confused with “feeling,” which is of a different quality altogether) is carried primarily in the nervous system but is concentrated in the region of the solar plexus. It perceives the world through empathetic resonance and/or emotional polarity.

In Gurdjieff’s take, in order to fully qualify as a “conscious human being” all three centers must be online and in communication with one another. Otherwise, one is technically asleep, no matter how passionately or eruditely any single center may be holding forth at any given moment.

According to this delusion-busting analysis, most of the great intellectual work of Western civilization has been carried out in sleep—and continues to be carried out in sleep.

Short, quantitative, and brutal. No more batting around terminology (as if the naming of something established claim to its possession.) No more speculating and emoting about whether I am one of the rising Integral elite. Instead, simply, Where are my feet? If I can’t answer—if I can’t in this moment sense my direct connection to my position in time and space—I can pretty much conclude that my vaunted Integral emergence is still a dream playing in my mind.

When the experience of working from a balanced awareness is touched, however—even fleetingly—something miraculous happens. The entire body is filled with a vital and harmonizing energy (“integral,” if you want to call it that.) And at the same time, a connection opens up to the two higher centers—higher



emotional and higher intellectual—from which objective knowing and authentic feeling indeed pour forth. Once the three lower centers are trained and stable enough not to buckle in the face of this far more intense conscious infusion, you are at last (for the most part) a reliably “conscious human being” and are ready to take up your post in the cosmic dance of giving-and-receiving with authentic clarity and agency. You are no longer simply a consumer but a transformer of life force.

Gurdjieff’s straightforward schematic also yields a veritable treasure trove of daily exercises, movements, and teachings geared toward supporting this “waking up” process and the stabilization three-centered awareness. As such, the Gurdjieff Work offers itself as a powerful gateway and user’s guide to the midwifing of the emergent Integral structure of consciousness on both an individual and collective basis. Just how powerful a small group of my Wisdom students were amazed to discover when the pandemic accidentally threw us into the into forced company of Gebser’s Ever Present Origin and Joseph Azize’s new collection of the Gurdjieff Exercises. Strange bedfellows indeed, it first appeared. But as we worked diligently with these resources for more than a year (and the work still continues), it was extraordinary to discover how deeply these teachings unlocked and energized each other, and how unexpectedly they bestowed on us a whole new set of inner resources for coping with the mounting anxiety and fragmentation of our outer world.

Of course, the delineation between “knowledge” and “being” is by no means original with Gurdjieff. As the Quaker mystic Isaac Pennington famously commented back in the 17th century: “There is a great difference between comprehending the knowledge of things and tasting the hidden life of them.” This full tasting is what Gurdjieff’s “being-consciousness” is all about, and I believe it also fundamentally what Gebser’s “verition” is all about. It also just may be what St Paul is touching on when he concludes his profound teaching on Love in 1 Corinthians 13 with the mysterious affirmation: “For now I see through a glass darkly, but later face to face; now I know in part, but later will I know even as also I am known.”



This dynamic, creative interplay between knowing and being-known, between seeing and being-seen-through, is, I believe, none other than the radiance of Gebser's Originary Presence shining through our fragile human form. Like a beacon, finitude both manifests and transmits light; it "magnifies the lord." We can become those light-stations as we are increasingly able to do the work. And willing to pay the cost.

Here's the next installation, continuing my exploration of the interconnections between the teachings of Gebser and G.I. Gurdjieff. Them's that's interested, have at it!

Lesson 16: BALANCING CENTERS, INTEGRATING STRUCTURES

Yet another connecting link between the Gebserian and Gurdjieffian systems lies in the fruitful interplay between Gurdjieff's three centers and their respective counterparts in the Gebserian structures of consciousness. The correlation is not precise, but the energetic resonance is palpable. It's clear that centers and structures dialogue readily with each other, and the energetic bridge thereby created opens up whole new access route to the integrative task that evolution has now placed on our collective human plate.

The moving center corresponds with Gebser's magic structure in its vital energy and direct, sensation-based perception.

The emotional center corresponds with the mythical structure in its ambivalence and emotional polarity.

The intellectual center corresponds with the mental structure in its linearity and directedness.

Both Gebser and Gurdjieff explicitly stipulate that before one can advance to the next "level" (or 'structure') of consciousness: the earlier structures must be consciously integrated. Not simply "transcended and included" as in the popular current renditions, folded into a rolling snowball, but each one preserved and



fully accessible in its unique particularity—like rooms in a museum, as I pictured it earlier, or perhaps the two natures of Christ.

But how do we even begin to approach this task? What does it mean to integrate the structures? What does it feel like when it actually happens?

As children of the deficient mental structure of consciousness, we habitually equate “integration” with conscious articulation. The job description, then, assumes the shape of an interior excavation project: uncovering and consciously weaving into our personal meta-narrative of the pieces that now lie buried in our individual and collective unconscious. By a variety of routes—dream work, soul work, psychoanalysis, artistic expression in its various modes, prayer and contemplation—we strive to bring all that is buried or obscure within the unconscious into the full light of conscious understanding.

The fly in the ointment, however—at least according to Gebser, in one of his admittedly more notorious assertions, is that “there is no so-called Unconscious.” [!!!!] “There are only various modalities (or intensities) of consciousness; a one-dimensional magic, a two-dimensional mythical; a three-dimensional mental consciousness. And there will be also an integral four-dimensional consciousness of the whole.” (EPO, p. 204; italics Gebser's.)

Granted, Gebser made this pronouncement more than seventy years ago now, before Jungian models had gained their presentday canonical status. It was a much more open argument back then. But his point is still worth considering today. Is the concept of an unconscious—particularly a collective unconscious—really the most useful way to structure the playing field? Does it cause us to keep missing something that might turn out to be useful? As he perceptively comments a few sentences later: “The ‘unconscious’—if one insists on using this misleading term at all—is the structure of consciousness one dimension less than a particular or given structure; and it is this next “higher” or incremental structure which makes the unconscious amenable to its mode of understanding.” (p. 204)



In other words, what we now conceive of as “integration” is still mostly our own projection of the mental structure’s passion for schematization and spatial abstraction imposed top down upon the mythical and magical structures. For all its conceptual brilliance, it is still stuck in the perceptual habits of the waning mental structure—which all too soon will find itself similarly relegated to the “unconscious” once the new structure has fully kicked in! (A point, incidentally, which Gurdjieff had been making all along.)

The Gurdjieff teaching offers a way out of this perspectival catch-22 by offering an alternative pathway toward conscious integration, one which kicks the intellectual center out of its command post and brings the three centers—and hence the three structures—into a harmonious balance. On the movements floor, as you struggle to bring moving center, emotional center, and intellectual center fully into a single coherent whole, you are simultaneously achieving the same desideratum for the same for magic, mythical, and mental structures because of that strong resonant bridge between them. “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” as the old saying goes—particularly since you are no longer doing the integrative work through intellectual abstraction, but through direct, three-centered presence.

What Gurdjieff is actually about here (clever sod that he is) is to set up the conditions—the only conditions, he would say—in which that other quality (or “dimension”) of consciousness can arise; then he throws you right into midst of them for better or worse. When you work directly in the vibrational fields of these three centers simultaneously (as you are required to do in movements and in many of the exercises), you will inevitably find pushed beyond your limits. You will be tempted to give up. But if you don’t—if you can somehow remain standing in your inner ground—you find yourself mysteriously dropped into the presence of some deeper integrating capacity within yourself that knows how to do this when “you” get out of the way. From that place you begin again, working from a fierce, quiet presence through which something else pours. When it happens, it’s electrifying. Every cell in your body quivers with the aliveness of it.



Wisdom Waypoints

Call it “Real I.” Call it “the fourth dimension.” Call it the dawning Integral structure of Consciousness. All you know is that you’ve actually tasted it, and it remains within you as a living benchmark of what you are awakening into. You now begin to have a glimmer of what “intensification of consciousness” actually means.

And thus the transformation begins, in the only dimension it can (the Integral), using the integrative tools appropriate to that dimension and hence unfolding completely beyond the purview of the always prying mental structure. For me, this sheds more than a little light as well on what Gebser means by “systasis” and why it’s as different from mental “integration” as a kitten is from a tiger.