

Prose Probings



*Collected Essays
of Alan Harris*

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**At the end of a day, is there one less day in your life
or one more day in your life?**

Photos on front and back covers
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Where Is Love?

A Perilous Search

by Alan Harris

WE ARE FOREVER LOOKING FOR LOVE in our lives. We look for a sweetheart who will turn into a loving spouse. We look for love from our parents and respect from our children. We look for love from our government, hoping our leaders will be compassionate with us and our countrymen. But strangely, we often get into our worst messes when all we are doing is looking for love. A marriage may split up due to one of the partners looking elsewhere for love. A teenager may wreck his car and his body by driving too fast in a quest for a certain kind of love from his peers. Desperate for love, people ruin their minds with drugs which give them a temporary surge of a counterfeit feeling similar to love.

Does anyone ever find love? If so, where is it? Observation suggests that love, real as it is, cannot be found and isn't anywhere. When you go looking for it, you are going to find something else. What you find may keep you occupied for awhile, even addicted, but it's not love. Love is the most priceless treasure that life affords us. Religions enshrine it, billboards exploit it, professors categorize it, and newspapers report on its perversions. But it is nowhere to be found.

Love is a song that threads its way through our lives from beginning to end, but did you ever try to *find* a song? You just know when you're hearing a song, and you just know when you're experiencing deep love, but you can't *find* either one. The song is a process. It weaves its way through the vocal cords and through the air molecules, but neither the vibrations, nor the ears that hear them, nor the voice that produces them, is the song. You can write notes on paper to suggest a song, but the notes are not the song. A song is a process that cannot be the same twice. Even if you hear a recorded song twice in succession, there are two different songs because you yourself have changed slightly between hearings. A song is a participatory, unrepeatable process. And so is love.

Love and songs hide in the cracks of the universe--not only between the atoms, but between the betweens, in the realm of quality, not quantity--in the unmanifest (which is nowhere). Love and songs must and do express themselves using time and space, but they can be neither found nor captured in time and space.

If no one were looking for love, our world would be in sad shape, some might say. But our world already is in sad shape precisely because so many people are on this quest which seems so laudable and reasonable until you examine the results of it. The problem with looking for love is that it is the me that wants it. The me wants love in the form of pleasure, money, status, fame, and any number of other forms. And if the me wants these things badly enough, the me will get them. Unfortunately, all the me gets is the forms and not the love. The me grabs for the beautiful flame and gets only hot ashes. Love eludes the me always, because the me is somewhere, and love is nowhere--they can never meet.

Is there no way, then, to find love? Is there no solution to this dilemma? Probably not. However, it is a simple fact that anyone can love. It is one of our inalienable rights as humans to love and to give. Perhaps life could not even exist without this process. There is an electricity generated in the action of love that is as real as that

which powers a train or lights a reading lamp. As with electricity, no one really knows what love is nor where it comes from, but we do know we can channel both electricity and love through conduits. Properly channeled electricity can transform our environment, and properly channeled love can transform the quality of our lives.

It seems that love is most vibrant in us when we forget ourselves. Self-forgetfulness is recommended by most religions as a way to peace and enlightenment. Knowing this, spiritual aspirants try to forget themselves, hoping peace and enlightenment will come. Catch number one here is that they cannot forget that they are forgetting themselves, so they are still caught in the me. There is no catch number two.

When we grow weary of looking for love and finding only its ashes and its forms, we may suddenly give up the search. When we have been bitten by our greed and have had our very health impaired by our search for love, we stop our hurried quest one day and look within--not within the me, but within the cracks of the universe. We may not see anything, but we feel something--we hear a song. We feel a change in ourselves, a new perspective from nowhere. We haven't asked for it. We just stop searching and there it is. That is love, sneaking into our lives from the cracks between the betweens. We were never away from love, but we could never find it. We wore ourselves out like the man who ran around the streets of the village searching for some air to breathe. He wasted much air to do his searching, but he never found air.

Listen to the silence if you would hear the song of love. Love may catch you between bites of an apple or while you are cleaning the toilet. You live within love always, but you can never find it, capture it, preserve it, or explain it--you might as well try to build a rose with a hammer and nails. Just wait, and listen, and watch, and work--and one day when the time is right, a rose appears on the bush. This rose is rooted in the cracks of the universe, and so is love, and so are you.

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Trusting Emotions

Are We Safe in Them?

by Alan Harris

HAVE YOU NOTICED that some people distrust joy? If they find themselves feeling joyful, they will ask themselves: "Now what calamity is about to happen which will undermine this joy I'm feeling?" Some people who are currently enjoying good fortune will playfully (yet fearfully) knock on wood for good luck.

Distrust of joy is usually less intense than our common distrust and dread of depression, fear, or anger. However, I suggest that even these negative emotions need to be trusted. They guide the little boat of our personality through strange and dangerous seas--albeit with occasional inaccuracy, unpredictability, and inefficiency--yet, emotions as a whole keep our lives afloat.

A root question about existence might be "Are we safe?" And if we are, a secondary question would be "Can we have emotions without distrusting them?" My own intuition persuades me that we are ultimately and completely safe. We seem to be held close to the breast and beating heart of a Benevolence that is concealed in, yet revealed by, every emotion we have--of whatever quality. My body may be destroyed in an accident, or I may die from a slow disease or some other awfulness, but my emotions remain emblems and conduits of a mysterious underlying safety.

Animated mannikins we are not. Our bodies seem rather like the outer garment of something infinite. Robots and mannikins, for example, don't go innerly moist in the presence of tears shed, whereas any human facial expression goes all the way down to the fathomless Root of our safety. As humans, not robots, we are able to reach for a life of joy, and find it. Yes, subsequent events may cause a plunge into introspection or sorrow--but then we work with and through those emotions, gaining strength and wisdom as we reach again for a state of joy. In the gamut is the glory; in the reaching is the teaching.

There are some, perhaps many, who (whether by nature or from having been "burned") choose to stand back from their emotions as being untrustworthy or dangerous. They might agree that emotions are necessary to help us manage our lives, but to them, emotions feel too murky and uncontrollable. To those people I would suggest, without proof, that safety at our deepest level is a universal spiritual "given." Many contexts and degrees of safety are possible, but I can imagine nothing--not death, demons, nor my own stupidity--nothing which could take away my essence, snuff out that spark which somehow wears my body and personality like an overcoat, and which will later cast them aside when they are worn out.

Something in you and me is here to stay. The here and the now will never not be. In us, and as us, the enduring "spark that we are" never becomes less alive nor less evolved, but gradually and patiently through the eons accumulates awareness through experience. I make these assertions on no authority except my heart, but I invite your heart to weigh them as working hypotheses.

When we are upset or depressed or threatened or confused, we don't "feel" safe--but that illusion later subsides, whereupon we again may grow to feel safely held in the

arms of Mother Everything--in a safety not physical or emotional, but an inestimably profound "soul safety."

If we could only feel the spiritual safety beneath our emotions, then we might also feel safe when they swirl within us. Emotions are the windstorms of who we are, and not inconvenient slush or guck to wade through until we "get better" or "get there." Emotions, like winds, may bring us the aroma of flowers or the stench of sewers. They may bring heavy, depressing rains as well as new growth. But for us to detach from our emotions would be like excising our heart.

Through emotions a mysterious instructional force talks to us right where we live. No enemy is this force--it is none other than our infinite Friend.

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Peace

Its Inner Hiding Places

by Alan Harris

THERE IS A PEACE in the world of forms to which all earnest students of the spirit aspire. That peace finds favor with each heart that loves.

When the mind keeps quiet and speaks no inner word, peace floods the area where this silence prevails. A heart which feels the flavor of peace needs an outlet for its pulsing effervescence. Peace is an explosively subtle state. It seems quiescent, yet it needs to spread its wings and fly to the edges of the universe.

How can a state of peace be achieved in this world of flimflamery, jostling bombast, and uncivil greed? Where is the sanctuary to be found? The office has noise and veiled hatred; the factory has hurry and fear; the very fields with waving grain are viewed as a perishable commodity under a capricious sky. When, where, how is peace ever achieved?

Between pulsations in the heart there is peace. Between days of toil, in the still of night, there is peace.

In the smile of an infant, in the breeze-tossed tree, in the cumulus cloud, in the patient grass--in all of these there is peace. There is peace in every nightly flourish of the moon across the sky, and in the drone of a lawful of crickets.

How does our humanity fail to partake of this peace which is ubiquitous? We are like fish swimming in a sea of peace, refusing to acknowledge it as we breathe its very essence. The time will come when we will know what we breathe, when we will enjoy this gift which we now fail to notice. A fineness of character will gradually evolve, and we will eventually transmute the lead of our current selfish crassness into the glorious gold of peace by employing the fire of love.

Find a flame in your heart, and the gold will be nearby. Find silence, and peace will come close behind. Find blessings in the sky, and the mind is blessed. Where can you not find peace, if you open the door of your self and allow air to come in? A breeze entering through an open door perfumes the whole house. When the door is open, there is peace.

Front Yards

What the World Sees

by Alan Harris

IF YOU WALK THROUGH my neighborhood, you will notice great variety in the front yards of the houses. For that matter, you notice great variety in the back yards too, if you know the people well enough to go back there or if you're a burglar. Some of the yards are plain--just a sidewalk, maybe a concrete driveway, a tree or two, and grass. Others have a variety of windmills, bird feeders, statues of animals or saints, boulders or rocks, and flower gardens. We sort of wear our front yards on our shirt-sleeves, to terribly mix a metaphor (and to split an infinitive).

Is it that our front yards are how we want people to see us, and our back yards are how we really are? There may be something to consider here. And inside the house, the living room is for how we think people think we should be, and the family room is for how we really are. Just as our body has a skin to cover up its ugly internals, and clothing to cover up the unseemly parts of the skin, we seem to have to arrange our houses and lots in a dualistic fashion--one part the facade, and the other part the genuine.

Some folks go to great lengths to keep even their family rooms very presentable to the public, while others may have living rooms that look like a used stable, so we have these exceptions to the internal-external phenomenon I have been developing here. But there's always something, even in the homeliest of homes, that is meant to be presented to the public--a bowling trophy, a picture of the family (after all, we know what we look like), a mounted muskie, or whatever other thing we might be just a bit proud of and want to display to the world.

Next time you take a walk around a neighborhood, notice the front yards. You will see some of the most pampered grass and some of the most "natural" grass. You will see the yellow beauty of dandelions in some, and the healthy green evidence of weed killers in others. Some yards will be full of happy children, while others will be silent and empty. Some will have grassless cracks in the sidewalk, while others will luxuriate with various weeds sprung from whatever last year's wind blew in.

In a way we *are* our yards. We are both our front yard and our back yard. We are the external and the internal. Most people walking by see only half of us (our front yard), but if they look deep inside themselves, they see our back yard too, because they know what their own looks like. I pick this little dandelion from my back yard and offer it to you.

Quality: 11 Glimpses

Seeing the Unseeable

by Alan Harris

1. Quality moves with motionless grace, rises to the depths, breathes our lives in and out, and slips easily through the walls of definitions.
2. Quality can be found without seeking, and can be lost in the midst of formulas and goal-setting.
3. Quality may brush the corner of your eye as you focus on something known and tangible.
4. To recognize quality, even fleetingly, tinges your moment and aerates your mood.
5. Quality may paint a hauntingly beautiful landscape within your vision, but seldom does it paint by numbers. Unaccountably, quality seeps between all digits like a fog drifting through a prison fence.
6. Quality can push up through layers of logical mentation like a delicate flower blooming in a trash heap.
7. Quality may sometimes be sensed, though not found, in the fine fuzz at the edge of a moving thought.
8. If you are seeking quality, your quest may obscure it. If you are struggling toward a height from which you wish to emanate quality, your struggling may poison the emanations.
9. Quality is seen not with the third eye, but with the one eye.
10. Quality may surprise, like a graceful pirouette in the middle of a square dance.
11. Quality eludes all of these words--and yet, and yet. . . .

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The Inner Web

A Communion of Aspirations

by Alan Harris

QUICKENED ACCESS TO A COMMUNION of human ideas, aspirations, and information--a communion that I call the "Inner Web"--is at the heart of a cybernetic tool known as the World Wide Web. The Inner Web is an emerging siblinghood of the spirit, a trust that eases humans from fearful separateness toward fully-sensed unity. Known also as brotherhood, this spirit has been growing and maturing through the centuries like an indestructibly delicate flower.

Plato, Rumi, Abraham Lincoln, H. P. Blavatsky, Gustav Mahler, and Ralph Waldo Emerson all saw and extolled unity and brotherhood, each from within a unique mission.

No less than these torchbearers, anyone at any moment has open access to the Inner Web, through outer communications and inner communion. The Inner Web that we all share has recently seen the introduction of new tools. Now, by means of the World Wide Web and Internet e-mail, millions are enabled to communicate quickly and informally with others who may share similar enthusiasms or griefs. Friendships blossom as easily between continents as between neighborhoods. Just enough anonymity may prevail in these e-mail relationships to allow for personal confessions, the sharing of which seems to matter more than knowing full names.

A few denizens of the wired-world have destructive or selfish motives and have regrettably been empowered for harm by our new electronic environment. The wary are reluctant to "jump onto" the Internet for fear that they will fall prey to some dastardly scheme or dangerous personality. Be that as it may, the Internet may be found to be safer than most streets, provided that one isn't prone to being cheated through one's own deviousness, "losing the farm" through a quest for easy wealth, or letting romantic fantasies ruin one's personal integrity (like it or not, any of these can happen).

Web-published writings of many flavors are reaching appreciative audiences now without the traditional midwifery of profit-based print publishers and their editors. Web readers can locate original writings easily and enjoy them, or if not, just surf on. The democratic pulse of humanity's Inner Web can be felt within much that is offered on the World Wide Web. Writers are enjoying their new access to readers, even though some college professors and critics openly scorn the work of fameless Web authors who are neither published in journals nor enshrined within English 102 anthologies. In fact, a few years ago I was amused to hear a poetry professor at the University of Iowa refer to Web poetry as "swill." How aristocratic he must have felt. But there are plenty of readers who actually prefer this alleged swill to the sheeplike literary hero-worship that isn't difficult to find in academia. Those with cultivated tastes might wonder how surfers could possibly enjoy literature that is less than the finest. Well, perhaps these surfers need exactly swill at this moment in their life's walk, rather than the elegant elegies listed in a college syllabus.

Let's observe that millions of very fine human beings have no need for the hallowed lines of Shakespeare or T.S. Eliot. In a more democratic vein, Edgar Guest's poetry, much satirized by America's correctly-credentialed literary pundits, has spoken genuinely to multitudes in the simple rhythms and rhymes they find attractive. Probing further into democracy, we find that many of today's Web poets misspell words or corrupt meter or reach for awful rhymes. And yet, the inner experience imparted by these writings can often be engaging. Gold can be found in ugly mines.

Equipped with the World Wide Web, citizens of the Inner Web are empowered to journey broadly and (if so inclined) deeply--while sitting at home. Search engines allow quick sifting through the unwanted to find the wanted. In the commercial milieu, the purchase and sale of scarce items is now more efficient than before, and corporations of all sizes have new opportunities to primp their pretty plumage before the public. Blossoming e-mail relationships have cut through traditional social boundaries to link individuals and bond families. Even the apparent harm that some would blame e-mail for might be seen more positively as a quickening of personal cause-and-effect, leading to solid lessons and a stronger character.

The Inner Web is not the same as the Internet, although the latter is one avenue into the former. The Internet as a tool or medium facilitates the transcendence of separateness that springs from barriers--i.e., oceans, languages, mountains, ignorance, prejudice, and disparate beliefs. Separateness usually manifests as hostility or fear or ego, but at root it appears to be an apartness from one's own inner life--treatable out of the inexhaustible pharmacy of unity and compassion found within the Inner Web.

The Internet is neither a panacea nor a scourge as within its flow of electrons we learn to "touch into" the Inner Web. Perhaps with it (or something better) we can eventually realize unity in a separative world--especially if, as sparks, we will awaken to that Flame we have in common which warms us, feeds us, is us.

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Questions for Making a Decision

1. What is my primary motive as I make this decision?
2. Will my decision cause benefits beyond myself and promote a wider good?
3. Will my course of action unnecessarily diminish or hurt any person or group?
4. Will the consequences of my decision be long-term or temporary?
5. Will I be turning over control of my life to another person or agency?
6. Will I be able to have the necessities of life?
7. What sacrifices will I need to make, and what benefits outweigh these sacrifices?
8. Whose strong influence am I feeling upon my decision, and shall I allow that?
9. What is the worst result my decision can bring, and can I accept that?
10. What safety net will I have if nothing goes as planned?
11. Will high risk be offset by potential growth and deepening?
12. When am I going to stop thinking about this decision and do something?

The Scrooge before Christmas

Yes, there is a Scrooge. He haunts the hearts of those who wish that Santa's \$10.00 white beard were real--who wish that his "Ho, ho, ho" meant more than the \$6.00 an hour he is paid to utter it. Scrooge-inhabited people desperately long for a "Ho, ho, ho" from deep within a genuine person's heart.

We seem to want people, all people, to be genuine, yet most people have personality owies that deflect them away from thoroughly genuine behavior. Christmas would ideally be a time when all of those owies would get better, but through some quirk of human nature, they usually get worse. The showy get showier, the stingy get stingier, the drinking get drunker, the overeating get overweight, and the busy get busier.

Considering the above, "Christmas" would seem a mockery when we consider that two-thirds of the word is "Christ". Perhaps those of Scroogish persuasion would prefer to spell it "Christmess".

Scroogish people are not the only ones who clamor for change. Certain religious types are annually haranguing each other about the True Meaning of Christmas. These frustrated (and sometimes ultraholy) people don't usually identify at all with Scrooge, but they, too, hate the tinsel, the tawdriness, and (other people's) hypocrisy. They want everyone to concentrate on the Christ child, the angels, the star, and other symbols which provided comfortable myths and icons to live by during their childhood. They tend to cling to these warm, fuzzy concepts the more tightly as they find themselves struggling with the bottomless mysteries of relationships, emotions, illnesses, and the Big Unmentionable. These bewildered adults cry out for something more stable, something safer, something holier, and something that makes sense when life doesn't.

Scroogeness could be defined as a thin layer of rage masking a desperate search for sincerity beneath. The Scrooge in our hearts knows the difference between the Jesus and the junk. Scrooge is the skeptic who dares to call tinsel tinsel, the seemingly cruel man who eschews sentimentality. Scrooge dares to drill down deeper than the reindeer manure, down into his past hurts and heartaches, down to the deepest gnarled roots that tap into his tortured soul. No, he does not like Christmas, nor does he especially like himself, but in digging deeply, he discovers a little child in there who can scarcely breathe. He sees that the "Bah" in "Bah, humbug" has all along been a crying out for breath and life and truth and goodness. Humbug has been smothering this little child for most of its life.

Long live the Scrooge within us, for deep within this Scrooge is the holy child who began life in a stable full of smelly stuff, and in whose innocent heart shimmers a true light which will dissolve the false lights and shams.

The Christ, then, may be said to inhabit Scrooge and you and me. Even though our whole land be filled with tinsel, Scrooge and you and I may discover that tinsel is an improvement over the smelly stuff in the stable. Through this child's eyes we may even see a light which we might call, for lack of a better word, a star.

Thoughtlets

for a Quiet Mood

Our Origin

Either:

No one knows our origin, or
No one knows *who* knows our origin, or
People know people who know our origin
and I'm not one of them.
Even so, perhaps the mystery of our
origin has a solution that is in plain view.

Where Are We Going?

We are like electrons laughing and
dancing in a wire. We never go far along
the wire, but the magic we conjure up in
the process, in the here and the now, may
also closely resemble our destination.
Electricity abounds in laughing and loving.
Are we going, then, to where we are?

What Is Doubt?

Doubt is the snake squirming inside us
when we feel superior to teachings we
little understand that are merely poorly
taught. Doubt justifies (or tries to) a
chronic indolence within those who scorn
the sacred as being decay and who shun
advancement as being delay.

What Is Faith?

Faith is an enthusiastic arrow shot toward
the open sky in hopes of hitting some
target. Faith climbs and yearns. Faith is
strong enough, some say, to move
mountains. But when faith and ego
intermix, there can be a mighty
hollowness, a thundering emptiness.
Purest faith quietly and simply serves the
community.

Education

Education is the process of insisting upon
your essence ever more gently. A seed's
essence shoots a stalk up through dirt and
manure--and matures. You are the seed
and stalk. The school system is the dirt.
The curriculum is the manure, because of
which and in spite of which you blossom.

Hiding

The eyes are the windows of the soul, and the mouth's expression is the window of the heart. Children know a fake smile because it fails to match the eyes. They use the voice as a reliable stethoscope. Gestures, too, are a wind-vane revealing the direction of the soul's breath. Eyes, mouth, voice, gestures: these instruments of discovery, plus time, reveal all hiding.

A Mess

Order unperceived is called a mess. A mountain range is then a mess of piled rock, trees, and snow. A rain forest is a mess of flora and fauna. An artist's home may be a mess of paint, canvases, and brushes. Who sees messes? The one who judges. And who judges? The one who is blind to order under disorder.

Seeking

Seek, and you shall find another thing to seek, until you find a grave. Can you drop your seeking? If you can, your seeking may in turn release you. You may then find yourself to be anchored rather than self-yanked by a leash along some self-serving path. You may safely drop all, for nothing truly needful can fall away. A light load, no seeking, no path--will roses then fail to bloom?

Isms

Isms organize great thinking into neat mausoleums, each ism occupying its cataloged row and column, sealed off from change and living. Visit a mausoleum, and you may discover that any original ideas you hear are coming from your own soul, which is not dead, nor will it ever be. Never box me up or seal me up with an ism. Being always alive, I may need to whoop or sing. Let me breathe the breeze until I am the breeze.

Middle

Everywhere we go, we are in the exact middle of all thought, all doing. Others whom we think of as far away are also in that middle. We are billions of middles, all apparently separate yet somehow all concentric--all sharing one middle. Eccentricities continually appear and

prevent stagnation, but they, too, share the middle. Seen from a dynamic middle, all may be well.

Purity

A religious costume is more likely to cloak impurity than to reveal purity. Purity is more a dancing than an achievement, and it dances through every heart in unique rhythm. Purity washes the soul with tears whenever there is a breakthrough. We have seen purity manifest in strong men, in hard women, in awful children. We have known purity by the generous act, the comforting smile, the glistening eye.

Listening

To listen deeply is to give deeply. Words decorate the rise and fall of more than our voice. Words are the throbs of our heart of hearts. Take bread and wine as you wish, but honor the communion of the moment--at school, at work, and in the family circle. Hear the hearing of others as well as their speaking. Meet in receptivity.

Unfamiliar

If we observe and honor the unfamiliar feelings that haunt and hurt us, these feelings will be found the growing ground into which we have already been planted. Following the unfamiliar through the tangled thickets of the familiar may lead to a blooming. Yes, there may be awful aching, fear, and upheavals--but one day comes the sweet grace of the blooming.

Days

At the end of a day, is there one less day in your life or one more day in your life? Is your life a stack of days, like a deck of cards? Or is it a stream in which waking and dreaming ripple on a surface above unfathomed depths? "Are we digital or analog?" we might ask. "Particles or waves?" The particle folks bottle the water and sell it, while the wave folks flow in it toward the sea. Lungs and longings whisper "waves" to my own ears.

When All Goes Well

When all is going well, going badly is not far away. When all seems lost, well-being

hovers nearby like the breath of an angel. Exulting will be humbled; despairing will be consoled. Lucky is the one who has no waves like these to ride--or is he?

Spirit and World

While the Spirit fills our souls with endless hints and nuances, the World carries the World home to the World in little shopping bags. Spirit or World--which is ruling? They may appear to alternate in supremacy, but if you have ever felt the intensity of being worldly, you may agree that Spirit has no rival at all except for lesser Spirit.

Alone?

I ask Above for guidance, and I remain who I am. Was there guidance? I ask who I am, and I remain who I am. I ask why I am here, and here I am, asking. I ask where my ancestors have gone, and silence reveals only their memories and legends. Answers fail. But now a neighborhood child rings the doorbell and asks to talk. We two answer for each other.

Ventilating the House of Knowing

Knowing is stowing;
unknowing is flowing.

Building a house requires intricate knowing;
living in it will tap a rich, dangerous stream not charted in the blueprints.

To study someone's horoscope numerically builds up a house of concepts;
to cry with someone is to surrender to an indescribable flowing.

Financial expertise is a product of keen attention and experience;
heartfully allocating resources can be done by a three-year-old giving his dog a biscuit.

To gather straight A's in college is an obedient harvesting of the known;
later upheavings may lead to sleepless, fathomless nights that drain away diplomas but open one's heart to a fresh humility.

Knowing is a keen memory of all the chess openings, over a neatly squared chess board, with well-behaved pieces;
unknowing brings one to a bewilderment in midgame from which a victory may spring.

Knowing within a religion can spawn rickety beliefs, defensive fears, or exclusive duality;
to avoid naming the nameless, or believing in the heard, or excluding the "other" can admit a universe into the mind, and release the mind into a universe.

Experience leads to knowing; knowing leads to more intense experience;
then perhaps to a shambles; from which may emanate a steadying awe of the flowing.

The known manifests as forward motion;
the unknown as a gentle, inscrutable smile.

The knower has developed a system for success, having created a perfect tinker toy windmill;
his fragile fabrication already tosses precariously on an unseen boundless sea.

Many know their appetites, preferring a certain spice or sugar;
the mysterious source of all flavors is unknown to them but controls their dining.

Professors in universities want to increase and perpetuate the known;
the Perpetual winks.

Knowing is to have a well-kept lawn;
flowing is to have nothing but everything, to leave it right where it is, and perhaps to care for the lawn too.

A brilliant nation converts a billion dollars worth of knowing into a Stealth Bomber;
to sit at one's dinner table is to fly imperceptibly fast on a planet, free of charge, without need of a target.

Knowers worry about dying, which might destroy their tinker toy windmill;
the imponderable is immense and welcomes windmills of all designs.

A violinist knows his part; a conductor knows his score; a composer knows how to
notate his emotions;
*in concert all of them yield their knowings to the fountain source of music, with
exquisite results.*

The known is of great price;
the unknown is priceless.

Assertions have been made herein as if known;
a puff of wind from no direction will soon scatter them without loss.

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Seeking Truth

A Dialogue

by Alan Harris

I seek the truth.

Where do you think the truth is?

I don't know, but I feel I must seek it.

I don't know either. But I shy away from seeking it from others.

Why?

Because somebody with unknown motives might offer to help me find it. A paid guru. A paid psychologist. A paid university. And I might be taken for a ride, for major money, and find only the ashes of truth.

*But if they **were** to lead you to the truth, wouldn't your money be well spent?*

The truth they'd lead me to would be their money's truth and not my own.

Then where will you find the real truth?

Perhaps in the vast within. Perhaps everywhere. Perhaps in suddenly breaking a pencil in half, or straightening a picture on the wall.

That sounds absurd. You'll never find the truth if you're not serious about it.

Serious? As in adopting a peacock vocabulary and learning concepts and theories by the basketful and perhaps teaching them intact to later students at a university? That kind of serious? I'd prefer to drop a stone over a bridge railing and watch the circular ripples go out. This magnetizes me.

Are you anti-intellectual, then?

No. Are you anti-stone?

No, but I feel that many wise people have gone before us, and if I study their writings, I'll be able to find the truth.

Maybe--but what, inside you, will know when you've found this truth?

I think that everything will just snap into place.

And what if everything is already in place, and that snap turns out to be the loss of your sanity?

You make no sense. I simply believe that if I follow the right course of study, I'll find the truth.

If you study late into the night, you will probably pick up many gems.

Is truth not in these gems?

Is truth not within you, right now?

I think I'm wasting my time talking to you.

Perhaps you're right--but I'm not being flippant. And what would be a better use of your time?

In continuing my search for truth, obviously.

Imagine, if you will, that truth is secretly and innerly **seeking you** while you continue to attend college classes and study intricate theories. Might not such external seeking then be a waste of your time?

Perhaps, but it's absurd to think that truth could find me without my knowing it.

How did you first find your parents?

I didn't find them. They were just there.

Then--they found you, and you didn't know it?

Yes, in a way.

How do you find air to breathe?

You're being absurd again.

It finds you? Do you see my drift?

Yes, but it's a fallacious argument.

Not an argument at all. I'm just throwing stones into the stream and watching the circular ripples go out. Are you reading some books currently?

*Yes, I do need to be going. I'm studying Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason** and Hume's **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**. I wish you well with your stone-tossing and your chosen ignorance, but I must continue to seek truth.*

Have a pleasant quest. Your "must" will take you far, I predict. Very far.

Suicide and the Agony of Separateness

When the Ego Becomes an Eggshell

by Alan Harris

Note: If you are now contemplating suicide or know someone who is, please also read the last page.

THE NATURE OF THE FORCES which motivate a person to take his or her own life usually remain hidden from those who are left behind, for if the suicide has been completed, no further psychological inquiries can be made, and if incomplete, only tentative hypotheses are possible due to the fact that there really was not a suicide. However, there does seem to be a common mental condition which underlies not only suicide (whether completed, abandoned, or thwarted), but also the loneliness and depression which often lead up to this act. Such a mental condition goes by many names, but I will call it "separateness," or more accurately, a separative consciousness.

Let us not deceive ourselves by merely pointing to this condition in "others," for we all share it to some extent. "Their" agony is our agony, even though it may now manifest less intensely in us. And to be completely honest, let us even allow that we *are* they. A surprisingly large group of our population has either contemplated or actually attempted suicide at some time or other. For many of those seemingly happy people we meet on the street or in our jobs, the thought of suicide has been a more or less silent alternative in the midst of life's reversals. It is not an impulse that people commonly publicize regarding themselves, hence one naturally imagines that few others experience it.

Sympathetic friends typically regard a suicidal person as being an unfortunate victim--of blind chance, of other people's thoughtlessness, of an unfair social system--or some combination thereof. While this impression of a suicidal person as a victim is probably frequently held, there is another view--that an attempter's "victim psychology" may be the logical outcome of his own subtle but deadly ego trip.

What does it mean to say that suicide can be the result of an "ego trip"? We could define an ego trip as the separative frame of mind already mentioned, usually accompanied by an inaccurate image of one's own worth. Careful observation might reveal that feelings of superiority and feelings of inferiority *both* spring from separative assumptions, and are therefore *both* egoistic. One attitude says, "I am better than you," and the other says, "I am worse than you," but "better" and "worse" are merely different names for the same imaginary wall between "I" and "you." We sit precariously on this wall like Humpty Dumpty, trying desperately to balance our egg-like existence amidst the strong winds of adversity which threaten and discourage us. This is separatism, and it is likely to lead to "a great fall" because it is based upon illusion or unreality. The inexorable (but in the end, kind) forces of evolution eventually must topple us off this wall which our minds have built up out of rotted thoughts.

In the following scenario, let's assume for the sake of illustration that you and I have fallen into this trap (or, perhaps more accurately, never climbed out of it). It is quite easy for us to adopt an attitude of separateness because we are conditioned into it almost from birth. Most of us have unwittingly bought into the assumption that we

are separate from others. After all, we have separate bodies, separate homes, separate jobs, and separate ambitions. We want to make money, perhaps *more* money than other people make, so that we can indulge our egos a bit by having fancier cars, wearing more stylish clothes, living in larger homes, or sending our children to more prestigious colleges. Even if we don't have such tendencies toward conspicuous consumption, we may put ourselves first more subtly by taking the largest piece of cake on the plate at a party ("I really do deserve it"), by feeling that our religion is superior to that of others (and generously trying to convince them of it), or by burdening our friends with long stories about our successful encounters (and blithely ignoring their yawns). Many of us lack a sense of unity and brotherhood toward our fellow humans, and we instead view our associates as divided between the "bad guys" (our competitors and enemies) and the "good guys" (those who serve and comfort us). Our minds whisper to us, "You deserve the best, because you're number one. Let the others fend for themselves."

The hidden danger in having a separative outlook is that, while it appears to serve our best interests in the short run, it can eventually lead us into that dreaded and all-too-common ailment, loneliness. The very attitudes that maximize our own feelings of importance and minimize the roles played by others are the same attitudes which, when the chips are down, trap us in a cocoon of self-pity or self-destructive desire for oblivion.

Into a life lived separately there may come a shocking discovery: "I am *not* the most important being in the universe, and never was." This discovery may come suddenly by way of some devastating personal tragedy or great disappointment, or gradually through a long succession of smaller eye-openers. We learn that the world can indeed get along without us--that we are expendable. We then feel cynical like the man who observed, "The graveyards are full of people who couldn't be replaced." Such an awakening may hit us like a ton of bricks (if suddenly), or like a ton of feathers (if gradually)--but either way, it's a ton. We feel as if some great weight were pressing down on us, and we perceive a world inexorably closing in. All hope seems to have fled. Nothing remains but black despair.

When we do fall off the wall of self, when our ego shatters like the egg that it is, and when we thus turn our thoughts to suicide in a misguided attempt to ease the resulting emotional pain, we agonize in guilt and fear. If we are religious, we may worry that suicide will send us straight to hell, or we may be tortured by concern for those whom we will be leaving behind. However, the overriding mission remains--to escape from this apparently unfair, hostile, dreary, meaningless life. Typically, we wish to end the pain by somehow drifting off into a pleasant, nebulous never-never-land where cares and sorrows are behind us forever. And, by the way, we *do* want our death to be painless. If we could handle pain, we wouldn't be suicidal in the first place--hence the popularity of sleeping pills or the sudden-death methods.

Assuming that our suicidal feelings or attempts do not actually result in our death, how do we heal ourselves? Slowly. Suicidal depressions are seldom cured quickly, due to the immensity of the task. Our self-centered thought patterns, established and hardened over many years, can hardly be reversed in the typical month or two we might spend recuperating in a psychiatric ward. Gradually we have to reconstruct our broken egos along lines that allow a progressive realization that other people are our brothers and sisters, and are not almighty "others" to be impressed, coddled, or feared. After our suicidal ego trip is over, we must move upward from humiliation to humility, and we can do so by finally perceiving more clearly the deep unity within which we all share our lives as a *family* of earth dwellers.

Probably the most healing first step we can take in recovering from our failed ego trip is to begin putting others first--by living a life that begins to manifest loving, giving, and forgiving. The impartial law of cause and effect which led us into our "valley of the shadow of death" can now become our friend and firm support. Before, hatred beget hatred and competition beget competition. Now we discover that love begets love and cooperation begets cooperation. A definitely therapeutic psychological chemistry arises in us through our loving and giving to others. In fact, a generous spirit is perhaps the quickest and surest approach to permanent health or wholeness. The American might call this approach Christianity (love); the Japanese might call it Buddhism (compassion); the Chinese might call it the Tao (balance). But plainly speaking, it's just common sense, mainly because it works. According to scholars, the scriptures of all major religions assert in one form or another that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Thankfully, this goes for the good seeds as well as the bad seeds.

If a lesson is to have any lasting value for us, we must learn it *by ourselves*, through our *own* initiative or our *own* pain, or both. It is highly difficult for a well-meaning Good Samaritan (whether friend, family member, crisis line operator, or psychiatrist) to convince us that our suicidal thoughts have arisen from separatism, an ego trip, a tripped ego. And even if our helper sees this, he is wise not to mention it, for when we are crying out for help, the last thing we want or even need is a set of unflattering theories. What we need is support, caring, being there--at least until we can wade out of the mud.

The unwelcome truth cannot really be communicated to us adequately through words at all. It must flow from the very marrow of our bones. There may need to be sleepless nights, flaming anger, tears by the pint, gnashing of teeth, and even some more glimpses into the chasm of death before we can slowly awaken from our nightmare of self-imprisoning separateness or egoism. When hope dawns again, as it usually does, we begin to see life's inevitable misfortunes and disappointments not as deuces dealt out by a heartless deity from a stacked universe, but as *opportunities*--for growing, for learning, and for aiding fellow strugglers. Each failure teaches us a valuable lesson in the "dear school" of experience--a lesson which advances us toward a more useful attitude of self-forgetfulness and one-pointedness (by which is meant "pointed towards the One"). When we can live for others, we no longer have to die for ourselves.

Note: If you are contemplating suicide or know someone who is, please also read the next page.

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If You Are Feeling Suicidal Right Now....

**Call Suicide Prevention Services (IL): 630-482-9696
or the National Crisis Hotline: 800-784-2433,
or visit Suicide Prevention Services at www.spsfv.org**

Nobody who has not previously been suicidal can fully imagine the pain you are experiencing right now. You are trying to maintain your outer life as you think it should be lived and seen, but secretly you may be trying to figure out how to end your life prematurely, whether gracefully or not. The surges of deep agony you are experiencing may often become unbearable. You may grit your teeth often, or even sometimes writhe on the floor.

Perhaps you are already seeing a therapist or a doctor, but you can't bear the thought of telling him or her about your secret feelings or plans. You may have determined to solve your problem yourself, to carry it through to its conclusion, no matter what the consequences for you, your family, and your friends. Within you there may be a bleak doubting of your worth, a blank wall where the future used to be.

You may be researching ways to end your life, hoping for the least amount of pain that will lead to an imagined release into oblivion. You may be deciding upon the perfect place, and you may be mentally composing the perfect message to leave behind. Guess what?

YOU ARE NOT ALONE. Thousands of people have had feelings like yours. Although some of those people are no longer with us because they succumbed to desperation, many others have found ways to cope with such previously unmanageable feelings -- and they have created useful, successful, and happier lives out of what could have ended in tragedy.

What did these people do? **THEY GOT HELP.** They talked to counselors or doctors or pastors or parents or trusted friends. Some received help from taking prescribed medicines that alleviate feelings of depression, anxiety, and desperation. These medicines allowed them to get a new grip.

Chances are that, awful as you may feel right now, you value your life very much, but you just don't know how to stop the pain. There's a way. By means of some combination of time, counseling, medicine, and planning, you can avoid the fate of those who, for whatever reason, didn't take that first step forward.

At this very moment you have the option to **GET SOME HELP** if you have access to a telephone. If you live in northern Illinois, you can **call Suicide Prevention Services at 1-630-482-9696**. If you live elsewhere in the United States, you can **call the National Crisis Hotline at 1-800-784-2433**.

You don't have to say who you are over the phone. You can explain your situation and feelings to a person who understands. You can learn about new alternatives that you may not have considered before. You have nothing at all to lose. **NOW IS THE BEST TIME.**

Your inner pain can become less troublesome if you get help. Very likely these impulses will go away completely after a period of healing. You have much ahead of you, and right now a concerned person is ready to help you on the phone. Just call.

A Reply from the World Bureau of Fame

Advice from the Director

by Alan Harris

DEAR I. M. PRESSER:

Thank you for your unwritten application to become famous. Here at the World Bureau of Fame we receive millions of such applications every day, through the air as it were. We note that you, along with about half of the world's population, harbor a fond hope that fame will soon visit you, solve all of your problems, and allow you to live out your days in easy glory.

We note that you have been working quite diligently toward fame. Be aware, however, that as you concentrate upon your own work, you become less aware of other people's work, undermining their prospects for fame by not noticing them. And they, in their quest for fame, are hardly likely to notice you. If everyone were famous, one wonders who would be left to care about anyone else?

Here at the Bureau our policy is to dispense world fame only to people who, for whatever reason, need to suffer intensely. To our applicants who require only moderate suffering we offer plenty of opportunities for lesser fame. For example, you can achieve local fame (and a good taste of suffering) by serving on your school board. Or, you might try being the pastor of a church in order to discover the slings and arrows of being famously good. Even at home, you can test your fame on your fickle, unappreciative cat.

To come to the point, we must deny your application for fame at this time. Please read up on the inner lives of several world-famous people of your choice, and after that, if you continue to itch for fame, you may send us a second unwritten application. If we detect that your itch is strong enough, we'll dig around here in our bin of sufferings and give you a whirl.

Kind regards,

Frank Who, Director
World Bureau of Fame

Rediscovering Depth

Trees versus Technology

by Alan Harris

I HAD BEEN WORKING at my computer a couple of days ago for quite a long stretch when I decided to go outside for a walk around the neighborhood. Exercise and fresh air, even in the winter, are more a necessity than a luxury, according to many folks. As I walked out of our court, I noticed for the first time in many years that when I looked at the trees, bare against the late afternoon sky, the ones in the background appeared to move at a different rate than the trees in the foreground. I had rediscovered depth.

I surmised that my long period at the computer screen had been all two-dimensional, and that the outdoors with its three dimensions was therefore a surprise to the eye. But it made me consider that perhaps our technology in general, also, is only two-dimensional, like a flat bar chart on a piece of paper. It deals with only the trivialities of life, and leaves completely untouched the depths of it.

How easy it is to build a factory or an airplane or a bridge, when you compare this with the birth of a baby or the discovery of a new way of life. The first requires a lot of effort, planning, manipulation of people and funds, and so forth--yet it's quite easy once the details are attended to. But the deeper marvels of life are so subtle that no amount of effort, planning, or manipulation can bring them about or put them to rest (depending on their quality). They flow naturally and must be dealt with naturally.

No foolproof method has been developed for creating a new human being. It happens when it happens. No one can prescribe a new way of life for another person and make it work--growth has to come from inside the other person, as the result of pain, insight, perception, fear, and love. These changes come about like the movement of the slower trees in the background. So simple, so natural, and yet so profound.

We may play with our technology, work with it, live with it, and seem to grow with it, but the real growth in our lives happens when we put aside our clever braininess and walk outside into the profundities of a late winter afternoon.

Fiddlers' Campground Impressions

Weiser, Idaho - June 20, 1996

by Alan Harris

WALK WITH ME through this 10-acre campground which is temporarily home to country musicians from all over America. Listen to the various string-and-wood instruments snickering across the breeze. They're being played in jam sessions by little circles of the laidest-back musicians you may ever see, warming the heart cockles of roving listeners. These jamming musicians gather just about anywhere--between motor homes, under plastic awnings, around stumps, or wherever else they durn please. Their motto seems to be: "Play it, and they will come." And people come.

Go ahead and let these sounds haunt you--the mellow whine of three men's high voices in close harmony, the lackety-splattering of the banjo, the cock-a-doodle-doo of the show-off fiddle, the cackling of the mandolin, the rich rummaging of guitars, the elephant walk of a booming string bass, and the occasional sassy yammering of a harmonica. When our musicians end their song with a diddle and a strum, feel free to clap, for light applause is their only pay around here where the music is free and the going is easy.

The annual National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest in Weiser, Idaho (pronounced "Weezer") brings together hundreds of country music enthusiasts for pickin', fiddlin', grinnin', singin', drinkin', and deep thinkin'. Newly met strangers, once they begin playing music, behave like lifelong friends before they've reached the first chorus of a familiar tune. What makes them friends (besides friendliness) is their love for these chord changes, lyrics, and melodies, plus the ad-lib tinkles and plunks they are able to weave into the sonic tapestry.

Let's wander some more around these grounds where Weiser's agricultural institute once thrived. My watch reads 10 p.m., but the solstice twilight is lingering stubbornly here on the western edge of Mountain Time Zone. Above your left shoulder notice the scythe-like new moon skimming down over Oregon across the Snake River. As we walk, look down and notice all the personal belongings that are lying around, held safe enough by the honor system that fiddling brings to town.

Here beside this next tree we come upon another fiddling session. Listen carefully for a minute. Do you feel the past in your chest? The present in your head? The future in your feet, itching to dance? This is music as real as it gets, flowing right here in front of you, into you, through you.

These sounds won't last long here in the Weiser twilight, and our memory of this evening will fade, though perhaps you have been permanently touched by some lively refrain. Fiddling music seems to sound best when not confined too much, and how much freer could it have been than in tonight's open air?

It's getting dark. The jam sessions are breaking up. Musicians and listeners are heading back to their campers and tents. Best we go home now with fresh hummings in our heads.

Crisis: Its Causes and Effects

From Ignorance to Freedom

by Alan Harris

**Pain kindly wakes up stupidity
Lest it slumber through eternity.**

WHAT CAUSES A CRISIS? Such a question may at first seem unanswerable because there are so many different kinds of unpleasant situations into which we humans can get ourselves. In one word, however, the real culprit is probably ignorance.

Ignorance, as used here, does not imply a lack of formal education, since one frequently sees highly educated persons getting into serious personal crises. Real ignorance is a lack of understanding of the law of cause and effect in our own lives. Many of us seem to think that we can do whatever feels good--acquire wealth, achieve status, pursue romantic conquests, eat heartily, and so forth--often at the expense of others, without ever having to concern ourselves with the consequences of such living. We foolishly ignore the karmic wisdom expressed in those popular phrases: "What goes around comes around." and "Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap."

Pain, unpleasant as it may be, is our stern benefactor. It teaches us vital lessons as to the conduct of our lives. Feeling pain means that something just isn't working and that it's time to change ourselves or get help through another's experience. Getting help is a wise first step toward overcoming ignorance. When we hurt and really need the help, we listen attentively with mind and heart. We begin to learn those lessons which will prevent us from getting into similar predicaments later on. Some of us have to suffer consequential pain over and over before we are finally ready to seek out its causes. But eventually we say "Enough!" and get to work.

What if the crisis is not our fault, we might ask. Frequently a crisis victim who thinks himself to be blameless will lash out at society, chance, God, fate, the system, his family, or whatever other abstraction it is most convenient to blame. But the threads of cause and effect are many and multicolored. Our puny minds can hardly know for sure how or when an effect will blossom from a previous cause, nor what combinations of circumstances are being dealt to us by our own past choices.

We are the masters of our future because we are free beings, but we are equally the slaves of our past and must pay folly's price.

Helpers in many different roles are available to give us the timely aid we need when in crisis. There are friends, psychiatrists, pastors, counselors, teachers, crisis line operators, doctors, nurses, social workers, and numerous other sources of reeducation when we are up against a wall. If we will only ask them, they can help us overcome that ignorance which has, at least in part, caused us our present agony.

Situations are many and varied, but it is safe to say that a situation never becomes a crisis until it involves pain. Pain spurs us on to *ask*, and exactly at that point is where solid and beneficial learning can begin. Whatever our diplomas and degrees, this is the only real learning. It is this learning that sets us free. Ignorance, mistakes, pain, learning, freedom--so goes the eternal cycle of human evolution.

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Contemplating September 11, 2001

Wiping Dust from Our Eyes

by Alan Harris

THE RECENT SHOCKING ATTACK on the innocent in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania is another manifestation of evil among many examples throughout history. Evil (alias the dark forces, cruelty, hatred, separateness) will perhaps always be humanity's unwelcome gadfly as we evolve, but evil cannot be the ultimate victor because its assumptions about physicality and separateness become, in practice, self-limiting.

The creative human heart is eternal, I suggest, whereas evil's destruction is like dust thrown into our eyes. Our newest war is not geographical but spiritual, and we can help each other by looking within, striving heartward, and purifying ourselves of irritation, anger, and hatred, all of which are bombs inside our own beings.

If the unity of humanity can be viewed as an emerging fact and not merely an ideal, we have a new opportunity to remove some dust from our eyes and see more clearly our destiny of joy.

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Coming Home from the Parade

Can We Live Without Images?

by Alan Harris

IF ONE EXAMINES his own thought, he may find it to be entirely made up of images. The images may be visual, tactile, musical, sexual, egoic, gustatory, and so on. Life for humans consists of a succession of these images that overlap, interweave, and contradict each other. And the mind is not content with the images it has. It builds or seeks out new images to experience and add to those that already make up the consciousness.

Each person has an overall self-image which consists of all his collected images from the outside combined with his inner psychological or egoic images. The psychological images and those collected from the outside may be mixed inseparably as a complex network of sensations, aspirations, regrets, and memories.

The thirst for new images may be termed desire, seemingly a universal condition among human beings. Desire sets up a subtle interplay between psychological and remembered images. Images may take on a pleasurable, neutral, or painful aspect, depending on the person's own self-image and his physical characteristics. Desire influences the personality toward pleasurable and familiar images. One wants to have more images like the known ones that have been pleasurable, and one wants to avoid the repetition of remembered pain.

There is seemingly an inborn desire in each human for psychological security. But security is not only elusive on the physical and psychological levels, it is only temporary even if attained. Each person looks to his images for his security. He has an image about his house, about his car, about his spouse, about his family, about his bank account, about his job, and certainly about himself. But inwardly he fears that this frail network of security is like a spider's carefully spun web, which the next gust of wind or passing animal may destroy.

Rituals and beliefs are units of sequential images which become familiar and therefore seem to offer security. They also offer an arena for pleasurable activity that builds on and reinforces the current belief system. Whether belief systems are built from inside or adopted from an external source, the individual sets himself up to be led by an authority who has more knowledge, more images, more experiences to share about these beliefs. In the physical or psychological presence of this authority one feels secure because the authority is perceived as farther along on some linear continuum or path. The follower wants to be not where he perceives himself to be, but where the authority is. Since he can't be in both places, he is subject to subconscious nagging by a self-created and unresolvable conflict.

Concepts are interlocked sets of logical images formed by a more or less fixed pattern of mental action. The bookstores and libraries of the world are filled with both visual images and verbal concepts which lead one almost anywhere he desires to proceed, at least in the arena of knowledge and so-called psychological progression.

Some people seek security by surrounding themselves with many books in the home, more books than it would be ever possible to read in a lifetime. Security is sought in the sheer volume of agreeable concepts and in the comfortable feeling that one can choose from many mental paths in the future.

In the universities of the world, students and professors alike feed and grow on a steady diet of images transmitted through books, word of mouth, and various other media. These images serve to prepare students for the vocations, and their careers will bring in still more collections of images. University study brings a parade of comparisons and choices, but always between images. Students learn to build, receive, blend, and retain their images, and finally package themselves in a cap-and-gown image for presentation to the market place.

What is missing, one may ask, from the parade of images within which humanity passes its days and expends its energy? It can be seen that the comfort or relief offered by images is always temporary, yet every attack of pain or boredom sends a person out for more images, and they are everywhere to be had.

Is there a true security which is somewhere other than in images? One might reply that there is security in love or in God. But upon examination, one may find that love and God are merely words, collections of images and concepts based on thought and conditioning from without. Is there a security that is entirely free from images, from concepts, from time, from place, from physical and logical desire, from inertia, from boredom?

How to find security is a question asked directly or indirectly by most thoughtful persons. Abhorring this vacuum, gurus, psychologists, metaphysicians, philosophers, scholars, priests, economists, politicians--authorities of every kind--have rushed in with their various formulas for security, few of which agree. The answers they give are mostly more images and concepts that build upon the old ones, more formulas for progression toward psychological triumph, more academic courses for intellectual distinction, more schemes for monetary prosperity. A follower of such authorities may, with great effort, achieve some kind of temporary security, but eventually a loved one dies or an economy crashes or a war begins, and he finds himself asking the same question again: where is my security?

Can one drop images entirely? Is there security in no images? One might reply that the human body can survive only through the sensory images that help keep the organism regulated. Allowing for the essential physical images, can one drop all psychological images? One may discover that not only do these "me-related" images fail to bring security, they can lead to wasted energy, baffling complexities, painful insecurities, and even despair.

Can there be a psychological transparency which does not hold onto "me-related" images, yet which allows the natural sensory images their necessary functioning and interplay? For example, can one experience another's anger fully and not hang onto or nurse a psychological image of this anger? Can one experience intense pleasure and not hold an image of it or crave its repetition? Is it possible for one to drop his psychological self-image completely?

If all psychological images are dropped, what remains? Perhaps nothing--at least nothing knowable. But in that nothing might there not be complete security? Not

psychological, not physical, but complete? To a mind steeped in images, the image of nothing might be ugly or frightening. It threatens all tradition, culture, and personal experience, and therefore one wants to drop it immediately. Then drop it. Can one drop even the image of nothing? Is there a nothing which is not an image of nothing, but a true nothing? Can this nothing somehow understand completely all the somethings and make room for a love beyond images?

What would happen in the world if each person could instantly understand the parade of images that comprise his life--understand the desires that lead to more complex images, understand the false security that images and desires bring? If each one could just watch this parade, not as a judge from the reviewing stand but as a participant in it--simply watching it and then coming home--would the life of humanity be transformed? And where would home be, if not in some parade? Can a mind saturated with images come home from the parade and find truth?

Can one drop everything to gain nothing, so to speak? Can he drop his clutter of psychological images to find a nothing which is understanding and love, a nothing which is also the unknown? And if he does this, will anything at all be lost?

Any answer offered here might only be another image or concept, but if each person would explore for himself his stream of images with no reliance on any authority or any book, where could be the harm?

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18 Rules

1. Love truth.
2. Welcome folly.
3. Distrust goals.
4. Laugh deeply.
5. Farm money.
6. Die daily.
7. Give forgetfully.
8. Digest adversity.
9. Bury ambition.
10. Scrutinize motives.
11. Carry silence.
12. Befriend nature.
13. Work restfully.
14. Touch hearts.
15. Trust emptiness.
16. Avoid advising.
17. Break rules.
- 18.

Cottonwood Seeds

Airborne Immortality?

by Alan Harris

AS I OFTEN DO, I'm looking out my east window above my desk, and I'm fascinated by hundreds of fluffy cottonwood seeds from the neighbor's tree as they drift close to the window or swirl far out over the yard. Depending on the changing winds, they are myriad like snowflakes for a while, then become absent completely.

Today I won't rhapsodize much on cottonwood tree seeds, although they certainly can inspire a rapture. One might say that these seeds are merely a device to further cottonwoodism. They do form out of tree egotism, don't they?

The neighbor's tree wishes to make the whole world into a cottonwood forest by means of these thousands of seeds it is producing.

Most people, too, want some kind of immortality, whether heavenly or earthly, such as through their gene pool, artistic creations, memories, or large recognized donations and bequests. Someone once said that in the eonic future, when the universe is coming to an end and only one last fragment of rock remains rolling in space, most people would secretly like to have their name carved upon this rock.

What are the benefits that earthly kinds of immortality will give us? Any? Granted that they offer other people some benefits such as allowing new people to exist (birth), making others feel better (art), or disseminating the social easings and enhancing that monetary donations enable.

What of our heavenly immortality? Yours. Mine. Do we have it? Do we know of it? Some claim to know of it. Others "know" they know of it and never grow tired of telling whoever will listen. They give lectures or sermons, and they cite books and relate experiences conjured up from their meditations or their hopes. Do they really know? Or, does their knowing end about where yours and mine does, at the shore of a massive ocean of unknowing?

Short of knowing, do you and I somehow feel immortality from within? Of course, we can read books about it until the libraries melt, and we can listen to the voluble gurus until they warm the crematoriums. But we have within us an intimation of beyondness. The thinnest word in the English language, "I," denotes an ego which may wish to expand into forever, with or without a harp. But does merely having this intimation make that dreaded black oblivion impossible after death?

I don't know. No container in me holds the answer. I do observe a certain phenomenon, however. I observe how a cottonwood seed flying over my yard knows already how to be a tree--just add water. I observe how my grandson, after only three body- and brain-building years on earth, can startle others with skills seemingly pulled out of the air. Is he remembering these skills somehow?

In earth life, something's remembering. Something's recapitulating, growing, learning, and surpassing. Whether this something is an oversoul or individual souls, or both, is not clear to me. But, as much as I don't know, I do feel secure that in dying, my body will do just what it is supposed to do. And I don't think that my soul, mystery though it be, will cling for long to my ashes.

Cottonwood seeds have filled the air once again outside my window, swirling about like stars in a galaxy. If a seed knows how to be a tree, what does a planet know how to be? What does a star know how to be? For that matter, what does a human know how to be? Somehow I feel that we are very, very safe within a flow that never ends. But I don't know--do you?

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Intelligence "Out There"

Will Outer Space Be Found Within?

by Alan Harris

ISN'T IT A BIT ODD that we humans are wondering lately whether there could be intelligent life elsewhere in the universe? By elsewhere, we usually implicitly mean elsewhere than in the human race, which seems a shame right off the bat, since this attitude ignores a possible intelligence in each tree, animal, rock, and planet, for starters.

Next, we wonder how to communicate with this possibly existing intelligence which we imagine as somewhere "out there" in space. We listen with our mile-wide radio antennas, and we send out cryptic symbols attached to our interplanetary spacecraft bound for unknown reaches outside our solar system. We speculate that since there are so many billions of stars out there, at least one of them must have an earthlike planet on which there is a humanlike life which may be further advanced than we are, and which has been trying for centuries to get in touch with us even as we fiddle with our radio apparatuses and antennas.

Most people of this mind-set fail to stumble upon one possibility which seems so obvious once it is considered. That is: perhaps these intelligences are about us all the time, have instant and intimate access to our innermost thoughts, and are constantly communicating with us--successfully!

Perhaps there is nothing wrong with building huge radio telescopes to discover the physical realities of our universe. There are plenty of things to study "out there." And perhaps one day our scientists will receive a stray communication from some ham operator in another galaxy who is just trying to send a CQ across his own planet. Perhaps he will even be saying something intelligent which can with great effort be translated. But what then? What if he should give us some exceedingly wise axiom or theorem? Would we believe him? Or would we say (if we didn't comprehend what he said) that he is only of an inferior intelligence, but thanks for calling, bye?

Would it be too revolutionary to suggest that each of us may be an amalgam of intelligences? Of course, we each probably have our own unique root intelligence, but what if that is being added to not only by our daily bumbings, bawlings, and joys, but also by others who have chosen as their intelligent work to aid us from behind the scenes, right here and right now? They can't be seen, you might say, so therefore one has no proof. How can one prove that there is "other" intelligence in this universe, and that it is right here?

By way of reply I might ask you how one can prove a sunrise, how one can prove that a bird is singing, how one can prove that there is such a thing as love or electricity. There is a certain inner calling, inner love, and inner intelligence that drives this whole great soft subtle machine, and it seems to permeate the cosmos from the outer physical layer through our most subtle thoughts and intuitions. It is not necessary to prove something that proves itself by its manifesting in every moment. Love may have no wheels or cogs, but it simply is. Intelligence does not

may have no wheels or cogs, but it simply is. Intelligence does not need a high score on the SAT exam to exist. It is.

We need not look far to find extraterrestrial intelligence--it is only as far away as a kind act, a painful lesson, an intuitive perception, or a kiss in the dark. None of the above are confined to a mere physical lump spinning around a single white-hot sun. They belong to, and offer hints of, the Ultimate Intelligence.

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Clouds

A Study in One Act

I've opened the curtain of my east window here above my desk, and I sit now in a holy theater before a sky-blue stage. A little cloud above the neighbor's trees resembles Jimmy Durante's nose for a while, then becomes amorphous as it slips on north. Other clouds follow, big and little and tiny on their march toward whereness. Wisps of them lead or droop because there must always be leading and drooping.

The trees seem to laugh at the clouds while yet reaching for them with swaying branches. Trees must think that they are real, rooted, somebody, and that perhaps the clouds are only tickled water which sometimes blocks their sun. But trees are clouds, too, of green leaves-- clouds that only move a little. Trees grow and change and dissipate like their airborne cousins.

And what am I but a cloud of thoughts and feelings and aspirations? Don't I put out tentative mists here and there? Don't I occasionally appear to other people as a ridiculous shape of thoughts without my intending to? Don't I drift toward the north when I feel the breezes of love and the warmth of compassion?

If clouds are beings, and beings are clouds, are we not all well advised to drift, to feel the wind tucking us in here and plucking us out there? Are we such rock-hard bodily lumps as we imagine?

Drift, let me. Sing to the sky, will I. One in many, are we. Let us breathe the breeze and find therein our roots in the spirit.

I close the curtain now, feeling broader, fresher. The act is over. Applause is sweeping through the trees.

Echoes of Earlville

Home Town Hankerings

by Alan Harris

WHEN SOMEONE FIRST revealed to me that I lived in Earlville, Illinois, I had no inkling there was ever any other place to live. Show me another town where trains would wail from creek to crossover, glissando-ing like slide trombones.

I remember winter nights in bed when long steam-engine whistle toots would bring about deep slumbering--reliable as lullabies.

Soon progress dared to usher in the brassy, strident dissonance of diesel horns, "long-long-short-long," which set the window panes a-buzz.

Percussion also spread through town from near the Farmer's Elevator--during harvest rush, staccato pops from John Deeres lined up near the scales sent complex polyrhythms further east than the Legion Hall.

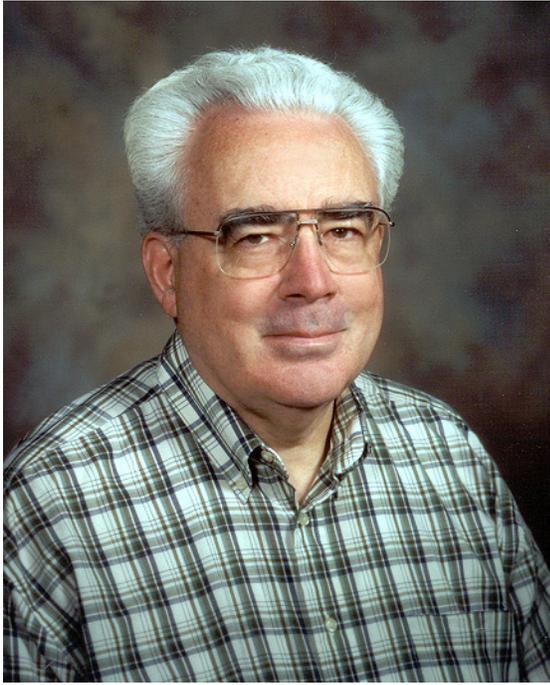
Earlville was small, so most knew most--for everybody's good, it seemed. Few homes were listed, bought, or sold without a buzz of estimates proceeding through the telephones. Transgression stories relayed at the noisy downtown coffee shop made patrons want just one more cup--and filled the owner's till enough to pay the waitress and the cook.

In Earlville, peaceful though it was, occasional embarrassments were held quite close to home and hearth. Shrewd townfolk having secrets knew the power that perfect silence has, so that even at the coffee shop no mortal ever was the wiser.

I wonder whether Earlville now is still the way it used to be. Are the same things happening today except to different residents? Do trains still pound those west-end switches, filling town with jazzy rhythms? Do policemen cruise the streets at night and watch for tavern stragglers who think booze helps their driving skills?

The Leader prints the deaths of friends I used to work and joke beside, their laughter now a memory. Obituaries fail to tell the grief and joy these townfolk knew. If Roman Catholic, they find eternal rest on holy ground off Union Street just east of town. For Protestants and "faith unknown" the Precinct is the plot of choice, out by the blacktop south of town. I'll join my townsmen there someday when hidden forces that I trust decide it's time I go back home.

Although I can't be sure I'll hear those trains at night from where I rest, the living folks will surely hear them on and off between their dreams. As each nocturnal freight train bawls through town, then fades out west or east, light-sleeping heirs to Earlville's past will pull their covers up a bit, turn over, and go back to sleep.



About Alan Harris

When Alan Harris was born on Sunday, June 20, 1943, his father, Keith E. Harris, was piloting a B-17 in bombing missions over Europe while his mother (Margie) worried about Keith lovingly from Illinois.

Schooling in Earlville, Illinois (Alan's home town) was interesting, useful, and generally free of creativity (do what the teacher says, get the good grade). From 5th through 12th grades he played the trumpet in the school band and enjoyed the contest trips. His father drove a school bus as part of his living (farming was the other part), and if Alan happened to ride on his father's bus, he had to very much behave.

Illinois State University was where Alan became chagrined over how a student with a full class load could possibly keep up with all of the assignments given in said classes.

He felt he was a pawn in a game, but with judicious time-shuffling and corner-cutting he plowed along and made respectable grades amidst all the worries.

A bright spot at ISU was taking a contemporary American poetry class with Dr. Ferman Bishop. Through him Alan discovered depths in poetry that he had never dreamed of while in high school. E. E. Cummings took him for zingy flights of in-your-faceness. T. S. Eliot, whose symbols even had symbols, fully baffled him. Robert Frost was slyly charming. Emily Dickinson's mastery of rhyme and meter for conveying soul and spirit made the young poet's heart go funny. Alan started "being a poet" in his sophomore year (1962) at ISU. Poetry had been previously unneeded in his life but now was available to contain parts of his soul that he hadn't realized were there.

After graduating from ISU in 1966 there was the little matter of having to earn a living, which took the form of two years of high school English teaching, three years of tuning and repairing pianos, and (after a 1976 MS in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University) about 25 years of computer work (mainly programming, in-house computer teaching, and Web development—for Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago).

During most of that vocational stint before retirement, Alan continued to write poems. Even with the whirl of commuting it was still possible to emote at home. He launched his current Web site (www.alharris.com) in 1995 with a few poems, and eventually has populated it with almost everything he has written. As a poet, essayist, story-writer, and photographer he has spurned the print publication route, having seen the excruciations gone through by other writers trying to make a big name and big money for themselves via magazine and book publishers. With the Web, there's instant publication, moneyless communication, and a worldwide potential audience. Of course, the literature has to stand on its own feet to get readers, but it's always there for those who seek it, or just happen in, or get sent in.

Alan met his wife Linda at ISU in 1962 and they were married in 1966. Linda has worked as a school speech therapist, insurance medical office worker, and medical transcriptionist, in addition to being a conscientious wife, mother, and grandmother. They have a son, Brian, who is a Tucson percussionist.

