

Let's imagine for a moment that the room around us is alive. That these walls have memory, that this floor pushes back up against your feet at every step. That each chair is its own being, cradling you with warm intent. That the air and light travel with purpose to fill your lungs and eyes. That all those elements are active participants in the reality of this room, along with the ostensibly more conscious and important participants, which is to say, us.

And walking outside, we encounter a living sky and earth, filled with living beings, our relatives, who are deep in conversations that we can hear, if we pay attention.

The slow voice of the mountains, the dancing feet of the clouds sounding on the air, the singing of the green leaves as they follow the sun.

Such an idea would have been – and indeed still is – a basic understanding of how the world works to indigenous peoples. And to most of our ancient ancestors as well, no matter where they came from.

Because all them were immersed in what we now call Nature, and were deeply dependent on the generosity of the web of life. And because they saw the other beings in the web of life as having dignity and being worthy of respect, they treated them that way.

When Western biologists first went exploring in the Amazonian rain forests, they asked the local shamans about their use of medicinal plants, information that the shamans were then happy to share. Then they asked them HOW they came by this knowledge, and the shamans said, "We took this one plant (psychoactive), communed with the other plants, and they told us."

A great deal of what the plants told the shamans turned out to be true.

There was a deeply felt reciprocity with the generosity of the natural world. Never take too much, so that the world could regenerate and the people and all beings could thrive. Other beings – plants and animals - were seen as being equally entitled to that generosity.

Although we're told not to anthropomorphize these beings, I say go ahead. These relationships are personal. These are our cousins, after all.

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A few years ago, biologists began taking a look at what really goes on in forests. What looks like individual trees competing for light and resources are actually complex communities that trade information and nutrients underground. Trees of the same species growing close together will sometimes fuse their roots and exchange materials. And seedlings of different species can share nutrients via mycorrhiza, the symbiotic fungi that grow alongside and between tree roots.

Together, the trees and the fungi and other organisms co-create a stable, healthy forest.

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We are also learning that our bodies and health depend on billions of bacteria that line our guts and cover our skin. Without them, we wouldn't be alive. They are co-creators of our existence.

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As we begin to understand all this, I think we have to ask, How does this inform our spiritual experiences and our understanding of religion?

For a long time, a couple of different ideas have informed the way we understand these things.

The first of these is called the perennial philosophy, which underpinned a great deal of religious thinking in the 18th and 19th centuries, and it heavily influenced the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists. It is a philosophy whose influence we still feel today.

Perennialism envisions a single preexisting spiritual ultimate which can be directly known through spiritual experience. This knowing provides us with direct access to 'things as they really are', the ultimate nature of reality and our innermost identity. Central to this view is the idea that once we lift the manifold veils of cultural distortions, doctrinal beliefs, our ego projections, our sense of separate existence, and so forth, the doors of perception are unlocked and the true nature of self and reality is revealed to us in a liberating insight. In the classic perennialist view, every spiritual tradition leads to this identical, single ultimate. They are like different paths to the top of the same mountain.

We're all getting to the same place, just in different ways, so a certain amount of universalist sentiment and camaraderie is possible with other people and traditions.

Another possibility that arises from this view is that each religion is only seeing one aspect of the ultimate, and so has an authentic but limited perception of divine reality, producing only a partial understanding of the universal truth, which requires syncretism to achieve a complete understanding as well as a path towards salvation or spiritual enlightenment.

This leads us to the old folktale about the blind men and the elephant, each of whom thought the elephant was like different things, a snake, a tree, a rope, a wall. None of them can agree, so they start fighting.

The second idea is that spiritual phenomena are individual inner experiences... it's all in our heads, basically. Experienced by each of us alone, and having no external validity.

So what if all of that is wrong?

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A few years ago I encountered the work of the transpersonal psychologist Jorge Ferrer, whose ideas transformed my thinking on this subject.

The short version is this: *No pre-given ultimate spiritual reality exists, and that different spiritual ultimates can be enacted through intentional or spontaneous co-creative participation in an indeterminate spiritual power or Mystery.**

A key phrase here is "different spiritual ultimates." We aren't all trying to get to the top of the same mountain. There is no mountain.

There is only an indeterminate and dynamic Mystery that has no pre-given ultimate state to be revealed.

The other keyword is enact. The various traditions lead to the enactment of different spiritual ultimates, spiritual liberations, and/or disclosures of reality. (Revelations)

Although these spiritual ultimates may share some qualities, they constitute independent religious aims whose conflation may not be justified. What they generally share is the intention of leading the participant away from self-centeredness to larger and larger circles of awareness and concern, a liberation from limiting perspectives and understandings.

Ferrer uses the metaphor of an ocean, the Ocean of Emancipation.

And the Ocean of Emancipation has many shores. The enacting of different spiritual insights and ultimates requires specific mystical teachings, trainings, and practices for each. We might say that particular 'rafts' are needed to arrive at particular spiritual 'shores': If you want to reach the shore of nirvana, you need the raft of the Buddhist dharma. The Catholic raft takes you to the Catholic shore. And if you want to realize knowledge of Brahman, you need to follow the path of Vedic study and meditation, and not the practice of Tantric Buddhism, devotional Sufi dance, or psychedelic shamanism.

And these enactments are not just in our heads.

Spiritual knowing is not a mental representation of pre-given, independent spiritual objects, but an enacting, the bringing forth of a world or domain of distinctions co-created by the different elements involved in the participatory event. Some central elements of spiritual participatory events include songs and rituals; sacred objects; sacred places; individual intentions and dispositions; cultural, religious, and historical frameworks; other beings; and, most importantly, a dynamic and indeterminate spiritual power of inexhaustible creativity – the Mystery.

*The participatory nature of spiritual knowing refers to the role that our individual consciousness plays during most spiritual and transpersonal events. This relation is not one of appropriation, possession, or passive representation of knowledge, but of communion and co-creative participation.**

Enacting - bringing into being together. Just as the forest, just as our bodies and our symbionts.

Participatory knowing is transformative at least in the following two senses. First, the participation in a spiritual event brings forth the transformation of self and world. Second, a transformation of self is

*usually necessary to be able to participate in spiritual knowing, and this knowing, in turn, draws forth the self through its transformative process in order to make possible this participation.**

For those of us who see our daily lives and experiences as some expression of the spiritual, there is little division between ordinary experience and spiritual experience. From this perspective all experiences are transpersonal phenomena, and involve all the senses, the body and mind, and everyone and everything involved in the experience.

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Although the metaphor of an ocean with many shores is helpful to illustrate the variety of spiritual ultimates, it is ultimately inadequate to convey the participatory and enactive nature of spiritual knowing advanced by Ferrer. As with all geographical metaphors, one can easily get the mistaken impression that these shores are pre-given, somehow waiting out there to be reached or discovered.

This view would automatically catapult us back to a kind of perspectival perennialism, which accounts for the diversity of religious goals in terms of different perspectives or dimensions of the same pre-given ultimate. Like the story of the blind men and the elephant.

No, these shores are brought into being through enactment in a participatory relationship with the world. They did not exist before, and will cease to be when they are no longer enacted.

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In the participatory view, our spirituality is developed and revealed primarily in relations with other beings, things, places, and ideas. If you regard spirituality primarily as the fruit of individual practices, such as meditative attainment, then you can have the gross anomaly of a "spiritual" person who is an interpersonal oppressor, and the possibility of "spiritual" traditions that are oppression-prone.

If you regard spirituality as centrally about liberating relationships, then a new vista of participative religion opens up, and this calls for a radical restructuring and reappraisal of traditional spiritual maps and routes.

Ferrer argues that our goal can never be simply the recovery or reproduction of some past sense of the sacred, for *"we cannot ignore that most religious traditions are still beset not only by intolerant exclusivist and absolutist tendencies, but also by patriarchy, authoritarianism, dogmatism, conservatism, transcendentalism, body-denial, sexual repression, and hierarchical institutions."* *

Put more bluntly, the contemplative traditions of the past have too often functioned as elaborate and sacralized techniques for dissociating consciousness from brutal social realities.

It is, after all, very easy to be emancipated from "the world" or to become one with a deity or ontological absolute and leave all the world's grossly unjust social structures and practices comfortably in place: Racism, gender injustice, homophobia, religious bigotry, colonialism, caste, class division, environmental degradation, etc.

A perennialist ultimate reality that locates all real truth in the "One" is now superseded by a world in which the Real reveals itself not in the Savior or the sacred text or the Ultimate Reality, but in radical relation and the sacred present. Consequently, our religious life cannot be about returning to some golden age of scripture or metaphysical absolute; it is about co-creating new revelations in the present, in critical interaction with the past. Such a practice is dynamic, uncertain, and yet hopeful—a tikkun-like theurgical healing of the world.

The metaphor of an "Ocean of Emancipation" is also problematic in this context. If traditional spiritual paths first define that which they then liberate from, then those enacted spiritual ultimates may actually be less liberating than we think. From modern perspectives what most of the religious traditions have meant by "emancipation" or "salvation" is not at all what we would like to imply by those terms today.

A more useful term than emancipation or liberation (which are always an emancipation or liberation from something) might be that of transformation - transformation into.

If spiritual realities are co-creative enactments, what matters is not who has the "Truth" or what set of beliefs or system comes closest to it, but how cooperatively and creatively we act together in enacting a just and sustainable world. The Ocean of Transformation awaits us, and we cannot navigate it alone.

The participatory vision also reframes our relationship with the divine, from that of children or subordinates to a Father/Mother/Higher Power, to individuated adult beings in relationship with the Mystery. Since the Mystery is indeterminate, no individual, group, or system of belief may claim authority over others in the name of the Mystery. The top down authoritarian model of divinity is replaced by a more equal partnership with the divine and a co-equal redistribution of creative power.

Sacred immanence, wholeness, and relationship are central to the participatory vision.

Universalism is thus revealed as a dynamic process we share in, and with, the Mystery. Universalism is still present, but it can no longer be seen as the highest expression of the One, but rather as existing only in a dynamic relationship to pluralism; as a deep and ongoing interplay among the Many.

This phenomenal world is now seen as an innovative process of being and becoming, not a place to be liberated from. This dance reveals an endless creative power seeking to more fully manifest and embody all forms of being and knowing, subject and object, love and wisdom - through intimate dialog and communion.

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In the Mountains and Rivers sutra, Master Dogen wrote:

The appearance of the mountains is completely different when we are in the world gazing at the distant mountains and when we are in the mountains meeting the mountains.

John Daido Looi Roshi has this to say about these lines: *The nature of the mountain is completely different when we have separated ourselves from it as observers, and when we are the mountain with the whole body and mind. When we are intimate with something, it no longer exists and we no longer exist. There is no way to talk about it, to judge it, to analyze it, or categorize it. It fills the whole universe.*

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In closing, I leave you with these words: Intimacy. Communion. Co-creation. Transformation.

*Quotations from:

Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality
by Jorge N. Ferrer, SUNY Press 2002