

The Casual Alchemist

*Trail Markers for Spiritual Explorers,
seekers, elders, outliers, caretakers, the
wounded and the healing.*



Thin Places 2018 and 2019

*a term from Celtic spirituality --indicating places
in nature, and spirit, where the veil between this
world and the Other, is “thin” and offers a new
perspective.*

*The Night, Memory, The Sting, Empty,
Poison Ivy, Vultures, Walls*

Reconnecting with Night

At least a third of our life is spent in The Night, that thin place which has always disturbed and terrified humans. Dwell for a moment on your own experiences of the night: night skies, night air, nightcap, nightmares, nightshift, night watchmen, night sweats. There are struggles around night and its different ways: adjusting to darkness, getting to sleep, staying asleep, noises, pains, the internal voices, the reviews, the dreams. Mythology is quite rich and deep in naming those fears and shoals we still encounter every night.



The Greeks had Nyx as the Queen of the Night. She had been born from Chaos. Her large dark wings protect sleepers and allow visits from her many children. Let me introduce a few of the seventeen: Oizys, is the primordial goddess of miserable

distress, anxiety, grief, depression.

Her twin brother is Momos, the fault finding and humorously disagreeable god of ridicule, sarcasm, blame, disgrace. Sound like some of your middle-of-the-night visitors? But all were not terrible.

There was Hemera who always brought Day after Night; and Thanos who brought a peaceful death; and Amor (love) and Philotes (friendship). This wide ranging cast of characters and characteristics emerged before Christianity sorted such things into good or evil, black or white. Before that, they were just what was, and known as **daemons**, but not demons. We've kind of lost touch with these simply regular, natural forces, sometimes dark, usually impersonal and not within our control. They are the many parts of our creative unconscious.

Our age has medicalized these energies of the Night into insomnia and sleep disorders, 80 different ones so far, and prescription medicines for nearly all. Holistically, there are ways to reconnect with The Night.

Accept the invitation of The Night and its different ways – like it's a drive-in movie or a trip. Be curious about the impersonal intelligence of sleeplessness and what moves in through dreams.

Get back to the more original, normal rhythms of human sleep, actually two three-to-four-hour sleep times: The first deep, dream-laden sleep and then a time of awake to share dreams, read, study, play, have sex. Then back to sleep for the second or “morning” sleep.

Genesee 8 5009w

Memory is a Thin Place, at times a deep, dark forest, equal to any National Park.. What lurks?

On Christmas, my 91-year old uncle called to say Merry Christmas. I returned the sentiment and simply waited. He said he'd been calling many people and I was the only one who answered. He had tried calling my mother (his sister), who'd died 20 years ago. He said he'd tried reaching his parents. I said they died many years ago. I did give him the number of my 86-years old aunt who was likely at home. He asked what her husband's name was. I told him and said he'd also died years ago.

“Have we talked lately?“, he asked. I said yes we talked yesterday when you called to wish me Happy 70th Birthday. He was surprised. “Really, We talked yesterday? I don't remember that.”

I said, Yes, You were amazed that “Little Danny” had suddenly gotten old and told me “Wow, 70, really? You're still a boy in my mind.”

He did not seem embarrassed or agitated by this mix of the past and the present, the living and the dead, the remembered and the forgotten. Indeed, his sister, his parents and yes, Little Danny were quite vital in his mind, “alive” in a certain way.

That very day, I'd been reading James Hillman's 1999 book on aging, called The Force of Character. It's quite a radical take on what are often seen as the

failings of old age. He turns them into other understandings and opportunities. About this kind of memory “loss”, he says it’s a release and relief from the tedious details and differentiations of adult life which are no longer needed; That this lack of discrimination helps you do your late life work of slipping into that thin gauzy place of The Ancestors, where you are blending, blurring, fusing with the whole Family Tree; that the activity of late life is a digesting process, a weaving, tasks quite different from those of mid and early life.



I cried a bit after we hung up, not so much sad as touched to have contact with this time-traveler. Later, I remembered the long-gone phone number of my grandparents: *Genesee 8 5009w*. It’s now in my iPhone Contacts.

The Shock of the Sting

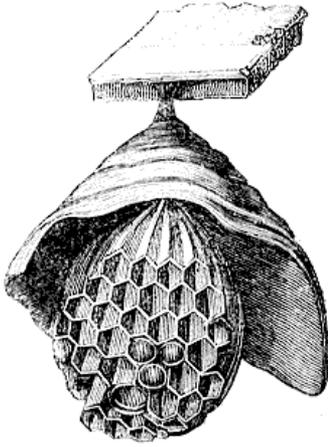
For those of us who pay attention to accidents and coincidences, a hornet sting might be an occasion of interest. So when my wife got stung on the head by a hornet in September, it got my (and certainly her) attention. A basketball size paper nest was right there, hiding in plain sight on Rhododendron branches about 8 feet above the porch and driveway. Each trip to the car was now taken as a threat by the likely 300 White Faced hornets just finishing off their life cycle. We learned to take the longer way around.

Besides the surprise and pain of the sting, there was the primal alarm. DANGER! YouTube offers many versions of Angry Man Warring with Hornets. Pseudo-scientific warriors with torches, foam, sprays, brooms and, the favorite, baseball bats. All take aim at the bulby grey buzzing alien in the yard, threatening children or just property rights. The frosts of early November render the hornet's nests lifeless. No baseball bats are needed. The fertile queen has left and burrowed into some leaves to wait out the winter. And she will not return to the old nest.

In spring and summer, hornets help with pollination and feed on flies, caterpillars and ants. Ah, but they themselves, in that Great Chain of Being, are favored by the praying mantis, dragonflies, beetles,

moths, birds, frogs, bats and more. And those soft, delicious little hornet larvae, tidied up altogether in the nests, like so many Altoids, are hunted by skunks, raccoons, weasels and even humans, in Asia.

When I saw this nest again, in early November, the



winds and rains had sliced off the bottom. It was still very intriguing, with that grey marbled paper fused around branches and leaves. In the open part, I could see the remnants of the hexagon cells, with a few dead larvae still

attached. The architecture and construction of these nests is amazing: both strong and delicate, its beautiful honeycomb a symbol of life. How do they know how to do it? I clipped the branch it was on and it's now above the worktable where I used to build furniture. It's there to remind me of the fleeting order and beauty and inevitable disorder that follows. I look forward to the Spring.

Empty containers as possibility

I am starting to downsize. As an aging sculptor and rustic woodworker, I have the expected tools, sticks, logs, driftwood and hundreds of found objects. But what I am also discovering –everywhere - are empty containers: big, small, covered, uncovered, take-out containers, nut containers, wine boxes and fruit crates; cardboard, metal, wood, black, white and clear plastic. Seems my favorite now are those small glass yogurt jars.

Let me try to untangle how this happened. The collection grew quietly. There were endless small choices: recycling? or will I need this sometime? In my defense, weakly, I only saved containers that had some design merit: they were lightweight or trim or sealed well or stacked well or were black and would look good with a white label.



Perhaps I am just a good boy scout, ever-ready, always-prepared to withstand inevitable disorder. Empty containers are emblems of a hopeful future. They wait, as potential, not deprivation. As long as it's empty, there's the possibility it can be filled with the best, the rarest. Always a future promise to manage the disappointment of a regular present. I have been studying alchemy for the very same 20 years as the containers were collecting around me. Actually, many containers had gotten filled and labeled: lead, mercury, ash, air. Maybe there's a connection. Alchemy is the elegant combination of head, heart and hand. It's a process, like breathing, that never ends. It's the exercise of the intuitive, the spiritual and the technical looking for the "entwined and dramatic life of matter," as Mircea Eliade, a groundbreaking historian of religion, put it. It involves containers or "alembics" – obsolete for flasks or beakers – to cook, store, display the discoveries. But as any alchemist knows, s/he is really the fundamental alembic. S/he changes as The Work proceeds. The Work is always on your Self.

This very day I am trying to finish these notes, I find myself rummaging through the recycling bin admiring two shoe boxes my wife threw there. I have now taken these wonderfully strong, handsome empty containers to my workshop to join many others.

Obviously, this is not yet over. And listen, I have extra alembics. If you'd like some, let me know.

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I write this with itchy, blistered hands, the result of an encounter with poison ivy. Before you go feeling all sorry for me, I was an enthusiastic partner in this. I sought it out; took risks, tho' ill-advised. My life with poison

ivy goes back at least 40 years. In the early 70s, I sat in a patch of it while fishing. "Lounged" might be more accurate. A very serious all-over-the-body case. That really started my fascination, and obsession, with it. I became hyper alert to seeing it, finding it, telling other people about it and then trying to pull it out. A fool's errand. It is stronger than I am. It is perfect Trickster plant, hiding there in the Vinca, deliberately keeping its leaves as small and as vinca-like as possible; or there, in the wild strawberries with dull serrated leaves. It's a cousin of cashews and mangoes. That sap can stay potent for years! But I go on too much.

My plan of attack is quite simple and often ineffective. On one arm, I put one of those long plastic bags that newspapers come in. Off I go.

Grab, grab, yank, yank. Oh, but it's a vine and one pull often loosens a whole dangling trail of connected plants which more often than not brush up on the upper part of my arm. Sometimes those flimsy bags tear right away and I get intimate with the poison ivy immediately. Well, no matter. I'm practiced at Magical Thinking, a belief that real world cause and effect are, well, an illusion. I magically think that I have always just narrowly escaped all that sticky urushiol; that it went the other way, to the Other Dan Mack. But I do always wash up right away with Brown Soap. *More Magical Thinking?*

There is no known value for poison ivy for humans - except offering lessons in frailty. So in my recent epic battle, I left this elegant little plant right next to this Buddha as a reminder of the many Teachers in this life. And you, your life with poison ivy?



These two vultures live in an abandoned shed in Sugar Loaf, NY. Around the Lower Hudson Valley, we have either Turkey or Black vultures. These are Black with a 4' wing span, shorter than those red-headed Turkey Vultures. The population of both seems to be increasing a bit, according to the local Audubon Society. But vultures or buzzards still have a bad reputation. It's understandable. We usually see them at work: plucking and tearing at roadkill. That plays right into our most primal fears of the unknown. But they are very social creatures

and often just feed together. That's called a *venue* of vultures. When they are airborne, either circling carrion or gracefully riding the air currents, that's a *kettle* of vultures. Though they are around death, they rarely kill what they eat, but do a great service cleaning up what has been killed and has started to rot. That's their main benefit to the ecosystem: to aid the health of other living beings by limiting the spread of carcass-borne diseases like anthrax, rabies, botulism and cholera. Their digestive system is high in uric acid which kills these pathogens and sterilizes the environment. But there's more than science about the vultures. *Ex damno alterius, alterius utilitas* "From misfortune of one, advance of the other." They epitomize the interdependence of all god's creatures. They embody, literally, the contradictions of life and death. They symbolize purification, a letting go, a dying.

And for us land-locked humans, their airborne grace and economy is humbling. They use air currents and gravity to glide effortlessly on the winds using little or none of their own energy, just the energies of nature. Finally, they use the sun to dry feathers each morning and sterilize their heads from the work of the previous day. Truly a creature in tune with the elements. Saturday, Sept. 8 is International Vulture Awareness Day. (*Yes, it was big news to me, too.*) I'm planning a celebration with other vulture enthusiasts. Costumes? Dances? A bit of roadkill sushi? at that shed in Sugar Loaf. I saw them there just a few weeks ago. We scared each other. *Interested?*

Long before the Border Wall,

fences have been provocative: keeping something in or out; the good side, the bad side. The idea seems to slice the world into two clear pieces, us and them. Life is more complicated and subtle than that.

Young Robert Frost got right to it in his 1914 poem, **Mending Wall**. *Look it up.*

In recent years, I've been experimenting with fencing that does not immediately scream **Keep Out**. It started after the Tropical Storms Irene (2011) and Sandy (2012). My village property was strewn with downed trees and snapped branches. I began by just tidying up the fallen branches in piles near the property line. I'd clip or chainsaw them as straight as possible. The stacks kept growing all along the back of my property, then the side, then along the back of my neighbor's property and recently onto the local Community Center where there's a Nature Play area. I now call them "Debris Fences"

Debris Fence Building is a dreamy, meditative activity well-suited to people who want to try to make order and beauty out of the random elements of nature. Debris fences can be short, tall, thin, fat, straight, wavy and curving around trees and over rocks. They quickly become home to chipmunks and fox and woodchuck burrows



Deer can usually jump them easily and have been heard laughing as they do it. Debris fences are in perpetual state of decay, returning themselves into the earth. They ask for a bit of care, more debris and restacking. This makes them offensive to Fence Traditionalists who believe that a fence should be strong and forever, made from riven Black Locust or Red Cedar logs, not windfall Norway Maple twigs.

This is a very different approach, softer, gentler and playful. It's Organic. Come, take a look, and smile, at the 3 Pines Nature Place at the Warwick Valley Community Center.