

Body of Light
The Spirit of Matter
by Todd F. Eklof (09-07-03)

During a walk in the park yesterday my children and I happened upon a statue of Pan, a Greek nature god. If you're not familiar with this delightful character, he's a small boyish figure with goat legs and two horns atop his brow. He carries a flute of reeds in his hands which he notoriously uses to harmlessly frighten wayward travelers, causing them to *panic*. I remember several years ago a coworker told me that he and a friend had been walking through this same park one evening when they happened upon a large group of pagans, nature worshippers, preparing to celebrate the summer solstice. "Come worship with us," one of the friendly pagans suggested. But the two young men thought the whole thing rather strange and decided to continue their walk instead. They eventually came upon a clearing where they stopped to stargaze, enjoying the view for quite some time until it was interrupted by the inexplicable and encroaching sound of a flute. As the unmistakable sound grew closer, the two young men began feeling uneasy and decided it was time to find their way out of the woods. But the farther and faster they walked the louder and closer the music became. Before they knew it they found themselves so frightened that they were running to get away from the mysterious noise.

I responded to this odd story by saying, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you had an encounter with Pan, the god of the forest who likes to panic wayward travelers with his flute." Upon hearing this the young man's eyes bulged in shock and disbelief.

"When we finally found our way out of the woods," he said, "we were standing before a statue of Pan."

This is a good story to begin with because it suggests, in a *Twilight Zone* sort of way, that Pan is still out there watching over the forest. Perhaps, in this particular case, he played his trick on these two young men because they rejected the opportunity to pay nature its due respect by refusing to worship with the pagans. But they ended up encountering the divinity of the forest whether they wanted to or not.

Our dismissal and rejection of nature's importance, however, is often much more severe than just neglecting its significance, which, given the great ecological crisis we are in today, is bad enough. Not only do we collectively reject the importance of nature, we too often demonize it as well. Somewhere along the line the features typical of Pan, his goat feet, pointed tail and horns, became characteristic of the Christian Devil. To the Christian world, in which our western culture is deeply enmeshed, everything in nature, including our own bodies, is the epitome of evil. This view seems so far askew from the reverence and dependence our ancient forbears had for nature that they might have said Christianity has a backward view of nature. Indeed, if you reverse the word *devil*, you have the word *lived*, and the word *evil* becomes the word, *live*.

So how did we arrive at this point, wherein nature, the very source and sustenance of life, has become so reviled? Perhaps it all began with the Romanization of Christianity.

As historian Thomas Cahill points out in his book, *How the Irish Save Civilization*, "To Roman citizens, the place to be was a Roman city or villa. The *pagus*, the uncultivated countryside, inevitably suggested discomfort and hardship."¹ In short, Christianity was a religion of city-folk who looked down upon and even feared the ways of their country cousins. As Cahill mentions, the Greek word for the uncivilized countryside is *pagus*, and those who lived there were the *pagani*, from which we get the word *pagan*. They were considered, as Cahill puts it, "country bumpkins, rustic, unreliable, threatening."² Indeed, the city-folk were so fearful of journeying into the country, that is, the chaotic untamed territory beyond the control of Rome, that the areas depicting them on medieval maps were often marked with the foreboding words, "Here do be monsters."³

Neither of the greatest molders of Christianity and the modern Christian mindset, the 1st century Apostle Paul, or Augustine, the famed Bishop of Hippo, who lived during the 4th and 5th centuries, ventured beyond the Greco-Roman controlled territories. Augustine, especially, influenced by the popular platonic idea that the soul is separate from the body and matter is separate from spirit, developed an increasing disdain for all things natural. He came to view sex, in particular, as a necessary evil that should be used as sparingly as possible, and only then for the sole purpose of procreation. Keep in mind that Augustine was the first to formulate the *doctrine of original sin*, which not only makes the claim that we live in a fallen, and, therefore, evil world, but that sin itself is passed on from person to person through the act of sexual intercourse. So, according to the Christian mindset, sexuality, perhaps the most profound force of nature within us, an experience that is at once extremely pleasurable and life sustaining, has become reversed to mean something vile and evil. Toward the end of his life, Augustine went so far as to describe a woman's embrace as "sordid, filthy, and horrible."⁴ To the Augustinian mind, infants must be baptized so they don't burn in Hell because they are born dirty little creatures in a sinful world. Sin itself is physically transferred from one person to another through sexual fluids. Today Augustine would probably call sin a sexually transmitted disease! But, as filmmaker Luis Bunel once said, "sex without sin is like an egg without salt."⁵

In truth, a young married Bishop named Julian once argued with Augustine concerning his views on original sin, infant baptism and Hell, by accusing his God of being a cruel tyrant. He went on to admit that he had sex with his wife whenever he felt like it. To this, as Cahill points out, Augustine exploded, "Really, really: is that your experience? So you would not have married couples restrain that evil—I refer of course to your favorite good? So you would have them jump into bed whenever they like, whenever they feel tickled by desire. Far be it from them to postpone this itch till bedtime: let's have your 'legitimate union of bodies' whenever your 'natural good' is excited. If this is the sort of married life you lead, don't drag up your experience in debate!"⁶

We should also keep in mind that Augustine's conversion came after a life of wild physical experimentation and promiscuity. "I sought every pleasure—the countryside, sports, fooling around, the peace of a garden, friends and good company, sex, reading. My soul floundered in the void—and came back upon me. For where could my heart flee from my heart? Where could I escape from myself?"⁷ His answer to this plaguing

question came when he overheard a child singing an unfamiliar song, "Take, read, take, read." Taking this as a sign, Augustine opened his Bible and read the first words he saw, from Paul's letter to the Romans, "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof."⁸

So it seems Augustine learned to escape himself by escaping his body which, in modern terms, seems closely akin to what today's psychologists call Dissociative Disorders, wherein the soul, or *psyche*, flees the body. These include *Dissociative Identity Disorder*, more commonly called *Multiple Personality Disorder*, *Schizophrenia*, which literally means "split mind," *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*, which separates a suffering individual from the present through flashbacks, and *Dissociative Fugue* wherein one simply forgets painful memories. The word *fugue* comes the Latin word meaning "to flee," from which we get the word *fugitive*. So, it could very well be that for the past 1500 years, westerners have become fugitives from our own bodies, influenced by Augustine's own psychological need to separate himself from his own passions.

Fortunately, modern science is giving us reason to rethink the significance of our bodies. If we agree with the physicists that all matter is really "frozen light"⁹ as David Bohm suggested, and that matter and energy are interchangeable as Einstein discovered, then perhaps we have reason to conclude that our bodies, along with the natural world itself, are as much a part of spirit as anything else. These ideas give us reason to rethink the 1500 year old Augustinian paradigm so that we might begin to see the natural world and everything in it, including our own bodies and passions as part of Divine goodness.

You might be surprised, as was I, to learn that in Jewish mysticism the greatest sacrament is considered the sexual act. As Kenneth Rexroth wrote in his introduction to A.E. White's book on *The Holy Kabbalah*, "Over the marriage bed hovers the Shekinah"¹⁰—God's glory. But how difficult it has become for us to appreciate the possibility that God is present when we are making love, two people entwined at once in the heat of passion, and the warmth of tenderness, in the gross exchange of bodily fluids and the spiritual exchange of the utmost pleasure and ecstasy. The 1500 year old Augustine in us is sickened by this suggestion and asks how we can possibly arrive at such a vulgar conclusion. But the mystic in us wonders how we could have possibly lost sight of this time honored truth, that life is not evil, and that our bodies, with all their passions and fluids, are created in the very image of God, and God is present in them.

This awareness is evident in other spiritual traditions and practices that seek to put us back in our bodies. Yoga, Tai Chi and Chant are good examples of physical practices that call the dissociated soul back to the body. Rumi's relation to the Divine is filled with passionate expressions like "Drink *all* your passion, and be a disgrace... Taste the lovers mouth in yours... Love is musk. Don't deny it when you smell the scent!" We should also remember that the Priapus was the Pan of ancient Asia Minor, a short pot-bellied God of the garden who walked around with a constant erection. The word *Pan* itself means *all*, as in *panorama*, and it is clear Pan was the lover of the garden, nature and the entire creation. In one story, for example, his lover was turned into a reed. To console

himself, Pan cut the reed and turned it into his flute. Pan makes music of his love! He sings it and shouts it! When another of his lovers was blown over by the wind and crushed by a stone, Gaia, the Earth Spirit, turned her into a pine tree. Pan/Priapus is the lover of the garden, of plants and trees and of the figurative garden guised in our genitalia.

Perhaps my favorite image celebrating passion is the burning bush Moses encounters. The burning bush itself may be a metaphor of heat and sexuality. More importantly, it represents the union of both matter and light, $E=mc^2$, the transformation of matter into energy, of body into spirit. Remarkably, however, the bush is not consumed by the fire. This is a fire that does not burn. A burning that brings no harm. Surely Augustine got it wrong, and 1500 years of shame also has it wrong! The natural world, including our body and its passions are not only a Divine gift, but the very manifestation of God! Like the burning bush, our's is a divine passion that does not bring harm.

How different the past 1500 years may have been if on that fateful day, rather than opening his Bible to the pages of Paul, Augustine had stumbled upon the first words of Creation, "God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good."¹¹ And how different the next 1500 years might be if we open our minds and hearts and bodies to those words today.

1 Cahill, Thomas, *How the Irish Save Civilization*, First Anchor Books Trade Paperback Edition, March 1996, p.107.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 108.

4 Ibid., p.66.

5 Perel, Esther, *In Search of Erotic Intelligence*, **Utne**, Sept.-Oct., 2003, p.68.

6 Cahill, *ibid.*, p.65f.

7 Ibid., p.41.

8 Romans 13:13-14.

9 Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p.53.

10 White, A.E., *The Holy Kabbalah*, University Books, New Hyde Park, New York, NY.

11 Genesis 1:31.