

Looking Ahead in Spiritual Evolution

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Paschal Paradox: Reflections on a Life of Spiritual Evolution

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Chapter 10 – Holding Integrity in a Liminal Impasse

For me, writing is not about gathering facts, wrapping them in lucid thoughts, then getting them down on the page. It begins by dropping deep into my not-knowing, and dwelling in the dark long enough for my eyes to adjust and start to see what's down there.

—PARKER J. PALMER

In the opening chapter, I described my first arrival in the city of Dublin, fascinated by the orange-colored neon lights along Mount Merrion Ave. Young men from the countryside often came to the city for work. Some settled in well; others did not. For me it marked the transition into some of the most fruitful years of my life. In a very real sense Dublin became my new home. And my adult self began to grow and blossom.

Several years later, the millennial year of 2000, I landed in another city, greeted once more by neon lights. It was Manila, the capital of the Philippines. In those days they did not use a jet-bridge, so we stepped off the plane onto the tarmac. Looking at the main building, the word *Mabuhay* bounced out at me, and without any idea what the word meant I knew it was a warm greeting.

I stood on the tarmac and gazed around. It all looked so familiar. Momentarily, I doubted my own memory as I thought back on what countries I had visited, and this was certainly not one of them. As I entered the arrivals hall, I was greeted by warm smiles, by people I had never seen in my life.

Being my first time in a strange country, I had arranged to stay with a group of Irish Columban missionaries in Singalong St., Malate. But, in fact, nothing felt strange. As I walked the nearby streets, it felt as if I had known this city all my life. Nor was there any hesitation in exchanging greetings with the people who spoke to me. Filipinos are renowned for their friendly spirit, and that was my experience from the start. There was, however, also a strong sense of homoerotic attraction, the meaning of which would only emerge some years later.

ENCOUNTERING FORMER LIVES

In September 2003, I learned of an American healer who was visiting London, where I lived at the time, specializing in chakra healing. I decided to have a consultation in the hope of better

understanding a recurring bowel disorder. After an initial introduction in the consulting room, the healer asked me to confirm my name and give my date of birth. She then went on to explain the process of reading my chakra field. She sat a short distance in front of me and with her eyes closed began reading my chakra energies.

After about ten minutes of silence, she began to explain that my heart chakra looked quite dark, gray, and heavy. A lot of energy concentrated there, and it needed releasing. Among the possible causes she suggested were influences from past lives (a concept I had encountered when I studied psychology but to which I never gave much attention). She informed me that she was picking up extensive information on my former lives, which she shared with me.

I was a monk in the Middle Ages heavily involved in the study of the vowed life, a topic on which I did extensive research and writing.

She then opened her eyes and looking straight at me said: "And I get the impression that you have been doing similar work in this lifetime." Wow! Spot on! How on earth did she know that? We had started the session as complete strangers to each other. How much more does she know about me?

She detected former lives of mine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when I had a keen interest in both spirituality and science, and particularly the integration between the two, which incurred disapproval from specialists in both disciplines. That observation left me wondering how that former life impacted my current interest in science and spirituality.

Then came what can only be described as a bombshell. I had spent a number of previous lifetimes in the Philippines, during which I had several intense, complicated human relationships, many of a homosexual nature. At that stage in her disclosures, I felt like running out of the room, and she probably picked up my discomfort as her feedback moved on to how I might try to integrate all that former experience into my present life, thus lifting some of the dark cloud surrounding my heart chakra.

My initial visit to Manila and all the strange familiarity that had baffled me began to make sense. By the time the session with the healer in London occurred, I had made three visits to the Philippines and was now enmeshed in a few intense homoerotic relationships. It took another three years to deal with those intricate issues. It was intensely emotional, but, paradoxically, it drew me into deeper levels of spiritual awakening. Fortunately, back in London, I had a very skilled spiritual director who accompanied me through a difficult discernment process that often was both exhilarating and bewildering. Essentially I was undergoing yet another paschal journey.

THE EXPANDED SELF

Millions of people acknowledge that we live at a time of great change; by trusting more deeply in their adult selves, many seem to be able to ride the tides of our changing times. We seem to

judge the forces of change, however, largely by external factors, be it in information technology, economic shifts, or political process. One wonders how much attention we are giving to changes coming from within. How many among us are even aware of these? And when we do become aware, how well can we articulate this evolutionary unfolding?

In chapter three above, I noted the shift from the strongly individualistic identity, promoted by Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, to the more relational one encapsulated in the phrase: "I am at all times the sum of my relationships and that is what confers my identity as a person." Despite the fact that the relational construct is widely recognized in the social sciences and among many therapists and counselors, in the public arenas of education, politics, economics, and religion, the earlier model of the robust individual reigns supreme. Meanwhile there is a rapidly evolving sense of personhood, of which connection with former lives is just one aspect.

There is a subtle but substantial shift going on here, one that is likely to become more visible and culturally accepted as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. In many ways it might turn out to be one of the more formidable paschal journeys that we will have to negotiate in the next few years. I highlight briefly three developments moving us in this new relational direction: the protean self, the cyborg, the rainbow body phenomenon.

An American psychiatrist, [Robert J. Lifton](#), popularized the idea of the *protean self* to denote the postmodern tendency to become fluid and many-sided in our attempts to engage the flux and fluidity of our age. Named after Proteus, the Greek god of many forms, the Protean is characterized by a tendency to forgo the certainties and securities of the past, engaging instead in continuous exploration and personal experiment. Lifton contends that the postmodern self is less traumatized by modern rootlessness than we might expect, continually refashioning integrity by an ability to stay on the move between partial, incomplete, and irreconcilable realities. While this fluidity is often associated with the superficial posting of images on social media, we are dealing with an evolutionary development needing a much deeper assessment of what is at stake.

Another take on this same phenomenon, albeit with a technological rather than psychological focus, is the notion of *the cyborg*, sometimes described as the post-human. A cyborg denotes a cybernetic organism, a person with both organic and biomechatronic body parts. The term was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline and popularized by the American feminist social scientist [Donna J. Haraway](#). Beyond the integration of multiple personalities, as in the protean self, the central issue here is the expanded notion of self, beyond an exclusive organic identity to that of the integration of human and machine. An example that every reader will understand is that of the pacemaker, given to regulate human heart function. Let's suppose that my doctor recommends a pacemaker to regularize my heart condition, and having refused the offer, I die some months later, aged sev-enty-two years old. Now supposing I accept the pacemaker and live to be eighty-five. To use traditional religious language: which was God's will for me—to die at seventy-two, or live on until eighty-five? The pacemaker is not merely a piece of medical technology; it becomes an integral dimension of the life force at work in my entire being.⁷⁸

For most of our contemporaries there is no dilemma here. To accept the pacemaker seems to be the obvious and responsible thing to do. But how many among us realize that we are fundamentally changing what it means to be human? Some fundamentalists might claim that we are playing God. It strikes me that this is an evolutionary development that God wishes us to accept and promote.

It opens up, however, a proverbial hornet's nest. According to the futurist [Ray Kurzweil](#), by 2040, many of us will be able to go to a doctor's office and order a range of nanobite technologies (entities invisible to the human eye) that a doctor will be able to insert into our brains in order to alter one or more aspects of our behavior. I suspect this will already be happening by 2030. Might this also be God's will for us, an evolutionary advance that is ultimately for our good? Or is it the beginning of a slippery slope leading to ultimate perdition?

The great fear is this: *In whose hands will this technological power be held? And what are the ethics that will guarantee its responsible use?* How do we negotiate relevant ethical standards in a world where the traditional guardians of morality—namely, religion and the church—no longer command credibility? In several cases, they don't even understand what is evolving. Ethics and morality are now in the hands of secular powers, not necessarily governments but rather mega-corporations, for whom voracious consumption and financial superiority are the dominant values.

My third example comes from the Buddhist tradition of Asia, popularly known as the [rainbow body](#) phenomenon. In 1998, a Tibetan Buddhist monk named Khenpo A-Chö was able to achieve a metaphysical ancient phenomenon known as the "rainbow body." Although this was the most recent record of a rainbow body occurring, there have been over 160,000 people who have reportedly achieved a rainbow body through the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Dzogchen. [Dzogchen](#) is a collection of teachings and meditation enlightenment. Achieving a rainbow body is the result of reaching a peaked enlightened state and refers to the act of either shrinking the body before death or at the time of death. The shrinking and eventual disappearance of the physical body is understood as a complete transformation into light.⁷⁹

From the Personal to the Transpersonal

On several fronts, what it means to be human is being stretched into new evolutionary possibilities full of promise and peril. The three examples offered above the protean self, the cyborg, the rainbow body phenomenon are merely the tip of a proverbial iceberg. There are also several narratives about former life experiences, largely dismissed, and even ridiculed, by modern science. Rational wisdom cannot keep up anymore. Evolution is plunging us all into greater depths of knowledge and wisdom. Mystical consciousness (as explored by the philosopher [Philip Goff](#)) is leading the way, and if we wish to survive as a species we had better come on board.

Our inherited understanding of personhood is no longer tenable or credible. It is too narrowly functional and individualistic. It needs to be re-visioned in the light of the transpersonal. That will involve a painful dying to what [Herbert Marcuse](#) one time called one-dimensional man, but it also inaugurates the launch of the transpersonal human, and therein lies a more enduring sense of hope and promise.

How we relate, individually, interpersonally, and socially, will need to be reimagined. Most formidable of all is the challenge to deal in a more informed and proactive way in the articulation of human sexuality in this new relational landscape.

BEYOND ARISTOTELIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

For most of our time on earth, we, as a human species, operated out of a very different sense of self. In chapter four, I outlined the Aristotelian definition of the human person as the autonomous, self-reliant, separate, rational individual, which today dictates not merely our anthropology but also our education, politics, and economics. And all the major religions seem to endorse this understanding of the human person. It is a tragic and dangerous departure from the relational self that has characterized much, if not most, of our long evolutionary journey of seven million years.

As a species we are endowed with an inherited capacity for relationality and cooperation. Many among us are not even aware of that fact, and the fierce competition so endemic to our contemporary lifestyles leaves us with a deeply debilitating sense of woundedness. We need to reclaim that which is deeply inscribed in our physiological make up:

The cells themselves are cooperative organizations. Without extensive cooperation between the molecular processes and organelles that make up cells, we would not exist. Each of our million billion cells is made up of thousands of incredibly small and intricate parts that cooperate together to produce the functions of the cell....

We are cooperators that are made of cooperators, that are made of cooperators. It is cooperation all the way down... Wherever evolution has been able to fully exploit the benefits of cooperation, we always find the extraordinary level of specialization and interdependency that results from a high degree of division of labor. We find it within cells, within our bodies, within our social systems, and between nations. And there is every reason to believe it will also be a feature of organizations that are capable of future evolutionary success on even larger scales.⁸⁰ Quote from [Evolution's Arrow](#)

The ethnological data from hunter-gatherer cultures has provided a rich resource from which to surmise how Paleolithic hunter-gatherers structured their reality, living in bands consisting of fifteen to thirty people. Among our human ancestors, the hunter-gatherer band is the oldest known human social structure. There are still hunter-gatherer bands, but precious few, and

many of them are threatened with assimilation. Hundreds of examples have, however, been studied in the past century. Researchers have found that hunter-gatherers tend to live a life of eco-nomic, political, and social egalitarianism.

Central to this egalitarianism is an alternative anthropology encapsulated in this description: *I am at all times the sum of my relationships, and that is what defines my personal uniqueness.* Relationality is central not merely to who we are in the here and now but to everything happening within and around us. Today, we understand this relational capacity not merely as a human endowment but as a resourced gift we inherit from our status as Earthlings.

And beyond the earth is our cosmic identity, woven into the fabric of creation initially from the remnant of dying stars. We are stardust, and it is well beyond poetic license to claim that our destiny is written in the stars. And if we are being re-birthing in a range of lifetimes, might this not also have something to do with the death and resurrection of star energy?

Human beings are not mere organisms, defined primarily by biology and genetics. Nor are we material bodies enlivened by a God-inserted soul. More accurately, we are each a cosmic, planetary process unfolding in time and space, across many generations and several lifetimes. And each time the process unfolds into its cosmic fullness, then we yield to the transformative creativity of the Great Spirit, and our individualized energy fields return to their cosmic origins for the Spirit once more to reweave new embodied possibilities.

It is called reincarnation in some religious traditions and resurrection in others. In both cases, the envisaged outcome is largely if not solely anthropocentric (confined to the human). There is little recognition for the earthly and cosmic dimensions or for the destiny that is written in the stars. The egalitarian grandeur of our being and becoming is almost entirely suppressed. It is the personal devoid of the transpersonal, stripped of the relational empowerment that has made us the unique species we are meant to become.

OUR PSYCHOSEXUAL LANDSCAPE

Sex in my young formative years was a dark, dangerous mystery. Even the mention of the word was prohibited. Many among us, myself included, went into our adult years not merely with suppressed emotion but more seriously with repressed psychic energy.

Repression, it seems to me, is the critical issue. Ever since Aristotle defined sexuality as a male prerogative, requiring a biological organism called a female to fertilize the male seed, we have been incarcerated in a psychic prison breeding waves of repression that have prevailed over several centuries.

For Aristotle, sex has one function only: the reproduction of the species, a biological imperative endorsed by St. Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, by world religions generally, and by many governments till relatively recent times. The human capacity for intimate loving, bonding, emotional nurturing, and spiritual development, which, I suggest, are among the

primary purposes of our sexuality, have been moralized out of existence, feeding the dark repression that has been haunting us until the mid-twentieth century.

When eventually the lid was blown off the repressed boiling cauldron in the 1960s, raw sexualized energy spewed out all over the place. It was not just the young that threw caution to the wind. The frenzied acting-out featured across a much wider age group, as it still does to the present time. Copulation became a response not so much for reproduction of the species but to express the long-repressed hunger for erotic fulfillment: male and female, male and male, female and female. As we moved into the twenty-first century, the experimental climate moved further along as LGBTQI became the synonym for an ever-expanding horizon of possibilities. And as the urge for sexual release became culturally more acceptable, gender identity became the next feature in the culture of super-fluidity

Some people wonder where will it all end. I wonder whether we have even begun the process of responsible discernment—on an issue that touches the lives of every person. Despite the extensive sexual acting out and the sexual liberalism that allegedly characterizes our time, sexuality continues to be subject still couched in a great deal of toxic secrecy. Moreover, as a species we face a huge challenge of psychosexual healing, not merely for the victims of sex abuse, but for all of us who carry hurts and wounds from the centuries of repression.

This has probably been one of the most painful Calvarys that our species has had to endure, and it will take a few generations to move us toward healing and wholeness. I do detect seedlings of resurrection amid this murky background. Even within my own extended family, I see younger people, who fortunately were not trapped in sexualized guilt and shame, negotiating the new sexual landscape with a great deal more agility and wisdom. What to an older generation may seem like loose morals (for example, the extensive practice of co-habiting) is actually a proactive negotiation of a relatively new territory that in time will require a whole new psychosexual ethic.

What that ethic will look like is too soon to speculate. We don't even know who is going to create it or how it will be implemented. I cannot see the major religions making much of a contribution, stuck in a nostalgic dream to revive the monogamous heterosexuality of bygone days. Governments will need to lead the way, requiring politicians who will be sensitively aware of the complex landscape needing attention. In voting for future elected officials we will need to keep this challenge in mind.

Ours is indeed an entangled universe. Nothing makes sense in isolation anymore – if indeed it ever did. We all belong to multiple worlds and multiple selves. Technology will carry this sense of connected multiplicity to new levels wherein the integration of human and machine-what Ilia Delio calls "techno sapiens" —will elevate our interconnectedness to new levels of engagement. There are indeed major cultural and ethical challenges at stake here, but let's trust the Spirit's creative energy at the heart of our evolutionary universe.

FACING MY OWN DEATH

Ever since I studied quantum physics in the 1980s, my sense of death and afterlife changed dramatically. At the heart of this amazing universe of which we are all entangled parts, energy is the stuff that keeps us all going. And as indicated previously, I believe that all energy is energized by the Great Spirit. All energy is sacred.

It is in the erotic, birthing power of such energy that we are all born out of the world (we don't come into it—we come out of it). And in that complex formative process, initially in the creative urge of our parents, then in the fertility of our mother's womb, and finally as we arrive in the realm of space-time, field-influence sorts out how everything falls into place, in the process of birthing new life.

Much of it is obvious and can be observed and measured by humans, but the crucial dimension is hidden. It is what I referred to above as field-influence.⁸¹ Around each of our bodies are a series of invisible energy fields, stretching out for approximately seventy centimeters (thirty inches). Healers work regularly with the field closest to our physical bodies, namely, the aura. Without these energy fields we cannot even exist. They ground us in the universe, connect us as Earthlings to the home planet, and sustain all the energy-based processes on which we grow and flourish from birth to death.

Experienced hospice carers often allude to their experienced sensation of energy disappearing as they sit beside a dying person. In all probability, this is the gradual disappearance of the energy fields, until nothing is left except the aura. Then that evaporates and the person will die shortly thereafter.

Here we run into the limitations of human language. Strictly speaking the energy does not disappear or evaporate. As we know from standard physics, energy is never wasted nor destroyed. Energy will always reconnect with energy and will be transformed into other embodied forms. Therefore, at my death, the energy fields that keep me alive will leave my corporeal configuration (my body) and will be integrated afresh with the great energy fields of the universe.

In this cosmic communion of saints, my evolution will continue. How, exactly, I have no idea, and, to be honest, I have not the slightest worry about all that. I trust the Great Spirit will keep me on my toes as she has done throughout my present life-time.

And after all that? I totally endorse the wonderful declaration from Parker Palmer:

Theologies that portray heaven as a gated community in the sky don't speak to my condition. Among other things, an eternity spent exclusively among members of my own tribe sounds more hellish than heavenly. Nor am I persuaded by claims that, when we die, spirit separates from matter and takes on some sort of disembodied wraithlike life. As far as I can tell, matter and spirit are intertwined

and indivisible, a distinction without a difference, two sides of one coin. If flesh and earth were not infused with spirit, how could we and the natural world be so full of beauty, healing, and grace?...I am certain of two things: when we die, our bodies return to earth, and earth knows how to turn death into new life. ⁸²

How we will be reunited with those we have loved and cherished in this lifetime is a matter I am more than happy to leave in hands of the Great Spirit. She has maintained creation in its erotic birthing over several multiverses but also in the creative energy of every subatomic particle. She knows what she is about—let's trust her creativity!