

# Empowering Hope in Dark Times

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This has not been an easy ten months for the people of this planet or the planet itself. I want to reach back tonight and invoke a vanished tradition, get to the heart of it and try to show how we can bring this forward in our lives to empower hope in the most dark of situations and even make these dark situations the raw material of a clearer, stronger hope than might ordinarily be the case. A few days ago I was talking to a friend of mine and he wanted to tell me the story of sitting in the presence of a 104-year-old Vietnamese monk. The monk had basically kept his mouth shut and hadn't said much around the monastery where he just sort of cleans up, but then he announced that he wanted to talk about meditation and he opened his remarks by saying, "We are all luminous beings. Why, then, do we not appear before each other radiant in our illumination?"

This is the conundrum of life. This is the problem. It was T. S. Eliot who said, "Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow." Why is that? As psychedelic people, this is the problem that we grapple with in our own lives and when we look out at the world. You've heard me say many times: we have the vision, we have the money, we have the technology, but why can we not then appear before each other as radiantly luminous beings, and why can't we reclaim our planet from toxification, disease, overpopulation and bonehead politics? You know the list. What is the hangup here? What is the problem? Why is perfection so distant?

Well, what I've learned from life, vegetables, travel and books can be summed up in two Greek words. It's the central message of the philosopher Heraclitus. He was always my favorite philosopher, but whenever I would read about him he was called "the crying philosopher." I had to live to be 44 years old to understand the poignancy of Heraclitus' message. He said, in a nutshell, *panta rhei*. All flows. Nothing lasts. Nothing is permanent. This is the hardest message life has to teach because what it says is: your joy is transient, your anguish is transient, your fortune, your home, your dreams, your moments of great ecstasy, your moments of great insight and your moments of great empowerment. Everything is flowing through your hands at the moment that you are aware of it.

William Blake, who, in a way, set this engine going a couple of centuries ago said, “What is the price of experience? Is it bought for a song, or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with all a man hath: his wife, his home, his children.” This is not a pessimistic message, and William Blake was not a pessimistic guy. He was the same guy who told us that if we could but cleanse the doors of perception, we would perceive the world as it is: infinite in a grain of sand. How can we take this poignancy, this sense of impermanence, and weld it into something which is paradoxically indestructible and has meaning in our lives, and gives us not only the strength to carry on but also the power to be exemplars? The power to stand up before other people and let them feel the power of vision in the paradox of impermanence in the face of the need for indestructibility.

It was also Heraclitus who said, “All is war.” What he meant was that everything occurs in the presence of its opposite and out of that is generated the friction, the heat and the light that all comes together in an indissoluble package as part of life. What I want to talk to you about tonight, and how it relates to “unfolding the stone,” is the notion of alchemy of all things. Alchemy, as I’m sure many of you know, is really the secret tradition of the redemption of spirit from matter. Many of you may imagine that alchemy is simply a discredited prescientific obsession of unbalanced minds interested in changing base metals into gold, lead into the stuff of commerce. This is the benighted reputation that alchemy has acquired in a century so given over to the literal, the material and the non-spiritual that it has lost all touch with the adumbrations of meaning that vibrate behind the perceptions of the alchemist.

The central conception of alchemy is the conception of the philosopher’s stone. What is it? It’s the universal panacea at the end of time. It’s the chocolate cake that your mother made once a week when you were a child. It is the *panis supersubstantialis*. It is all things to all men and all women. If you’re hungry, you eat it. If you’re dirty, you shower under it. If you need to go somewhere, you sit on it and you fly there. If you have a question, it answers it. It’s something that the human mind senses in itself and related to, invoked and worshipped over centuries before the slow rise of patriarchy, rationalism and materialism turned it into a myth and a fairy tale. It is not a myth or a fairy tale. It is the burning primary reality that lies behind the dross of appearances.

Alchemy is based on a philosophy called Hermeticism that was developed in the 1st and 2nd centuries by Gnostic thinkers — Greeks, Jews, people inside the Roman Empire as it was beginning to show the first signs of degradation and decay — who felt a profound disaffection with their world, a disaffection that on the scale of those times was as profound as our own existential disaffection. The Hermetic philosophers drew back from the rise of Christianity with its doctrine of the fall of man, original sin and the stain of Adam and Eve. These Hermeticists took a different tack and made two points that I think we need to recover and live out for ourselves. The first point was that men and women are divine beings, not lower but higher than the angels. The *Corpus Hermeticum* actually uses the phrase, “Man is God’s brother.” We have no idea what it would mean in our own lives if we could throw off the notion of ourselves as

fallen beings. We are not fallen beings. When you take into your life the gnosis of the light-filled vegetables, the psychedelic plants that have stabilized the same societies of this world for millennia, the first message that comes to you is that you are a divine being. You matter, you count. You come from realms of unimaginable power and light, and you will return to those realms.

The second point that these philosophers wanted to make was that fate can be overcome. Fate can be overcome! Now, for the Greco-Hellenic world, what that meant was the starry engines of the machinery of fate that they saw strewn across the night sky. They were intensely aware of the power of the zodiac, the stellar shells inhabited by demons that extended out to the unimaginable imperium of the All-Father that was beyond fate. Into that world of astrological fatedness, which is such a strong idea for the Greek mind, the Hermeticists announced that fate can be overcome, and they had a novel answer for how this could be done. It can be done through magic, a word not often enough heard in the present world. The overcoming of fate is achieved through magic, and then the stellar machinery becomes not an invasive force into one's life but an empowering force. Now, some of us may believe in astrology and some of us may not, but we are all strongly influenced by the notion of fate and of our powerlessness in an existential world. Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Nature is mute," and we, embedded in the media-dense, message-dense and programming-dense matrix of these hypersocieties that we have created, often feel like hapless atoms running endlessly according to the blueprints and programs of unseen masters. Whether it's the banking industry, Madison Avenue, whoever, we tend to disempower ourselves. We tend to believe that we don't matter, and in the act of taking that idea to ourselves we give everything away to somebody else and to something else.

The rebirth of the sense of the stone and its possibility within each of us entails these two ideas: our divinity and our power to overcome fate. There is no inevitability in our lives unless we submit to the idea of inevitability and then give ourselves over to it. Where can we look in the world to see some confirmation of what I'm saying? How can we draw it down from being the airy-fairy rap of a bardic Irishman? Well, I think that the place to look is history. If you go to the academies, those ivory towers that Tim Leary was talking about, and ask, "What is history?" they will tell you that it is a random walk, an endlessly pointless fluctuation. Empires rise and fall, migrations of people come and go, but it is essentially meaningless. I don't believe this. I don't even think there is strong evidence for it, because what I see when I look at the world — not only the world of history but the world of nature out of which history has emerged — I see novelty. I see something wonderful, maddening, paradoxical, ever-increasing and ever more conserved. Every iota of novelty that comes into existence is somehow saved and passed on. That's why when we walk or drive down Melrose we see Egyptian fashion motifs, we see fashion statements drawn from the 14th century, the 2nd century, Assyria, Egypt and Angkor Wat. All the novelty of history coalesces in the living moment. It's always been that way. Every society in the moment of its existence has lived as a resonance, a completion and a distillation of what has preceded it.

The alchemical idea that spirit can be redeemed from matter begins to get teeth when you connect the idea of spirit to the idea of novelty, which has not ordinarily been done. Novelty is the life of the party, and the life of the party is to be high-spirited. This is what we need to focus on as the thread in the dark labyrinth of the prison of the material world that can lead us back to the light. The universe is an engine for the production of novelty. It always has been, since the first moment of the Big Bang 12-15 billion years ago. Simpler states have been replaced by more complex states, which have then set the stage for yet greater complexity. The drift of this, then, is the emergence of language, tools, culture and higher ideals like courage, love and self-sacrifice. These ideas are not flukes, sports or mistakes. These are further steps along the way in the process of the great alchemical furnace of being: heating and casting, dissolving and recasting, purifying and recasting alchemical gold. Hard as the world may appear, dark as the hour may appear, in reality we exist in a dimension of greater opportunity, greater freedom and greater possibility than has ever been. The challenge, then, is to not drop the ball. The challenge is to know this, to act on it and slough off all the leeches, backhandlers, weasels and cryptofascists who want to deny that and turn man into a machine for their own purposes.

Alchemy has always perceived this and has delineated stages in the transformational process. These stages are worth talking about, not in the details but in the two bipolar states that define this. They used a bastard Latin and they called them the *nigredo* and the *albedo*. The *nigredo* is the precondition for transformation, and what is it? It's shit. It's detritus, it's flotsam, it's debris. It's being HIV-positive. It's being deep into your fourth marriage and sinking fast. It's bankruptcy. It's serum hepatitis. It's the inevitable dark night of the soul that comes upon us; and these dark nights of the soul come on all of us. Nobody gets through this world without a little dung raining down on them. Believe me, you may evade it for decades but then there'll be a knock on the door. It's said that the millstones of fate grind slowly but they grind exceedingly fine.

So what we do with that? The answer is, we welcome it. This is what the alchemists awaited: the *nigredo*, the *prima materia*, the dark matter and the chaos that is the precondition for redemption; and God knows, we've got lots of chaos right now. We've got war, famine, revolution, millions of homeless people on the move. The nation-state is dissolving. The relief agencies of the world can't keep up. The various secret societies, mafias and cabals that have always tried to tie us into chains, they're all working overtime. We are in the *nigredo* condition. Hallelujah. This means that the kissing has to stop but the real fun can begin.

The other end of this bipolar condition in alchemy was called the *albedo*. The *albedo*, the whitening, and that means that out of the chaos can come a new beginning, a new reality and a new hope. These alchemists existed in a philosophically more naive world than we do, so they actually projected onto the processes of matter their own interior psychic condition. They did work with matter and fire, furnaces and retorts, and what they would do is they would take the *prima materia*, lead or excrement or something else, and then they

would heat it. They would turn it to ash and then calcinate the ash or pour solvents through the ash and get an extract, and then heat that and sublimate it. Out of this, almost as a footnote, came modern chemistry, but that was not the important side of it. The important side of it was that they were projecting mental states onto the swirling retorts of their laboratory. It was like a magical mirror for them. It was in fact, dare we say, psychedelic. What “psychedelic” means is getting your mind out in front of you by whatever means necessary so that you can relate to it as a thing in the world and then work upon it.

From the *nigredo* to the *albedo* there were a series of these stages. Now, I said a few minutes ago that magic was the key, and by “magic” I mean the reclaiming and the reconstruction of language to a sufficient degree that it becomes at first possible, then probable, then inevitable to each one of us, that miracles can happen. The Grateful Dead have a song, “We Need a Miracle Every Day.” We do need a miracle every day. Is that too tall an order? I don’t think so. Years ago, one of these talking vegetables said to me, “Mind conjures miracles out of time.” Time is the *prima materia* on which the alchemical process works. The alchemists, again in their naive way, believed that precious metals — diamonds, gold, sapphires — grew in the earth, because from the alchemical point of view everything was alive. The idea that nature, all of nature, is alive; not simply organic, cellular nature, but that the earth itself is a living being. So, mind conjures miracles out of time. The proof that this can be done — and it’s an incontrovertible truth, I defy any naysayer or bring-down to overcome it — is ourselves. We are the proof that mind can conjure miracles out of time.

If it weren’t for us, there would just be birds and foxes, coral reefs and glaciers, but nature was not content with that level of novelty. 100,000 years ago, nature grew discontented. It said, “Let’s raise the ante. Let’s go to higher-stakes poker in this planetary game. Let the monkeys speak. Let them build fires, let them elaborate tools, let them march forward onto the stage of creation.” Remember, I said that the Hermetic faith was that humankind could act as the brothers and sisters of God: not motes in God’s creation, but copartners in the invocation out of being of yet greater novelty. Why? For play, for fun, just the cosmic madness of it all, the pure cussedness of it all, to raise the stakes higher and higher and higher. Now, I keep going back to this thing of, “Can it be done?” I want to convince you because I’m so certain.

I love Herman Melville and his rhetoric, and friends of the whale, bear with me. For Herman Melville, the whale was not the endangered creature it is today. It was the dark, cosmic God of Christianity that haunts us and tries to pull us down. There’s a wonderful speech in *Moby Dick* where Starbuck, the first mate — you remember wimpy little Starbuck, he stood for Christian right reason — he says to Captain Ahab, “To seek revenge on a dumb brute seems blasphemy.” Ahab says, “Blasphemy, Starbuck? Speak not to me of blasphemy. I would strike out the sun if it insulted me, for could it do that, then could I do the other, for there is ever a sort of fair play.” You’ve been told from the cradle that the deck was stacked against you with the fall of man, original sin and so forth and so on. It’s absolute bullshit! There is a sort of fair play, and you can get in touch with that in your life.

When Mohammed wouldn't come to the mountain, the mountain came to Mohammed. That's fair play! If you can have that perception, the world will begin to work for you. It will begin to move toward you as the mountain moved toward Mohammed. The mushroom said to me once, "Nature loves courage." Nature loves courage, and I said, "What's the payoff on that?" It said, "It shows you that it loves courage because it will remove obstacles." You make the commitment and nature will respond to that commitment by removing impossible obstacles. Dream the impossible dream and the world will not grind you under. It will lift you up. This is the trick. This is what all these teachers and philosophers, the ones who really counted, who really touched the alchemical gold, this is what they understood. This is the shamanic dance in the waterfall. This is how magic is done. It's done by hurtling yourself into the abyss and discovering that it's a feather bed. There's no other way to do it.

This is why I have always taken the position that as modern people we can't go out and set armies marching or launch religions — who would want to, anyhow — but to the people who say adventure has fled, that it's all humdrum, I just know that they have forgotten the five grams of psilocybin in their refrigerator. Magellan may have had excitement rounding the horn, but you in your living room later tonight can put him in the shade, if you have the courage to do the things that are necessary to do; and we know what they are. The first thing to do is to tell society to fuck off, because they don't know what's going on. This is a matter between the person and the planet. It is a matter between the person and the planet. All the detritus of history and all the games that people have tried to lay on you, know that they just want to get you down in the ditch they're in. We know this because aboriginal societies have never broken the faith. The living gnosis is still there, and not only for people who paint themselves blue and dance around buck naked, but for us as well. It takes an act of courage, not a weekend at Esalen, and not a trip to the ashram where they tell you that if you sweep up for a dozen years then they'll hand on the whammy. No, the speed with which you can reach depth is under 45 seconds if you know where the elevator shaft is; and you do. I don't have to tell you.

There's one more alchemical metaphor, or stage, that I want to mention here because I think it refers to this psychedelic possibility. Not all the alchemists included this stage in their recensions of the work, but I think it's central. Again in their bastardized church Latin, they called it the *cauda pavonis*, the peacock's tail. Now, the physical basis of this: if you ever played around with metal and fire, there are certain metals that, when they pass to a certain temperature range, iridescent colors play across the surface and sometimes even freeze. In the glazing of pottery at low temperatures in raku, what these pottery masters are aiming for are these wonderful iridescent surfaces that play across the glaze and can then be frozen into it. This is the peacock's tail, and in alchemy this was thought to precede the final whitening, the passage into the pure, and the goal, really. Rather than see the present world as exclusively a vale of tears and a black prison — none of these metaphors are mutually exclusive — the great strength of alchemical thinking, and the way in which it is completely antithetical to science, and in fact why science has so much contempt for it,

is that the alchemists had the wisdom to see that everything occurs in the presence of its opposite. It's not either/or, it's both/and. They called this the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is the coincidence of opposites, the unity of opposites.

This is a great truth, because I think all of us live under the rubrics of, "Am I good or am I bad? Am I lazy or am I obsessed?" The answer is that it is never one or the other. It does a tremendous injustice to being to ignore the unity of opposites. Now, the work of science is essentially a technological work and not a deep philosophical work — it's a minor art, science, that's all it is. It's the art of the physically possible, but it has presumed to be the arbiter of all thought, all feeling, all worth. My God, the hubris of René Descartes to divide the world into the primary and secondary qualities. What are the primary qualities? Motion, mass, spin and momentum. What are the secondary qualities? Color, feeling, taste and tactility. This tells you that you're nothing; you never touch reality, you live in the world of sense, therefore can only aspire to the real world through some kind of mathematical disembowelment of what your own body and what your own feelings are feeling you.

In the *cauda pavonis*, the peacock's tail, this is where the contradictions meet and generate heat and light and an excruciating sense of poignancy, meaning and identity. Our world as we experience it tonight is quintessentially — another good alchemical word — that *coincidentia oppositorum*. Where do we meet this most dramatically in our lives? I think we meet it in the phenomenon of birth. If you had just parked your flying saucer in the bushes and came from a world where sexuality was unknown and people were grown in vats and you came upon a woman in the act of giving birth, it would appear to be a catastrophe in progress, a tragedy at the limits of tragedy. Blood is being shed, anguish is on the surface, real agony pervades the situation, and yet nature in her wisdom has bound pain and ecstasy, death and completion, regeneration and dissolution into that experience in such an indissoluble fashion that no woman can miss the point. Unfortunately men have traditionally averted their eyes, and this has gone on in the hut at the edge of the village. Nobody wanted to be there. Maybe the shaman would be there, but he was loaded in order to be there, and the mystery of mysteries goes on outside the sight of men.

Now in our world we are caught in this kind of metaphor. A cosmic birth, a birth of planetary scale is underway. There is agony; there is no doubt about it. I remember an embryologist who once taught me that the fetus in the womb is literally sculpted by the hand of death. The immature hand of the fetal organism is a webbed claw, and it isn't that the flesh retracts to form the human hand, it's that the cells in between die and slough off into the amniotic fluid and are carried away. Our world is in this kind of circumstance. There are no rational solutions at this point. We are now in the hands of the miracle makers, the shamans, the mind of the planet, the life of the ocean and the atmosphere. It's going to get tougher, so we have to forge the indestructible adamantine stone of alchemical hope, because heavier challenges lie ahead.

100 years from now, 200 years from now, I cannot but imagine that this planet will be empty of human beings; not because we have become extinct, but

because we have gone to our fate. It's unimaginable at this moment because we are in the planetary birth canal. We are at the peak of transition right now and the walls are literally closing in. We are being suffocated. We are fighting like a strangled man to try to save ourselves, yet we have to believe — and I invite you to educate yourself about the history of the planet — there is no reason not to believe that we will come through. There is light at the end of the tunnel. There is a meaning to history, but it's an alchemical meaning. History is a vast engine for the forging of an alchemical humanity.

I don't have the answers, believe me. I don't know whether we go to another star, whether we become eight ångströms high and all live in a block of metal underneath Mount Everest, or whether we march off to the heart of the sun. The scenarios are endless because the human imagination has such a power to bootstrap itself to higher and higher levels. What would Paleolithic man have made of the religion of Pharaonic Egypt? What would the Pharaohs have made of the engines of war and hydraulic machinery created by the Romans? What would the Gothic scholastic Enlightenment have made of the age of cybernetics, psychedelics and virtual reality? The imagination is the alchemical *deus ex machina* that can lift us out of time, out of the *nigredo* of history and into higher and higher states of being.

There is no reason to simply ride along in this process, because another perception of the alchemist that is central to getting all this lined up is the idea of the macrocosm and the microcosm. What does that mean? It means that the world truly is fractal in the most profound sense, meaning that what is going on at some very large scale is condensed, intensified and recapitulated on smaller scales, so that the dynamics of a love affair are the dynamics of an empire. Both are the dynamics of the evolution, expansion and extinction of a species. There is only one way that things can happen, and whether we're talking about microphysical events or the life of an entire solar system, the curve of binding energy is going to be the same. That means that in this redemption of spirit from matter — that is the historical process that we are embedded in — we can do our part by working on our small section of this, which is ourselves.

This is why alchemy was so fascinating to the Jungian psychologists: they saw that this work of redeeming spirit from matter is nothing more than the work of redeeming the self from the contaminated dross of the traumatized and damaged psyche that we each inherit from our passage through the parental shitpile. We each have that gift to deal with. That *nigredo* is within ourselves. That's why we're in therapy, why we take psychedelics or why we meditate. We do this because we all have this dross within us, and this is a great gift. It means that we can begin consciously the process of distillation and sublimation, the casting of ourselves into that golden being, that luminous creature that this 104-year-old Vietnamese monk sensed and evoked to my friend; but it's more than that. We do that alchemical work to perfect our own sense of the unity of opposites and our own sense of the presence of the living alchemical stone within, in order that we may then participate, act in and be part of the transformation of the planet.

It is an immense transformation, and there is no reason to doubt it, because

the emergence of organic life from what preceded it is as dramatic a miracle as anyone could imagine. The emergence of language from mute bestiality, which is only 100,000 years in the past, is as dramatic a miracle as anyone could imagine. The emergence of a planet instantaneously unified by electricity and media — this is only fifty or sixty years in our past and it's still going on — is as dramatic a miracle as anyone could imagine. It's absolutely irrational to not be filled with the fire of consuming hope. You just have to overcome the leveling that we inherit from these empty, existential scientific ideas. When we do that and lift our eyes to the real, living, spiritually empowered reality that exists in nature, in society, in our lover, in ourselves, then you see that the peacock's tail, the *cauda pavonis*, is a transcendental object at the end of time, an enormous unspeakable something that beckons across the historical landscape and that casts a shadow that reaches clear back to the earliest moments of the universe. We have always been in the grip of that iridescent strange attractor. It has propelled our poetry and our art. Our best moments have always been when a tiny scintilla — another good alchemical word — a tiny spark of that alchemical completion burned for a moment in our mind, in our life and in our perception.

We occupy a special position in regard to this. Millions of people, thousands of generations of human beings have come and gone and could only glimpse this in the ecstasy of eroticism, psychedelic empowerment and ritual magic; but we are the last people. Beyond us lies the mystery, if we have but the courage to move forward into that abyss, to believe that nature will reward the dreamer. Then we can complete that wonderful Irish toast which says, "May you be alive at the end of the world." It's that close; it cannot wander much longer. All of the preconditions have been met, and the peacock's tail grows daily whiter, more radiant and more brilliant, as we sense it now breaking into our dreams, breaking into our waking lives, the presence of this attractor. It has always given people meaning but we are the privileged inheritors of that meaning. We have, then, the privilege of putting it all together in one piece and standing ready at the end of history to go into the mystery and be completed.