

II. Excerpts from B.W. Powe's Ladders Made of Water

B. W. Powe

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II. Excerpts from B.W. Powe's *Ladders Made of Water*

Ladders Made of Water is a collection of essays, presentations, poems, stories, reflections on film, fragments and percepts. It was described on Amazon.ca in the following way:

You'll find Included in this collection a selection of public presentations and thoughts on our spiritual and ecological crises, including reflections on Jacques Ellul, Simone Weil, Teilhard de Chardin, Marshall McLuhan and Anne Carson, lyrics for an unfinished rock opera, a dramatic homily on Harry Potter, meditations on Dune Part One, Nomadland and Eternals, poems and the parable "Manna", a Mash-Up of Aphorisms and Fragments, and Biographical Pages on his in-process work Mysteria (<https://www.amazon.ca/Ladders-Made-Water-B-W-Powe/dp/B0BTRTBP14>, accessed Oct. 16, 2023).

B. W. Powe has consented to share with us the following excerpts from *Ladders Made of Water*:

Manna

The Medium and the Light Speech

MEA Conference, Rio de Janeiro Conference, Thursday, July 7th, 2022

The Thin Red Line The Palm-Phantoms

Manna

by B.W. Powe

Part One

Here's a story.
Adam is ailing.
Seth, his son, grieves.
He thought his father couldn't die.
On his bed Adam murmurs something about paradise.
Seth vows to go and find food to heal his father.
He enters through the flames he finds on his way.
(The circle of fire isn't far off.)
The Cherubim admit him.
They don't know at first why they do this.
Maybe to honour a son of the original inhabitants?
Seth returns with food.
The old father touches the food and eats some of it.
Instantly he speaks a language no one knows.
It's beautiful. The others kneel.

Eve eats some of the food and she speaks the beautiful unintelligible language. It has music and echoes.

Adam dies.

Eve prospers.

She travels and sings the language over and over to herself.

Then to the fields, to trees, to birds, to the winds.

Then to rivers and to the seas, to the clouds, and to the moon and stars she sees even during the day.

Part Two

Seth often returns to paradise.

Each time the Cherubim step aside for him.

The flames part.

He brings back more food.

Many eat it.

They continue to speak the new language.

No one has a way to decode it.

They follow the rhythms, the echoes, the rhyming words, the enigmatic sounds. Slowly it begins to make sense, to some.

Sometimes it makes sense only to the people who murmur it.

Part Three

Seth, now old, takes others through the flames to the food. He takes sisters, wives, mothers, daughters, sons, brothers. They change the language when they murmur it. It now carries scents, birth-cords.

Desperate refrains and shadowlands.

Why did the Cherubim hold back the curtains of fire for many?

Cherubim had at last understood that they know the future.

A way to preserve forever and the infinite is to speak with the traces of paradise. The obscurities, the chants, would bring sustenance.

They knew one day the new language would be called something. Have a special name.

The Cherubim conferred.

Try wisdom, one said.

No, try revelation, one said.

Try dreams, yet another said. Why not pathways? another said.

Part Four

The trace of paradise, Seth's great grandson said to other children in a circle. Do you think we should name it?

A word that can be food too.

It could be the sound coming when we ask it to come.

It could be a sound coming even when we don't ask it to come.

Shall we call it the past? or the present? the future? or all three in a new word?

Poetry, a girl said to the children in the circle. Let's call it this.

They repeated the word.

Poetry.

The Medium and the Light Speech

MEA Conference, Rio de Janeiro Conference, Thursday, July 7th, 2022

by B.W. Powe

Gratefully accepting this award.

Gratitude to friends who spoke on behalf of my writing and teaching. Grateful for the grace of this recognition.

Gratefully I'll address the light that keeps drawing me when isolations and disconnections are close, too real.

I speak to you from Cordoba, Spain. Here with my family. Recently, we experienced another round of COVID. All are mending. I'm talking when it's late, after 1 AM. Speaking from what the poets Gongora and Lorca say is *La Convivencia*, where cultures, faiths, lyrics, songs, visions, sites, stories and myths coincide. Nearby the Mesquite domain is home to a church and a mosque, a synagogue ruin, a *zoco* where artisans make flamenco guitars and Arabian drums. I talk from the heart of an ancient city, inside the conduits of the signals linking-dividing us. Lately, I've brooded on the words "remote" and "enmeshed."

It's a spiritual concern to be engaged in asking what despair and desolation will do: what frustration and numbing—the increase of insensitivity among us—what insecurity and unease, exhaustion and meanness of expression—the narrowing of articulate thought—must do. This is part of the effect of living in the after-razed of the Pandemic. But is *La Peste* truly over? What's been done to our senses. Let us recognize additions. World War 3 raging in the Ukraine. Teetering economies. Ecologies in disarray. Authoritarian turns. Extremist threats to trust in democratic forms. Emotional convulsion. Fatigue seizures. Desperate derangements on the world-wide-web. Infections amok. "The world is burning down," says novelist Arundhati Roy.

Yesterday I took my morning walk through the old quarter, across the Roman Bridge by the Calahorra, back to our small flat in the trees by the fountains of the Plaza de Andalusia. I saw reams of garbage. Beer cans. Plastic wrappers. Latex gloves. Masks. Food scraps. Animal droppings. Cigarette butts. Graffiti spraypainted on a wall saying, *Cry Baby-Bitch—Anti Feminista*. Stunned, I glanced at paradise, and saw this.

I've said before, in other places, how it's difficult for me to accept words and stories, essays and expressions, that don't reflect rupture, the cusp of impending destructiveness. Any attempt to address things positively without a sense of vulnerability and of the many who suffer—those who drop trash in a park near paradise must suffer too—seems to me, finally, of little kindred use.

But to express my gratitude for this night of grace, I'll speak two words that I know inspired my mentors. Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye, among them. And inspired

teachers, friends. Colleagues, comrades. Healers, dreamers. Writers, artists. Family members, many who've passed. These have been years when I've experienced too many losses. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can result in painful transits: more losses.

First the word to express what I believe must be said:

“Eudaimonia.”

It means the flourishing.

The other word to complement “Eudaimonia” comes from Hildegard von Bingen: “Veriditas,” the greening.

I see these words implying: the work. I take the words to mean, the alchemical opus of our inwardness, cultivating depths during our time of technological expansion.

The flourishing also means finding channels, contacts, openings, outlets, agencies. Silencing, restricting access to others—these harm our sensibilities.

The flourishing of the work implies:

the vocation of creating...

the honour of teaching...

the channel to a public, even if the readership is small... the welcoming range of possibilities...

And I take “Eudaimonia” to mean:

To have some shelter from the storm. To have care, good health. To have degrees of safety.

To be able to live without the threats of disease and war.

But if we offer hope, it mustn't be a feeble one; if we offer proposals and pitches, they shouldn't be glib.

I learned from my guides, and this ancient city and its poets, and the passings in my life, those I've had the good fortune to know, these ardent essentials—

Education means transformation...

Art means changing perception, cultivating perception and inwardness...

Extension means expansion of our reach, of our senses and minds...

Art and education mean time to reflect, space for one's emotions and thoughts to grow: time to array perceptions, listen for the singing voice: space to work in necessary intervals of solitude...

Extension and deepening, side by side, both moving in wave forms...

But technological innovation shocks us into evolutionary hyperdrive. Whiplash—jetlag are everyday experiences.

Deepening means we cultivate a reflective inwardness.

But relentless extension puts us on the invisible rack—stretching nerves thin. Relentless inwardness descends into withering loneliness. The interval of solitude becomes a gap into which you fall into depression.

Stretching and imploding... The self, seeking transcendence and yet experiencing the magnetic draw toward cataclysm.

The need of our spirit is true: it cries for the middle way—the medium—between the overpowering universal experiences of stretching and imploding.

Our words and teachings, then, in Paul Celan's evocation must be like messages in a bottle washed up on the turbulent shores of our besieged island Earth where communiques swarm and dark-energies like *La Peste*, like the war, loom in our atmosphere. Sorrow could be in the bottle, joy too. Who knows where the words will go? Our connectivity becomes waves, our screen-times become our unmappable shores.

Have I mixed too many metaphors? Reached too far tonight?

“Eudaimonia” may mean, look up—send the messages even in scraps, in the bottles awash on the oceanic—dream well and gaze deep, see-sense again.

Extension means expansion of light, though recognizing that perspectives on light will turn and falter.

I’ve learned some things over the years.

Writing and teaching must be visceral, thus passionate, if they’re to have an effect. And to increase affect and effect—the greening beyond numbing and the impatience that’s a result of racking and straining—is part of why I write and teach. To counter the insensate. I remind myself of this every moment I put pen to paper, when I enter a room to talk. To be in contact with those who struggle. And to witness what we’ve made. Witness the Algorithm: like the power Kafka vividly depicts in his fragment-novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, it hunts us. IT thrives on hurt, need. (If you’re not a little paranoid these days, then you’re missing what’s happening.)

What Simone Weil calls “the embedded self” points to intimate involvement in the process of extension and deepening. Imbedding is the crucial juncture, the tensed engagement and immersion. I write and teach myself into encouragement. I do this by embedding what I can into words and talks.

Rabbi Tarphon said, *“You’re not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”*

This Hebrew Wisdom I repeat to myself when I mourn lost family and absent friends, and I feel prickly, estranged, and I’m depleted, overwhelmed by garbage in the park near the paradise of an ancient city, and when I’m daunted by clouded paths. This wisdom is a vision of how the splendour melds with the media and history we often blindly create, with what both expands and racks our minds and senses. I hold to this: surely “Eudaimonia” means expanding, not expulsion; deepening, not a disappearance into oblivion.

Now in Cordoba’s deep night, I hear dogs barking in the fields around the city. Fire alarms sound in the hills because heat lightning strikes the trees, igniting flash-fires. Friday morning the work will summon me back.

I follow the current. Back to pen and paper. Back to the words. Back to looking for sources that inspire, provoke. Back to communicating to others in our rooms full of crises and connections.

Perceiving, making: legacies that ask us to commune. Yet maybe going far off track is the only way I can go now. It’s what is available to me in our crashing moments. By saying too much I may learn what’s enough and not enough. The medium point, again. “Intolerable insolence,” Ai Weiwei, the dissident Chinese installation-artist, says of the creating process: this means following your inward call and the outward momentum of our immediacies, no matter what comes.

What's ahead? What's calling? Do we fight ghosts? Do we fear meeting the images that merely reflect ourselves? Do we find ourselves fearing the loss of companions and channels? Flourishing, greening—can they emerge everywhere, for everyone?

I know: there's only the work, going up and down on ladders made of water, and often back and forth on routes leading to disputable crossroads made sometimes of fire and always of our breath.

Thank you, all who honoured my work with this award. I bid you a good night.

The Thin Red Line by B.W. Powe

The dream path is a thin red line with many intersections.
The path must be spare because it's harrowed by traps and tangles.

Raging shades, manic outcries—who's to say the ghosts aren't there?

A new dream leads you.
A feverish shadow batters. Leaves and branches scatter, obscuring your steps.

Crossroads keep appearing.

You look from side to side, sometimes looking behind you at distorting shapes, sometimes hearing siren voices.

You falter forward along this path where you worry about manias on each side, a presence of visions ahead.

The Palm-Phantoms by B.W. Powe

“The trees are looking into the water,” your little daughter says.

“The trees are inside the water now,” she says, stamping beside the puddle’s reflections.

She’s quiet for a moment. Then she steps into the puddle and gazes at the shapes rippling and reforming again.

“I wish I could be water...,” she muses. “Like water,” you reply, standing beside her. “Be water...”

“I have trouble keeping up with what you say.” She doesn’t smile. Her face is very grave. “...but...be...,” she says.

“The water.”

“The little pool is holding the trees...”

Now she smiles and moves on, walking quickly to another larger puddle and its dissolving, reshaping reflections.

“Papa, come and see this...,” she says, waving.

“See what?” You walk to where she is.

“It’s happening again over here. The trees have moved to this pool. Look...”

They always become water.”

She reaches into the puddle and stirs it.

“Look at how it all changes again.”

(From *Ladders Made of Water*, new book publication, 2023)