

What is truth?

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And heaved and heaved, still unrestingly heaved the black sea, as if its vast tides were a conscience.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

The altar is a mysterious place. It renders its mysteries only slowly and in stillness. This is why the altar wants to be visited more than once. The religious experience is nourished by its repetition. Religiousness therefore roots in the essence of all things: the sun rises more than one morning; we get to know the seasons through their returning; day and night live by their alternation. The altar gathers the pathways and orbits out of which all repetition can unfold. We come to the altar, leave, and come back. This breathing of coming and going, of appearing and disappearing, gives life not only to the human but also to the divine being. In the interplay of giving and receiving, of concealing and revealing, the divine can mirror itself in the human. For what does it mean to be human? The human being shows and hides itself at the same time. We stand in the world. We live and work in it, experiencing joy and sorrow. That part of us is visible. Another part of us, though, cannot be found in this world. It remains invisible. It withdraws itself. It is there and it asserts itself, but remains removed never the less. This is our spiritual being. We carry this secret part of ourselves to the altar in the Act of Consecration of Man. In doing so, the altar becomes an image of our own being: it is both visible and veiled. It waits and is patient. It grants the fullness of its secrets only to those who return. Faith, Goethe said, is love for the invisible. It is an openness for the secret, a willingness to be addressed. This willingness to receive a revealing word, a blessing gesture, or the silence in between them, is a condition for experiencing the elusive thing that we call truth. For truth is not the mere establishing of a fact. It is not the rendering of a correct assessment or the verification of certain circumstances. Truth is much more than that. “The truth is not a fixed system of concepts that can manifest itself in only one way, but is a living ocean in which the spirit of man lives, and that can bring forth waves of the most different kind at its surface.”¹ (Rudolf Steiner)

¹ GA 6 *Goethes Weltanschauung*, Kapittel 1, *Persönlichkeit und Weltanschauung*.

The notion that truth is not correctness but a deep, moving force with a surface and hidden depths, opens up new possibilities of thought. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was able to delve into these possibilities with pertinent skill. Versed in Greek, he let the original words speak for themselves. Truth is called *aletheia* in Greek. This sparked the imagination of Heidegger. Because for the good listener this means, that according to the Greek truth meant bringing something or someone out into the open. The word *aletheia* is a compound of the word *Lethe* and its negation, *a*. In Greek mythology the *Lethe* is the river that brings forgetfulness. In that respect it is the counterpart of the river *Styx*, that brings remembrance. Just before a human being is born, he or she wades through the river *Lethe*. Human beings forget the life they led before they were born. The part of ourselves that we forget about when we enter this world, is the part we leave behind. It is the part of us that remains hidden, sheltered in the spirit. When we die, we remember who we are. Dying is disclosing. We are reunited with our essence, our eternal being, and we awaken. This awakening is brought by wading through the river *Styx*. When truth is called *aletheia*, the word itself thus indicates that truth shreds all veils of ignorance. *Aletheia* means the vindication of what was left behind. It means the opening up of what was closed at birth. The truthful person or truthful event is therefore he or that which stands in the unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) of things. For Heidegger it became a matter of great importance not just to grasp this intellectually. He wanted to live this to the fullest of all extents. This he did in thought. It became clear to him that truth is less like a field of stones and more like water. He crossed and followed the *Lethe* and the ocean of Being opened up to him.

In the meditation he gave at the Christmas conference of 1923, Rudolf Steiner spoke of *das Geistesmeereswesen*, the spirit's ocean being. In this ocean, man lives with his limbs, reaching into the sphere of the Father-God. A remarkable reversal of elements takes place for the one who takes this meditation to heart. Nothing is dry anymore. When we walk, we actually start to swim. The water of life surrounds us, unbeknown to us, but by waking up from the sleep of mundane life, by acquiring arcane knowledge, it flows anew. In its more solid version, the *Lethe* is also referred to as a threshold. Can we come to terms with the fact that our deepest self, our true being, is only to be found beyond the threshold? Can we elevate ourselves to what remains unborn at our birth and what proves to be immortal at our death? Do we have what it takes to reunite with the hidden part of ourselves? "*I gaze into the darkness,*" Rudolf Steiner wrote in a meditation.

*I gaze into the darkness
therein arises light,
living light.
Who is this light in the darkness?
It is me, myself, in my reality.
This reality of the I
does not enter my earthly existence.
I am but the image of it.
But I will find it again,
when I enter,
fulfilled by goodwill for the spirit,
the gates of death.²*

This meditation, in all its compactness, reveals that truth is not to be found in light, or at least not at first, but in darkness. In order to find our true self, in order to break free from the banks of *Lethe*, we have to bear and endure and gaze in the darkness. Only by night do the stars appear. Death has to become a friend before the light can truly become ours. There is no short cut to heaven. In the Old Testament it is above all Jonah who knows this. Jonah is swallowed by the whale. He is dragged into the depths of the ocean. There he will encounter what he tried to evade, the abyss. He rides not on the back but in the belly of his beast of burden. The whale, we know, is capable of diving thousands meter deep. This grand, plump creature descends where no man can follow. In silent massiveness it glides through the waters. The surface is only vaguely remembered as something of another world when this colossus embarks on its journeys. Hallways of space are in awe of what passes through. A dark way is being paved. The sun may shine, but not here. All rays of light are rebuked. An opaque density seems to extend itself; a sullen silence resonates. Into these ungodly surroundings, Jonah is cast, and who knows whether he will make it out alive. Then he does. When he reaches the surface not only of the ocean but also of his ordeal, he knows what the depths of darkness require. He is akin to his vessel now. The whale can dive relentlessly only because he takes something with him on the way down: his specific way of breathing. The whale inhales and exhales through the blowhole on its back. The

² “Ich schaue in die Finsternis:/ In ihr entsteht Licht,/ Lebendes Licht./ Wer ist dies Licht in der Finsternis?/ Ich bin es selbst in meiner Wirklichkeit./ Diese Wirklichkeit des Ich/ Tritt nicht ein in mein Erdendasein./ Ich bin nur Bild davon./ Ich werde es aber wiederfinden./ Wenn ich,/ Guten willens für den Geist,/ Durch des Todes Pforte gegangen.“ Rudolf Steiner, GA 245 *Anweisungen für eine esoterische Schulung*, p.76.

whale's body is opened not to the depths but to the heights. This delicate spot is its connection to the upper worlds, also in the deep. Jonah can emulate this now. He has touched upon the sphere of the Father, the ground of all existence, the deepest of all worlds, but *das Geistesmeereswesen*, the living ocean of the spirit, does not overwhelm him anymore. He has opened up to what resides above him. He is brought out in the open. He has found himself. His words ring true.

In Heidegger's thought these religious undertones were never far away. In the book that established his reputation as the most prolific thinker of his century, *Being and Time*, he talks about man's fall into this world. The human existence, or *Dasein* as he calls it, is thrown into the world. By being thrown, it finds itself in a state of forlornness. Being born is being cast into deep waters. Becoming an adult is finding exactly this out. Our true self is just a distant memory in all this darkness - if it even is a memory at all. This is how things are. In order to live, in order to be born, we have to forget where we came from. The truth is a secret we initially don't even know about. We are a mirror image, nothing more, when we first start to face ourselves. Being thrown into the world is to be shrouded in nothing but the appearance of a self. That is the inevitability of incarnation. It brings us at odds with our own being, though. A subtle insincerity takes hold of us from the very beginning. Heidegger has a name for this charade. He calls it living according to the way *they* live. "They" are all the others that hamper our relationship with the truth, but not as a force outside of us, something foreign to us, but as something that is at play within us. "The They" (*das Man*) is that in us, which impels us to evade ourselves. It is what keeps us from disclosing ourselves to others and to ourselves. In beautiful elaborations, Heidegger describes how *Dasein* tends to be not itself, and how it prefers to be the image that others project on it. We don't live authentic lives: "Everyone is the other, and no one is himself."³ In that respect we are all stuck in "the They". Is there a way out of this? There is. But it comes at a price. It is to oppose conformity, abandon all levelling and averageness, and not accommodate to others anymore. This shocking act sets us free in unexpected ways. We discover the world once more. What was far way, is now drawn near. We connect to ourselves. "If *Dasein* explicitly discovers the world and brings it near, if it discloses its authentic being to itself, this discovering of 'world' and disclosing of *Dasein* always comes about by clearing away coverings and obscurities, by

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, State University of New York Press, Albany, p.120.

breaking up the disguises with which *Dasein* cuts itself off from itself.”⁴ - This owning up to our true selves brings us into a realm where things can unfold unequivocally. This is what the Greek called *aletheia*. It is the kind of breakthrough that only comes with perseverance. For it becomes clear that once we cross the *Lethe* backwards, once we cross the threshold to find our unborn self, it is not just we who are cast in a different light. The whole world appears anew. All things concealed break open. Truth is laid out before us, in plain sight. This is something we are not inclined to appreciate. Like Jonah, we tend to run from ourselves. We are so accustomed to the dark that the light becomes an unwelcome guest. If we rise to the occasion, though, and remember who we were, our deepest being emerges. Past lifetimes enter the fray. Our horizon expands. In struggling with our true being, we only find more complexities, but ones that redeem us as well. The ancient mysteries become new ones. The key here, now as it was then, is courage in self-knowledge - the willingness to reveal, consistent and inconsiderately.

This dismissal of all disingenuous imitating brings us into an open space that Heidegger called a clearing (*Lichtung*). In a remarkable feat of thought, Heidegger now treads hardly discovered grounds. For the clearing is not only what opens up when human beings are honest with themselves; it is also the mysterious place where gods appear and disappear. The clearing is the locus of truth. It is the venue of thought (“*der Ort des Denkens*”), the boundless expanse where the divine and the demonic meet. It is in this magnificent unfolding of events that all decisions of destiny are made. The crux here is that when the human being reunites with its hidden self, it encounters more than just itself. In entering the clearing, in engaging with the unconcealed, we get the premonition of a vast array of beings, benign and malign, that intersect with us, also when we are not aware of it. By gazing into the darkness, by coping with the black sea that hides the beast, we stumble upon a conscience that is both our own and not our own: we plunge into the deep and merge with it. Our true being approaches us. We feel ourselves and something that widely exceeds ourselves. A whispered prayer removes all doubt. We know now how much we had forgotten that the gods are near.

This activity of thought and contemplation is not easily accomplished. It requires patience and faith, and the loyal practice we call repetition. This is the tender discipline we happily engage in. We know where to go. The altar is a mysterious place. It is a clearing in a

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, State University of New York Press, Albany, p.121.

world of untruth, a place for the honest. The altar delivers on its promises. In laying our secrets at its feet, time and time again, we ascend and open up. Memory is brought back. Sunless existence is no more. We rise through the waters, sensing the heaving, still unrestingly heaving waves above us. We close in on ourselves. Our blowhole reaches for the sky, we break through the surface - and breathe.