

Column

THE RUINS OF TIME

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Theme: Sacred Spaces

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Late November, 1990. I am standing at a kiosk in the Plaka district in Athens, searching for an English newspaper. Willing to fork out 300 drachmas (\$2.00) to read about the larger world within which this month-long vacation is being conducted. I'm hungry for news, riveted by the mushrooming crisis in the Middle East.

No luck. "No Anglika." Huge headlines shriek only in Greek. Motorcycles roar past on all sides, the noise level continually building to a climax. The intensely passionate talk and gestures of the Greek temperament no longer feel strange. Nor does the fact that modern cosmopolitan culture is nonchalantly conducted among mysterious ruins of ancient temples.

Our weeks immersed in the mountain village life of Crete are over. Already they seem like a dream, a vision — one long backwards hazy layering of time into eternity.

Certain memories I will treasure forever. Already, I sense their fertility, promoting a subtle, mysterious mutation within my entire being.

The day, for example, when we walked the dirt lane from the village down to the valley floor, past an old graveyard on the left, a herd of long-haired goats on the right, to visit a 2,000-year-old grove of olive trees. We were walking quickly, absorbed in our talk. Now, under the leafy green canopy, it is as if we have entered a great cathedral.

Instinctively, our voices fall to a hush. Our bodies slow down, finding new/old depths. Minds are useless here; they cannot encompass this reality. Our bodies have been taken over, magnetized by the palpable vibration of these great and hoary tree beings. Silently, we wander through acre after acre of silent, gnarled majesty, mute witness to the various peoples and cultures that have inhabited this ancient land.

A row of giant stately cypress trees lines the edge of this grove. Mere remnants of the rich cypress forest which blanketed Crete in ancient times. Here too, the earth has been depleted, the wild animals reduced to scorpions and the rare red fox.

Nearby, the stone ruins of an early Greek Orthodox temple warm in the sun, covering yet another ruin, this one a Roman bath. Scraping aside the branches of a tenacious creeping blackberry bush, we find the pattern made by thousands of tiny tiles still partially visible.

And everywhere, rock walls, tumbling down or nearly vertical, terracing mountainsides into tillable land. Some walls new, some old, some very very old, and all built in the same way. Time has not changed either the construction methods or the donkey driven plowing of these tiny fields.

Time here is present as a continuum, forming a temporal spectrum as vast as the ocean that surrounds this fabled island. And yet, there is a heaviness to this experience of time, a gravity, almost a sense of oppression. The longer I remain in Greece, the more I feel in my bones how the past spreads its arms to receive, to condense, to crush, to stratify, to obliterate. Our mortality is an inescapable and haunting fact.

This fact is contrasted by another, opposite fact, one which astonishes me. For the heaviness of time's duration is shot through with light. The light of human awareness shines through the gloom, leaving traces of itself along the way. These are the distillations of time, of memory, of culture — through the architects' organization of space, the artists' working of function and material into form; they bear silent testimony to that endless creative capacity which both expresses our humanity and lives on.

Every ruin we visit here is so rich and laden with memory that my brain short-circuits. There is no way out. I drop down into my body, seeking resonance, a way into the mysteries, those moments when the deep past and the present collide, fuse, leaving me changed.

That sunny afternoon when I turned around to see the view from the other side of the recently excavated site near the village of Eleutherna, on Crete, and suddenly broke into tears, overwhelmed by the utter familiarity of the place, its feel, its topography, its views.

The sense of recognition had begun earlier, during the ride down to Eleutherna. A deep inner thrumming in my solar plexus and heart, growing louder and more insistent as the miles went by. My companion noticed it too, within herself, and said so. She and I were sharing this journey to such an extent that I sometimes felt unnerved, wanted to create boundaries between us, to keep my identity clear. Over and over, one of us would voice what was in the other's heart, or mind. Over and over, we would enter an experience, feel it the same way, and leave when, together, we sensed it was over.

And now, at Eleutherna, an ancient recollection of the views: to the northwest, rolling terraced hills, covered with olive groves, stepping down for miles to the blue Aegean; to the southeast, hills stepping up to fade into the gradual rise of the great broad back of Mount Idi, birthplace of Zeus. Finally, directly across from the site, a cliff rising upwards in what I call the overthrust angle, between 25 and 30 degrees from the horizontal. This particular angle, which also inscribes many Wyoming cliffs, has haunted me all my life.

I will also treasure that lovely morning when, strolling into the ruins of the healing sanctuary at Eleusis, and becoming aware of the calm and peace of the countryside there. I felt suddenly drowsy, lay down next to an old stone wall and was instantly asleep — only to read later that the healing at Eleusis was accomplished through sleep and visions which come through dreams.

The day after our first day in Greece we took the bus to Delphi. There we held what we later realized was our initiation ceremony. Breaking the rules, we sneaked into Delphi's most ancient sanctuary at night, during that November's powerful Taurus full moon, and at the very moment we sat down on the innermost round stone rim, clouds parted to reveal the moon.

That was my first experience of stopped time in Greece, of a time which opened into space, spreading like the rays of the sun. The sense of expansion was breathtaking, and eerily contrasted with another, and opposite sense, operating simultaneously. This was of my body, feeling heavier than usual, rooting itself to the stone beneath, first three chakras opening to suck in the energy of the Goddess. As if I were a suckling babe. As if I were thirsty, and She gave me Her breast to drink.

We felt Her power that night, for the first time in Greece. Contemporary Greek culture feels it too; the Goddess lives on, though in perverted form. She inhabits tourist shops and jewelry stores. Her serpents of silver and gold wind around wrists and fingers, dangle from ear lobes. She has become a commodity like any other, Her value commercial, secular, a tourist diversion on the way from one greek salad and moussaka to another.

Knossos, Phaestos, Malia. We visit the ruins of these ancient palaces, stroll through traces of archaic splendor, drink in the elegance and bright spirit of one people's artistic temper. The Minoan culture on Crete was Goddess-graced, the final outpost of Her long and abundant dominion, a sea-going enterprise which flourished all over the Aegean.

Standing inside the snake room at Knossos, the room where two extraordinary snake goddess statuettes, now to be found in the museum in the nearby city of Iraklion, were unearthed. We had been awestruck by these figures upright together behind glass,

their mere presence speaking volumes, commanding instant attention, respect, even reverence.

And now, staring into the two snake pits, each of them six feet deep, a faint tremor pervades my body, as I imagine serpents winding around my arms, my chest, my waist. Fear. A fear that our culture encourages. A fear that nevertheless fascinates.

The Goddess. She to Whom I have been giving lip service for over ten years. She Whom we came to Greece to seek, and now discover that we are indeed driven to find Her, to absorb Her deep earth wisdom. She within whose embrace ancient European and Mesopotamian neolithic culture flourished peacefully for thousands of years.

The neolithic ruins are the most ancient to have been excavated. Directly above the neolithic stratum sits the full brilliant blossoming of the Minoan culture, which, in turn, was suddenly destroyed in 1450 B.C. by the eruption of the volcano on the nearby island of Thera.

It was upon this rubble that classical Greek civilization was founded. Greek civilization: said to be the birthplace of western art, culture and philosophy. Its ideal of human beauty is still ours. Democracy is said to have been born in Athens. And Greek philosophy is still the foundation on which western thought is based.

The word philosophy, etymologically, “philo-sophy,” means “love of wisdom.” We have been educated to believe that our culture began with the wisdom of the Greeks — despite abundant archeological evidence linking this civilization with earlier — and wiser — times.

At least this is my view. How else could the peaceful Goddess culture have flourished for thousands of years had there been no truly perennial wisdom guiding it from within? On the other hand here we are, as usual either in a war or threatening one. And here I am, searching for a newspaper, wondering which one we are in.

The original source of our civilization’s preoccupation with destruction is, of course, pre-Greek, Biblical. Eve, tempted by the Serpent to eat the Apple of the Tree of

Knowledge, “seduced” Adam to take a bite too. In retaliation, God the Father banished them both from Paradise. Yahweh would have no “false gods” before him, no snake goddess, no real wisdom.

In the time of the Greeks, what little remained of the Great Mother Goddess, and Her snake, symbol of earth wisdom, was demolished. The Greeks split Her into various parts, the Greek goddesses Hera, Aphrodite, Athena, et al. They hacked the Mother apart, divided Her wholeness in order to conquer. This dismemberment they then celebrated yearly, by re-enacting the myth of Apollo defeating the Python.

We look upon ancient myths to seek the causes of things. We came to Greece to seek the Goddess, to learn from Her, to resonate with Her, to ask for Her wisdom in healing our troubled souls.

The second wave of 200,000 gas-masked young American men (and now, women!) is now on its way to the Middle East. A so-called “new world order” (on the Great Seal of the United States: a “new order of the centuries”) is being manipulated into hasty and volatile form by western politicians as a reaction to the latest eruption of ancient hostilities in Mesopotamia, original fertile home of the Goddess, and now a bleak desert, its searing heat a perfect symbolic mirror of the boiling tempers of those who would kill each other for greed.

I find it difficult not to be cynical about our human prospects, when this critical time in human history is being approached with such an infantile state of mind. Cynical, that is, until I recognize the state of the world as a mirror of my own soul! And if I am part of the problem, then the solution to the problem, for me, must begin within myself.

Just yesterday, for example, having succeeded in my search for a newspaper, I noticed myself reacting to the news in the same way I did as a child! Picture this: a five-year-old girl down on her hands and knees, newspaper spread out on the floor in front of her, hurriedly scanning the headlines for news. No news is good news. The world won’t end today. My daddy won’t go back to war today.

So yesterday, reading the news, I noticed Bush said Hussein had until January 15 to pull back from Kuwait. “Oh goodie,” said my inner child, “I have at least until January 15 to stay alive. I can relax until then. The world won’t end until then.”

No matter how “enlightened” I think myself to be, I must recognize this older, more primitive “childish” stratum within my own psyche. I must acknowledge that consciousness is not a steady state; rather it is an uncertain, flickering light, sliding, usually involuntarily, up and down the scale from lesser to larger awareness. To the extent that I am not aware of the deeper, darker, less rational spaces within my own psyche, I am as liable as Bush or Hussein to do something drastic, infantile, to act without thinking of the larger consequences.

The layering of time as seen through successive strata of ancient ruins in Greece finds its parallel in the layering within my own psyche. All times are present here. The further back in time my awareness probes into my own deeper layering, the less likely am I to be able to use my mind to figure things out. In order to encompass these inner “ruins” I must surrender, let go of my mind, trust my body to move into its natural alignment with what I am seeking to understand.

And if I am a part of the whole, and if the dynamics of the part are structurally identical to those of the whole, then in order to resolve the current crisis in the Middle East, we must transform our manner of approaching it.

We are accustomed to thinking with our heads, trying to figure things out. Clearly, however, this situation is such a hornet’s nest of conflicting and complex issues, both current and historical, that our usual attempts to understand will not work.

The currents that animate the Middle East, a land of violent contrasts, are deeply religious, emotional, tribal. They stretch back through the centuries. They have evolved within cultures utterly foreign to ours. The only way we can even begin to approach this situation is to release our minds and drop into our bodies.

We drop into our bodies and we feel. We feel our pain. We feel our own pain so long and so acutely, that the pain intensifies and deepens, opens. We plunge into a black hole, dropping into the well of collective pain that has nourished humanity for centuries without our being aware of it. To actually enter the water of our feelings — no matter how painful they may initially be — is to dive into our aliveness, our vitality; our feelings are the fertile spring from which our souls have always drunk.

To allow ourselves to feel our own body's pain is to overcome our alienation, that acute loneliness which affects creatures numbed to the life within their own bodies. To drop down into our bodies is to become one with the collective body, Earth's very being. She is the repository of everything that has ever happened here. Her mountains, Her stones, Her trees contain our collective memories. To feel Her weeping, pulsing Self is to make deep contact with all other beings, human and otherwise, residing on Her skin.

Although our cultures may differ, our biological nature is the same. We humans are embodied beings. Through our minds and spirits we are protean, creative, wildly and gloriously differentiating through language and custom and art. In our bodies, we are one. Our bodies all have the same feelings, the same needs, the same instinctive life. They root us to the planet. They do not lie. Within the life of our bodies lies the common ground we share with all earthly creatures. The Goddess still rules, She is immanent within us, She is the body wisdom we can and must tap into.

Update 2010: It's hard to recall that I was referring to the first Gulf War when I wrote this essay in 1991, since my feelings then and after the next George (W.) Bush's war felt identical, as did the circumstances. Nearly 20 years after the first Iraq war, our occupation there grinds on and a second front, Afghanistan revs up. "Endless war," a phrase that entered the lexicon within the past several years. It now appears that all these wars are deliberate, that my analysis of war in this essay as being something one does when not considering the larger consequences, was naïve.

