

The Next Great Work: The Enneads at Esalen, in the Hour of the Unexpected

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2007.
(see [detail](#))

Article

For their concluding session, the Enneads, nine wise elders, so-called both for their number and as a way of recollecting the nine sections of the six books of Plotinus, had once again traveled to Esalen Institute in Big Sur on the rugged California coast, the furthest reach of western civilization. They were meeting at Esalen because it is known to be the vessel for visions and for the unexpected. The Enneads made their way from the lodge, where they had enjoyed a hearty Esalen breakfast and lively conversation, to the Big House where many wise men and women had gathered in recent decades to share ideas, agree and disagree, and in the process attain to wider and deeper insights. During their week together, as during their one-week conferences in 2005 and 2006, the Enneads fully occupied the famous places for conversation at Esalen—the lodge, the baths, and the famous Big House living room. As each of the nine entered the large white house surrounded by the rhythmic sound of the Pacific Ocean below, they were again welcomed by Michael Murphy, and by his two colleagues, Frank Poletti and Jeff Kripal, with whom Michael guides seminars under the name “Center for Theory and Research.”

These nine brought to this third and concluding conference a lifetime of research and more theories than they would be able to express in the available time. They also brought a commitment to meet the goal of the seminar—the theme or message of the next panentheistic “great work” worthy to serve as the defining worldview for the 21st century. At the conclusion of their second meeting, in August 2006, the Enneads had unanimously agreed that none of the prominent worldviews—theism, atheism, pantheism, pragmatism, existentialism, materialistic secularism, or various religious orthodoxies—would be adequate to meet the challenges of the 21st century. They agreed that their meeting in August 2007 would have to articulate a shared vision of an evolving Earth community and a method by which such a vision could be extended and implemented.

Because Plato’s *Symposium* is a dialogue, and because it climaxes with a revelation concerning Eros—i.e., it is about mutual participation of the human and divine, the very essence of panentheism—and because it is inspired by a goddess, most of the Enneads considered it to be a perfect model for their own symposium. The Enneads had a shared source and starting point but they did not yet have a vision that would fire the imaginations of the next seven generations. They clearly hoped that before they would conclude their dialogue they too would be graced by a divine revelation.

The Enneads, gathered from around the world—from Europe, Tibet, and India, as well as from the United States, the host country, the youngest culture as well as the most powerful and influential. It was unanimously understood, though unspoken, that because of its dominant position in the

world, and because it is the battleground between an anachronistic Christian theism and a strident scientific atheism, America is desperately in need of the panentheistic worldview these nine were striving to establish. As they had at previous meetings, the Enneads began by speaking their names in chronological order. They included their defining works as a way of reminding themselves and each other of their place in cultures that helped to form them and to which they owed a special responsibility. This particularity of culture was perfectly complemented by their shared realization that they were each called upon to contribute a 21st century panentheistic worldview in service to the whole of humanity and the imperiled Earth.

- J. W. von Goethe (1749-1832), *Metamorphosis of Plants and Faust*
- G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), *Phenomenology of Mind*
- William James (1842-1910), *Varieties of Religious Experience and Essays in Radical Empiricism*
- Alfred North Whitehead (1859-1947), *Process and Reality and Adventures of Ideas*
- Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), *An Outline of Esoteric Science*
- Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), *The Life Divine and Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*
- Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections and Symbols of Transformation*
- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (1881-1955), *The Human Phenomenon*
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1935-), *Kalachakra Tantra: Rite of Initiation and The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*

Before their arrival, it was known to New Age bloggers that an important conference of wise elders would be held at Esalen, known worldwide as the source of significant new ideas. The internet showed evidence of intense opinions concerning those in attendance as well as recommendations for alternatives. Some called the symposium a guaranteed failure because it included not a single woman; others considered it ridiculous that neither China nor Japan was represented. Some would have preferred one or more of the following: Einstein, the greatest scientist since Newton and an advocate for global peace; one of the great figures in the raising of ecological consciousness—Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, or Thomas Berry; some wanted Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela, or Archbishop Desmond Tutu, all leaders of national transitions from oppression to reconciliation and freedom.

Various groups of bloggers accused one or more of the Enneads of various limitations: Goethe of being anti-philosophical, Hegel of being dated and Eurocentric, James of being indecisive, Whitehead of using too many neologisms, Aurobindo of being vague and Victorian, Steiner of being too esoteric, C. G. Jung of emphasizing the symbolic at the expense of the historical, Teilhard of being too orthodox Roman Catholic, and Dalai Lama of being insufficiently evolutionary. However aware the Enneads themselves might have been of these and other weaknesses, as they set out to formulate the essential message of the first panentheistic great work in more than half a century (since Teilhard's *Human Phenomenon* in 1955), they clearly were focused on the positive contributions of each. They regarded positivity as a defining characteristic of their work together and of the vision of the future they sought to bring into focus and to bequeath.

Some of the Enneads proved especially effective in representing various sources of human wisdom: Goethe brought a "gentle empiricism" in service of Nature; Hegel brought the entire history of western philosophy from the Greeks to the early 19th century; James brought a rich synthesis of psychology, philosophy, and religion; Whitehead introduced insights based on the scientific revolution initiated by Einstein; Sri Aurobindo presented a vast evolutionary Neo-Hegelian, Neo-Hindu integral vision culminating in the transformation of the physical world; Rudolf Steiner presented esoteric traditions and the conception of Christ forming the subtle body of the Earth; C. G. Jung brought the whole of western psychology as well as religion, art and culture psychologically considered; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin espoused a seamless synthesis of

science and Roman Catholic spirituality; and the Dalai Lama brought the entire Buddhist tradition complemented by Gandhian non-violence. Informed observers generally agreed that these nine individuals, despite their limitations individually and collectively considered, probably comprised the best possible source of the next great work.

As they spoke with each other informally in the living room that had served as a site for many seminars of wise elders during the previous forty years, the Enneads knew that the world urgently needed the panentheistic vision that they had resolved to bring forth and to make available. They also knew that all nine diverse perspectives would need to find expression in the next great work, and that there would need to emerge one perspective, one vision, one big Idea—as well as a compelling method for its creation and implementation. Each of the nine had attained an authority well past the level of opinions; they all spoke confidently on the level of Ideas, and were recognized by the others to be speaking on this level, from a non-ordinary or inspired source. It remained for them to harmonize these deep (or transcendent) Ideas into a single vision. As anyone who has been to a seminar at Esalen can attest, such meetings often involve a breakdown of the ordinary states of consciousness, a dissolution of the usual separation of material and spiritual realms, of the temporal and eternal. At Esalen, one expects a startling mix of intense temporality and eternal Ideas, very specific situations mixed with fundamental archetypes.

Because eight of the nine Enneads who met at Esalen in August 2007 were no longer living on the Earth, many who had heard about this symposium assumed that it had not really taken place in time and space. The eight discarnate Enneads being who they are (not merely who they had been), the radical separation of matter and spirit, and of living and deceased, forcefully maintained by the dominant worldview, simply did not prevail. The Dalai Lama, the one Ennead who was still breathing earthly air, was well used to communicating with the so-called dead.

All of the Enneads agreed that dichotomous thinking has drained life, intelligence, and meaning from the cosmos, and has created a chasm between humanity and the rest of the Universe. For several centuries humanity as a whole, and individual human beings, have experienced themselves to be increasingly distant from the wonders of the sky, from plants and animals, and the Earth as a living organism. When they met for the first time in August 2005 the Enneads immediately agreed that this materialist, secularist, flatland view had led the Earth to a state of extreme peril, and humanity to despair. The Enneads disagreed on many important topics but they certainly all agreed that reality is more complex, more integral, and more mysterious than the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm that has dominated western thought and culture for the past three centuries.

Not surprisingly, it has been difficult for us who were not present to know who spoke for each of the Enneads, or how. The three conveners, Michael, Jeff, and Frank, clearly had difficulty explaining what they had seen and heard. They did, however, agree absolutely that it was the Enneads themselves who had listened to each other and had expressed their individual opinions—or rather, their Ideas. While it is not possible to know whether each of the great figures spoke their Ideas with some kind of discarnate voice or whether they spoke through others, or somehow both, the Enneads and the conveners have left us no room for doubt that the words spoken issued from the individual minds of the Enneads themselves. Exactly how that happened remained something of a mystery.

To varying degrees, the Enneads were conscious of the date: August 15th. No one mentioned whether the conference had been scheduled to end on this date because it was the birthday of Sri Aurobindo. (As Sri Aurobindo and his disciples noted quite emphatically in 1947, India's independence was occurring on Sri Aurobindo's 75th birthday). Similarly, most of the Enneads familiar with the thought of C. G. Jung noticed that this date was the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. In *Answer to Job* Jung claims that the Roman Catholic declaration in 1950 of the bodily assumption of the mother of Christ as an article of faith is the most important religious

event in the past five hundred years. But, of course, the significance of Sri Aurobindo's birthday and of the *Assumptio Mariae* seemed not particularly important to Alfred North Whitehead, the Dalai Lama, and some others. It was like that with many perspectives and recommendations: what was significant or illuminating to some tended to be unnoticed by others.

The Enneads were grateful that they had come to know each other and each other's ideas so thoroughly but they were also distressed by their shared realization that they seemed to be far from a single vision, a compelling Idea held to be foundational by all of them. Despite, or perhaps because of, their wide and deep wisdom, the nine repeatedly generated nine root metaphors, nine different lexicons of special terms, nine specific intellectual and imaginal commitments. Yet, as diverse as the Enneads had shown themselves to be, several threads emerged, and reemerged with regularity. The most prominent of these threads was the affirmation of the eternal feminine. Sri Aurobindo was ever conscious of his consort, the Mother; Teilhard was devoted to the Virgin Mother; Jung emphasized the Divine Mother archetype; Steiner argued for the identity of Isis, Mary, and Sophia. The prominent role of the eternal feminine seemed unmistakable from the beginning of the seminar and perhaps more intensely so as the Enneads aspired to the wisdom of Sophia during this, their last session.

As they took their usual seats, each could clearly see at the end of the room two well-worn flip charts, one of several departures from the original symposium on the Acropolis. On one was written the words of the Hebrew book of Proverbs (29:18):

“Where there is no vision the people perish.”

This text was considered by all to be an accurate warning at a time when all terrestrial and species life, including the future of human civilization, and planet Earth itself, appear to be in peril. All of the Enneads specialize in vision but thus far their visions remained unique and discreet, still too different from each other's to serve as a foundation for the next great panentheistic work. Just a few feet away stood another flip chart with the warning words of Sri Aurobindo from his one-page prophecy, “The Hour of God”:

“It is the hour of the unexpected”

The Enneads accepted the truth of Sri Aurobindo's words—it could not be more evident that the clock was ticking, the light fading, the time for saving humanity and the Earth disappearing rapidly, but they had not come to an agreement on whether “the hour of the unexpected” referred to this particular morning, or the current year, this decade during which humanity is gradually awakening to forthcoming ecological devastation, or more generally to the loss of spirit (the “Death of God”) in the West over the previous several centuries. Perhaps “hour” referred to all of these time frames, all of these existential contexts.

Toward the end of the session, when optimism for a single vision or Idea that would serve the world in its most desperate “hour” was obviously wearing down, there emerged a sense that there had been too much talk and not enough silence. When Sri Aurobindo quoted the epigram of Mira Richard, the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, “No more words,” the group entered into meditation, no doubt in a variety of ways. What happened next is difficult to describe. The Enneads themselves gave various descriptions and interpretations about exactly what happened, and the three conveners have similarly given rather incomplete and apparently imprecise accounts. They repeated phrases such as “inaudible, and yet amazingly audible,” “words, and yet silence,” “individual voices, and yet one voice.”

The Enneads clearly had difficulty explaining what transpired during the last minutes of the last session of the symposium. Clearly, what did happen was something deeply mysterious, something of a gift, whether from a deeper or higher level. All of the great spiritual teachers accept the

concept of *adequatio*—that only those with a higher kind of hearing can hear higher Ideas, and only those with a higher kind of sight can see subtle events. Not everyone at the first symposium, the archetypal symposium on the Acropolis, was able to understand the Idea of Eros taught by Diotima. For many, Diotima seemed a literary device, whereas others saw her, rightly, as a goddess. With her supersensible sight, Mary of Magdala could see the resurrected Christ, but the Apostles did not, at least not without His help.

It would certainly seem that these nine Enneads, presumably above all others, would have the requisite eyes to see and ears to hear a higher revelation. Was there such? Did they hear and see something special, an Idea, that would help the world at the present time, and if so, what was communicated and how? The Enneads seemed eager to share their experience but unable to describe it or summarize what they heard for fear of not expressing what each of the others had heard. They each seemed aware that their experience was the same as the others, and that it was at the same time uniquely their own. In the end, they realized that both were true—their singular Idea really was the Idea of the group, equally owned, equally expressive of the biographies and aspirations of each of the nine. No wonder that the conveners had difficulty describing what had happened!

Piecing together the various accounts offered by the Enneads and the conveners, many interpreters came to the conviction that the message was the event itself, the divinely inspired unity of individuality and community, unity of interiority and conversation, unity of meditation and seminar dialogue, unity of one voice and nine, unity of human and divine. The experience of these unities, these dissolved dichotomies, had something of the experience of *kairos*, the touching of the human and divine in time and space. Like *glossolalia* at Pentecost, the spirit descended into this particular group because each member had prepared for such a revelation, for the divine presence. Like the experience of Arjuna on the firing line of Kurukshetra in dialogue with the god Krishna, this avatar experience was time and place specific. Their experience was similar to Arjuna's in that it was both the arrival of a being from afar and the realization of the divine within—with the difference that this was the experience not of a lone warrior but of a group of nine individuals with extremely different biographies yet united in a single endeavor. The divine that is omnipresent manifested in response to the call of the Enneads, and the call itself was made possible by the lifelong efforts of each of the nine joined in solemn purpose.

In that *kairos* moment of noon, August 15, 2007, the medium and the message joined so as to disclose the theme of the next great work: let those with eyes to see and ears to hear attend to this event, the next great work is being authored by the great souls past and present in their agreement and in their particularity, in their universality equally as in their unique 21st century individual mode of consciousness, whether American, Austrian, English, French, German, Indian, Swiss, or Tibetan. They had learned that participation is revelation. As James, Steiner, Jung, and the Dalai Lama in particular have explained so brilliantly, the divine is revealed in its pluralism; no one concept of the divine is adequate to the variety and complexity of human-divine relationships. This is what all of the Enneads had come to understand, and it is the theme of the next great work: unity issues from diversity in communion. Many are at the table, yet it is one feast; many are in the orchestra, yet it is one symphony; there are nine voices and yet one voice in this richly singular, temporal and eternal symposium. As the experience of the Enneads confirmed, the divine is neither exclusively eternal nor exclusively temporal; it is here and now and it is inexhaustible, eternally preserved. According to Whitehead, the primordial nature of God, infinitely good and beautiful, eternally serves as the ground for the infinitely varied, completely real singular moments of history, thought, and feeling that constitute His consequent nature.

Discarnate human beings make themselves known and heard to those with eyes to see them and ears to hear them, just what the Enneads did, or was done to them, but only because they had prepared, had followed talk with a silence filled with new, universal Logos-Sophia words. In the

beginning was the Word, and in the present moment is the Word; in the beginning is Isis-Sophia, infinite and eternal Wisdom, and in the Esalen Big House living room is Isis-Sophia, speaking-showing Wisdom to those with ears to hear Her, with words to speak for Her—in several different languages. Perhaps it was Goethe, the oldest of the nine, who saw this first and had made it central to his life's work: he saw that all creative work, and apprehension of true knowledge, proceeds by the simultaneous evolution of the total work and the parts. His idea of metamorphosis would be a key to the next great work: writing it would be like writing a drama that can only come to be by the creation of the dialogue—each of which line in the dialogue mysteriously draws from and advances the reality of the total drama striving to emerge.

Though it was only retrospectively that the Enneads and the conveners were able to understand this to be so, the Enneads in the hour of the unexpected had heard and spoken as one and many—a drama unfolding. The realization dawned slowly because the Enneads all experienced their hearing as peculiarly their own (as each character in a play tends to think that his or her part is what the play is really about). Eventually, all of the Enneads realized that their individual speaking was equally their own and the speaking of the entire dialogue, equally the speaking of human voices and at least one divine voice, perhaps best identified by names such as Sophia or Gaia, or perhaps Gaiasophia, Earthwisdom divinely considered. Slowly, Gaiasophia revealed Herself as core of the next great panentheistic vision. The unexpected hour witnessed the manifestation of Earthwisdom, of the transformation of dichotomies—matter/spirit, external/internal, divine/human, divine/earthly, human/earthly—into creative polarities, the human-divine, the Earth-divine, the silent-word, the Logos-Sophia Gaiasophia silence. Another Goethean ideal, polarity, had emerged as a key to a sustainable future.

By the inspiration and guidance of Gaiasophia, stubborn dichotomies gave way to polarities in this last of the Esalen 'Great Work' symposia: Goethe affirmed the Hegelian grand historical vision, Hegel added a contemporary understanding of Asian thought and culture, James affirmed Sri Aurobindo's conception of unity, Steiner recognized the genius of William James and the profound karmic role of American thought and culture, Whitehead granted the idea of personal immortality, Teilhard embraced Steiner's and the Dalai Lama's account of the contribution of Buddha to the evolution of human consciousness, the Dalai Lama committed to a more explicit account of earthly evolution, and they all resolved to practice Goethe's "gentle empiricism" in service of the ailing Mother.

Determined to attend to the fate of human and earthly life, the Enneads recognized the need to understand and explain their shared prescient moment at Esalen in the context of the unfolding future, and particularly in response to their two defining texts. They needed to assess whether their vision would prevent the people—and the Earth—from perishing, and they needed to understand what their unexpected hour might portend. In varying degrees, all of the Enneads were convinced that their vision came to them at precisely the right 'hour,' could not have come sooner, and would continue to gain in significance in the future. The great kairos they experienced together enabled them to see their experience as a new beginning, truly a New Age, the lineaments they were able to see even before they departed from Esalen and from each other.

Neither inevitable nor arbitrary, their vision had come by their free participation, their skilled devotion to *lila*, the divine-human drama in which, in this unexpected hour, the Earth had become an essential third party. All of the Enneads have been prized as panentheists because they lived their entire lives devoted to each moment in the evolution of consciousness; for them, each moment is unique, significant, transformative, and simultaneously each unique moment is rightly seen sub species aeternitatis. By their devotion to the past, present, and future, they knew they were contributing the best possible content to God's consequent nature. In God's biography they had written, and would continue to write, particularly by what they had modeled, a crucially important chapter devoted to the gradual reunion of matter and spirit, Earth and humanity, time

and eternity, silence and Word.

The Enneads foresaw that none of the “Hero’s Journey” works by lone male authors would have the unity-in-plurality vision that the Enneads had shared in the last hour of their last seminar. Among the panentheistic volumes by single authors, none had the visionary sweep or devotion to the future of humanity and the Earth that the Enneads had realized. Consequently, no panentheistic single work, or group of works, convinced the intellectual elite that panentheism offered a deeper, more creative, or truer vision of reality. Influenced by the lives, method, shared experience, and vision of the Enneads, however, young visionary thinkers, males and females of the next several generations working together, came to recognize that the experience of the Enneads provided the surest foundation for a viable worldview. Slowly it dawned on groups of inquirers around the entire globe that the great work would come not from a solitary visionary but from the harmony of the individual and community, from a dialogue or symposium, and that the vision that could save the Earth and humanity would affirm the distinct but not separate telos of the divine, of the human, and of the Earth.

The parts of the Enneads’ experience that gained traction in the writings of the next several generations included the mysterious interplay of the human and divine, and particularly the role of feminine divines. The panentheistic vision began to succeed largely because it was so profoundly (and mostly unconsciously) influenced by women and by the eternal feminine. Whereas all the participants in the Enneads’ symposium at Esalen had been male, it was increasingly clear that the emerging panentheistic worldview would be essentially feminine. Although the males continued to be prominent among authors of the long metanarrative—the story by and about winners—the content and methodology of their vision increasingly made explicit the indispensability of female collaboration, feminine process, and the guiding influence of the eternal feminine such as the Enneads had experienced in August 2007.

In effect, the Enneads’ symposium indirectly led to the gradual undoing of the sky gods and the white male project: in the West, Sophia and the Earth Mother, Gaiasophia, replaced the God of the Abrahamic religions, and in Hindu and the Buddhist traditions the Mother/shakti and Quan Yin emerged as the guides and goal of philosophy. The next several generations of collaborating panentheists began to build their philosophies on an awareness of Gaiasophia. They wrote philosophies that serve the erotic—and therefore an ideally sustaining relationship—between the human and the Earth. The emergent conception of the Earth as Gaiasophia proved essential for the gradual development of an ecological vision of Earth, humanity, and all species.

Successors of the Enneads throughout the world wrote a panentheistic affirmation of the Earth permeated by the eternal feminine manifest in this age as Gaiasophia. By the truth of Gaiasophia first recognized in August 2007, the next several generations of panentheists, all of whom the Enneads influenced, were set free of the materialist worldview that had disenchanted both cosmos and psyche. [Prior to writing *Passion of the Western Mind* and *Cosmos and Psyche* (the first significant panentheistic work of the 21st century), Richard Tarnas participated in countless Esalen seminars.] This recognition provided a third reason to celebrate August 15th. As the Enneads looked ahead they could see the positive effect of panentheistic Ideas, and they saw that words in silence and silence in words, one voice in many and many in one, would constitute a continuing revelation in response to a continuing desperate need.

And it was so. Following the Enneads, thoughtful individuals and groups began to affirm and serve the multi-voiced Gaiasophia, the wise mother of nature, of rebirth, and of the next great work. She came to be accepted as the silent spring and sea around us, as the epistemological insight that there is no “out there,” and the ecological awareness that there is no “away.” In the hour of the unexpected, the human, the Earth, and the divine came to be understood as one substance, one reality held by knowledge and love. Humanity increasingly came to know, feel, and to serve this

complex truth, this Idea, in words and in silence.

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