

## P The Rotting Tree Faerie

What is it that keeps faerie traditions alive? One answer, suggests Alastair McIntosh, is numinous experience. The stories keep reasserting themselves, as he suggests with this account adapted from his article, "Rainforests and High Finance," in *World Rainforest Report* 26 (October 1993), 18–20.

It was our last day deep in the Australian forest. And there, like out of a child's picture book, in an arched door-like entrance to this hollow rotting tree, was quite the most exquisitely beautiful mushroom any of us had ever seen.

It had a slightly bulbous, pristine white stem, and a perfectly circular, mottled grey cap with a ring of white spots as crisp and fresh as God in the morning light.

We gazed in wonder. And I said for a laugh – for the kind of laugh that you need when wrestling with the pain of nature undergoing destruction – "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

Everyone smiled. I mean, it's kind of ridiculous, to be enquiring after . . . faeries!

The other protestors from John Seed's Rainforest Information Centre gradually move on. But I stay, alone. And again, the question, burning now: "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

In the back of the tree lay some termite-eaten wood. It was annoyingly distracting me, for I could vaguely make out in it the face of a grim old man staring, motionless, down at the soil, like a New Guinea spirit mask. This was not what I was looking for.

Again, my question. But this time, the old man spoke. Yes, he actually spoke! Clearly, subjectively objective in my mind's ear.

In a big, empowered, booming voice, he spoke. He said: "I am the faerie who lives here."

"No, no," I replied, bemused. "You're just a sour old face I'm imagining in rotting wood. I'm looking for flower faeries. You're not that!"

"Oh," he responded, quizzically. "But I thought you

were the one who's always going on to your students about radical feminist theology?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Just that you're always telling them about calling one-another into being; that a person becomes a person in community inasmuch as they're heard, listened to, and *allowed* to be visible."

Well! I tell you . . . he had me by my own ideals! To deny his reality would have been to deny one of the insights that I most value.

"Fair enough," I said to him. "But if I accept that, I'm going to start seeing faeries all over the place!"

He laughed and laughed. He said that faeries *are* all over the place! God has many masks and I was presently face to face with one of them.

"Tell me then," I enquired. "What kind of a faerie are you?"

He swelled with pride and delight at being asked. "I," he said, "am the Rotting Tree Faerie!"

"But," I protested, "I always thought faeries looked joyful. You look like an undertaker. So what kind of things give *you* joy in life?"

This was the question he'd been waiting for and his voice shook the forest. "Rotting trees give me joy in life! This mushroom," he said, "is at my door precisely because I AM the Rotting Tree Faerie."

And as he said it, he let me feel the great processes of death and decay going on in this old tree, indeed, in the whole forest. He let me feel the mushroom's mycelia reaching from the roots into every part of that dying tree, and beyond. I could even feel the molecular processes of rot taking place, composting what had reached the fullness of its time and had died to create new soil and therefore new life.

The mask and the mushroom were, indeed, his Janus face. One side expressed decay and death. The other, in its beauty, was his veritable flower faerie self.

*Alastair McIntosh*

See also: Re-Earthing; Seed, John.

See also: Animism (various); Celtic Christianity; Celtic Spirituality; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Ireland; Scotland; Seed, John.

## The Fall

The Fall story of Genesis 1–11 is not only a theological text. It is also an aetiological narrative (a story about origins) concerning the rise of civilization in the late Neolithic period. Since the mid-nineteenth century the modernist–fundamentalist culture war in North Atlantic Christianity has generated two highly polarized

approaches to the biblical creation story: one that insists upon its putative historico-scientific content, and the other that views it as legend/folktale with no historical value. To move beyond this historicist straightjacket we might instead consider this story in terms of myth-as-memory. Might it be similar in character to origins-narratives of indigenous peoples, which postmodern anthropology is finally beginning to appreciate as legitimate "testimony" about prehistoric life?

Until recently there were few anthropological alternatives to post-Enlightenment evolutionary positivism's perspective on origins. There is no grander narrative in modern culture than the myth of "Progress," and this

ideology is grounded in the story of humanity's emergence from the swamp of ignorant *Homo erectus* to the triumph of increasingly rational, technologically adept and socially complex cultures of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Recent revisionist paleoanthropological reconstructions of human "pre-history," however, are challenging assumptions about the intrinsic nobility (or inevitability) of the so-called "Ascent of Man."

In particular, the "Neolithic revolution" of ca. 10,000 B.C.E. that led to what the dominant historiography calls the "dawn of civilization" is being reassessed in light of a very different paradigm. It is being argued that human lifeways throughout the Pleistocene – which were universally characterized by a social, environmental and spiritual symbiosis – represented a viable and sustainable cultural model, albeit one that the rise and relentless spread of civilization dramatically and progressively disrupted and destroyed.

Below are three anthropological hypotheses regarding this traumatic transformation during the late Neolithic period:

One interpretive stream pioneered by paleoarcheologist Marija Gimbutas and popularized by Riane Eisler concentrates on gender. It sees widespread goddess-worshipping, egalitarian Neolithic cultures from Sumer to Minoan Crete to Old Europe that were peaceful, horticultural, and symbolically "advanced." It is argued that these cultures were steadily wiped out by "Kurgan" invasions from the Asian steppes beginning ca. the fifth millennium B.C.E., which imposed iron technology, patriarchal institutions and the politics of war. Cynthia Eller has critiqued this view from a different feminist perspective.

A more widely accepted hypothesis focuses on the eclipse of hunter-gatherer lifeways by the domestication of plants and animals beginning ca. 9000 B.C.E., which led inexorably to the rise of the first cities in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia from 5000 B.C.E. Jared Diamond explores environmental explanations for why domestication arose in the Middle East first, whereas Jacques Cauvin attributes it to symbolic/ideological transformations. Paul Shepard focuses on the reciprocal nature of domestication: the more humans breed out wildness, the more we become "dull and mean" like our cattle. Evan Eisenberg examines how Mesopotamian urban agriculturalists substituted the artificial mountain of the ziggurat for the traditional *axis mundi* of the mountain wilderness. Daniel Quinn posits an archetypal struggle between "Taker" and "Leaver" cultures, and like Shepard, laments the triumph of the former.

A third hypothesis moves behind agriculture to culture itself, placing the decline of Pleistocene symbiosis further back into the Middle Paleolithic with the rise of symbolic thought. Direct somatic and sensory perception of the world began to atrophy – according to David Abram due to written language, and to John Zerzan because of the

power of representation, in which symbols first mediated reality and then replaced it.

These studies differ significantly in methodology, detail and explanation, but all share one crucial perspective with the Genesis account of origins (which they each reference with varying degrees of depth). This is the conviction that there was some sort of epochal "rupture" that signaled the beginning of the end of the widely dispersed, clan-based hunter-gatherer culture that had likely prevailed since "the beginning" of human life on Earth. The implications of this rupture have been devastating not only for the natural world, but also for human social life and spiritual competence.

In the "primeval history" of Gen. 1–11, Israel's sages – redacting older sources and probably writing in the aftermath of the failed monarchy – also attempt to explain this "rupture." Eden can be interpreted as a mythic memory of the old symbiotic lifeways: humans, creatures and God dwell intimately and richly together (Gen. 2). In radical contrast to the modern view, but not to other indigenous creation myths, this primal world is described as unqualifiedly "delightful" (Hebrew *to'v*, Gen. 1:31). This ancient equilibrium was/is shattered, however, by the primal human impulse to "reengineer" the world in order to control and "improve" it (Gen. 3).

What follows is a litany of woes: humans are relegated to painful agricultural toil (3:19); the first city is attributed to the murderous farmer Cain (4:17); violence spreads widely and rapidly (6:5ff.). God and nature fight back in the great flood which (temporarily) scuttles civilization (6:9ff.). Could the Flood myth – found in varying forms throughout the great cultures of the Ancient Near East – represent a collective memory of the catastrophic breach of the Bosphorous straits and creation of the Black Sea in the mid-sixth millennium B.C.E., as William Ryan and Walter Pitman have argued?

But civilization prevails again, and a "genealogy" attributes the spread of predatory imperial city-states to Nimrod, the "powerful warrior-hunter" (10:8ff.). The nadir of the "Fall" is thus narrated in the tale of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). It symbolizes the archetypal project of urbanism, in which human social, political and economic power is concentrated rather than dispersed. The warning fable is a thinly veiled parody of Mesopotamian ziggurats, as Eisenberg points out, in which the making of bricks (11:3) alludes to Israel's experience of slavery in Pharaoh's Egypt (Ex. 1). Such "civilizational" projects are thus resolutely "deconstructed" by the divine council in favor of the older vision of a dispersed, tribal humanity living in diverse bioregions (Gen. 11:5–9). The biblical counternarrative of redemption from the Fall then commences with Abraham's call to abandon Mesopotamian cities for the new archetypal journey of liberation: following God's call back to the wilderness (12:1ff.), a pattern that recurs in the

subsequent stories of Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah and even Jesus.

The "Fall" in Gen. 1-11, then, is not so much a cosmic moment of moral failure as a progressive "history" of decline into civilization – exactly contrary to the myth of Progress. Its polemical perspective is plausible when correlated with various aspects of the Neolithic "rupture" hypotheses noted above. The biblical primeval history thus should be considered not only as "mythic memory," but also as perhaps the first literature of resistance to the grand project of civilization – rightly warning against its social pathologies and ecocidal consequences.

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#### Further Reading

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- See also: Animism – Humanity's Original Religious World-view; Anarcho-Primitivism and the Bible; Creation Myths of the Ancient World; Creation Story in the Hebrew Bible; Creation's Fate in the New Testament; Eden's Ecology; Shepard, Paul.

## The Family (Children of God)

This international, communal missionary movement emerged in California in the late 1960s, as the family of evangelist David Brandt Berg ministered to the needs of hippies and young people who were on spiritual quests. In consequence, it is a cultural amalgam of the traditional Holiness movement and the radical youth counterculture of the sixties. For example, the Family emphasizes both spiritual communion with Jesus and erotic experimentation. It is oriented toward millenarian biblical prophecy, but it is also interested in astrology.

A journalist called the group *The Children of God*, and under this name it became famous. Hippies, religious seekers, and disaffected wanderers joined by the hundreds, as Family teams crisscrossed the continent. Calling himself *Moses David*, Berg led the dispersed group via colloquial scriptures called *Mo Letters*. A few horrified parents hired deprogrammers to rescue their sons and daughters forcibly, and a national anti-cult movement arose to combat the group. Moses David and most followers went to Europe and then spread out across the globe.

While headquartered in the Canary Islands in 1974, Moses David developed a new form of evangelizing, called *flirty fishing* or *FFing*, in which women of the Family offered their sexual love to an estimated 200,000 emotionally needy men, as a sample of God's love. After a decade, the group abandoned this practice, for a variety of reasons which included health hazards and the vehement opposition of critics in the surrounding societies.

In 1978, police raided a commune in Mexico, and over the following years a series of government raids attacked communes in Argentina, France, Australia, and Spain. Altogether, authorities seized six hundred of the group's children under the suspicion they were victims of sexual abuse. However, in each case the charges were eventually dropped and they were returned to their parents, after being traumatized by forced physical exams and often weeks of separation from their families.

Today, the group practices a form of open marriage. Married members feel a responsibility to meet the erotic needs of single adult members, and they view sexual intercourse as a sacrament of God's love. With the permission of the other spouse a husband or wife will have dates with a member of the opposite sex that involve sexual sharing as well as heart-to-heart conversation and other qualities of enduring friendship. Opposed to artificial birth control, the group has a high fertility rate and considers children to be gifts from God. It raises them communally and educates them within the commune.

The death of Moses David in 1994 brought an end to what members believed was his constant channeling of messages from Jesus and lesser spirits. Therefore they undertook a vigorous campaign to develop the sensitivity of all members, and the overwhelming majority now