Julian Langer
Revolting Folk Religions and Dialogic Praxis
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distraction. My personal preference for this praxis is to meet with living presences that are local to where I live, as these relationships feel more authentic than those with greater geographical distance. This quite literally involves physically being-with living presences and doesn't need any ritual, rite or assimilation into churches or temples.

I will end this description through sharing a moment of personal experience, as folk story, as I personally want for with this. My Nana died and I am found myself desiring the presence of wisdom and agedness that I associate with tribal elders. I go walking in ancient woods that are about a mile away from my house, as part of my personal ecotherapeutic/shinrin yoku practice, with reorienting myself to a world without her in my mind. In a part of the woods that are a little off from the centre I notice an oak tree that is covered in moss, with an open area in front of it. I lay on the ground before this tree, upon the leaf litter, breathing into me this presence and exhaling myself in response. We are together here, non-separate within the holism of this space, different individuals creating numinous and mystical space through the relationship. I lie upon the ground until I hear the chitter chatter of humans walking with their children. When I sit up I hold on to as much of this I-thou encounter as I can, keeping this dialogue alive for as long as possible, before the conversation becomes interrupted to the point that the exchange has been lost in this moment. I get up and return to walking. I come back on a different day and sit at the base of the oak tree, starting new communications between us. This tree is not God or a god to me. They are a presence and our unclosed meeting renders me with an experience that is more valuable to me than any icon, idol, symbol, text or ritual, of acceptance, appreciation, affirmation, trust, belief, desire and a closeness that enters my being without violence and feels utterly loving.

"I and me are always too deeply in conversation:
how could I endure it,

if there were not a friend?"

-Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

"All real living is meeting."

- Buber, I and Thou

Much energy, effort, sacrifice, violence and abuse has gone towards, continue to go to and will likely still be made towards the efforts of dialectics and dogma, religious, political, social, etc., for as long as there are individuals willing to expel energy and efforts, sacrifice others and engage in violent and abusive acts in their name. And while there are differences between dialectics and dogma, the intensity to which those differences matter seems far less when the conclusions reached are largely the same. This being said, it seems necessary to note that authentic experiences of living beings inclines me to affirm life and sincere communication between living beings has a dialogic quality that does not conform to these totalitarian approaches to conversation; which is the intended affirmation of this piece of writing. The presence of dialogic relationships between individuals affirms the potential to engage in praxes other than those of dialectics and dogma. This affirmation of dialogue is not intended as a negation of dialectics or dogma, but as destructive-differentiating, to undermine both's absolution. This affirmation of dialogic praxis undoubtedly falls short of a full description and, while I am intending to articulate more thought about dialogic praxis and preservationism in another writing projects, this failure seems inevitable to me, as the holism this pertains to can never be accounted for through the reductionism of writing. For this piece, my focus is on religion and activism and perhaps activist religions.

Dogma and Dialectics

Before affirming dialogic praxis, it feels poignant to provide a description of dogmatic and dialectical praxes. This description is being done from a dialogic approach, so the engagement of dialogic praxis has already begun, which seems to necessitate reflection and affirmation from the outset. Authentic and holistic dialogic relation involves an intensity of self-awareness and self presence, speaking from the phenomenology of personal, individual experience. This involves speaking from the "I", affirming that there are bias' and limitations to the descriptions of experiences that any individual can provide and not seeking to hide the speaker from what is being said. I am here, now, writing this, to describe my experiences, my perceptions. These descriptions require situating them in relation to other living beings and perceptions, with their own experiences of the world, which are not mine. In affirming their presences, differences are apparent and I have no desire to synthesise these, advance any absolute totality or dominate over any other voice.

Dogmatic praxes are perhaps best known within religious contexts, though I have frequently found activist ideologues to communicate and behave in ways that I would call dogmatic. Religious dogma is easily recognisable in the authoritarianism of unquestionable truths, which have and continue to inspire some of the ugliest and most violent abuses, particularly when questioned. In activist conversations, I have found dogma to emerged within the moral authoritarianism that many activists assume, often leading to authoritarian-type attempts to reduce the conversation to their concept of what individuals should do. It would be easy enough to list examples ranging from Christian and other religious dogmatisms, through to ideologies, such as socialism and techno-progressivism, that I have seen upheld with dogmatic rigidity amongst activist conversations.

Creating Folk Religious Praxes Through Unhuman Dialogues

My attention turns to two thoughts. The first thought is that it seems desirable, for myself and others, for there to be spaces for religious praxes that do not conform to the monologic totalitarianisms of dogmatism and dialectics. The second thought is that my experience of I-thou relationship with wild non-human presences, which have frequently felt intensely mystical and numinous, fit this desire. This second thought is my final consideration for this piece of writing and I am very much aware that my description here will be limited and affirm this in as much as dialogic praxis is not oriented towards absolution or completion. Attempting to describe in words the non-verbal communication that occurs when in I-thou relationship with non-human presences has an obvious absurdity to it, much like the absurdity of trying to describe the beauty of a sunset, which really needs to be seen to be appreciated. David Abrams described these communications as "the spell of the sensuous" and this strikes me as the type of dialogue Muir meant when he wrote about his conversations with bears; even their descriptions cannot account for all the qualities that actually being there contain. My mind turns to primitivist critiques of symbolic cultures, as mediatory forces, and my preference for directness.

Such a dialogic religious praxis seems to me to best grow from the ground of direct meeting, which seems to be at the root of folk religious praxes. What I mean is that meeting mountains, rivers, seas, non-human animals, forests and other living presences, with an I-thou openness to non-separation, holism, mysticism and numinous experience, involves directly being-with in body and mental attention – I am certainly not suggesting here anything of mind-body dualism, but affirming that individuals can be mentally not be present through

of conversation, as individuals do just share their stories, but can block the grieving process and the acceptance of silence.

Moving on to dialogic praxis as meeting, I am drawing from the thought of dialogic philosopher Martin Buber, with specific reference to his concepts I-it and I-thou, with some differences in perspective and experience – affirming these differences is not intended as suggesting anything of correcting or improving upon Buber's concepts; only to be clear that I am using these terms with slight differences to Buber. I-it and I-thou are both relationships that occur within dialogic praxis and are valuable in different ways and situations. I-it refers to the relationship that occurs when someone is with another presence in ways that is not entirely open to their experience and is limiting in objectifying terms. When I pick up the guitar that is sat on the other side of the room I am sat in and use it to make music, I am engaging with the guitar in an I-it relationship. Similarly, were I to catch a fish for my meal and pick some wild garlic to eat with the fish, my relationship with the animal and the plant would be of I-it. I-it relationships are integral aspects of survival, though not entirely appreciative or receptive to the experience of the other – this undoubtedly can be intensified and/or lessened. In I-thou relationships there is real openness to the presences engaged in relationship, with particular appreciation for the non-separation of the different presences who are individuated bodies within the ecological holism of the relationship; like musical harmonising. Though Buber is less inclined towards individuation, "experience" and non-human presences within I-thou relationships, in my experience sincere and authentic openness to individuals and experiencing non-human living beings is I-thou meeting and the ground for intense dialogic praxis.

Dialectical praxes are better known within political and activist ideologies, though are present within religious activities. In previous essays and my book Revolting I have sought to present fuller descriptions and challenges to dialectics than I am doing here. The main challenge that I have sought to affirm has been that dialectics largely surmount to the logic of totalitarianism, as they seek to assimilate all within the totality they can, while erasing that which does not conform. When providing feedback on Revolting, Max Cafard put it to me that the religious dialectics of Buddhism and Taoism do not fit my descriptions of dialectics. Maybe he is correct. However, I notice that descriptions of Buddhist dialectics I have found to be largely oriented towards the absolution of a singular "the wisdom" having a very totalising quality that render me skeptical of non-totalitarian claims. Equally, the Taoist concept of yin-yang being an example of the dialectical notion of "the unity of opposites" – this being the only reference to Taoist dialectics I have found – is questionable to me. This skepticism draws from multiple different points, which I will describe here. First point: there is no opposition between light and dark, as they are not actually in conflict – with the conceptualisation light and dark as being oppositional and in conflict seemingly coming from agri-religious attempts to ensure good harvest – which means that they are not opposites. Second point, which follows from the first but doesn't continue: that they are not oppositional does not mean that they are united, as they are divided as differentiable aspects of the world, with none being entirely monologic, as there are different lights and darknesses, and so are able to be individuated. Third point, again following without continuing: as divided individualities, light and dark might bleed into each other, whilst emerging from different sources who co-exist within the world – as I cast a shadow on the ground, creating darkness, I am different from The Sun, whilst co-existing without opposition or unification. Fourth point, again following but not continuing: the division

between myself and the sun, which is not oppositional, the lights and darknesses we cast within the world (none of which are unified or monologic) affirms our differences through a non-verbal dialogic upon the ground of existence, rather than any dialectic oriented towards absolution. Given these thoughts, I question the intensity to which I hold Cafard's feedback as true.

Dialogic philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin considered both dogmatism and dialectics to be totalitarian, as they are directed towards the monologism of "unitary language". Unitary languages centralise thought, not in ways that are merely abstract, but in ways that erase voices and reduce conversation to monologic-absolute-universal truth – this is a similar perspective to how Nietzsche critiqued Christianity and Platonism. Bakhtin affirms within his dialogic philosophy the decentralising and disunificating power of "heteroglossia"; generally meaning the presence of two or more voices/perspectives being expressed in text or other art forms, though I would certainly not limit it in this way, as my lived experience is that the phonetic and paralinguistic expression of alternative perspectives immediately shatter the absolution of monologism too. The force of heteroglossia is found within the individualised speaking, which Bakhtin affirms in individual dialect and thought; and I would add to by affirming the individuating quality of speaking from the personal and subjective experience. As I have no desire for dogmatic or dialectical religious or activist praxes, I feel affirming of heteroglossia as a means of de-totalising monologic forces. One area where I do differ greatly in perspective of Bakhtin is with regards to poetry, which Bakhtin considers to be a monologic form of art and articulation; as poetry seems to be able to contain multiple perspectives within a single piece, as well as being the poet's individualised voice as a rebellion against the monologic forces of political and religious machines.

Dialogic Praxis

At this point I am somewhat concerned that I have thus far presented dialogic praxis as just some form of reaction to dogmatic and dialectical monologisms. There is definitely a rebellious refusal to conform that I am seeking to affirm within dialogic praxis, when that praxis is done in-relationship and in-response to monologisms. However, there are other aspects of dialogic praxis that differ from this. One of these aspects, which I do not intend to focus on here too much, is when communication happens when there is only silence that can be met, as the speaker is speaking to the dead. The aspect that I intend to focus on here is that pertaining to dialogue as meeting, as a lived encounter of being-with. I am sure that my account is limited and lacking, but there are always limits to descriptions and I am limited as a describer.

With regards to communicating with the silence of death, there is a definite quality of the ending of the conversation. In ending, the silence of death demarcates the limits of dialogue in much the same way that death is the limit of a life. When an individual dies and, with them, their unique voice and experience, what do you do? If you appreciated their presence, their voice, their perspective, then, in my experience, something of grieving this phenomenological encounter of absence is needed, if we want to not fall into despair. Grieving that seems both healthy and desirable, seems to happen when there is a meeting of those who connect through the dialogic practice of story sharing, which helps those involved reorient themselves in this world without those who died. All to often, within this culture that is oriented towards totalitarian monologisation, I see that this grieving process becomes usurped by either, the narratives of dogma, through after-life rhetoric and God's plan, or dialectics, through the rhetoric of "they were good for the Cause/thesis", or both. This usurpation is never entirely homoglossic, never an entirely absolute centralisation