

Why Blake is Important to Me

William Blake (1757-1827), English poet, painter, prophet, printer, and engraver, is important to me because he taught me the nature of reality and he showed me who I really am.

Blake's great task, his mission, was to teach people how to see.

*Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me.
Yet they forgive my wanderings, I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination (Jerusalem 5:16-20)*

That's exactly what he did for me.

Raised in a devout Christian family, I had a deep personal relationship with Christ; but experiences in my late teens and early twenties caused me to doubt my religion. First, as a young mother of four children, I had a kind of breakdown—physical and emotional, and for a few months I was unable to care for my children and home. Since, as a wife and mother I was living the life I had been taught God wanted me to live, I wondered why it had made me sick. I began to question everything the Church had taught me, beginning with the role of woman. Second, at that time the civil rights movement began and as I became more aware of the status of black Americans, I found the racial segregation of churches unacceptable. Third, the anti-Vietnam War movement made me deplore the churches' support for the war or their silence about it. And finally, the women's movement affirmed my doubts about Christian teachings on sex roles and patriarchy. I hadn't completely jettisoned my faith, but it had become riddled with doubts, questions, and in parts, rejection.

I no longer believed the Bible as I had been taught to read it. I no longer knew how I was supposed to live as a woman. I no longer belonged to a church and I no longer accepted the doctrines I had been brought up with. I didn't know what to believe. It was in this context that I began to read William Blake. Since I was steeped in the Bible, having studied it all my life, what I saw immediately in Blake's Prophetic Books were his uses of Biblical terminology and allusions. It was clear that he understood the Bible differently from the way I had been taught and I felt an urgent need to understand him.

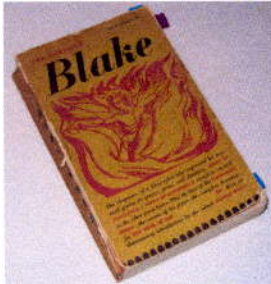
Blake seemed to be for the things I was for—equality of the sexes, racial equality, social justice, and sexual freedom. Even though he condemned imperialistic war, he was an ardent supporter of the American and French Revolutions. He was a friend of Tom Paine.



Frontispiece to *Jerusalem*. Blake bringing light into darkness as he leads the reader into his book

He opposed slavery at a time when there was strong opposition in England to ending it. He was exceptionally frank and open about sexuality and he denounced sexual hypocrisy.

*In a wife I would desire
What in whores is always found—
The lineaments of Gratified desire.* (Verses and Fragments, PB, p.134)



My worn and tattered, much read textbook

In my first study of Blake's Prophetic Books, I became convinced that he was a true prophet in the Biblical tradition. Just as the Hebrew prophets had spoken inspired words to the people in their time and place, addressing critical issues of social justice, true religion, and politics, so Blake spoke to the English people of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His purpose was the same as the Hebrew prophets, to bring the people back to right relationship with God. I realized then that revelation did not end with the



Heavily annotated as I struggled to understand

closing of the Biblical canon.

The first difficulty for me was Blake's concept of God. As my awareness of sexism grew, the concept of a male God, a Father God, became repugnant. It helped that Blake called this image of God, "Nobodaddy."

*To Nobodaddy
Why art thou silent and invisible,
Father of jealousy?
Why dost thou hide thy self in clouds
From every searching Eye?* (PB, p.130)

*Uprose terrible Blake in his pride
For old Nobodaddy aloft
Farted & Belchd & coughd.* (Blake's Notebook)

But if Blake had no use for the orthodox concept of God, what was his idea of God?

He identifies God with Human Imagination.

Man is All Imagination. God is Man & exists in us & we in him. (Marginalia to Berkeley, 219)

As Northrop Frye explains further, "Man in his creative acts and perceptions is God, and God is Man. God is the eternal Self, and the worship of God is self-development." (Frye, p. 30) He goes on, "All works of civilization, all the improvements and modifications of the state of nature that man has made, prove that man's creative power is literally supernatural." (Frye, p.41)

Okay, I rejected the old Nobodaddy aloft, but seeing God as imagination was a far stretch for me. I had to understand what Blake means by “imagination.” He uses “imagination” interchangeably with “mental” and “intellectual.” (And I think of it as “consciousness”.) Imagining is perceiving because perceiving means we are forming images of objects in the mind and incorporating those images into our own experience and way of thinking. The images we create are reality for us. While the vegetarian and the meat-eater see the same roasted chicken, it appears to one as a slaughtered creature and to the other as appetizing food. They each see the chicken with their individual “imaginings.” Thus, perception is reality and for Blake everything depends upon how we see.

People not only perceive differently, they perceive (form mental images) with varying degrees of intensity, attention, and acumen. The person who puts more of him/herself into perceiving sees more, and that which he or she perceives is more real. Imagination organizes and gives meaning to sense perceptions, which otherwise are simply chaotic and meaningless. Imagination is the freedom of the active mind to go beyond conventional, normal, accepted, consensual perception and see for itself. Such creative seeing Blake calls “vision”. Turning sight into vision is self-development and it is what we should all be striving for—to see more.

Blake deals with two ways of perceiving reality—the materialist/naturalist and the spiritual/creative. Throughout his works, he shows the consequences of seeing only in the materialistic way—the world as we know it, and contrasts that view of reality with the creative way of seeing that sees the infinite in all things. Of those who see in the materialistic way, Blake says,

*...What seems to Be: Is: To those to whom
It seems to Be. & is productive of the most dreadful
Consequences to those to whom it seems to Be. (Jerusalem 36:50-53)*

These people see appearances and think they are seeing reality. They think nature and the physical universe are all there is. They see themselves as finite, mortal beings and not their true divine inner selves. From this failure of vision come all the ills of life in this world.

*If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.*

Until we learn to see differently, imaginatively, we perceive only what we can see with the eyes in our heads. We lack vision.

What Blake wanted to achieve is our liberation from everything that prevents us from seeing reality and realizing our full potential. First and foremost among the obstacles is our inability to see our true Selves, our Divine Humanity.

We don’t know who we are. Blake showed me. When I got it, while sitting in silence in a Friends’ meeting in 1964, I felt as though my mind had cracked open and my rigid, orthodox certainties had been broken up. There was an actual physical sensation. It felt as if in my head was an aluminum ice cube tray such as we used fifty years ago.



Ice cube tray

These trays had dividers, and when we lifted a lever, the dividers shifted slightly, breaking the ice into cubes with a cracking sound. That's what it felt like in my head at the time.

Still, I had a long way to go to understand how Blake perceived reality. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, I saw that heaven and hell are not places in an afterlife, but states of mind or levels of consciousness in this life. Blake's view of the orthodox idea of heaven is that it is hell—dull, passive, and unproductive. For him, the fires of the orthodox hell are the passions and energy that fuel joyful creativity, which is heaven. As for his idea of God, Blake had more to say here.

... God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men.
(MHH 16: 17)

The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God. (MHH 22:24-23:27)

The book includes a collection of "Proverbs of Hell" and here are some that struck home to me.

*The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.
Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by
Incapacity.*

*No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own
wings.*

*The eagle never lost so much time as when he
submitted to learn of the crow.*

*You never know what is enough unless you know
what is more than enough.*

All wholesome food is caught without a net or a trap.

Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.

Religions develop when men choose

... forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had order'd such things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast. (MHH 11:11-15)

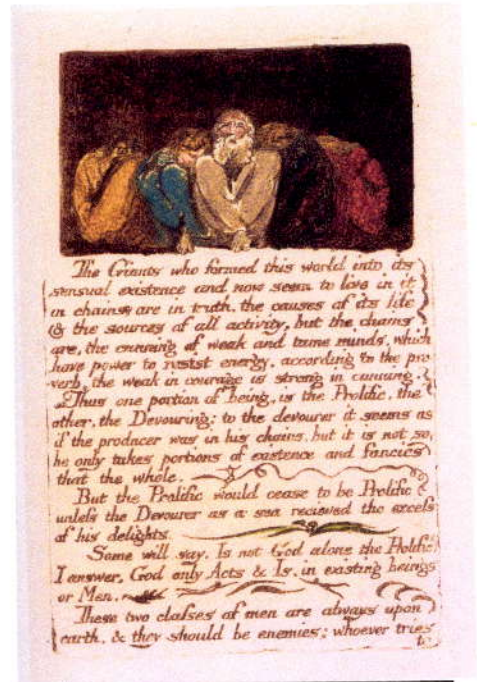
Religions make the gods of myth that are personifications of human qualities into external beings and they turn the myths into rituals, creeds, and doctrines.

One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression...

This was Blake's critique of moral law, which allows for no individual differences.

No ascetic, Blake claimed that revelation *...will come to pass by the improvement of sensual enjoyment.* Wow, I loved that!

And this is the final, ringing cry of this work:



*Marriage of Heaven and Hell,
Plate 16*

For every thing that lives is Holy.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake broke down for me “orthodox categories of thought and morality” as Harold Bloom says. As I understood him back then, in the 1960s, I rejoiced in his boisterous renunciations of orthodoxy and saw in them affirmation and enrichment of my own rebellion against the church. In his call for revolution, meaning the American and French revolutions of his time, I saw a parallel with my own affinity for the cultural revolutions of my time—for women’s rights, civil rights, human rights in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and sexual liberation.

The decade of the 1960s saw the beginning of the women’s liberation movement. It coincided with my own need for a different life from the one I had been brought up to accept. As I sought to create a new way of being, I read many works about the role of women: Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the 19th Century*, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, among others, had great influence on me. But Blake provided spiritual authority. He taught that realizing one’s potential and becoming all one can be are spiritual practice. Trying to be the kind of woman I had thought I should be, I was limiting myself.

A key element of the women’s movement was consciousness-raising. We met in small groups to talk about our life experiences and thus learn to see them not as just individual situations, but common to all women like us, as the results of sexism. We taught ourselves a new way of perceiving our lives. We became more conscious, which I saw as spiritual development, thanks to Blake. Self-development could be a substitute for religion for me.

And so, in the 1960s I had a conversion experience—out of my religion, definitely facilitated by William Blake.

During the 1970s and ‘80s, I looked into my Blake books occasionally, but I was too busy in my work and family life to study them. However, as I continued my consciousness-raising, now mainly on my own through introspection, reading, and journaling; and as I participated in the human potential movement in my work and in volunteer activities, Blake still influenced me. He had convinced me that I would suffer mentally, emotionally, and perhaps physically, if I allowed myself to be squelched and did not try to realize my potential, if instead I accepted the stultifying sex role I had been assigned. This notion contributed greatly to the end of my first marriage.

By this time in my life, in my thirties and forties, I had internalized his doctrine that the Imagination is Divine and that exercising creativity is spiritual practice. I accepted his teaching that self-development is spiritual practice. My feminism was reinforced by what I thought was Blake’s spiritual argument for sexual equality. Although there is no evidence that Blake ever acted on his ideas about sexual freedom, I did. Briefly. [*As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences.* (PB, p.79.) Having been shown by Blake that all religions are in error, I took Blake’s motto as my own, *I must Create a System, or be enslaved by another man’s*. But I didn’t actually give much thought to systematizing my spiritual life then.

By the 1980s many people, especially young people, were actively and openly seeking spiritual experience not available in their religions. Many of them turned toward the East, to Buddhism and Hinduism, unaware that the West had its own deep spiritual traditions in contemplative Christianity, Jewish kabbalism, and Moslem Sufism. Like them, I also had no knowledge of the Western inner, esoteric tradition. I thought Blake was a "one-off." When my son Geoff returned from a Buddhist meditation retreat in Bodh Gaya, India, where Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment, and talked to me about his experiences, I became interested in Buddhism. I began reading about it. One book that particularly intrigued me was *Open Secrets: A Western Guide to Tibetan Buddhism* published in 1980 by Walt Anderson, which I read several times. Living in Boulder, Colorado for about 18 months, I had the opportunity of hearing Tibetan Buddhist teachers, getting to know Western Buddhist practitioners, and attending a Buddhist-Christian Meditation Conference.

Until then, I didn't know that there were contemplative Christians who practiced solitary, silent meditation as Buddhists do. Quakers practice silent meditation as a group in Meeting. Although I had gone to Meeting a few times, the Quakers I met there were too much like the Presbyterians I had grown up with—respectable church people, and I was in flight from church.

The Buddhists I met in Boulder were definitely not respectable church people; but they were too New Agey for me. Young, affluent, they seemed too much attracted by the foreign-ness of Tibetan Buddhism, the rituals, art, and paraphernalia. I didn't feel I belonged with them. Besides, I wasn't looking for a religion and I didn't want to pretend to be Tibetan.

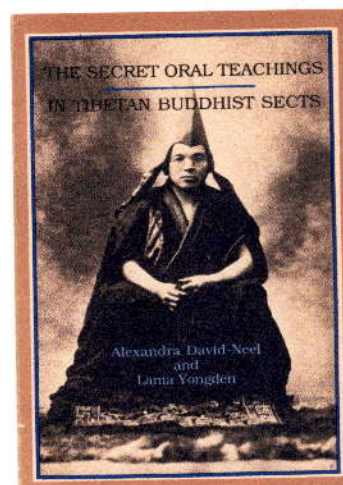
Nevertheless, from then on, I continued to read books by Tibetan lamas and books about Buddhism. The teachings reminded me of Blake. They helped me understand concepts in Blake that had been obscure.

In 1992, I broke down with undiagnosed symptoms and was forced to stop working. Because doctors and a psychotherapist could find nothing wrong with me physically or emotionally, I concluded I must be having a spiritual crisis. I began practicing meditation. I undertook training in a secular meditation methodology based on Tibetan Buddhism. I continued to read books by Tibetan teachers that were available to me at The Tibetan Meditation Center. In *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*, by Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden, I found the same emphasis on perception that I had found in Blake.

The lower an individual is in the scale of physical and psychic development, the smaller is the number of his conscious perceptions. Likewise, more highly

developed individuals perceive more than others.

This passage in *From Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision*,



Lama Yongden on book cover

by Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, aptly illustrates the same concept.

...an animal may see an oddly shaped black and white object, a tribal person a rectangular flexible object with curious markings. To a Western child it is a book, while to an adult it may be a particular type of book, namely a book that makes incomprehensible, even ridiculous claims about reality. Finally, to a physicist it may be a profound text on quantum physics.

More about perception from *Secret Oral Teachings*:

Buddhist salvation, Liberation, consists in a fundamental change in our perceptions...it is an awakening resulting from transcendent and profound insight which causes us to 'see more' and to discover, beyond the world of virtues and vices, of Good and Evil, a sphere where these pairs of opposites do not exist.

Illumination is the discovery of the reality existing beneath appearances, and he who is enlightened will be aware of the place which he, in fact, occupies in this reality.

What we think of as reality, the reality of ordinary, mundane life, is actually an interpretation of the energy activity with which we come into contact. It is based on a combination of social conditioning and education—consensual reality: we see what we are taught to see; and karma—the inherited capabilities and limitations of our species plus our own instincts, habits, memories, and past experiences.

Just as Blake had done, these ancient esoteric teachings warned about the danger of relying on sense perceptions and thinking that our senses can show us reality.

Because our senses give us incorrect information, they lead us into error, and if we are deceived by them we are cultivating ignorance. For lack of access to reality, not only do we 'not know,' but we erect on our wrong information various wrong views, and the structure of a fantastic world.

These doctrines and the disciplines attached thereto date back to the distant past... and the spirit of these teachings has always, either in one world or another, inspired an elite of thinkers who were particularly perspicacious, and who 'saw beyond' that which appeared to the majority of beings.

Of course I knew that Blake was among the elite of thinkers.

Research is the Way.

Blake wrote, *As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences.* (PB, p.79)

Each atom of a grain of sand or dust, the Masters of the Secret Teachings say, is a world which comprises myriads of beings and where a drama of life and deaths, similar to that of which we are aware in our world, takes place.

And Blake says:

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,

Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? (MHH, PB, p. 252)

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. (PB, p.150)*

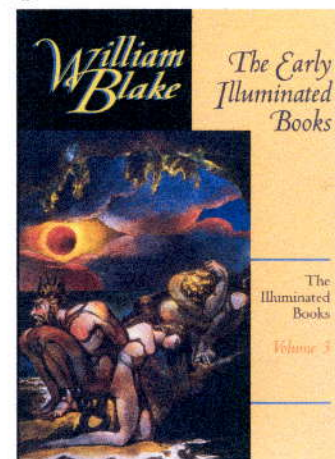
Over and over I found parallels between the Tibetan teachings and Blake. And Buddhism gave me something Blake had not—instruction in how to achieve his vision for myself. Buddhism gave me the technology—meditation techniques, visualization methodology, and mantra practice. But after several retreats at The Tibetan Meditation Center, I felt like a tourist in the Tibetan Buddhist environment with its exotic practices. Further, I didn't want to belong to any group. I was still religion-averse. I had already decided for myself that institutionalized religions were too wrong about too many things for me to want to be part of any. I got from Buddhism the technology that would enable me to experience what the wisdom teachers experienced. Then I went back to Blake.

Though he was in my own English Protestant tradition, he had the same insights about the nature of reality as the Buddhists, and so I spent about a year in 1994 and 1995 intensively, compulsively, studying Blake again, re-reading all his works and many books of scholarship on them. Reading Blake biographies. With the benefit of my Buddhist experience, Blake made a lot more sense to me. Through meditation practice, I had come to “see more,” to see as Blake saw.

Since the 1960s I had thought of Blake as a prophet in the Hebrew tradition and his main source as the Bible. In the 1990s I learned that, in fact, he was equally a sage of the perennial philosophy and read the Bible in its light. The perennial philosophy is the expression of the greater awareness, the higher consciousness, of a small elite found in all cultures and throughout the ages, those referred to by the Tibetan masters. All these gifted people who “see more”, see the same reality. In essence, they share the conviction “that appearances are not reality; that the findings of the rational mind alone are not sufficient, and that intuition is a prime source of knowledge; that mind informs the natural universe, interpreting or creating it in its own likeness; that the cosmic mind is in correspondence with the mind of the individual; that reality is mental.” (Percival, p. 280)

Blake went even further. He identified individual mind and universal mind, or consciousness and God. Through my meditation practice, I came to experience that Oneness.

In the 1990s, The Blake Trust and Princeton University Press began publishing the first facsimile edition of the complete Prophetic Books as well as his early poetry, which they titled, *The Illuminated Books of William Blake*. Now, in six large volumes, I had access to the glorious works as Blake had created them. I bought them, but did not immediately do more than browse through them. A decade later I was drawn to study them closely.



In 2007 when my grandson Luke asked me about my college papers on Blake, and I found them, I wanted Luke to understand why Blake was important to me. I re-read my papers and my first Blake textbook from 1963, with its marginal notes. Then I re-read Northrop Frye's seminal and monumental study of Blake, *Fearful Symmetry*. I didn't want to engage in another in-depth study of his works; I intended a cursory review that would enable me to explain Blake's relevance to my life. Despite myself, I became engrossed.

As I studied Blake's illuminated books, thrilled by the beautiful designs and images, as well as the powerful words, I was as exhilarated as I had been in 1963, when I first met him. I was also impressed by how much of Blake's philosophy has become my own.

*Go, tell them that the Worship of God, is honouring his gifts
In other men: & loving the greatest men best, each according
To his Genius: which is the Holy Ghost in Man; there is no other
God, than that God who is the intellectual fountain of Humanity;...* (Jerusalem) 91: 7–10)

*I care not whether a Man is Good or Evil; all that I care
Is whether he is a Wise Man or a Fool, Go! Put off Holiness
And put on Intellect...* (Jerusalem 91: 54–56)

*"I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind
to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination Imagination the real & eternal World of which
this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow..."* (Jerusalem 77)

The Prophetic Books are extremely difficult to read. Youngquist refers to their "beguiling opacity." (Youngquist, p. 148) Maybe that's one reason why I enjoy studying them: I like giving my mind a workout. Blake responded to a correspondent's complaint about the difficulty of his work, ...*What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care.* While Shakespeare's plays are equally dense with meaning, allowing endless interpretations, they are not difficult to follow on the surface. It's easy to know what's happening and what the characters are saying. Not so with Blake's books. He wrote about the inner life— at the same time the inner life of an individual, of a society, and of all humanity. Mind-boggling. To read these books, one has to learn his language of symbols, which is complex. Some symbols stand for several things, and some things have several different symbols, and the text is full of symbols. One has to become familiar with the odd names he created, such as Enitharmon, Urizen, Rintrah, Palamabron, Ulro, Golgonooza, Ololon, and remember who or what they are. Then there are the familiar words and names that Blake uses in his own way, with his own meaning, such as God, eternity, America, sleep, and so on. Not to mention his idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation, and his 18th century use of capitalization. Moreover, to get the full meaning,



Urizen, a pun on "your reason", who measures, analyzes, and sets boundaries that prevent human beings from realizing their potential

one must also understand the illuminations—the images and visual symbols that surround the text. These images and graphics do not just illustrate places, people, and actions in the text; they more frequently show us how to interpret it. Sometimes they provide more information, sometimes they comment ironically on the words. They are truly illuminating, shedding light on the meaning of the books.

What is important for me in these books is the psychological account of creation, fall, redemption, and apocalypse—how the world came (or comes) into being and why life on



A page from *Jerusalem*, showing the four Zoas

earth is as it is. I focused on the *Illustrations of the Book of Job, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and the major Prophetic Books—*The Four Zoas*, Milton, and *Jerusalem*, studying the art as well as the text. Very briefly, Blake visualizes humanity as one man. Before the fall, this human is a fully-integrated androgynous being living in a much higher level of consciousness (Eden, Eternity), joyfully learning and creating. Humanity lives in perfect unity and communion, in mutual self-sacrifice and love. When humankind loses integration, it falls to a lower level of consciousness and enters the world of time and space. Actually, the fall is simultaneous with creation, for time and space and the phenomenal world are the perception of the limited senses and reason of the fallen human being.

The four-fold whole human is now broken into

separate faculties—reason, emotion, the senses, and imagination or intuition, and into two sexes. These parts are in conflict with each other—what Youngquist calls “the politics of

consciousness.” (Youngquist, p. 74) Reason asserts its sovereignty over feeling. Emotion overcomes reason. The senses have lost power and become constricted. Moreover, fallen humanity has lost the awareness of its own divinity. Only imagination/intuition can restore to human beings their knowledge of God within themselves, which then leads to the re-integration of the whole being, the experience of Eden or Eternity again. Blake says that it is possible to experience this higher level of consciousness in our everyday lives.

Blake calls life in this world “generation” because all life on earth is born or generated, lives, grows, reproduces or generates, and dies. Life in this world is a parody or a partial, flawed, imitation of eternal life, of life lived at a higher level of consciousness. Our everyday life is to eternal life as a mirror reflection is to the living person. The reflection has the appearance of the person, but it is two-dimensional, immobile, and dead, while the person is rounded, living, and functioning. Everything in this everyday life is inadequate, incomplete, faulty, and lacking because it is not the real thing. We feel dissatisfied. We know somehow that there could be a better world. We want more than this life offers, and

we palliate ourselves with all kinds of distractions. Although we try to improve life in this world, we often fail because we have only our limited faculties with which to work. We fail because we don't understand who we really are—parts of each other, and we are driven by fear and jealousy of the other.

In this world our task is to create civilization and to humanize nature—turn wilderness and wasteland into gardens and vineyards. And to develop ourselves. Blake sees history as a repeated story: humankind falls away from God, wanders and suffers; a spiritual leader appears who inspires people to turn again to God; but again they fall away.

The Four Zoas, in which Blake elaborated this myth and which is thought by some critics to be his greatest achievement, explains why life on earth is so bad and how it got that way, and why human beings are so troubled. The four Zoas are the four parts of human nature—reason, emotion, senses, and imagination.

At the higher level of consciousness (Eden), there is perfect Oneness, perfect integration, perfect brotherhood of all beings in one Being. With humanity's fall come time and space, because humans no longer have the capacity to perceive eternity and infinity. With humanity's fall, nature, the natural world, manifests because humans have lost the ability to experience reality as God does. To us matter seems solid and nature seems real. It seems ultimate. We substitute or mistake what our fallen, limited senses and capabilities can perceive and understand for what IS. We mistake the partial for the Whole.

The four Zoas fight with each other and struggle against nature until finally there is a great cataclysm when all their errors are exposed, which causes nature to be burnt up, and Reality (Eternity) to appear. History is seen as a series of revolutions, as people suffer as much as they can bear, then they rise up against their oppressors. But history is not just repeated revolutions; there is progress as each new age that follows a revolution represents a gain in consciousness. What Blake shows in this epic poem is the inner life of the individual person, which is the same as the outer life of society and history—full of conflict and anguish. Brilliant psychology and sociology.



Milton as a falling star
entering Blake's foot

Humankind's greatest error and the underlying cause of all our suffering is the ignorance of, lack of awareness of, or disbelief in, our unity with God. We think of God as separate from us, external. In fact, we are part of God.

Milton was important to me because I applied the lesson Blake learned to myself. Blake learned that he could not refuse to be himself, that he could not refuse to be all he could be. In this book he shows us how he came to accept fully his role as prophet, even though it meant rejecting material comfort and security. He imagines that John Milton leaves Eternity and returns to this world to correct his errors. He does so by

entering into Blake, whose epic poem corrects Milton's mistaken Puritan doctrines. Thus, Blake becomes the Milton of his time. In *Milton*, Blake also turns autobiography into a

myth in which one character is a fiery, visionary genius, another character is that genius's need to earn a living and get along in life, and the third character is the genius's well-intentioned friend and patron, a man of mediocre talent and conventional taste who tries to instruct the genius. Blake concludes, *Corporeal Friends are Spiritual Enemies!* (Milton 4:26)

In *Jerusalem*, Blake again tells the Biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and apocalypse in psychological terms. Thus he made it possible for me to assimilate my tradition in an interpretation that made sense and was acceptable to me. It was compatible with my lived experience, with my temperament, and with my intellectual interests. In this account, Albion (England) has fallen into a deep sleep. He is unconscious of his Divine Humanity. Because of this lapse, he has lost his bride, Jerusalem (Liberty). As Blake exposes the errors of his time that keep Albion in this state of unconsciousness, the errors of orthodox Biblical religion, of rational materialism, and of false Christian doctrines, Albion finally awakens and is reunited with Jerusalem. Realizing his potential, Albion can now build a truly human civilization.

Jerusalem explains how all the suffering and ugliness in life are due to humanity's acceptance of false ideas about what it means to be human. Religion, philosophy, and the Church promulgate wrong notions about human nature, about the natural world, and about human relations. Blake condemns religion for positing a separate God who insists on moral laws, who is punitive and demands sacrifice for sin. No, says Blake. God is in us and we are in God. Knowledge of this truth comes by direct experience of the reality of who we are and the Oneness of all that is, our unity with the ultimate. Blake contrasts orthodox religion with visionary experience. Life can only be good and positive when people live in mutual respect and forgiveness, not under moral law and vengeance; when they recognize the Divine in self and others and not when they are worshipping a God they have created.

He condemns philosophy, meaning the rational materialism of his time, as just another religion, without God, a belief system that deifies the natural human capacities, especially reason, and denies human divinity. This philosophy turns the universe into a dead system and human beings into worthless worms. Atheism, rationalism, secularism, humanism, existentialism, and all worldviews, according to Blake's thinking, are not the opposite of religion, because they, too, are belief systems. The opposite of religion, which is based on belief and ritual, is art, which is based on inspiration. The opposite of theism is creativity.

While Blake gives primacy to the imagination, he does not reject reason as the way of knowing about the phenomenal universe and natural life. It's when we think that reason alone can know reality that we are actually closed off from reality. Unless reason is informed by imagination, it cannot go beyond the everyday world we inhabit. Moreover, if reason and the senses were our only way of knowing, there would be no civilization, for



Jerusalem with the four fallen Zoas

civilization is the result of human creativity. It is possible only because we can imagine something that does not exist in the phenomenal world.

He blames Christianity for preaching chastity and venerating virginity, causing people to be at war between their sexual desire and reason, which cautions conformity to moral law. He saw that denial of sexual gratification wreaks havoc psychologically and socially. Further, sexual desire stands for all desire, all passion. Blake thought the Church taught people to be mild when it is intense desire that motivates people to do great work. Blake asserts that true religion is forgiveness of sin, the religion of Jesus, for there is no one who does not sin, i.e., fall short of full humanity.

“Jesus did not discuss heaven and hell (which are states of mind, not places) in terms of good and evil, but in terms of life and death, the fruitful and the barren. The law of God that we must obey is the law of our own spiritual growth.” (Frye, p. 80)

Describing life in eternity, in the highest level of consciousness, Blake wrote:

*...Our wars are wars of life, & wounds of love,
With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought:
Mutual in one anothers love and wrath all renewing,
We live as One Man; for contracting our infinite senses
We behold multitude; or expanding: we behold as one,
As One Man all the Universal Family: and that One man
We call Jesus the Christ: and he in us and we in him,
Live in perfect harmony in Eden the land of life.
Giving, receiving, and forgiving each others trespasses. (Jerusalem 38:14–22)*

When we are seeing with our fallen senses, we perceive humanity as made up of separate beings, “multitude”; but when we are seeing creatively with our expanded senses, we see that humanity is One.



Blake’s retelling of the Job story is yet another recounting of his myth. Youngquist calls *The Illustrations of the Book of Job* Blake’s “greatest work of engraving...among the best engravings ever.” (Youngquist, p. 12) In his version, Job is a pious, prosperous man who believes he is living a righteous life. But there is no joy in his life. His family’s musical instruments are hanging up, unplayed. Then come all his terrible sufferings and his theological discussions with his friends. Throughout, Job maintains that he is a good man. Finally he has an apocalypse, a revelation, enlightenment—a direct experience of God, in which he realizes that God is within him. This realization liberates him from his religious thinking and he surrenders his self-righteousness. Now he is living a creative, productive, and joyful life as shown by his family playing the musical instruments. Psychologically expressed, through suffering and his a-hah moment, Job has grown to a higher level of consciousness. Blake interprets Job’s



experience as that of everyone—how we separate ourselves from God in our ignorance, experience the inevitable suffering that ensues, learn from our experience, and return to God.

Nietzsche in describing “the mystery doctrine of tragedy,” completely expresses Blake’s credo: “...the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in an augury of a restored oneness.” (Quoted in Youngquist, p. 39)

William Blake taught me to think differently. Through him I learned that eternity is not everlasting time and infinity is not endless space. They are higher levels of consciousness. Time and space are simply creations of the human mind that result from the limitations of our senses at the lower level of consciousness in which we ordinarily live. This world of ordinary experience is appearance only, not Reality. Thinking that we are individual beings, separate from each other and from nature is a mistake. Reality is all one. Everything is interconnected and interdependent. Everything is a part of the whole and not separate. The Whole is God. Thus, God is in me and I am in God, as is everything. All the woes and horrors of life in this world, all the suffering and dissatisfaction, all the conflicts and exploitation we see everywhere throughout history, are due to our mistaken thinking. We think that God, Divinity, is separate from us and that we are separate from each other and from nature.

Were our doors of perception cleansed, we would have love and brotherhood instead of laws; forgiveness instead of punishment; salvation through self-sacrifice instead of Jesus’s sacrificial atonement; inspiration instead of belief; creativity and study as worship instead of religious ritual; and self-development and consciousness-raising as religion.

When Blake died in obscurity and poverty, “he had written some of the finest poems in the language, painted some of the most vital pictures done by an Englishman, and singlehandedly made a comprehensive mythology, an achievement still unique among poets, though many have attempted it since Blake.” (Bloom, p. 314)

He changed my life. I felt liberated. He taught me that the good life is a life lived from within. I learned to trust my Inner Self rather than rely on what others thought. I became more independent and self-directed. Partly because of Blake, I have lived my life experimentally. My husband and I have a saying, “How else will we know?” Blake taught me that there was more to see, and meditation practice has allowed me to see more. Blake wrote, *Prayer is the Study of Art. Praise is the Practise of Art.* (PB, p. 497) For the past ten years or so I have been praying and praising in my practice of needleart.

Blake is important to me because, although I have rejected the Christianity in which I was raised, he made it possible for me to return to my Biblical roots by showing me the true meaning of the Bible. When I first read Blake, comprehending only partially, I felt somehow that he spoke to me and that I had to get it. Now as I read Blake, I feel that he speaks *for* me. He opened my eyes... *inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.*

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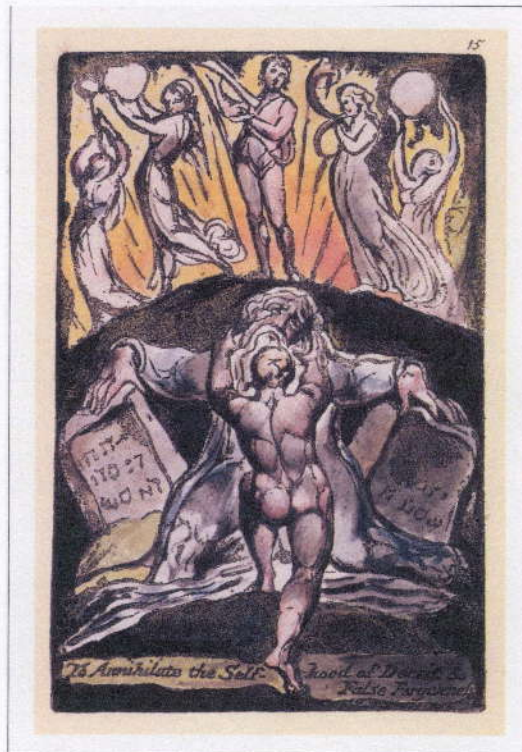
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Milton struggling to overcome his Puritanical concept of God, the God of the Ten Commandments, who is also Urizen, the god of this world, so that he can experience "the improvement of sensual enjoyment" that is enlightenment, as shown by the music-making five senses above.