

LIVING MYTH PODCAST

Episode 377 – Eclipses and Epiphanies

Mabel Loomis Todd, who was a close friend and early publisher of Emily Dickinson's poetry, once said, "I doubt if the effect of witnessing a total eclipse ever quite passes away." She went on to describe what she called a startling nearness to the gigantic forces of nature that seemed to be established by witnessing a total eclipse of the sun.

On April 8, the universe will grace parts of the United States with one of nature's great spectacles in the form of a total solar eclipse. Along a roughly 115 mile wide zone, on what is called the path of totality, the bright sun will vanish for up to four and a half minutes, plunging the Earth from daylight into Twilight. A total solar eclipse happens when the Moon passes between the Sun and the Earth and completely blocks the face of the sun. The sky darkens as if it were dawn or dusk, and in the place of the normally shining sun, a black disk appears surrounded by a shimmering entrancing ring of light. This solar corona is the outer atmosphere of the sun that is usually obscured by its own light.

Seven years ago, another total eclipse traversed parts of the United States, and a survey afterwards at the University of Michigan estimated that more than 150 million people observed the total eclipse directly, while another 60 million watched it on TV or on the Internet. The survey stated that this level of exposure dwarfs the viewership of the Superbowl and other earthly events, and it ranks amongst the most viewed events in American history. Another study found that around the time of the total eclipse, Twitter messages exhibited more or less from people who expressed less self-focused attention and more of a pro social, affiliated, even humble, collective sense of connection and language. That study concluded that just as the moon aligned with the sun, up in the heavens, people down on Earth aligned with each other in awe of this spectacular celestial event.

During the moments of what is called totality, darkness descends upon the earth with stunning swiftness, the air temperature suddenly drops as birds and insects start acting strangely. The power of a total eclipse comes from this strangeness, from the fact that the event is so unusual that it appears unlike anything else. Since ancient times, this seemingly natural event has been seen to have supernatural overtones. Seeing the sun's corona or hidden crown is a rare thing in itself. But the eclipsed Sun is also revealed to be surrounded by bright stars and planets that are otherwise not seen in the daytime. The sun and the stars, and the planets do not under normal circumstances seem to be sharing the same sky. A total solar eclipse has the paradoxical quality of hiding the sun, while also revealing aspects of its true nature.

At totality, the sun appears as it truly is, a star amongst the other stars. At totality, it looks more like a living, breathing thing, rather than a bright, solid orb. This unusual sight can be a reinforcement of the now common idea that we are each but a mere speck on a piece of rock drifting around the sun. Or it can be a revelation that reassures our souls that we are secretly connected to the whole living cosmos.

Going back to the statement of Emily Dickinson's friend, the startling nearness of the gigantic forces of nature that are revealed during a total eclipse never quite passes away. That was said at what now seems like a much simpler time. But the message of what is now called totality is hidden in the word itself. That is to say, that the hundreds of millions of modern people who feel instinctively driven to observe this rare heavenly event are not acting out of simple curiosity, but are knowingly or not, being drawn to the underlying sense that we are connected to the heavens, that we are interconnected with the cosmos itself.

The term eclipse comes from Greek roots that mean an abandonment or failing or forsaking of the usual situation. And so it was that some ancient peoples felt abandoned by the absence of the sun and are said to have attributed a sense of bad omens, and even the sense of the end of the world to total eclipses. So that's the eclipse side in which the sun seems to disappear momentarily, while the other side, which I would call the epiphany side, reveals the sun in his connection to the other stars and planets, and can reveal to us ways in which our own souls are connected to the hidden totality of life, which secretly aligns our individual souls with the whole living, moving, changing cosmic thing.

One condition of life in the modern, post-industrial world is that we experience a sense of separation from nature, along with a sense of dislocation from the cosmos. When we look for meaning, we might be told that meaning has become a relative thing, that it can be deconstructed and rephrased in many ways. If we turn to typical science for comfort, we can be told that life is no more than an accidental occurrence on a small planet orbiting a relatively unimportant star within a random and meaningless universe. Yet, there are moments in each life when we touch what the Irish poet James Joyce termed was an epiphany, a moment in which the soul of the most common object can seem to us radiant. Epiphanies are occasions of unexpected benediction and blessing during which meaning can flood us with a felt sense of the wholeness and the holiness of life.

Despite the increase of cynicism, and the rise of nihilism, our souls have an inborn expectation to have profound experiences of luminosity and the hidden unity of life. The numinous appears as something uncanny and mysterious that gives us a sense of the presence of the Divine, and awakens a deeply felt intuition of the rightness of a situation or an event. Within such a moment, the habitual distinction that we make between inner and outer, between subjective and objective, between dream and reality breaks down to reveal the living cosmos and our own lives under one eclipsed light. For a moment of indefinite duration, our attention is pulled away from the increasingly divided and polarized world in which we live, and the world suddenly makes sense. And as wise people used to say, the whole world revealed itself to be a form of living truth.

In the midst of all the confusion and growing chaos in the world, I keep thinking of the part of us that naturally searches for meaning and for beauty and for truth, as the inner archetypal initiate. In many traditional initiations, the novice would be introduced to a deep sense of connection to nature, but also to the sense of the sacred experienced as being part of the living cosmos. So those who were initiated would not be feeling the sense of deep separation from the pulse of nature, nor would they be feeling dislocated from the cosmos as a whole. One of the purposes of the initiation would be to connect the deep self and soul of those seeking for knowledge with the psychological, mythological, mystical sense of being woven uniquely into the living web of the cosmos.

Since the modern world typically lacks any meaningful connection to the dynamics of Rites of Passage and initiation, it may take an unusual event like the total eclipse of the sun for people to want to drop everything in order to look up at the heavens. For me, the idea that you cannot look directly at a total eclipse of the sun carries a suggestion that we are supposed to see such a cosmic event in another way. The other ways of initiation would involve using meaningful events to open up the sacred history of the world and of humanity in ways that can lead us back to the origins of creation, which can be symbolized by everything going dark, and then coming back into bright existence.

One of the purposes of entering a dark initiation hut or a dark night of the soul was to enter a descent into darkness, through which the inner eyes of the soul could open and see the world as a living web to which we are each tied in a unique and meaningful way. Not that long ago, an old burial mound was discovered in Italy. And within the mound there was a tomb with the skeletal remains of an ancient person. Placed carefully near the head of the deceased there was a thin folded sheet made of beaten gold, and etched upon that golden sheet was the following statement. I am a child of the earth in the starry heavens, but my race is of heaven alone.

Scholars have considered that the golden sheet was a kind of passport for the deceased to use to gain entry into the other world, the place of origins, the world behind this world. Another old wise saying asks the question, "why wait until you're dead to find out what you can learn now." In other words, the golden passport found in the tomb also says something about the living souls. It says something about where we really stand in life. It says something about our place in this great drama of existence. For in this old sense, this old way of understanding the human soul, we are each a child of the fertile earth below our feet. And we are also descendants of the starry heavens above our heads. We belong to more than one dimension of life and our souls are secretly attuned to other levels of reality.

That's another way to see the meaning that shines forth from a total eclipse of the sun. One level of life is visible, palpable, and readily observable to the human eye, and the other is mostly invisible, seemingly ephemeral, and more difficult to come to know. Yet, it is the second level that is most essential to our well-being, and critical to our understanding of both life and death. This inner and other realm of the unseen that often goes unrecognized holds the missing elements we need to become truly self-aware, and to be more fully realized. The point is not to become inflated with an exaggerated sense of the overriding importance of humanity. That kind of inflation is what has separated us from our innate connection to nature. The point involved the interconnectedness that places us and also stretches us between the dark earth and the heavens above.

Despite all the confusion and all the literalization and all the dumbing down of the imagination of people, we are still each star born and we can be at times star guided. The hidden light within our souls is the star spark that connects each of us to the cosmic origins of life. As life all around us seems to make less and less sense, we are called to rediscover our cosmic origins, and our mythological inheritance.

The notion that we are secretly threaded to the stars and drawn to destiny set within us may seem like lines from a poem of a long gone age when things were more fanciful and facts were less prevalent, yet

at times, fact and myth approach each other, and the star in humankind which can be deemed an unearthly idea has increasingly become the intrigue of many modern scientists. Hard-nosed physicists find themselves waxing metaphysical as they encounter the mysteries of life at the extension of powerful telescopes and penetrating microscopes that reveal the pure and continuing wonder of the creative world. Astrophysicists now consider that a bit of the original star has to be in each person. They reason that if it all began with the explosion of a star, then anything that appeared afterwards must have some of that original star in it or else it could not be part of existence.

Unknowingly they are following the old dictum from mythology that states everything is at the beginning. That which shapes us from within turns out to be both astronomical and astrological and mythological, a speck of cosmic star hailing from the very beginning of time, being reborn in the self and the soul of each person. We live upon a star, and we carry the residue of stars within our earthly frame as each ingredient of the human body is formed from elements first forged in the inner furnaces of ancient stars. When our manmade institutions rattle and even nature undergoes radical changes, we need to remind ourselves of our innate cosmic connection to the whole living thing.

If there is to be a renaissance of some kind, in the midst of all the worldwide disturbances and global troubles, we may have to find the sparks of inspiration and the glint of innovation in the speck of star we carry within ourselves. The many disasters of modern life include the lack of vertical imagination, and the loss of the mystery and wonder of this world. And along with it, a tragic misunderstanding of our central place within it. On one level, we are each insignificant, merely a speck of life in the immense reaches of a seemingly random universe. And on another level, an inspired and even epiphanic level, each soul comes to life as a unique torchbearer, each one bearing the eternal flame of existence and carrying that flame for an indeterminate length of time. For each person carries in their own way an inner spark and speck of star, the flame of imagination and the light of consciousness trying to awaken in ways that allow each person to contribute something to the ongoing creation of the world.

On one level, we barely matter. On another level, what matters most to us turns out to matter to the world as well. As the fabric of life loosens, and the veil between this world and the other world becomes thinner and more permeable, we can begin again to align ourselves with the luminous ground of imagination that is the inherited territory of the human heart and soul. Our minds which are secretly connected to the deep well of memory can learn again to serve the deepest longings of our hearts and draw upon the wisdom hidden in our own souls.

As the eclipse of the sun draws near, and a moment of darkness can be predicted, our planet already stands at a crisis point. Our way out can no longer lie in fantasies of control, but rather in a new wisdom, which is really the ancient wisdom come round again. And just as the light of the sun appears after a period of darkness, an awakening of the human soul can be gathering itself in the midst of a dark time on Earth.

And just as time seems to be running out on everyone, the eternal force of life tries to slip back into human awareness. As in the midst of a total eclipse of the sun, things become both impossible and more possible at the same time. And amidst the theories about how it all might come to an end, the threads of the eternal that rise from the original source of life can be found again. As the poet painter

and philosopher, William Blake put it, "each day has a moment of eternity waiting for you." And an eclipse of the sun can be seen as a gift, as a collective moment of eternity waiting, wishing and wanting to be seen by the inner eyes trying to open from within each and all of our souls.