

Between Our Demons and Our Gods

Human Encounter in the Light of Anthroposophy

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When Melanie Reiser, AWSNA Executive Director for Membership, asked me if I would speak at the opening of this conference, she read me our Association's Shared Principle #7. It begins with the words: "Waldorf schools are self-administered. This work is strengthened by cultivating a shared anthroposophical understanding of social interactions." She said, "Talk about what that means."

My mind quickly turned to my earliest days as a Waldorf teacher. There were two teachers in the school I joined, and every week during the faculty meeting a strange ritual would unfold: Some topic or other would be up for discussion; sooner or later, one of the two would take a stand, usually in strong, confident words. With the predictability of a Swiss watch, the other would take the opposite point of view. It didn't matter whether we were talking about a specific child, planning a festival, or debating where teachers should park their cars in the morning. Sometimes it seemed that one of them would try to take the point of view that the other usually espoused, as if to make nice. No matter: The other would contradict his usual approach just for the occasion, as if saying, "I usually stand for X, and you stand for Y, but today, since you suggest X, I must advocate for Y." It became clear to me that the topics were not really what mattered; rather, it was the encounter

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between these two that had its own gesture. The consequence of these weekly debates was that the meetings often felt both predictable and exhausting. I would even say predictably exhausting. I would like to leave this little image, surely one that is not entirely unfamiliar to many of you, as an example of one kind of encounter.

The other example I want to present is from a College of Teachers meeting I attended several years later. The purpose of the meeting was to review the work of the College during the previous school year. A colleague said something deeply significant: "Two things really strike me about our meetings: The first is that they always surprise me. We find new ideas and solutions that no one seemed to have had when the meeting began, and I personally often leave feeling that I have more energy than I had when I came in." So that's a different kind of encounter, with radically different results. I would like to posit that surprise, in the good sense, and renewed energy are two hallmarks of the encounters we should foster.

Back to Melanie and Shared Principle #7: I pondered the wording, particularly the "anthroposophical understanding of social interactions." It struck me, eventually, that anthroposophy has one essential contribution to make to the study of social interactions. It is strikingly simple to articulate: Spiritual beings interpose themselves between us as we meet. Whatever techniques, practices, policies, and structures we can find helpful from the world outside Waldorf education, this essential insight will always form a dimension that must be taken into account.

Spiritual beings interpose themselves between us as we meet.

Mainstream psychology and sociology books that have looked into the area of social interactions have not been able to explore this possibility, and for three reasons: first, because the requisite conceptual framework that would allow for this contribution is missing. Therefore, second, the language that would allow for an articulation of insights is missing or ignored. And third, the capacities that are needed for meaningful research to unfold are nowhere to be found, since no one recognizes that they are needed in the first place. In other words, given that spiritual beings are not acknowledged in the mainstream, they do not enter its conceptual framework, its terminology, or its tools of research and analysis.

When we undertake the task of leading an organization as a team, clarity about, and a conscious cultivation of, the relationship with spiritual beings is an ever-urgent pair of challenges. We will first look at the historical development of our relationship with certain spiritual beings and then consider a few suggestions for cultivating healthy human encounters in light of the presence of those beings.

Soul Encounters as a Particular Challenge

The image of the human in anthroposophy is of a threefold being: body, soul, and spirit. I will focus here solely on the second aspect of the human constitution, namely the soul.¹

Because they are often entangled in a web of emotions, difficult soul encounters challenge us in ways that can feel overwhelming and insurmountable. They lack the clarity of spiritual principles, and so remain nebulous, yet they carry a powerful surge of emotional intensity.

Rudolf Steiner describes two phases in the relationship of the “I”, the Self, to the lower members of the human constitution. The first phase entails an unconscious, the second a conscious set of transformations. The first phase

produces an elaboration of the lower members (developed for us by spiritual beings) into three soul layers. The second phase produces three layers of spirit. I would like to briefly describe the stages of the first phase and to characterize the resulting soul layers. In anthroposophical nomenclature, all of these layers have particular names. My language here, to the extent possible, will avoid these names in favor of signature gestures, by which I mean the activities that most characterize each layer. My intention is not to deny the validity of the usual terminology, but to encourage both you and me to avoid familiar words that we, often too easily, assume we understand, perhaps more than we actually do.

Historical Context

At the outset of the transformational process just mentioned, the human constitution includes three facets that Rudolf Steiner called the physical, etheric, and astral “bodies”; I should note that the English translation “body” for the German *Leib* can be problematic in discussing the etheric and the astral, since they lack obvious physical characteristics. (The German *Leib* is not as problematic, given that its original signification is less grounded in the corporeal—the way the word used in relation to the animal and human body, *Körper*, is; *Leib* is closer to the use of “body” in English in expressions such as “body of knowledge.”) The first is a physical body. We can think of it as the material level that we share with all mineral, living, and sentient beings. The second is the life body, which we can think of as the level we share with living organisms that grow and reproduce, namely plants and animals. The third Steiner called the astral or soul body. It is the level we share with all sentient beings, namely animals. Its signature gestures are movement, both inner (as in a response to stimuli and circumstances) and outer (autonomous displacement that plants cannot achieve). Another way of saying this is that beings endowed with an astral body exhibit some degree of consciousness.

When the human Self, or “I,” was introduced into the evolution, it began interacting with these existing bodies. These interactions were initially completely unconscious. And although they have produced increasingly conscious results, as we shall see, these interactions only recently began, themselves, growing more wakeful within us.

The Desiring Soul; The Spirit of Fun and Freedom; Illness, Suffering, and Pain

At first, during a period that Rudolf Steiner calls Lemuria, the Self began interacting with what we have termed the astral body. Merely instinctual, animal-like responses to stimuli grew more individualized. People could begin to like and dislike aspects of their environment in ways that differed from their peers. Rudimentary personality traits began to emerge.

At this point, an important spiritual intervention took place. Up until then, only benevolent spiritual beings were involved in earth evolution. But now, adversarial spiritual beings at a level equivalent to what Western traditions call angels developed a different relationship with humanity. Collectively, we can refer to these spirits in the singular as The Spirit of Fun and Freedom. Genesis depicts it as the serpent; elsewhere it is called the Devil, or Lucifer. It introduced the possibility of error into human conduct. The result was, on the one hand, a greater level of separation of humanity from its divine origins, and therefore freedom for the individual human being; and, on the other, the development of desires, cravings, and lust for sensations.

It was the first elaboration of the human soul—we can call it the Desiring Soul. Think of the moment when you meet a person and feel either an irresistible desire or an equally strong repulsion toward that person. On a more trivial level, you open a catalogue that just arrived in the mail, or surf a commercial website, and suddenly you cannot live another moment without owning an item that five minutes earlier you did not even know existed. Or you see

something that someone else has and you really, REALLY want it.

An important characteristic of the Desiring Soul is that it is inherently insatiable. No amount of goods, food, or pleasure is ever enough for more than a brief interval of time.

In order to mitigate the results of what The Spirit of Fun and Freedom wrought, the benevolent spiritual forces had to introduce illness, suffering, and pain into the life of humanity, so that we would not utterly succumb to the temptations of the senses. This may sound cruel to the modern mind, but we can also think of it as being given the opportunity to learn to live with consequences. Other terms for that are growing up or maturing. Like a young person coming into adulthood, one has to learn there is a price for bingeing on anything, and sometimes even for trying just a little taste. A hangover after a night of drinking is one common example of how our desire for sensations can result in adverse consequences. Addictions of all kinds provide more examples.

The Explaining/Planning Soul; The Spirit of the Machine; Karma

The next step in evolution involved the Self penetrating and unconsciously transforming the life body. This took place in the period that Steiner terms Atlantis. Living organisms grow in regulated, law-governed ways, which shows us that there is an intelligible pattern governing their life cycles. This pattern is coded, so to speak, into the life body. When the Self finished “working through” the life body, the result was a second layer of soul, one that we can designate The Explaining or Planning Soul. To get a feeling for it, we can imagine that the Desiring Soul wishes for some item or experience. It is the role of the Planning Soul to figure out how to satisfy the wish of the Desiring Soul. For example, we can plan on buying this item, stealing it, or killing our neighbor in order to get it. All three would achieve the desired result, and for the Planning Soul there isn’t yet a particular preference for

one over the other, except expediency. In the realm of knowledge acquisition, the Explaining Soul does just that: It explains things, which means replacing mysterious phenomena (e.g., nature's) with models that are easier to comprehend. The entire edifice of natural science is the glorious, and problematic, triumph of the Explaining Soul, essentially replacing the mysteries of nature with mathematical formulations. It is immensely satisfying to feel that we know what something "really is," even if, for example, we are not much closer to understanding the nature of pleasure when we say that pleasure "really is" nothing but the body secreting certain hormones (e.g., serotonin, oxytocin, or dopamine).

We have just turned our gaze to where the street lamp is lighting a section of the sidewalk, even if it isn't where we lost our keys, or at least not most of them. Still, we are left with the satisfying illusion of knowing. In effect, we have translated the world into the language of mathematics, and now a blind person can understand color just as well as a seeing person, because "color really is nothing but an angle of refraction, or a wavelength, that can be expressed mathematically." The same goes for all the other senses and their sensations, and even for consciousness itself. We think that we have explained the senses, but in reality we have only explained them away. The world disappears, and all that's left is math.

When the Explaining/Planning Soul came into being, there was a second intervention of spiritual beings, this time of the adversarial level equivalent to that of the archangels. We can name them, in the singular, The Spirit of the Machine. The Persians, as well as anthroposophists, name it Ahriman. Others call it Satan. Initially, this spirit's influence led to the possibility of what we call sin. Sin differs from error in that the former is deliberate. Human beings could now know in advance that they

were violating the intended order of the universe. A second consequence of the presence of the Spirit of the Machine was that knowledge of the spiritual origins of existence was gradually lost, and people could no longer see beyond the senses. We can appreciate, therefore, how materialism could develop.

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To mitigate the influence of the Spirit of the Machine, the benevolent forces introduced death and the law of karma. We shall return to death a little later. But karma is really a wonderful thing! We usually think of it as the source of all manner of difficulties, but we should be eternally grateful that it exists, for it allows for the balancing of sins. Imagine if your sins were written into your being in such a way that it would be impossible

to make matters right. Next time you find yourself in a karmic knot, be glad and thankful for it. You may not be able to untie it yet, but at least you have the opportunity to try.

The Understanding/Empathetic Soul; The Spirits of Darkness; AHAVA

The third chapter in the Self's unconscious transforming of the lower members was its penetration of the physical body. It is still ongoing and has been bringing a third soul facet into existence. This facet we can designate the Understanding or Empathetic Soul. Its chief attribute is that it can serve as a moral compass. In the example I gave earlier, the Planning Soul can find different ways of satisfying the cravings and wishes of the Desiring Soul. How would one choose which of these ways is best? For the materialistic-thinking Planning Soul, expediency is the only arbiter. But what of ethics? If the Planning Soul can say, "true or false, fast or slow," the Understanding Soul can tell, and FEEL, the difference between good and evil. It is the soul that can understand, rather than merely explain, and that can empathize with another human being. After the increasing distance from the

phenomena that the Desiring Soul and Explaining Soul have produced, the Empathetic Soul can re-connect with phenomena, this time without disappearing completely into a dreamy or sleepy state of consciousness. “I” can understand “you,” rather than merely feeling attraction or repulsion, as with the Desiring Soul, or explain you (using extrinsic measures) to myself, as with the Explaining Soul.

There is also a third intervention of adversarial spiritual beings that is beginning, and this one has a particular twist. These beings are the adversarial equivalents to the spiritual hierarchy designated in Christian esotericism as the Archai. While the benevolent Archai bestowed the Self on humanity, these adversarial counterparts work in precisely the opposite direction. They encourage human beings to divert the understanding capacities (which the Self has been developing) in order to manipulate others in purely egotistical ways. Sociopathy and psychopathy are examples of this type of action, and orgiastic behaviors, for example, point toward a future in which some people will gear their entire lives toward incessant sensual pleasure. The sociopath has a keen understanding of others, but does not care about their wellbeing. The psychopath is similarly insightful, but goes even further by actually enjoying the pain he can inflict. The twist in the narrative here is that, according to Rudolf Steiner, the benevolent spiritual powers cannot help us find redemption for acts committed under the influence of these new adversarial forces, which he names (using an old term for the Archai) the Asuras; every time we choose the path of pure egotism, a sliver of our divine Self is lost to darkness. This is a new reality in human evolution, and means that we are now increasingly capable of self-annihilation. It is darkness, the likes of which humanity has never encountered before.

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But where a great darkness appears, a great light must also be present. This light I would like to designate AHAVA, the acronym for “Archetype of Human Amity, Verity, and Altruism.” Conveniently, AHAVA means “love” in Hebrew, and we can think of “the archetype of the human capacity for love” as another name or designation for AHAVA. I will use “the Love Impulse” to describe what AHAVA is trying to help us develop. Rudolf Steiner referred to it, in a term that was less problematic for his milieu than it is for our time, as the “Christ Impulse.”

According to Steiner, there was a moment in history when AHAVA joined the earthly, human stream of being for a brief period. It penetrated the lower sheaths, or bodies, of a human being and, as a human being, shed blood into the earth as it died. This love-infused blood turned into life forces (ether), and the earth itself began, for the first time, to radiate light into the cosmos. AHAVA moved its sphere of action into the sheaths surrounding the earth, and the light associated with Love began radiating as the earth’s own emanation. This light was not yet physical, but if human beings take this Love Impulse into themselves, it will increasingly condense into physical light until the earth itself will become a new sun!

The Etherization of Blood and the Love Impulse

As if the idea of helping to make the earth into a new sun is not inspiring enough, Rudolf Steiner also says that every human heart turns a portion of the blood that passes through it into a fine stream of life (or etheric) forces that flows upwards into the head. When human beings take up the Love Impulse into themselves, the individual stream of etherized blood joins the etherized stream of the Love Impulse, and completely new capacities can arise in the soul. Those capacities are key elements of any

potential progress for humanity, and, I suggest, for the potential survival and success of Waldorf schools. They entail, among other things, direct perception of spiritual realities and an ability to act out of the highest moral ideals.

Human Encounter on the Three Levels; Proposed Practices

Thus far we have surveyed an evolutionary process and followed the appearance and influence of various spiritual beings, both benevolent and adversarial. It is time to “get down to brass tacks,” as the saying goes: What can we do in a school context in order to facilitate healthy human encounters, knowing that our demons and our gods, as my title suggests, are both eager for our cooperation?

I would like to take each of the three soul facets, or members, characterize its typical appearance in human relationships, and propose an approach that concentrates on the elements that promote health and wellbeing—in other words, a salutogenic approach.

The Desiring Soul

The two archetypal gestures of the Desiring Soul are attraction and repulsion. A new colleague or parent comes into view, and one feels a strong attraction toward this person, or perhaps a strong revulsion. In our culture, it is not acceptable to express these sentiments. I don’t think that school communities would benefit if they encouraged verbal expression of the animal-level desires and revulsions that we might feel toward one another. The point here is not to externalize what might ordinarily be expressed only in anonymous online chat rooms. There are not only humane grounds for restraint, but legal ones as well.

However, simply suppressing the lower impulses of the Desiring Soul is not a good practice either, if it remains the only thing we do.

Suppression leads to repression, and repression leads to illness. You can sit in a faculty meeting and find yourself wondering why on earth tensions run so high when the topic is seemingly so banal. The same two or three individuals seem intent on clashing with one another regardless of the topic, as in the example with which I started. The opposite can also happen: People agree with one another based on sympathy, or even attraction, and yet the root of their agreement is not the topic at hand or the wellbeing of the school. When people manage to sublimate their attraction and repulsion completely, physical and/or emotional illness can arise. We don’t overcome a lower aspect of ourselves by pretending it does not exist.

In short, the two extremes of repression and expression are not healthy for us, nor for the school. What I would like to suggest is that there is a way of processing the impulses of the Desiring Soul, a way that can be healthy. By this

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I mean engagement with the arts, specifically in what I would call chamber arts: eurythmy, chorus, speech chorus, drama, music making, and so on. There is a whole field of artistic endeavors, some extant and some waiting to be developed, that would allow teams to work through the impulses of the Desiring Soul so that beauty can emerge out of the process. Since the Spirit of Fun and Freedom is also a key inspiration for artistic creativity, we would be using this Spirit’s gifts to neutralize his malevolent influence!

An essential benefit of chamber arts is that they provide a strong impetus for recognizing the spiritual in our fellow human beings. Artistic processes, when done well, move people through obstacles and long-established patterns, and allow them to grow. When we witness someone growing, we know that we are in the presence of a “human becoming” entity. This experience should always leave us hopeful: What is problematic today may change in time. As long as we are hopeful, progress is possible.

The main problem with our patterns of desire and revulsion is that, especially with the latter, we assume permanence. But when our “enemy” has overcome an artistic blockage or, better yet, helped us overcome one of our own, a layer of enmity is shed. Over time, sufficient layers can be shed so the two of us can see the better aspects of each other that were previously hidden from our view. Real conversations, verbal or through correspondence, are another way of overcoming these impulses. They are seeds of the future social art of conversation. A striking and very moving example is the late-life correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

In short, I would like to throw down something of a gauntlet here to my art-teaching colleagues: There is a whole field of exercises that you can develop to help teams healthily process the lower impulses of the soul.

I want to be clear that individual artistic work can also be helpful. I have written a lot of poetry to process my life’s events. But individual work helps an individual. Chamber work helps those who are in the chamber, which, in the context of the current discussion, is the relevant group within the school. But another aspect of its efficacy is that it invites the spiritual beings that support harmony and collaboration to be active for the duration people strive together artistically.

The Planning/Explaining Soul

The signature gestures of the Explaining Soul have in common that they are past-oriented and replace genuine encounter with analyses and prescriptions of all kinds. Because the birth of the Explaining Soul was accompanied by the possibility of sin, schools and organizations have introduced “sin prevention” programs: policies and procedures! This leads to a safer environment, but also to a stilted and warmthless one. Every bureaucrat says, “That’s the policy. I did not make it, I just administer it.” The policy was no doubt created because someone did something that had the “flavor” of sin, therefore having some kind of justification for it.

I am not suggesting that policies and procedures have no place in a school. But they do present a new kind of challenge by introducing general rules for all, thereby limiting activities of the human being as an individual and handling complex realities with a one-size-fits-all approach.

A second common gesture of the Explaining Soul is the dissection of another person by the use of psychoanalytic language. This language is invariably past-oriented. Parents or food or some trauma are held responsible for something that a person did or for the way he or she is behaving. Again, there may be some justification for this approach, but it comes with the danger that we distance ourselves from the other, and most importantly that we feel superior to the other. Since we think we know why she behaves in this particular way, we can respond with empathy, but all too often we adopt the self-congratulatory mood of seeing the other “from above.”

I would like to suggest three practices that can help us work with the gifts of the Explaining Soul in order to neutralize its deleterious effects:

- 1.** The first is enlivened study of inspired texts. The hallmarks of enlivened study are that it is experiential, context-rich, and deed-oriented. When we merely read a text in a faculty meeting, the effect is minimal and sometimes even negative. Study is best begun by bringing in an experience; just as we know from the classroom that beginning with the will and proceeding through feeling to thinking is the best way to go, so also in the faculty study.

Healthy study is also context-rich. It arises out of and, in turn, creates context and relationships. Anything, even an anthroposophical concept, studied in isolation is a lie. For example, the cultural, political, and location-specific circumstances of Steiner’s lectures are important; we can also follow up a reading with a discussion of how the themes he develops may need to be articulated in terms of our own circumstances. It is inconceivable to me that Steiner would be saying the same things in the same language a

hundred years later. He was the consummate innovator and revitalizer of culture; how would he have developed his themes in light of what has transpired since he first brought them forth?

Finally, study should be deed-oriented. We should ask ourselves: What is indicated by this study for our work? How do we translate the inspiration of the text into action?

2. The second practice or “cure” for the Explaining Soul is a study of nature as a text. For example, the works of two of our colleagues, Craig Holdrege and Dennis Klocek, demonstrate instances of research into the meaning of natural phenomena.² When we seek for meaning, as opposed to explanation, we learn to read nature as a text. A text implies a creative force, an author, and this sense helps us overcome an ailment that the Spirit of the Machine has infected us with: the estrangement from our divine origins.

3. The third “cure” is the study of projective geometry. The Explaining Soul typically traffics in mathematical explanations that replace phenomena with numbers. Projective geometry is a mathematical field that requires imaginative capacities if it is to be understood. It is, if you will, the redemption of our relationships with mathematics. It begins with familiar geometric notions, but quickly moves into dimensions that must be grasped imaginatively. The soul has to dance, so to speak, between observable spaces and familiar laws, on the one hand, and specifically and precisely imagined spaces and phenomena, on the other. We learn to see with the mind’s eye, and even draw what only the mind can actually see. Thus, the mathematical mindset that once estranged us from the non-physical worlds becomes a gateway back into these worlds.

The Empathetic Soul

Encounters that originate with the Empathetic Soul are most easily characterized as those moments when someone else sees us. Beyond gender, race, age, appearance, status, and all the other veils that hide us from one another, we are, all of us, human beings, each one of us a species unto ourselves. When another person can see us, we are neither simply attractive or repulsive, nor are we explained through some pre-existing model (not even an anthroposophic one). While these interpretations will, no doubt, play into what another sees, he or she can see something genuine—us, or something of us. It is an exhilarating moment! It is just as exhilarating when we are the ones who manage to see—really see—another human being. On the few occasions in my life when that has happened, I have felt like Adam in the Garden of Eden.

There is such simplicity and purity in this kind of encounter; it leaves your heart open and receptive, without the veils that customarily come between people. The question then arises: What happens now?

When one person sees another, there are usually only two basic choices to be made: to love or to hurt. I don’t mean sensual love; I mean that you have seen another human being, including his or her golden qualities and less-than-golden needs. To the needs you can respond with whatever it is you have to offer. To the other’s golden qualities you respond by calling them forth. Or you can put a hook into the need and begin to manipulate. You can also ignore, remain indifferent, but that is just another way of hurting. And you can try to undermine the golden qualities.

We have all met people of both kinds of resolve. In the presence of someone who has seen another and chosen love, we feel peace.

With those who lust for power and who utilize their insights for control and manipulation,

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we can feel helpless. They are far too clever and skilled for us to meet head on. We can sense that ultimately only love can counter their power. It cannot redeem them, but it can serve as a countermeasure within individuals and communities. The opportunity for love to build momentum in our situation may take time. In the meantime, they can do a lot of damage.

As I mentioned before, there is no direct remediation of the dark impulses we are talking about. But if love is ultimately the antidote, there are a couple of practices that we can take up in order to strengthen our relationship with the Love Impulse. There are others, too, but we are focusing now on collegial relationships.

1. The first is biography work. This is a fairly well-developed field of study in our circles, with people who are skilled at facilitating excellent processes. Entering attentively into the images of another's life and then taking those into our sleep life for several days can go a long way toward building a real feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood.

2. The second is meditation. The path toward the Love Impulse needs to be taken up within each one of us. As Steiner developed this work, an essential aspect of it is that we first build up a picture, and then we allow what we have achieved to disappear, to die, as it were. Only the force we had built up in the process of forming the image remains. Apart from the value of meditative work as a spiritual path of knowledge, the practice of letting something die within us is a profound step toward Love.

When death is approached without fear, anger, or resentment, it can be the most amazingly graceful moment in the whole of life. We can "gift" our dying to those around us as their opportunity to care. In the realm of ideas, death means renouncing our ownership

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and attachment to what originally came to us, allowing it to be owned and revised by the group. And when we see another person, with her physical, emotional, karmic, or any other illness, we can ask ourselves: "Were she on death's bed,

would I love her?" If the answer is yes, and few of us would choose to attack or ignore a person on death's bed, the next question is: "Why should I wait until she is on death's bed to love her?"

We find, when approaching our fellow human being with the mindset that "Love shouldn't wait," that the twin experiences of surprise and invigoration meet us all the time. Just like a good College meeting!

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a summary of Steiner's threefold image of the human being, see my "Contribution to the Study of the First Core Principle." *Research Bulletin* 19(2): 54–57, 2014.
- 2 Craig Holdrege's work encompasses plant and animal studies, and can be found at www.natureinstitute.org; Dennis Klocek studies a wide range of natural phenomena. His work can be accessed at www.coros.org.

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