

ALLEN WHEELIS

Spirit

We come into being as a slight thickening at the end of a long thread. Cells proliferate, become an excrescence, assume the shape of a man. The end of the thread now lies buried within, shielded, inviolate. Our task is to bear it forward, pass it on. We flourish for a moment, achieve a bit of singing and dancing, a few memories we would carve in stone, then we wither, twist out of shape. The end of the thread lies now in our children, extends back through us, unbroken, unfathomably into the past. Numberless thickenings have appeared on it, have flourished and have fallen away as we now fall away. Nothing remains but the germ-line. What changes to produce new structures as life evolves is not the momentary excrescence but the hereditary arrangements within the thread.

We are carriers of spirit. We know not how nor why nor where. On our shoulders, in our eyes, in anguished hands through unclear realm, into a future unknown, unknowable, and in continual creation, we bear its full weight. Depends it on us utterly, yet we know it not. We inch it forward with each beat of heart, give to it the work of hand, of mind. We falter, pass it on to our children, lay out our bones, fall away, are lost, forgotten. Spirit passes on, enlarged, enriched, more strange, complex.

We are being used. Should we not know in whose service? To whom, to what, give we unwitting loyalty? What is this quest? Beyond that which we have what could we want? What is a spirit?

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A river or a rock, writes Jacques Monod, “we know, or believe, to have been molded by the free play of physical forces to which we cannot attribute any design, any ‘project’ or purpose. Not, that is, if we accept the basic premise of the scientific method, to wit, that nature is *objective* and not *projective*.”

The basic premise carries a powerful appeal. For we remember a time, no more than a few generations ago, when the opposite seemed manifest, when the rock *wanted* to fall, the river to sing or to rage. Willful spirits roamed the universe, used nature with whim. And we know what gains in understanding and control have come to us from the adoption of a point of view which holds that natural objects and events are without goal or intention. The rock doesn’t want anything, the volcano pursues no purpose, rivers quests not the sea, wind seeks no destination.

But there is another view. The animism of the primitive is not the only alternative to scientific objectivity. This objectivity may be valid for the time spans in which we are accustomed to reckon, yet untrue for spans of enormously greater duration. The proposition that light travels in a straight line, unaffected by adjacent masses, serves us well in surveying our farm, yet makes for error in the mapping of distant galaxies. Likewise, the proposition that nature, what is just “out there,” is without purpose, severs us well as we deal with nature in days or years or lifetimes, yet may mislead us on the plains of eternity.

Spirit rises, matter falls. Spirit reaches like aflame, a leap of dancer. Out of the void it creates form like a god, *is* god. Spirit was from the start, though even that beginning may have been an ending of some earlier start. If we look back far enough we arrive at a primal mist wherein spirit is but a restlessness of atoms, a trembling of something there that will not stay in stillness and in cold.

Matter would have the universe a uniform dispersion, motionless, complete. Spirit would have an earth, a heaven and a hell, whirl and conflict, an incandescent sun to drive away the dark, to illuminate good and evil, would have thought, memory, desire, would build a stairway of forms increasing in complexity, inclusiveness, to a heaven ever receding above, changing always in configuration, becoming when reached but the way to more distant heavens, the last . . . but there is no last, for spirit tends upward without end, wanders, spirals, dips, but tends ever upward, ruthlessly using lower forms to create higher forms, moving toward ever greater inwardness, consciousness, spontaneity, to an ever greater freedom.

Particles become animate. Spirit leaps aside from matter, which tugs forever to pull it down, to make it still. Minute creatures writhe in warm oceans. Ever more complex become the tiny forms which bear for a moment a questing spirit. They come together, touch, spirit is beginning to create love. They touch, something passes. They die, die, die, endlessly. Who shall know the spawnings in the rivers of our past? Who shall count the waltzing grunion of that surf? Who will mourn the rabbits of the plains, the furry tides of lemmings? They die, die, die, but have touched, and something passes. Spirit leaps forever away, creates new bodies, endlessly, ever more complex vessels to bear spirit forward, pass it on enlarged to those who follow.

Virus becomes bacteria, becomes algae, becomes fern. Thrust of spirit cracks stone, drives up the Douglas fir. Amoeba reaches out soft blunt arms in ceaseless motion to find the world, to know it better, to bring it in, growing larger, questing further, ever more capacious of spirit. Anemone becomes squid, becomes fish, wriggling becomes swimming, becomes crawling: fish becomes slug, becomes lizard, crawling becomes walking, becomes running, becomes flying. Living things reach out to each other, spirit leaps between. Tropism becomes scent, becomes fascination, becomes lust, becomes love. Lizard to fox to monkey to man, in a look, in a word, we come together, touch, die, serve spirit without knowing, carry it forward, pass it on. Ever more winged this spirit, ever greater its leaps. We love someone far away, someone who died a long time ago.

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“man is the vessel of the Spirit,” writes Erich Heller; “. . . Spirit is the voyager who, passing through the land of man, bids the human soul to follow it to the Spirit’s purely spiritual destination.”

Viewed closely, the path of spirit is seen to meander, is a glisten of snail’s way in night forest, but from a height minor turnings merge into steadiness of course. Man has reached a ledge from which to look back. For thousands of years the view is clear, and beyond, through a haze, for thousands more, we still see quite a bit. The horizon is millions of years behind us. Beyond the vagrant turnings of our last march stretches a shining path across that vast expanse running straight. Man did not begin it nor will he end it, but makes it now, finds the passes, cuts the channels. Whose way is it we so further? Not man’s; for there’s our first

footprint. Not life's; for there's still the path when life was not yet.

Spirit is the traveler, passes now through the realm of man. We did not create spirit, do not possess it, cannot define it, are but the bearers. We take it from unmourned and forgotten forms, carry it through our span, will pass it on, enlarged or diminished, to those who follow. Spirit is the voyager, man is the vessel.

Spirit creates and spirit destroys. Creation without destruction is not possible, destruction without creation feeds on past creation, reduces form to matter, tends toward stillness. Spirit creates more than it destroys (though not in every season, nor even every age, hence those meanderings, those turnings back, wherein the longing of matter for stillness triumphs in destruction) and this preponderance of creation makes for the overall steadiness of course.

From primal mist of matter to spiraled galaxies and clockwork solar systems, from molten rock to an earth of air and land and water, from heaviness to lightness to life, sensation to perception, memory to consciousness – man now holds a mirror, spirit sees itself. Within the river currents turn back, eddies whirl. The river itself falters, disappears, emerges, moves on. The general course is the growth of form, increasing awareness, matter to mind consciousness. The harmony of man and nature is to be found in continuing this journey along its ancient course toward greater freedom and awareness.

In these poetic passages, psychiatrist Allen Wheelis portrays the eerie disorienting view that modern science has given us of our place in the scheme of things. Many scientists, not to mention humanists, find this a very difficult view to swallow and look for some kind of spiritual essence, perhaps intangible, that would distinguish living beings, particularly humans, from the inanimate rest of the universe. How does anima come from atoms?

Wheelis's concept of "spirit" is not that sort of essence. It is a way of describing the seemingly purposeful path of evolution as if there were one guiding force behind it. If there is, it is that which Richard Dawkins in the powerful selection that follows so clearly states: survival of stable replicators. In his preface Dawkins candidly writes: "We are survival

Machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known to us as genes. This is a truth which still fills me with astonishment. Though I have known it for years, I never seem to get fully used to it. One of my hopes is that I may have some success in astonishing others.”

D.R.H.