

THE TRAIL OF QUETZALCOATL



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QUETZALCOATL

WESTLEY O. HEINE

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A M E R I C A

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SPECIAL THANKS

It is an immense joy to see the release of “The Trail of Quetzalcoatl” after all this time. Special thanks to Janet Kuypers at Scars Publications, my fiancé Andrea Shoup, Roy and Sue Heine, and to Israel Alpizar and his entire family. Also thanks to Michael Markowski, Daniel Pinchbeck, and Alex Grey. I am excited to include portions of the interviews we performed at that time, not only because they explain what the poetry eludes to, but that so much of our conversations had to be cut from the documentary for time and continuity.

Portions of this poem appeared in the documentary “The Trail of Quetzalcoatl” by myself and Israel Alpizar, also “Life I forgot to Live” by Michael Markowski, Israel Alpizar, and I. The original manuscript was published in a DIY fashion at art shows, performances, and briefly available at the Gladeye art store in Wicker Park Chicago. This properly bound release contains all of the original artwork, photos, and collage work designed by myself. Israel Alpizar and Sara Brown shot some of the photos.

INFORMATION SAGE: FORWARD, AFTERWARD, & NOW

WESTLEY O. HEINE

Symbols in their very nature communicate complicated information quickly, and aid in the ability of thinking in blocks of information rather than processing information in a linear fashion. Collage, montage, computer code, graffiti, and graphic novels may be reflections of pictographic thinking, and the hieroglyphs of our time. As both an artist and a writer, I've always been obsessed with fusing these two mediums as if to unite the predominately left brain mode of writing with the predominately right brain mode of art together into a harmonious meditative expression. In the "The Trail of Quetzalcoatl," I came close. Words paint pictures in our heads through free associations in a very personal way. Also, to invoke the cliché, a picture is worth a thousand words. In "Trail" the words and images complement each other in a pleasant alchemy. Of course, the hieroglyphs of the Maya had already achieved this, and provided strong inspiration, with Quetzalcoatl being the primary symbol I drew from.

Humans now have access to more information than any other time in recorded history. Due to this, our individual voices seem deluded in the flux. Mysticism and poetry are less relevant to the mainstream than ever before. Who has time to absorb abstract concepts when there is so much more digestible media readily available? Yet consider what these modes of expression offer our psyches in processing this deluge of information, as well as the pleasure of the inner invocation of images and rhythms this cerebral stimulation produces.

Carl Jung used archetypes from ancient religious traditions to illustrate different personas found in each of us. Most would concede that both divinity and demons exist in us all. But consider the whole spectrum of gods, goddesses, demi-gods, heroes, creatures, and spirits of the ages like Quetzalcoatl, and what they may teach us if not literally, but as symbols nested in our collective cultural consciousness.

APOCALYPSE... AGAIN?

In the summer of 2006, I was invited to live in a small town outside of Tula Hidalgo Mexico with the family of Israel Alpizar. Israel and I were film students in Chicago. Both of us are painters and musicians, though I am primarily a writer. Israel and I became friends quickly because we shared an interest in experimental video that continually detoured us away from the slick, glossy, and empty commercial art we were learning. We landed in Mexico City with no real intentions, except to tape our vacation away from the noir life of Chicago. Once there we were drawn to the wealth of ancient ruins. People we met, including some of Israel's family, liberally mixed Catholicism with traditional Mayan, Toltec, and Aztec beliefs. The result creates a whole cosmology of Catholic Saints and local tribal gods, many which had overlapping traits and ritual purposes.

One of the figures who kept coming up in conversation was the deity Quetzalcoatl, who had some parallels with the story of Christ. Some believe, including The Church of Latter Day Saints, that after the crucifixion Christ traveled to the New World and was called Quetzalcoatl by the Mesoamericans. Whether or not they are one and the same, both Christ and Quetzalcoatl were prophesized to have a Second Coming.

This Second Coming was equated with another looming theme during our trip: the Long Count in the Mayan Calendar was coming to an end on Dec. 21st 2012. This 26,000-year cycle charts the solar system revolving around the center of the Milky Way Galaxy. What that cycle might mean to humans on Earth has been famously exploited by psychedelic troubadours, conspiracy theorists, those anticipating the return of Christ, those fearing Pole Shifts, as well as poets like myself. When I wrote "Trail," 2012 seemed far away. For some, the coming and going of 2012 was almost as disappointing as when the Aztecs thought Cortez arriving from Europe in the 1500s was the return of Quetzalcoatl.

Even upon the conception of the poem, the 2012 hysteria was a potent metaphor at best, and a cosmic joke at worst. Presently, there is cultural interest in the "Singularity Point" which shares many of the same concepts including the crescendo of information, and integrating of thought and matter. The world is always on the verge of transformation. The "Apocalypse" is always "Now."

My early paintings and poems drew connections between science and mysticism, but for me to even entertain such a leap of faith as Quetzalcoatl's return marked a new creative period. Personally, my spiritual journey had been a long one.

SOMETHING IS DREAMING ME.

When I was coming of age in the 1990's, there was no real sense of vitality in the air. Everything was perfect and boring. There are hundreds of examples to prove me wrong, but for me, important events seemed like something that happened in the past, say in the 1960's or during World War II. The Berlin Wall had fallen. America sat on the razor's edge of history for a brief moment in an economic surplus. It was the end of the millennium, and seemingly the end of history. The stories in the news were meaningless. Clinton's sex scandal, the OJ trial, celebrity gossip, Y2K... these things did not matter to me. The heavy music my friends and I listened to was not concerned with the outside world in any direct political sense. The lyrics looked inward fighting demons, spiraling in existentialism, and crude psychoanalysis. Most of the time, our meaning was anti-meaning. The ethos was anti-church, anti-government, and anti-conformity. It was Anarchy, Hedonism, and Nihilism... or maybe I was just a teenager.

Then came Columbine, 9-11, the War on Terror, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Global Financial Crisis, and Hurricane Katrina, which even the Bush Administration acknowledged as a symptom of Global Warming, though they preferred the term "Climate Change." These events were rude awakenings that our lives were vital. The present became important. Our choices not only mattered to our generation, to our country but the whole world. Suddenly the paradigm went from a meaningless time to one more crucial than any other in history! Personally, this is the metamorphosis that Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, represents: the ascension from the gravity of cynicism, to rising up with hope to fight for the enlightenment of humanity.

Before visiting Mexico, I would have never imagined myself coming to any conclusions that acknowledged a deity equated with Jesus. Israel Alpizar drew no such lines. For him, the counterculture and Christ were not mutually exclusive. To Israel, Jesus was the ultimate rebel, not an oppressor. I took perhaps the longest road possible to having any respect for Christianity. It seemed to me that religious belief blocked thinking like a neurological disease. Yet, like a gawker at a car accident I've always been fascinated with human definitions of God. Ultimately, it may not be good to limit God to a definition, and let "God" be another word for "everything." Much like the concept of zero in mathematics, you can't touch it, but is necessary to figure the world. I began life as an Atheist because, like most religious people, I believed what my parents believed: which was this "zero." But growing up in the country and playing alone most of my childhood, my imagination had a predisposition towards visions. Then as an angst-ridden teenager, I experimented with acid and shrooms, which made me even more sensitive to the subtle living energy in nature. First, I became a superstitious agnostic, and finally a reluctant mystic. My active meditation of painting and writing as a young person lead me weaving through the usual Eastern Religion texts, theoretical physics, Shamanism, Voodoo, Sanatoria, Gnostic texts like the Book of Thomas, and eventually I became open minded to the positive aspects of Western faith. The final phase of my backward philosophical journey across the world happened when I was writing in Mexico that summer of 2006.

Alex Grey gracefully explained a similar shift in perspective during our interview with him at the Burning Man Festival in September of 2006. Grey was a major influence on both Israel's painting and my own. Sitting there in a geodesic dome as Alex painted was like being at the pinnacle of neo-paganism. At first, it made me nervous when Israel Alpizar asked him what his beliefs were in relation to Christianity:

Alpizar: I was raised Catholic, then I became an Atheist, and then I became a Christian... What is your background with Christianity?

Grey: That's an interesting question that isn't asked that much, curiously enough. Just like you were saying there was an Atheistic phase where I felt that the whole thing was bullshit, and is just a way for people to control other people's minds. Then I started to have spiritual awakenings through my use of LSD. I started to see what Christ represents is the hope of enlightenment and god realization for humanity. Christ never called himself the Son of God. He called himself the Son of Man. So to me, that means that he was an example of what humanity could evolve into if they were able to make the transformations and transitions necessary to become mature and evolved, and spiritually grounded beings that cared for each other because his primary gospel was love. It's really the Christ consciousness or awareness that runs through the web of existence. You could call in Buddha nature, you could look through a different cultural lens and call it a different name, but to me it's the same kind of god consciousness or primordial awareness that is at the fabric and the core of reality.

"The Trail of Quetzalcoatl" is not just about mysticism and symbolism, but how the metaphors relate to social and ecological concerns. What I found in Mexico was a land of great natural beauty, but also one of grotesque, unregulated industry. Mexico City seemed to swirl in the drama that the whole world was experiencing. Like a microcosm of the global condition, Mexico City struggles with issues such as corporate profits prioritized over the environment, the modern world steamrolling indigenous cultures, and in turn the dissolution of ancient shamanic wisdom.

One interesting facet of the Mesoamerican shamanic worldview is the alternative concepts of time where time is seen less as a straight line, but curved or even circular. Some theories in theoretical physics mirror these alternative ideas of time. What is always important to remember is that all these issues are interrelated. The modern concept of linear time feeds into the idea that progress only goes one way. The idea that things only get better as history goes on is so basic to our Western civilization that it is rarely challenged. Naturally, the advertising world wants us to take it for granted that the latest is the best, that the newest thing is always the most improved. This leaves us chasing trends, over consuming, and ironically doesn't lead towards utopian progress but environmental collapse. Then history starts over if at all. Consumerism, classism, religious puritanism, colonialism, racism, tribalism, depression, alcoholism, the War on Drugs, immigration... all these issues are interrelated, and poetry has always championed mixing subjects gracefully into a big picture and breaking up linear thinking, topical thinking, or compartmentalized subjects. Nothing happens in a vacuum.

NOTHING IS PURE. EVERYTHING IS PERFECT.

Israel and I toured the ruins, binged through Mexico City, and hiked through the "Cave of Diablo," which lead to the top of the Xicuco Mesa. I became feverish from some combination of bad water, expired pulque (fermented cactus milk), and chewing peyote buttons. Maybe it was the delirium I experienced as I wrote, but the connection between quantum energy and spirituality became obvious to me, beyond words, and briefly all was one. I had the energizing experience that writers sometimes have of channeling.

My state of mind also had something to do with the meditative silence that came from being separated from English speakers. People were talking all around me, but it was like music. Spanish is a very musical language full of vowels, harmonies, and crescendos like birds singing. I kept quiet, read, wrote in my journal and recorded snippets of poetry in a sketchbook. A lot of the images came to me when I was feverish. I had a handheld dictation tape recorder and I mumbled into it the descriptions of the moving shadows.

It was when my fever broke that Israel and I came to our agreement. This understanding was a dialogue between us both conscious and unconscious. It was both in jokes out loud and encoded in snores as we slept in the same bare room. Through half verbalized concepts we understood. He'd point and I'd know. With a glance, we would share thoughts. With a smile, we would have the same daydream. He'd hem and haw, and hum, and Om, and I'd compute the linear words and he'd say, "Exactly!"

We realized that this was more than art. We were more than artists. Art wasn't just about pretty things. Art was mysticism. Words were curses. Curses were intentions. Intentions were everywhere. Objects were ideas before they came into being. Art was a nonviolent weapon in a vast information war. Every thought and action had ripples that assassinated our enemy's eons before they were even born. Art could program generations on end, starting with one's self. This is what William Burroughs called, "The literal realization of art." What is the function of art? Cavemen drew deer on walls to visualize what they intended to find before going out on a hunt. Just as today art reflects the past and the present, but also creates the future. Proud ideas yes, but it is no "Secret" that this is how the universe works. So we began.

Then “The Trail of Quetzalcoatl” became a multimedia project. In the Marshall McLuhan “Medium is the Message” sense, “Trail” had to be extra-dimensional in form to match the function of the content. First, it was a poem. Then Israel and I recorded it as spoken word album. I read it in one take as he supplied the electronic music. Then we used that as a soundtrack to start a video documentary matching our footage from Mexico with the poetry using cut-up methods and long meditative shots of the ruins. So far we had a potent cosmic soup.

Yet we also wanted the film to have a proper narrative. In conjunction with another project we were doing, “Life I Forgot to Live,” with our professor Mike “Mr. Blue” Markowski, we traveled to Burning Man and gained the interview with Alex Grey. Upon research back in Chicago, I discovered the writings of Daniel Pinchbeck whose new book “2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl” had a similar thesis to what we were reaching toward. It was so perfect that Israel and I dug into our shallow pockets and went to New York to interview Pinchbeck. As we crisscrossed North America, we interviewed various Shaman, a Mormon Minister, and a professor studying psychedelics. Encouraged by Mr. Blue to embrace Cinema Verite and break down the “fourth wall” we then interviewed each other to fill the gaps in the narrative. Only after all these interviews did the project verge on what we were trying to express.

At the same time, using a copy machine, I self-published the poem complete with artwork. Contained in the release you are holding now are the original photos, drawings, collage, and stills from the footage to illustrate the words. I chose to work in black and white not only out of necessity but because it complemented the sense of going back in time that rural Mexico gave. Black and white also suggests Rorschach inkblots, gloopy galactic charts, and pixelated binary data like quantum particles. Back in Chicago, my artist friends and I would rip out the pages of “Trail” and put them up on the subway over the advertisements. I pawed it around at the art shows Israel and I had. In 2008, I read parts of it at my performance poetry feature at the Green Mill, home of the original Poetry Slam, as Israel pounded tribal drums.

The documentary was entered into a few film festivals but was finally set free on YouTube. Though the video quality was somewhat degraded from the uploading options at the time, the end of the Mayan Calendar was closing in, and everyone was searching for what that would mean. Our film gave some clues and got tens of thousands of hits each with its own butterfly effect. The inoculation entered the electronic bloodstream of the cultural unconsciousness.

MEET THE MAKER. MAKE THE METER.

In the years that followed the release of “Trail,” my spiritual journey hit a dead end as far as mantras, archetypes, and symbols. The Financial Crisis of 2008 began the year after I graduated from college. Spiritual growth constituted building a tolerance to the hardships of everyday life. My only “Ism” was “alcoholism.” I lived in my car journeying to California in the hope of joining the film industry. There I confirmed what I already knew: that Hollywood is more concerned with formulae than art, that the medium is based on collaboration and thus compromise, and that ultimately I was a writer, not a filmmaker. In small talk, everyone seemed pre-concerned with how great it was to live L.A. as if they were convincing themselves rather than me. I did not want to live in an illusion: a plastic paradise projected on a desert as we stared into screens like mirages. So I drove back to Chicago where I got more reality than I bargained for. I worked odd jobs when there were jobs. I lived in unhealthy relationships. Finally, I became a street musician and existed on the Westside as a squatter.

When the end of the Mayan Calendar did arrive Israel and I had a party to commemorate “Trail.” We climbed to the top of a pyramid at the Aztalan Burial Mounds in Wisconsin during a bitter snowstorm. Through the whole ordeal, we were self-defacing and ironic about this need to reach toward fleeting memories. Yet despite this, that night Dec. 21st 2012 my future fiancé and I made a commitment to each other. So in a very real way, my life has been completely different since the end of the Long Count. Maybe the stars aligned. Maybe it was all because of her. Either way, love won. For me, the ability to completely love may have been the result of the highs on top of Mesa’s in Mexico as well as the lows in Chicago.

Of all my creative efforts, “Trail” remains a unique project. The experience of making the documentary with Israel Alpizar has made me increasingly respectful of other belief systems. It made me realize how all religions stem from the very human impulse to reach towards the light. The content was a step outside my comfort zone, and perhaps outside myself.

The theme of time itself is emphasized in the piece, including nonlinear time, Mesoamerican concepts of time, lost and repeating histories, and immense cycles in the universe. The issues in the poem are still the same issues we have today both culturally and ecologically. The ten years since I wrote the poem are just a blink in eternity. It is never too late to resurrect.

- WESTLEY O. HEINE 2016

The Trail of Quetzacoatl

Something is dreaming me

Industrial flames

on ancient burial grounds

golden lakes with land-fill-islands

floating across Spanish-brick on top of Aztec Stone

Grain elevators, infinite basements, roads like waterslides through
apocalyptic red hills

wheels dive-bombing dogs

who bark back at their own echoes

Great golden beings

Fermented honey, flesh of maize and silken leather

Mountains shadow the city –

giant snails sliding over yellow streets

moving one inch per-year

absorbing nutrients from the soil and auras from the air

Power-lines clicking with insect agony in the sun

Neighbors talk politics more seriously

When invaded by foreign factories

Ads for officials fly like ticker-tape

Toothy faces everywhere, on whitewash walls, and labels of bottled water

Sliding through the past

steel shutters covered in piss and graffiti

Snake coiled in the center of the Earth

Bubbling-up pockets of paradise

And tar blistering and boiling

Its great tail hollowing out a hole for time to ooze through

Sedimentary Serpent crushing hard memories between cracks in the skin

Bending, creaking, curving, weaving

slowly it slithers

with panting weather

so old that it ignores that it is alive

Layers upon layers of stone skin rolled out in waves of earth-quakes

It weaves its destiny around itself, and must keep moving to exist

or the clock freezes and shatters

He'Co
Lizard House
C-K
tzalcoatl-ch-ch'



504285 constant

...the fly ... relaxed
Conrad-dell
Tremont