

Chapter 10 of [‘Why on Earth? - Biography and the Practice of Human Becoming’](#).

by Signe Eklund Schaefer (published by Steiner Books in 2013)

*The human heart can go to the lengths of God.
Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is no winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul men ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.
Where are you making for? It takes
So many thousand years to wake,
But will you wake for pity sake.*

Christopher Fry¹

Chapter 10 – Lifting the Veil

There is a myth that I have been living with for many years. As with any true story, I never grow tired of it, nor does it ever stop offering me new insights and new questions. I call it true not because it is recorded history or a biographical anecdote, but because it speaks to deep truths I recognize around me and within me. When I first read it more than thirty-five years ago, I knew I needed this mysterious story with its provocative images of contemporary life and of my own soul state. At first I related to it more through feeling than any clear understanding; as the years have gone by, it has posed me ever deeper questions in my efforts to glimpse into its levels of meaning.

In Chapter Two I mentioned my conviction that myths from all over the world express truths about how human beings relate to themselves, to nature and to the divine world. Their images are not to be taken literally, and no one myth contains the whole story. Nevertheless, in their often-puzzling soul and spirit pictures, they offer us important information about the time and place in which they were told as well as entry points into the consciousness of the people living then.

¹ Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York, 1953, p 62.

The story I want to share is a modern myth, first told by Rudolf Steiner in a series of lectures addressing myths from a variety of ancient cultures. It speaks of the New Isis– not the goddess as she was known in ancient Egypt, but in her current state. It is not a new rendition of an old myth, but a very modern tale about Isis in this new age. It is founded on a picture of evolving human consciousness, particularly in how we understand and relate to divine realities, and suggests that spiritual beings themselves also evolve over time. Steiner tells the story very carefully, asking his audience to listen with openness and impartiality. He speaks with humility, stating that he can only begin to characterize the basic elements of this new story.

For many people today even the monotheistic idea of one God is challenging, never mind what may seem like a return to primitive beliefs in a panoply of gods and goddesses. I can imagine that for some readers it may be difficult to consider a story about a goddess in contemporary times. There is a phrase from a lecture by Steiner that has echoed in my thinking for a very long time: “...for everyone resembles the god he (*she*) understands.”² What do we understand today of divine workings? And what might such resemblance have to do with the question of human becoming, for an individual and also more broadly in an era such as our own?

It was part of twentieth century cultural development that increasing numbers of people began to question the image of God as an old man with a long white beard. Some determined that “God is dead”, perhaps a liberating thought in the development of one’s individuality, but over time a view that leaves little with which to identify except cold materialism; unless, of course, one takes up the challenge to re-enliven the godly within oneself, not through dogma or belief, but as a conscious deed. From the middle of the century onward increasing numbers of people began searching into other traditions for warmer or more comprehensive images of the spirit. For example, different people have looked into Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, Daoism, Kabala and many indigenous practices from all parts of the world in an effort to forge a spiritual understanding for themselves that offers inner sustenance and inspiration. Some women, feeling the one-sidedness of male-dominated religions, turned to earlier forms of Goddess worship in their search for something to resemble, while still others embraced witchcraft. Within and outside of Christianity people also began to speak more about Mary, and even more so about Sophia, once revered by the Greeks as a being of Wisdom, by the ancient Hebrews in the Old Testament³ as a partner to God before Creation, and still remembered in the word philosophy (*philo-sophia – love of wisdom*).

² Rudolf Steiner, *The Gospel of St John*, The Anthroposophic Press, New York, 1984, p.191.

³ In Proverbs 8 and 9, Wisdom tells her story, particularly 8:22-35.

The widespread nature of this searching speaks of a desire to understand ourselves in relationship to a spiritual world of which we sense we are a part. Throughout history different cultures have experienced the divine world through the lens of their own life circumstances and needs, and they have connected themselves to the spiritual beings they perceived, for inspiration that would work into their daily lives. In our age, how can we find a way toward a living spiritual understanding that does not undervalue the strong sense of individuality that has developed over so many centuries? And how do we understand the call that so many individuals feel today, to a new possibility of selfless reconnection with nature, spirit and each other?

In Chapter Two I also mentioned the old myth of Isis and Osiris, which was so important to the ancient Egyptians. Isis was revered as the “epitome of all the deepest thoughts the Egyptians were able to form about the archetypal forces working in nature and in the human being.”⁴ There was a veiled statue of Isis in the temple at Sais with an inscription that guarded her deep mysteries: “I am the All, I am the Past, the Present and the Future; no mortal has yet lifted my veil.” The world of divine reality she guarded could only be known after death or by those who had a deep understanding of spiritual life, particularly those initiated into the Mysteries after long training. Without such preparation an ordinary mortal, bound to the matters of everyday life, could not lift this veil to the spirit and remain alive in the face of such majesty.

Here is a retelling of the New Isis Myth, in my own words but very close to how Rudolf Steiner related it.⁵

The New Isis Myth

The story takes place “in the age of scientific profundity, in the midst of the land of the Philistines.” On a secluded hill, there was a remarkable building that was open to visitors at convenient times, even though few people noticed it. In a central place in the building was a large statue of the Representative of the Human Being surrounded by adversarial beings. This statue, however, was actually a veil for another, invisible statue – behind the visible statue was a statue of the New Isis, the Isis of a new age.

Some people in this age of abstract thinking determined that the visible statue represented or signified the New Isis, but this only showed their complete lack of real understanding. The figures in the visible statue were artistic renderings of their own

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *Ancient Myths and the New Isis Mysteries*, Anthroposophic Press, Hudson, NY, 1994, p 61.

⁵ Ibid, chapter 3; also in Steiner, *Isis, Mary, Sophia*, SteinerBooks, Great Barrington, MA, 2003, p 191-202.

true realities, and behind them was the real New Isis. In special circumstances a few visitors had experienced the New Isis behind the visible statue and had seen that she was asleep. At very special moments some were able to read the inscription that stood clearly there: "I am the Human Being, I am the Past, the Present, and the Future. Every mortal should lift my veil."

One day, and then again and again, another figure approached the sleeping New Isis, somewhat like a visitor. And she considered this visitor to be her benefactor, and she loved him. One day both the New Isis and her visitor believed in a particular illusion: she had an offspring and she considered her visitor to be the father. He also thought he was the father, although he was not. This visiting spirit was, in fact, the New Typhon, who had been known as Set in ancient Egypt. He believed that if he took possession of the New Isis, he would secure a special increase in his worldly power.

The New Isis had an offspring, but she understood nothing of its nature. She moved it around, dragged it into far off lands because she thought that this was what she must do. She trailed her offspring through different regions of the world until it fell into fourteen pieces, through the very power of the world.

When the New Typhon became aware of how the New Isis had dragged her offspring about until the world had broken it into fourteen pieces, he gathered the pieces together into a single whole. With his vast scientific knowledge he made a single being again out of the fourteen pieces, but this being obeyed only the laws of the machine. It appeared to have life but it obeyed only mechanical laws, and because it had arisen out of fourteen pieces, it could reproduce itself fourteenfold. And the New Typhon could give an image of his own countenance to each one. Now each of the fourteen apparent offspring of the New Isis resembled the being of the New Typhon.

And the New Isis had to watch all these strange events, half-divining the miraculous changes that had occurred, aware that she had dragged her offspring about and that she had somehow brought all this to pass. Then one day she was able to receive her offspring once again in its true form. She received it back in its genuine form from a group of nature spirits, from nature elementals. Her offspring had been stamped into the offspring of Typhon only through an illusion, and now as she received it back in its true form, a tremendous, clairvoyant vision dawned upon her: she realized that although she had become a New Isis, she was still wearing the cow horns of ancient Egypt.

The power of her clairvoyance now summoned back perhaps Typhon himself, perhaps Mercury, and through the strength of her clairvoyance he was obliged to place a crown on her head, to set it where the old crown which Horus had seized from her so long ago had been, in fact on the spot where the cow horns now stood. But this new crown was only of paper, covered with all sorts of scientific information, and yet it was of paper. So now the New Isis had two crowns on her head, the cow horns and the paper crown adorned with all the knowledge of the age.

One day, through the power of her clairvoyance, there arose within her the deep meaning, "as far as the age could reach", of what is described as the Logos in the Gospel of St. John. The deep meaning of the Mystery of Golgotha arose within her. Through the strength of this mystery, the power of the cow horns took hold of the paper crown and transformed it into a golden crown of genuine wisdom.

Trying to interpret a myth runs the risk of destroying the magic that makes it so powerful. Nevertheless, the images in this story call out to be at least briefly considered. And they pose provocative questions. It is not difficult to feel how the age of scientific profundity refers to our own time full as it is with logical, materialistically literal and self-important theories on everything. Few today have the eyes or the inclination to see invisible statues of present-day spiritual beings. People familiar with Rudolf Steiner's work will, however, recognize the description of the building on the hill with its statue of the Representative of Humanity: in January 1918, when this story was told, the first Goetheanum was being constructed in Dornach, Switzerland, as a center for the developing anthroposophical movement. A large sculpture like the one described was intended as a centerpiece for the building.

That statue, which was carved by Rudolf Steiner and Edith Maryon, survived the fire that destroyed the building a few years later, and it is now in the Second Goetheanum, constructed after Steiner's death. The wooden statue is massive, over twenty-four feet tall, with a large central figure of the Representative of the Human Being balancing different forces of evil that beset human development. There are beings that tempt us away from our human work on earth, offering us light, warmth and spirit bliss, puffing us up with self-importance and pride; there are also powers that would contract us in pain, suffering, and cold isolation, that would bind us to the material earth. This latter kind of evil thrives on fear and manipulation, hoarding and deceit.

Why would a statue of the Representative of the Human Being, the essential human spirit core, with the different adversaries held at bay, be a veil for the new Isis? How is she to be found behind that dynamic work of balancing polarized qualities of evil? A first step is clear: only those who truly look will find her. The inscription declares that this New Isis is herself the human being, a divine presence as a picture of our soul; and it challenges every mortal to lift the veil. Now is the time for us to open to the spiritual dimensions of our past, present and future, time to lift the veil of slumber. For here at the beginning of the story, the New Isis, as human being, is asleep. The excerpt from the play *A Sleep of Prisoners* by Christopher Fry quoted at the beginning of this chapter echoes the inscription with the timely question, "But will you wake for pity sake?"

Another figure, reminiscent of the jealous usurping brother in the ancient Osiris-Isis myth and now gifted with modern technological know-how, visits the New Isis and she considers him her benefactor, and loves him. In our digital age what powerful

illusions and virtual experiences do we love, and consider as true supports? In the story, illusion surrounds the relationship of Isis and Typhon: both think he is the father of her offspring, although he is not. Who is the true father of this offspring? Is this a contemporary virgin birth – remembering that the original meaning of *virgin* was one who is complete within themselves, and not only a reference to sexual chastity? Typhon yearns to possess the New Isis, to gain more power for himself. Who is she really? What power is he after? She is still asleep to the nature of her offspring. Like any modern mother, she drags her offspring around – to the mall, to the movies, to daycare -- because of some dim sense that she must, in order to survive, or to be sure her child is 'ready' (for what?), or just because everyone else is doing it. Or perhaps it is each of us who drags our inner spirit self around, into the enticing, demanding and stressful world that encompasses us. But with all the chaos and stimulation, the spirit child falls into pieces.

In the myth, Typhon now marshals his scientific and mechanical skills to reconfigure the fourteen dismembered pieces of the offspring into a whole, as if putting together the parts of a machine. Then with a push of pride he clones his creation into fourteen apparent beings, each bearing his countenance. These kinds of technological feats, and an at times blind adherence to the laws of the machine, surround us today, but in 1918 they could barely have been imagined. When do we fall under the spell of mechanical images of life, and where do we try to impress our countenance, our mark of pride and personal influence on what we do in the world?

In a different mood, how familiar is the confused, half-conscious sense of responsibility that the New Isis feels as she watches what is happening to her offspring? Do you sometimes feel a dim personal accountability for the struggles and the suffering around and within you, but not know how to make things different? What to do when this passive sense of connectedness is coupled with an absence of will? To truly wake up, Isis must perceive a new dimension of reality and enter the world of formative forces where elemental spirits of nature are at work. This can offer her a knowing of her offspring in its genuine form. Is this a reference to our need and our possibility in this age of the consciousness soul, to awaken a capacity of living thinking -- or what can also be called etheric perception or spirit vision-- in order to consciously perceive the supersensible life forces behind the veil of lifeless matter?

As the New Isis awakens to the true nature of her offspring, she also realizes that she is still wearing the cow horns of her ancient Egyptian stature. The lingering power of this old way of being and knowing summons the return of her visitor who is obliged – a further clue to her innate power – to place another crown over the cow horns, a paper crown covered with all the scientific data of the age. This is for me a strangely amusing image: Isis with two crowns on her head where once she had worn her true Goddess crown. In ancient Egypt her son Horus, enraged that she had freed his wicked uncle from imprisonment, had snatched that crown away, replacing it with the cow horns. This horned crown, echoing her ancient, all-encompassing wisdom, is now encircled by a paper crown of endless information. The image of these two

crowns, sitting uneasily atop her head feels so familiar to me. As modern people we can intellectually study the ways of ancient initiation, the steps to earlier forms of enlightenment; and ringing our yearning for that wisdom from the past is the ever available internet, inundating us with the facts that feed our current desire to know ever more. It often feels that these old and new ways of knowing are uncomfortable with each other – important as they both are to our present and future, they speak different languages to different parts of our being, and tell of different domains of reality.

In time, and in a way appropriate to the times, the clairvoyance of the New Isis becomes strong enough for her to understand the meaning of the Logos, as referred to in the opening of the Gospel of St. John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a God.” The Logos, the Word, has been understood also as the Christ Being, and in the story the term ‘Mystery of Golgotha’ addresses the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, Golgotha being the name of the hill where the crucifixion took place.

Rudolf Steiner spoke often about the Christ Being but not in any denominational or dogmatic way. He addressed Christ’s connection to all of humanity and pointed to his significance in many different religions, although sometimes he was known by different names. According to Steiner, Christ’s universal presence cannot be owned by any religion, for his deed of sacrifice has spiritual import for all the earth and all human beings. His earthly mission of selfless love has hardly begun to be articulated or understood. As a spirit of the Sun, Christ entered a human body at the Baptism on the Jordan, lived on the earth for three years, and went through death and resurrection in order to unite his divine presence with our ongoing human destiny.⁶

I am very aware that for many modern people referring to the name of Christ is an obstacle to considering ideas like those expressed above. The history of Christianity is riddled with narrow interpretations of so great a mystery, and sadly also with prejudice, intolerance, violence and abuse. Next to that, it must also be said, stand centuries of devoted prayer, piety, compassion and service within various Christian traditions. A similar problematic polarity can be found in the histories of all the major religions. Can we conceive of the Christ Being unhampered by any particular religious doctrine or practice? Can we recognize in his deeds of sacrifice and resurrection something fully inclusive that speaks to the spirit within us all? Can we imagine this Spirit of Love connected to our own indivisible self? And do you listen, as I do, for what the next, more all-embracing name of this universal spirit of humanity will be? This question has lived in me for many years, but it was spurred on when I once read that Isis had been known as Isis for over 3000 years. That is a very long time, but the statement also suggested that she, or any divine being – just

⁶ Rudolf Steiner spoke often about the significance of the Christ Being in earth evolution. See, for example, *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, lectures on the Four Gospels, *The Fifth Gospel*, and *Reappearance of Christ in the Etheric*.

like reincarnating human beings – has been and will be known by other names in other times.

Returning to the story, it was when Isis awoke to this deep mystery of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection that the cow horns could take hold of the paper crown and transform it into a golden crown of genuine wisdom. Through an inner awakening to the power of divine love, the spiritual contributions of the past could join with the learning of the present and so be of service to a truly human future. This picture speaks to where we stand in our present time. Can we now wake up to the spirit within and around us? Can we transform our ways of knowing with a newly enlivened spiritual consciousness? In Steiner's words: "Even though the power of action which is bound up with the new Isis statue is at first weak, exploring and tentative, it is to be the starting point of something that is deeply justified in the impulses of the modern age, deeply justified in what this age is meant to become and must become."⁷

I have barely touched the many deep questions that live within a myth like this, a myth that we modern people are in the process of fulfilling. As with any myth or fairy tale, the different characters are all part of our own individualities; they live within our soul potential. We are mother, father – illusory and real – and child, visitor and visited, broken and whole, false and true, unknowing and wisdom-crowned. In this New Isis myth we are called to lift the veil, to recognize our spirit core, to face the counter forces within and around us that distract and dull our attention, and most urgently of all to develop new powers of perception and love.

Two years after telling this story, Rudolf Steiner himself began to identify the new Isis being with the name Sophia, most explicitly in a series of lectures called, *The Search for the New Isis, Divine Sophia*.⁸ In these extremely moving lectures, Steiner speaks of the Christ Being's deep and enduring relationship to the earth and all humanity, even though we have lost the ability to know, to intuit, the true nature of this universal spirit. In our times, if we would awaken our capacity of intuition in the face of this great mystery, there is a preliminary step: "It is not the Christ we lack, but the knowledge and wisdom of the Christ, the Sophia of the Christ, the Isis of the Christ."⁹ We need to find a new relationship to this age-old, but ever evolving feminine principle of bearing; we need to bear new responsibility for our own soul reality, that we may come to know the true spirit within us.

⁷ R. Steiner, *Ancient Myths*, op cit, p 66.

⁸ R. Steiner, GA 202, *The Search for the New Isis, Divine Sophia*, Four lectures given at Dornach, Dec. 23–26, 1920, Mercury Press, 1983. Two of the lectures are also printed in *Isis, Mary, Sophia*, op cit, pp 203-226.

⁹ Ibid, Lecture 2.

With the mechanistic consciousness of our materialistic age, we can easily lose sight of divine wisdom spread out through all the universe. We become captivated by technological wizardry, mathematical abstractions, and the 'facts' of weight, measure, and number; and these can blind us to the deeper mysteries within the beauty of a rose, the magnificence of the starry sky, the raging power of a forest fire, or our own essential nature. To become truly human we must discover a new relationship to divine wisdom, whether we choose to call this Sophia or not. Our devotion to natural science needs to expand to an interest in spiritual science as well. With all the objectivity that we have developed in our efforts to observe and understand the world of matter, we need now to open ourselves in clear consciousness to what lies beyond the threshold of physical reality. It is becoming ever more possible to approach this threshold between ordinary and supersensible perception, and if we would go this path in a healthy and conscious way, then each of us is challenged to awaken a new capacity of living imagination.

Serious social, environmental and political problems surround us today, and we will not find the solutions we need with the same old ways of thinking that circle habitually round in deeply rutted and closed loops or that are grounded in selfishness, competition and greed. Global warming, gun-control, profound income inequities, partisan blockages in the US Congress, and perpetual unrest in the Middle East are but a few of the headline concerns of this second decade of the twenty-first century. These issues have all been building for a long time, and they will not be significantly addressed until we are able, both individually and collectively, to meet them with a new kind of heart thinking. I do not mean this in any sentimental way; I mean a thinking that is alive, morally intuitive, free of the constraints of tradition, discerning, and lovingly open to the real needs at hand. This is a work for everyone. The solutions to the problems we face do not lie in abstract programs, but will only succeed when grounded on genuine individual responsibility. Even good ideas are hollow if the people espousing them are not trying to live them. Violence, selfishness, prejudice and fear can only be addressed in the social world when individually enough people no longer give them harbor in their own souls, but rather do the inner work that can clear the way for new imaginations, for truly creative, independent and spirit-filled thinking, feeling and willing.

In Chapter Nine I mentioned one of Rudolf Steiner's basic books, now translated in English as *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*. For me, this book has been a lifetime guidebook for my own path of awakening. I have had the privilege of teaching it for very many years; and in the process I have myself learned to value living thinking, to appreciate and yet also try to open myself beyond the influences of my upbringing, schooling, temperament and life roles, and most of all to trust my intuition. Steiner described this book of his youth as "a biographical

account of how one human soul made the difficult ascent to freedom”.¹⁰ I appreciate this characterization very much and have found in the careful process he builds throughout the book, important landmarks and significant questions and challenges for my own journey of becoming more inwardly free. My road has been long and winding, with unexpected obstacles and detours; I have stumbled and made what have seemed at times like wrong turns. The possibility of error is an inevitable companion on the path toward freedom. Honest reassessments are a significant part of any movement forward. I do not anticipate a once and for all arrival, but I gratefully receive the open vistas when they appear. And the fellow travelers who have often pointed me in new directions. Amidst the rigors of the trek, the joy along the way has been both surprising and profound.

The closing chapter of the second half of *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* addresses the question of the free individuality as it relates to the many generic aspects that are part of being human. How can one be free when we share characteristics with others of like ethnicity, education or social background? In this book I have explored the universal quality of several different aspects of human nature, such as gender, temperament, soul orientation and life phases. These different facets of our life on earth can feel at times like the broken pieces of the offspring of the New Isis -- with each piece in danger of acquiring singular, and illusionary importance when separated from the whole. But when the various pieces come together in an individual life, the shared opportunities and challenges inherent within each of them offer rich life learning. Rudolf Steiner spoke of the different generic components of our human experience as the “medium through which we can express our own distinct being. We use the characteristics nature gives us as a basis, and we give these the form that corresponds to our own being.”¹¹

On the long road of becoming our unique selves, we can find many clues to the mystery of this life on earth by exploring how gender, nationality or temperament, like heredity and DNA have been the clay with which our I has molded an intentional vessel for its development. This magnificently constructed vessel, with its particular strengths and weaknesses, is not itself my real I, but rather its temporary home on earth – temporary but offering vital learning on the way to becoming fully human. In the various life phases we meet characteristic thresholds and so stand fully within the paradox of our earthly individuality and our universal humanity. Experiencing a joy, or sorrow, or challenge in life, can we recognize that in some mysterious way we came to earth to meet this? As we work through and beyond the commanding voices

¹⁰ This is from a letter by Rudolf Steiner to Rosa Mayreder, quoted in *Rudolf Steiner on His Book the Philosophy of Freedom*, edited by Otto Palmer, Anthroposophic Press, Spring Valley, NY, 1975, pp 5-6.

¹¹ Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*, Anthroposophic Press, Hudson, NY, 1995, p 226.

of duty, habit, fear, guilt, anger or even good behavior, can we practice, ever and again, meeting what we intended to meet with an open creative heart?

Can we freely take the different steps we need to take with love for the mystery of destiny, and with a grateful knowing that “This is mine”?

The wishes of the soul are springing,
The deeds of the will are thriving,
The fruits of life are maturing.

I feel my destiny,
My destiny finds me.
I feel my star,
My star finds me.
I feel my goals in life,
My goals in life are finding me.

My soul and the great world are one.

Life grows more radiant about me,
Life grows more arduous for me,
Life grows more abundant within me.

-Rudolf Steiner¹²

¹² Rudolf Steiner, *Verses and Meditations*, Anthroposophical Publishing Co, London, 1961, p 113.