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Keywords for Life Explorers



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Introduction: The Big Picture

An Attempt at Getting the Whole into View

*I want to know what this whole show is all about,
before it's out.*

Piet Hein

It is the big picture that interests me. Seeing the whole within its widest horizon. Understanding how everything is connected with everything—that has been the passion of my life. Being ninety-six years old now, I asked my young friend Thomas, who is in his twenties, “How about young people today? Do they—like myself and Danish poet Piet Hein—urgently ‘want to know what this whole show is all about’?” “We wonder about it, *all the time*,” he answered, without a moment’s hesitation.

It was Tommy’s answer that encouraged me to write this book. I want to offer to others signposts for orientation by sharing with them the most important insights I have gained in a lifetime. Only by looking at the dynamic interconnection of everything with everything can we hope to find our own place as human beings within the widest network of networks and understand our function within totality. That means no less than the attempt to sketch a stamp-size map of everything the mind can conceive. I

can't blame anyone for calling this a foolhardy venture. But why not be venturesome?

The first objection to our plan will probably be, *How can you draw a map of something that's constantly changing?* What we are looking for cannot be seen on a static map. Our vision will have to include movement and change as the most obvious features of the big picture. But we can also become aware of a less obvious, though equally important feature of the whole: stillness.* Although everything is moving, and we are moving along with it, all is—at the same time at rest in itself, in its own inner stillness—“still and still moving” (T. S. Eliot). Stillness, therefore, as well as movement, belongs to the whole, and we will have to acknowledge both in the big picture we draw. But can we find an image for the whole of all there is—for “the whole show”—that expresses both movement and stillness in one? What comes to my mind is a circle dance. Everywhere in the world, young children enjoy holding hands in a circle, singing and moving to the rhythm* of their song. And not only children: sacred dancers of many ancient traditions also follow this pattern of a movement that rests in itself. As the big picture we might even imagine a circle dance without beginning or end.

No matter how dizzying the movement may sometimes become—think, for instance, of whirling dervishes—any dance remains still at rest in itself. And no matter how long the strides or leaps of the dancers, they do not move toward any destination. We do not dance in order to get somewhere. The dance isn't moving toward a goal, yet it does have a goal: perfect dancing. Thus, the dance metaphor shows us that the whole can, paradoxically, at the same time have and not have a goal. Its direction has no goal, but its performance does. Each movement is an end in itself; each reaches perfection* by being fully itself. As we share in life's dance, our goal is the perfection of being in step—now and now and now. What it “is all about” is one opportunity* after another

to interact with all other dancers through the one partner next to you—to be in step, to be in tune with the universe.

In some great achievements of humanity—think of Handel’s *Messiah*, the Taj Mahal, or any hidden act of human heroism—our way of dancing can even reach a perfection that expresses something as primordial and universal as an archetype. Rainer Maria Rilke sees this as a sort of homecoming of all that is fully matured into a kind of primeval and lasting relevance and contrasts it with the irrelevant drifting of wandering clouds.*

*Swift though the world may shift shape
as clouds change appearance,
all that has fully matured
joins the primeval.*

This homecoming to deep relevance can take place in the humblest actions of human love and caring. Every time a mother takes her baby to her heart, she reenacts the Great Mother, and every time a young man conquers his willfulness, the archetype of the sage lights up behind him.

Using a different image, the poet speaks of us humans as bees who harvest the nectar of the visible into the great golden honeycomb of the invisible. Whatever the concept—honeycomb or archetype—it is beautiful to think of a plane of existence on which every brave, compassionate, creative response to life—all that reaches fulfillment on the level of constant change—finds its way home to a deeper level on which it is preserved from getting lost forever.

Improvement of one’s dancing is a personal task, but it is not a private matter; since everything hangs together with everything, the whole dance is affected by the way each dancer dances. The

* All quotations from Rilke are the author’s own translations.

quality of the sacred circle dance depends on the attention each dancer pays to all others. Every attuned dance step improves the whole dance. William Butler Yeats knew this:

*O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?*

(from “Among School Children”)

C. S. Lewis, in whose space novel *Perelandra* I first encountered the image of the Great Dance—the Great Game, he also calls it—writes,

It has begun from before always. . . . The dance which we dance is at the centre and for the dance all things were made. . . . In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed. . . . All that is made seems planless to the darkened mind, because there are more plans than it looked for. . . . Set your eyes on one movement and it will lead you through all patterns and it will seem to you the master movement. But the seeming will be true. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. There seems no plan because it is all plan: there seems no centre because it is all centre.¹

T. S. Eliot speaks of the Now as “the still point of the turning world.” That Now is the moment when the dancer is “still and still moving,” perfectly in step with the cosmic rhythm.

Keep that dance metaphor for the big picture in mind. It will stand as background behind all the explorations in this book. In

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Essential C. S. Lewis*, ed. Lyle W. Dorsett (New York: Scribner, 2017), 290–91.

a sense, the entire book is an exploration of the rich implications of this image. A more poetic title for the book might have been “How to Join the Great Dance.” We quote poets often, because they can unlock unexpected treasures hidden in a word, phrase, or image. This is true also of the Great Dance as image for “this whole show.”

A well-known Russian proverb says, “Love is like a ring; a ring has no ending.” And Robert Frost adds,

*We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.*

(“The Secret Sits”)

These two short texts taken together point in the same direction as Dante’s celebrated verse: “Love that moves the sun and other stars.” What “this whole show is all about”—the central Mystery of the Great Dance—is Love.*