

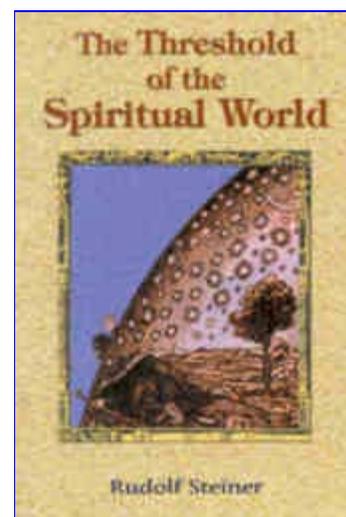
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A READER'S JOURNAL

**The Threshold of the Spiritual World,
GA#17
A Book
by
Rudolf Steiner**

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2005



This book contains an excellent summary of the various bodies of the human being and

how each relates to the world in which it operates. When we think of ourselves as residing in the physical world revealed by our senses, this is but one view by one of the four bodies which comprise our human makeup. Each of the bodies is present in us at every moment and each lives in its own world.

If I may use a crude metaphor to explain this, consider the computer on your desk. It is a piece of hardware filled with a network of pulsating electrical circuits. But outside of your computer is a world your computer cannot be aware of: you, as a human operator, provide it electrical power, turn it on, and operate the software within it. Your computer can only be aware once it is turned on and is completely unaware when it is turned off. Your manipulations as computer operator keep your computer alive and running in what might be called an "elemental world." Outside of yourself, there are software designers who never come close to your computer, but create the software which you install within the computer for it to run. These designers live as completely independent beings apart from your computer and yet the work they do operates within the computer at every moment. The pulsating electrical circuits, your manipulations of the keyboard, and the installed software all work at the same time, but at different levels or worlds. To the computer the software designers exist as if in a completely separate world, a "spiritual world". In addition, there is another world which exists which is independent of the circuits, the user or operator of the computer, or the software, and that is what you use the computer to do. Do you use it to keep business records, write novels, create works of art, or change the world? At this fourth level the combination of computer and user lives in a "super-spiritual world" which operates in complete freedom from the three lower levels, all the while depending upon them to exist.

The human being consists of four nested bodies which operate simultaneously in separate worlds. The chart below contains a summary of world, bodies, how thoughts exist, and the type of annihilation which occurs in each world.

Here is a short summary and a slightly longer one which Steiner provides for the row labeled "Experience Provided By":

[page 89] In the physical world I am confined to what my physical body allows me to observe; in the elemental world I am limited by my etheric body; in the spiritual world I am restricted to finding myself, as it were, upon an island in the universe and by feeling my spiritual existence bounded by the shores of that island. Beyond them is a world

which I should be able to perceive if I were to work my way through the veil which is woven before the eyes of my spirit by the actions of living thought-beings.

WORLDS	PHYSICAL	ELEMENTAL	SPIRITUAL	SUPER-SPIRITUAL
EXPERIENCE PROVIDED BY:	Senses	Etheric Body	Astral Body (Island)	Ego
THOUGHTS EXIST AS:	Normal Activity	Inner Activity to be held fast by the Will	Completely Independent Beings	Thought-deeds in a Living Thought-being
ANNIHILATION OCCURS:	By Death	By Transformation	By an act of Will	By loss of Senses, Thinking, Feeling, Will

[page 95, 96]

I. *The physical body in the environment of the physical world.* By its means man recognizes himself as an independent individual being or ego. This physical body was formed, at its first beginning, from the universal cosmic essence during a long-past Saturn period of the earth, and through its development during four planetary metamorphoses of the earth has become what it now is.

II. *The subtle, etheric body in the elemental environment.* By its means man recognizes himself as a member of the earth's elemental or life body. This body was formed, at its first beginning, from the universal cosmic essence during a long-past Sun period of the earth, and through its development during three planetary metamorphoses of the earth has become what it now is.

III. *The astral body in a spiritual environment.* Through it man is a member of a spiritual world. In it is situated man's other self which realizes itself in repeated earth-lives.

IV. *The true ego in a super-spiritual environment.* In this man finds himself as a spiritual being, even when all experiences of the physical, elemental, and spiritual worlds, and therefore all experiences of the senses and of thinking, feeling, and willing sink into oblivion.

In the next summary we learn how thoughts exist in the various worlds. Our thoughts appear as almost concrete objects in our physical world compared to their ephemeral nature in our other three worlds.

[page 90] **In the physical world the soul, in order to experience thoughts within itself, has need only of the strength naturally allotted to it apart from its own inner work. In the elemental world thoughts, which immediately on arising fall into oblivion, are softened down to dreamlike experience, i.e. do not come into the consciousness at all, unless the soul, before entering this world, has worked on the strengthening of its inner life. For this purpose it must specially strengthen the will-power, for in the elemental world a thought is no longer merely a thought; it has an inner activity, or life of its own. It has to be held fast by the will if it is not to leave the circle of the consciousness. In the spiritual world thoughts are completely independent living beings.**

At first the spiritual world seems non-existent to the astral body. The soul has only memories of

experiences in the physical and elemental worlds upon which to rely when it faces the apparent nothingness of the spiritual world. The thought it has is: Facing an ocean of nothingness, I stand on the shores of my memory and build a home. The soul must live in those memories to strengthen the forces of the astral body.

[page 91] With this strengthening begins the intercourse between its past existence and the beings of the spiritual world. During this intercourse the soul learns to feel itself as an astral being. To use an expression in keeping with ancient traditions, we may say, "The human soul experiences itself as an astral being within the cosmic Word." By the cosmic Word are here meant the thought-deeds of living thought-beings, which are enacted in the spiritual world like a living discourse of spirits; but in such a way that these discourses exactly correspond in the spiritual world to deeds in the physical world.

If we replace "Word" in the first verse of the Gospel of John with the definition in the above passage, we get the following: In the Beginning were the Thought-deeds of living Thought-beings. This sheds light on this otherwise difficult-to-grasp passage.

Next comes the hardest part for the soul; in order to proceed into the super-spiritual world, it must obliterate its only hold on reality at this point: its memories from the physical and elemental worlds, its thinking, its feeling, its willing, in short, all of its past.

[page 92, 93] If the soul now wishes to step over into the super-spiritual world, it must efface, by its own will, its memories of the physical. and elemental worlds. It can only do this when it has gained the certainty, from the spirit discourse, that it will not wholly lose its existence if it effaces everything in itself which so far the consciousness of that existence has given it. The soul must actually place itself at the edge of a spiritual abyss and there make an act of will to forget its willing, feeling, and thinking. It must consciously renounce its past. The resolution that has to be taken at this point may be called a bringing about of complete sleep of the consciousness by one's own will, not by conditions of the physical or etheric body. Only this resolution must not be thought of as having for its object a return, after an interval of unconsciousness, to the same consciousness that was previously there, but as if that consciousness, by means of the resolution, really plunges into forgetfulness by its own act of will. It must be borne in mind that this process is not possible in either the physical or the elemental world, but only in the spiritual world. In the physical world the annihilation which appears as death is possible; in the elemental world there is no death. Man, in so far as he belongs to the elemental world, cannot die, he can only be transformed into another being. In the spiritual world, however, no positive transformation, in the strict sense of the word, is possible; for into whatever a human being may change, his past experience is revealed in the spiritual world as his own conscious existence.

When beginning to study a new subject, it is best to know all about it before you start. This is why I have placed the above material first: so that you will have the light of its wisdom shining on the remainder of this review.

With regard to thinking, we tend to feel that we could always attain clarity if only we thought long and hard enough. Steiner explains that even a doubt about the efficacy of our thinking is due to our very reliance on thinking.

[page 10] The thinker who doubts the validity and power of thought itself is deceived about the fundamental state of his soul. For it is often really his acuteness of thought which, being over-strained, constructs doubts and perplexities. If he did not really rely on thinking, he would not be tormented with those doubts, which after all are only the result of thinking.

The soul enjoys the feeling of being immersed in thought like we might enjoy a good movie which takes us out of ourselves and refreshes us.

[page 10, 11] There is something deeply tranquillizing in being able to surrender oneself to the life of thought. The soul feels that in that life it can escape from itself. This feeling is as necessary to the soul as the opposite one of being able to be wholly within itself.

In the necessary change between these two conditions lies the healthy rhythm of the soul's life. Waking and sleeping are really only the extremes of these conditions. When awake the soul is in itself, living its own life; in sleep it loses itself in the universal life of the world, and is therefore to a certain extent freed from itself. The conditions in either direction correspond to the various inner experiences. And the life of thought is a release of the soul from itself, just as feeling, sensation, emotional life, and so forth are the expression the soul remaining within itself.

The proper attitude for thought comes when one feels the cosmic events flowing into one's soul. This leads to an attitude of soul which says, "It is not only I who think, but something thinks in me; the cosmic life expresses itself in me; my soul is only the stage upon which the universe manifests itself as thought." (Page 12) Steiner goes on to say that it is very helpful for one to say, "I feel myself to be one in thought with the stream of cosmic events." (Page 13)

The images from the spiritual world require special training to understand their meaning or else they will appear as letters of a new alphabet appear to someone who is unfamiliar with the alphabet. Those English readers who are completely unfamiliar with the Greek alphabet know the feeling. They discern that some meaning is present in the alphabet, but are unable to resolve the letters into pronounceable words, much less meaning.

Consider this: if a someone receives a message written in a language whose alphabet one is completely familiar with, it is eminently possible that the message can contain information, that is, news of something completely unfamiliar. Similarly, Steiner tells us, a clairvoyant can take familiar images and by their combination become aware of previously unfamiliar or unknown events. One must be able to receive the image *and* be able to read the meaning contained in the images.

[page 19] It may be said positively that for true clairvoyance there is required not only the capacity for beholding a world of images in oneself, but another faculty as well, which may be compared with reading in the physical world.

If I tell you to imagine touching a hot iron with your finger, and ask what you feel in your finger, would not your response be rather different from your actually placing your finger on a hot iron? Supersensible knowledge requires that one be able to discern the difference between images from the supersensible world and images from one's individual imagination. Anyone who asks how it is possible for one to know the difference need only touch a hot iron to receive an answer.

[page 23] This faculty of discernment becomes so developed by familiarity with supersensible worlds, that perception may in this sphere be as certainly distinguished from imagination, as in the physical world hot iron which is touched with the finger may be distinguished from imaginary hot iron.

It is easy to find people(1) who are bent on disproving the existence of the spiritual world. Why are there people so incensed by those who offer insights into the spiritual world that they will demean them without examining what they offer? Steiner explains that their rampant materialism provides a narcotic antidote for the dread that fills them about the existence of a spiritual world.

[page 25] Now when the soul searches, in the sphere of thought, for reasons for disproving and for evidence against the spiritual world, it does so, not because those

reasons are conclusive in themselves, but because it is seeking for a kind of narcotic to dull the feeling just described. People do not deny the existence of the spiritual world, or the possibility of attaining knowledge of it, as a result of being able to prove its nonexistence, but because they desire to fill their souls with thoughts which will deceive them and rid them of their dread of the spiritual world. Liberation from this longing for a materialistic narcotic to deaden the dread of the spiritual world cannot be gained till a survey is made of the whole circumstances of this part of the soul's life, as here described. "Materialism as a psychic phenomenon of fear" is an important chapter in the science of the soul.

As mentioned earlier in the metaphor of the computer, the four bodies of the human being are always existing in and experiencing themselves even though in our consciousness in ordinary experience, we are only aware of our the sensory data which impinges upon our physical body. It is only when we become clairvoyant that we begin to experience the etheric plane or elemental world.

[page 26] Man, as an etheric being, stands in an etheric, or elemental world.

Man is always "experiencing" the fact, although in ordinary life he knows nothing of it, that he, as an etheric being, inhabits an elemental world. When he becomes conscious of this state of things, the consciousness is quite different from that of ordinary experience. This new consciousness sets in when man becomes clairvoyant. The clairvoyant then knows about that which is always present in life, though hidden from ordinary consciousness.

One who cannot experience a phenomenon would be wise not to ridicule those who can experience it. If one brings a TV set to be repaired and the technician says a 60 nanosecond pulse had to be adjusted, one accepts as fact that the technician was able by means of an oscilloscope to view the pulse width and adjust it. One does not insist on seeing the signal first. One ought to bring a similar respect to a man like Rudolf Steiner who is clairvoyant and is able to perceive events which are invisible to the non-clairvoyant. Here is how Steiner describes the connection of our individual etheric bodies with the great etheric body of Earth:

[page 29] In the further course of clairvoyant experience that body comes to be recognized as the elemental, supersensible, etheric or life-body of the earth. Within the earth's etheric body an etheric human being feels himself to be a member of a whole.

Those who attempt to discern the true nature of the human being using only the physical consciousness and senses will always fall short. They will instead create what biologists and physiologists create today: reductionist images of mere flesh, blood, and bones. Similarly we cannot understand the beings of the elemental world fully using only elemental consciousness.

[page 29, 30] It is true that they so manifest themselves that they seem to be elemental or etheric beings, yet it may be seen that there is something in their etheric nature which is of higher quality than the essence of the elemental world. We learn to understand that it is as impossible to apprehend the real nature of these beings with the degree of clairvoyance sufficient only for the elemental world, as it is to arrive at the true nature of man with merely physical consciousness.

The beings mentioned above, which may figuratively be called earth, water, air, and fire souls, are, with the activity proper to them, situated in a certain respect within the earth's elemental etheric body. Their tasks lie there. But the beings of a higher nature which have been characterized carry their activity beyond the earth-sphere. If we come to know them better, through clairvoyant experience, we ourselves and our consciousness are carried in the spirit beyond the sphere of earth. We see how this earth-sphere has been developed from another, and how it is evolving within itself spiritual germs [RJM: kernels] so that in time to come a further sphere, in the sense of a

new earth, may arise out of it. My book *Occult Science* explains why that from which the earth was formed may be designated as an "Old Moon-Planet," and why the world towards which the earth aspires in the future may be called Jupiter. The essential point is that by the "Old Moon," we understand a world long gone by, from which the earth has formed itself by transformation; whilst we understand Jupiter, in a spiritual sense, to be a future world, towards which the earth is aspiring.

In other words, we find that the human being contains as its lowest bodies a physical and an etheric body which operate as follows in the physical world and the elemental world.

[page 31]

I. The physical body, in the surrounding physical material world. Through this body, man comes to recognize himself as an independent, individual being, or ego.

II. The subtle, etheric body in the surrounding elemental world. By its means man comes to recognize himself as a member of the earth's life-body, and hence indirectly as a member of it in three consecutive planetary conditions.

Just as materialists find it hard to accept that there is an elemental world which fills their physical environment, so also our soul finds the existence of a higher world hard to accept.

[page 32] It is especially difficult for the soul to recognize that there is something prevailing within its life which is environment to the soul in the same way as the so-called outer world is environment to the ordinary senses. The soul unconsciously resists this, because it imagines its independent existence imperiled by such a fact; and therefore instinctively turns away from it.

But it is not impossible; what is required is a conscious decision to accept the existence of the spiritual world, just as one consciously accepts the existence of a 60 nanosecond pulse, for example and learns to depend upon technicians who can see it on their instruments to design our electronic devices. With that decision it becomes possible to perceive an inner nucleus in our soul which exists independently our life between birth and death.

[page 32] We learn to know in our own depths a being of which we feel our own self to be the creation, and by which we also feel that our body, the vehicle of consciousness, has been created, with all its powers and attributes.

In the course of this experience the soul learns to feel that a spiritual entity within it is growing to maturity, and that this entity withdraws itself from the influence of conscious life. It begins to feel that this inner entity becomes more and more vigorous, and also more independent, in the course of the life between birth and death. It learns to realise that the entity bears the same relation to the rest of experience, between birth and death, as the developing germ in the being of a plant bears to the sum-total of the plant in which it is developing with the difference that the germ of the plant is of a physical, whilst the germ of the soul is of a spiritual nature.

A plant grows from a seed, blooms, creates a seed, drops it to the ground, the seed lies dormant for a time hidden under physical material, and in time it sprouts into a new plant. A materialist will find it ludicrous if someone used that as an analogy for how human beings survive from one lifetime to another. And yet, consider this: plants live as a part of the etheric body of the Earth from which they sprout and into which they sow their seeds. Are humans merely plants who grow, have children, and then die? That would be so if humans had not progressed beyond the level of organization as plants. Plants are, in fact, humans who did not progress beyond the stage of a physical and etheric body.

As Steiner shows in his *Occult Science*, plants were fully formed during the Old Sun condition of Earth, and humans have progressed since that time through the Old Moon condition into the middle of the Earth condition. During the Old Moon condition or phase of evolution, humans passed through the animal stage

of development, and the animals we know today are remnants of humans who did not progress past the highest stage of development of the Old Moon phase of evolution. Humans during Old Moon had a Group Soul which existed in the elemental world and animals today retain that structure of existence. Each species of animal has a Group Soul to which the individual souls of animals return upon death. Humans exited the Old Moon phase with a nascent individual soul in each human being, what is called "Ego" or "I" or "I am", and this Ego is the human germ or kernel which survives death and is reborn in successive lifetimes.

The human kernel or nucleus of the soul is not of a physical nature as the plant's kernel is, but it is of a spiritual nature. As a result no materialist can find evidence for it, now or ever, because they look in the wrong realm to locate it. The very manner of thought which informs the materialist's search makes finding the kernel impossible. Add to that what we learned about the materialist's fear of the spiritual world, and it becomes clear why materialists scoff at the existence of the kernel and blast those who accept its existence as "fools." The epithet of "fool" is merely a projection of their own folly.

[page 33] In the nucleus of the soul, which is to a certain degree independent of the soul, the latter is able to feel the germ of a new human life. Into that life the germ will carryover the results of the present one, when it has experienced in a spiritual world after death, in a purely spiritual way, those conditions of life in which it cannot share as long as it is enveloped in a physical earthly body between birth and death.

From this thought there necessarily results another, namely, that the present physical life between birth and death is the product of other lives long past, in which the soul developed a germ which continued to live on in a purely spiritual world after death, till it was ripe for entering upon a new earthly life through a new birth; just as the germ of the plant becomes a new plant when, after having been detached from the old plant in which it was formed, it has been for a while in other conditions of life.

In my book, *Flowers of Shanidar*, I wrote a short poem called, "Soul Captain," which describes the "other self" of the soul as it impacts our life. I imagined the Soul Captain back in 1990 when I wrote the poem as the Captain of a Cruise Ship who steers the ship according to a chart which we are unable to see. We can only notice the scenery as it goes by to garner a sense of the Soul Captain's intention for us. The Captain does not talk to us, but lets the path of the ship and the events which occur inform us of his intentions for us, of our unfolding destiny. As Master of our Destiny, the Soul Captain steers us through calm and perilous waters of many lifetimes, always with one eye on the chart and one on the sea ahead.

Soul Captain

*The Master of our Destiny,
Captain of our Soul,
Has his eye upon the map
his hands on the control -
He will not cut us any slack
unless that's what
we've come here for.*

Compare the Soul Captain of the poem with the soul's "other self" as described by Steiner in the passage below.

[page 35] Now even if the soul in ordinary consciousness knows nothing about its being inspired by its other self, yet that inspiration is nevertheless there, in the depths of the soul. It is, however, not expressed in thoughts or inner words; but takes effect through deeds, through events or through something that happens. It is the other self that guides the soul to the details of its life's destiny, and calls forth capacities, inclinations, aptitudes, and so forth within it. This other self lives in the sum-total or aggregate of the

destiny of a human life. It moves alongside of the self which is conditioned by birth and death, and shapes human life, with all that it contains of joy and sorrow.

Exactly as we say "I" to refer to our individual physical being, clairvoyant consciousness says "I" to the full life-destiny of the human being as body, soul, and spirit.

[page 35] That, which is called by an Eastern word Karma, grows together in the way that has been indicated, with the other self, or the spiritual ego. The life of a human being is seen to be inspired by his own permanent entity, which lives on from one life to another; and the inspiration operates in such a way that the life-destiny of one earthly existence is the direct consequence of previous ones.

Thus man learns to know himself as another being, different from his physical personality, which indeed only comes to expression in physical existence through the working of this being.

How can it be that the world is ultimately all spiritual, but we experience it as solid and material? There are spiritual beings who bring about materialization which we call Ahrimanic beings.

[page 37] It appears that their original sphere is the mineral kingdom. In that kingdom they reign in such a way that there they can bring fully into manifestation what is their real nature. In the vegetable kingdom and in the higher kingdoms of nature they accomplish something else, which only becomes intelligible when the sphere of the elemental world is taken into account. Seen from the world of the spirit, the elemental world also appears like a reflection of that world. But the reflected image in the elemental world has not so much independence as that in the physical world. In the former, the spiritual beings of the Ahrimanic class are less dominant than in the latter. From the elemental world, however, they do develop amongst other things, the kind of activity which comes to expression in annihilation and death. We may even say that in the higher kingdoms of nature the part of the Ahrimanic beings is to introduce death. So far as death is part of the necessary order of existence, the mission of the Ahrimanic beings is legitimate.

If these are spiritual beings why would they cause problems to human beings? The key is that these Ahrimanic beings do not feel a need to conform to the limits of the higher world in which they originate when they are operating in the lower material world. We human beings are thinking souls which come from a higher world, but the Ahrimanic beings would have us turn into sense-bound thinking beings solely within the physical world. As our comments about materialists have indicated, these beings are having quite a bit of success luring humans into sense-bound thinking, even to the extent that these sense-bound thinkers ridicule those who have not been duped into exclusive sense-bound thinking.

[page 38] These beings desire to give, as it were, a kind of permanent existence to a sense-bound thinking within the physical world. At the same time as their forces bring death, they desire to hold back the thinking soul from death, and only to allow the other principles of man to be carried away by the stream of annihilation. Their intention is that the human power of thought shall remain behind in the physical world and adopt a kind of existence approximating more and more to the Ahrimanic nature.

Human beings are free to choose the path of sense-bound thinking or the path of spirit-filled thinking. The choice is ours. We have since the time of Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century been focusing more and more on sense-bound thinking with encouragement from the Ahrimanic beings into whose hands we play when we ignore spirit-filled thinking. Neither way is wrong or right, but a one-sided approach of solely Ahrimanic sense-bound thinking has predictable effects for the soul who embraces it: annihilation and death.

The Ahrimanic beings wish for human beings to be free but amoral — that is — they wish for human

beings to be completely sense-bound in their thinking so that they lose completely their connection with the moral spiritual world. They desire to create a special kingdom in the material world for these sense-bound humans who have willingly shut themselves off from the spiritual world. On the other side are the Luciferic beings who wish to create a special kingdom in the spiritual world for human beings who will be moral automatons — that is — they will be moral, but unfree. The Ahrimanic and Lucifer beings offer humankind a Hobson's Choice: the illusion of choice without offering a real choice, therefore no choice at all.

[page 40] There is another group of spiritual beings, who from the world of the spirit are seen to be active in the physical world (and also in the elemental world), as in an adopted field of action. These are the spirits who desire to liberate the feeling soul entirely from the physical world, and therefore in a certain way to spiritualize it. Life in the physical world is part of the cosmic order of things. While the human soul is living in the physical world, it is passing through a development which is part of the conditions of its existence. Its being woven into the physical world is a result of the activity of beings whom one learns to know in the higher world. That activity is opposed by the beings who desire to wrench the feeling soul free from physical conditions. These latter beings may be called the Luciferic beings.

The Luciferic beings stand in the physical world searching as it were, for everything of a psychic nature (feeling) which is to be found there, in order that they may draw it out of the physical world and incorporate it in a cosmic sphere of their own, adapted to their nature.

What is going on here? We find two sets of spiritual beings: the Luciferic with a special inclination toward the spiritual world and the Ahrimanic with a special inclination toward the physical world. For spiritual beings imbued with physicality as humans are, these two inclinations seem appropriate. Without the Ahrimanic beings tempting us toward the material world, we humans might never learn the lessons of physicality we are here to learn. Without the Luciferic beings tempting us to focus on the spiritual world, we might get lost in the physicality of our humanity and lose our path to the spiritual world completely. A lot is going right, it seems. What is going wrong, however, is that both of these sets of guiding spirits are attempting to create special kingdoms into which unsuspecting human souls will enter a cul-de-sac from which there is no return.

What are we do with these two conflicting influences on our humanity? We must strive to balance them — to achieve a life in which we are neither skewed all one way or the other. Only through such a dynamic balancing, first one way and then the other, are we able to achieve our full humanity.

When someone deludes another person into performing an act out of their awareness that if it were in their awareness, they would not perform, we call that swindling. Here is Steiner outlining of how Luciferic beings attempt to swindle human beings.

[page 50] If the soul did not arm itself with adequate power for thought, the Luciferic beings, when seen from the spiritual world, would take possession of the world of clairvoyant pictures and bring about in the contemplating soul the illusion that it was penetrating ever more deeply into the spiritual world which it was really seeking, whereas actually it would be sinking deeper and deeper into the world which the Luciferic forces desire to prepare similar to their own being. The soul would certainly feel itself becoming more independent, but it would be adapting itself to a spiritual world not in keeping with its own nature and origin. It would be entering a spiritual environment foreign to it.

Steiner calls evil a "good out of its time". It would be evil for someone to wish to enter the spiritual world without sufficiently strengthening oneself and it is a comfort to know that each of us has a fail-safe mechanism built-in to prevent us from entering the spiritual world prematurely.

[page 53] . . . it affords a great satisfaction to know that human nature is so ordered that its instincts prevent it from entering the spiritual world before it is able to develop within itself, as self-experience, the necessary state of maturity. What a satisfaction it is that the first momentous meeting with a being of the supersensible world is the meeting with our own being in its true reality which will guide us further in human evolution.

We may say that there is hidden within man a being that keeps careful watch and ward on the boundary which has to be crossed at the entrance to the supersensible world. This spiritual being, hidden in man, which is man himself, but which he can as little perceive with ordinary consciousness as the eye can see itself, is the 'Guardian of the Threshold' of the spiritual world. We learn to recognize him at the moment at which we are not only actually he, but also confronting him, as though we were standing outside him, and he were another being.

This might seem to be a one-time meeting with the Guardian of the Threshold when one enters the spiritual world immediately after death, but in fact it is a meeting we have every night upon going to sleep. The difference is that our nightly meetings are outside of our consciousness.

[page 54] Exactly the same fact as is represented by this meeting happens to every human being every time he falls asleep, and we are confronting ourselves — which is the same thing as standing before the Guardian of the Threshold — for as long as our sleep lasts. During sleep the soul rises to its supersensible nature. But its inner forces are not then strong enough to bring about consciousness of itself.

"This is the way it's always been." "Why can't things stay the same?" "That's not like you." How many times have you heard people say phrases like this? What is the pattern which pervades each of these statements — that the present must remain the same as the past. Since the past is an idea held in one's mind or a *map*, it's equivalent to saying "Why can't the world match my map of the world?" Directly one enters the elemental world, things change dramatically, and flexibility is essential to deal with one finds there.

[page 56] When the human soul consciously enters the elemental world, it finds itself obliged to change many of the ideas which it acquired in the physical world; but if the soul strengthens its forces to a corresponding degree, it will be quite fit for the change. Only if it shrinks from the effort of this acquiring strength, may it be seized by the feeling of losing, on entering the elemental world, the firm basis on which it must build up its inner life. The ideas which are gained in the physical world only offer an impediment to entering the elemental world as long as we try to keep them in exactly the same form in which we gained them. There is, however, no reason except habit for adhering to them in this way.

The drawback for entering the spiritual world without flexibility is that one will be denied entrance by the Guardian of the Threshold, that wise inner part of one's self who insists that one be ready before allowing entrance.

[page 57] If the soul is too weak for conscious experience in the elemental world, on entering it the independence vanishes just as a thought does which is not imprinted with sufficient clearness on the soul to live on as a distinct memory. In this case the soul cannot really enter the supersensible world at all with its consciousness. When it makes the attempt to enter, it is again and again thrown back into the physical world, by the being living within the soul which may be called the Guardian of the Threshold.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* each story involves at some point a transformation of a key character into another being, an animal, or a plant (e.g., Daphne changes into a tree). Ovid focuses on metamorphosis as a universal principle, and in the elemental world, we find exactly that: transformation as a key principle at

work. Ovid must have been inspired by the elemental world to write so lucidly about transformations. When we enter the elemental world we must be prepared to deal with transforming ourselves into other beings in order to understand the world surrounding us.

[page 58] We must steep ourselves in the experience and identify ourselves with it; and we must be able to do this to such a degree that we see ourselves outside our own being and feel ourselves within some other being. A transformation of our own being into the other with which we are having the experience must take place. If we do not possess this faculty of transformation, we cannot experience anything genuine in supersensible worlds. For there all experience is due to our being able to realise this feeling, "Now I am transformed in a certain definite way; now I am vitally present in a being which through its nature transforms mine in this particular way." This transformation of self, this conscious projection of oneself into other beings, is life in supersensible worlds. By this process of conscious self-projection into others, we learn to know the beings and events of those worlds.

The other ability we must acquire is that of perceiving sympathies and antipathies in the elemental world. When we meet a being or event in the elemental world, we experience its nature by an experience that is best labeled sympathy or antipathy. These are equivalent to our perception of color in the physical world to distinguish things from one another.

[page 59] In the physical world it is indeed in a certain sense true that we only speak of a strong or weak sympathy or antipathy as the case may be. In the elemental world, sympathies and antipathies are not only distinguishable by their intensity, but also in the same way as, for instance, colors may be distinguished from each other in the physical world. Just as we have a physical world of many colors, so can we experience an elemental world containing many sympathies or antipathies. It has also to be taken into account that antipathy in the elemental realm does not carry with it the meaning that we inwardly turn away from the thing so described; by antipathetic we simply mean a quality of the elemental being or event which bears a similar relation to the sympathetic quality of another event or being as does blue to red in the physical world.

Although we have no physical body to wear out in the elemental world, we still require a period of quiescence similar to sleep. It is a time when we grow tired, in effect, of experiencing others and we wish to be alone. Curiously, when we are awake in the physical world, by being separated from elemental experiences, we are in a constant elemental sleep. As Steiner says in the passage below, "The life of the soul in the physical world is a spiritual sleep."

[page 61] This life in the self is, as it were, the sleeping state of the elemental world; whereas the surrender to events and beings is the waking state. When the human soul is awake in the elemental world and develops a wish to experience itself only, that is to say, feels the need of elemental sleep, it can obtain this by returning to the waking state of physical life with a fully developed feeling of self. For such experience, saturated with the feeling of self, in the physical world is synonymous with elemental sleep. It consists in the soul's being torn away from elemental experiences. It is literally true that to clairvoyant consciousness the life of the soul in the physical world is a spiritual sleep.

Love is the most important learning for us during our Earth phase of evolution. This theme I have encountered several places in Steiner's writings. Here it is especially poignant because he is describing its connection with and difference from the faculty of self-surrender in the elemental world.

[page 62, 63] But the faculty of self-surrender, a natural impulse in the elemental world, is not to be put on a par with what is called love in human experience. Elemental self-surrender means experiencing oneself in another being or event; love is the experiencing

another being in one's own soul. In order to develop the latter experience, the feeling of self, or ego-experience, present in the depths of the soul, must have, as it were, a veil drawn over it; and in consequence of the soul's own forces being thus dulled, one is able to feel within oneself the sorrows and joys of the other being: love, which is the source of all genuine morality in human life, springs up. Love is the most important result for man of his experience in the physical world.

The Guardian of the Threshold stands at the doorway between the physical world and elemental world and ensures that no evil results from the disparate processes of the two worlds inappropriately moving across the threshold. In the elemental world we must undergo transformation to exist, but if we brought that back to our physical existence, we would lose our personal identity.

[page 66] In the elemental world, in order to be a human being in the full sense, he must be able to assume the most varied forms. If this were impossible to him, he would be condemned to complete isolation in the elemental world; he would not be able to know about anything in it except himself; for he would not feel himself related to any other being or event. But this, in the elemental world would be equivalent to the non-existence of those beings or events, as far as such a person was concerned.

Without the guidance of the Guardian of the Threshold, we may be overwhelmed by our elemental experiences and return to the physical world full of hallucinations which appear real to us.

[page 67, 68] If we learn to know the Guardian of the Threshold we know the state of our soul with regard to the physical world, and whether it is strong enough to banish from physical consciousness the forces and faculties, belonging to supersensible worlds, which should not be allowed to be active in ordinary consciousness. If the supersensible world is entered without the self-knowledge brought about by the Guardian of the Threshold, we may be overwhelmed by the experiences of that world. These experiences may thrust themselves into physical consciousness as illusive pictures. In that case they assume the character of sense-perceptions, and the necessary consequence is that the soul takes them for realities when they are not so.

"The first shall be last and the last shall be first." Jesus spoke these words to illustrate a spiritual truth. Steiner explains how strong egoism in the physical world, placing oneself first above everyone else, leads to a weak soul unable to experience the spiritual world.

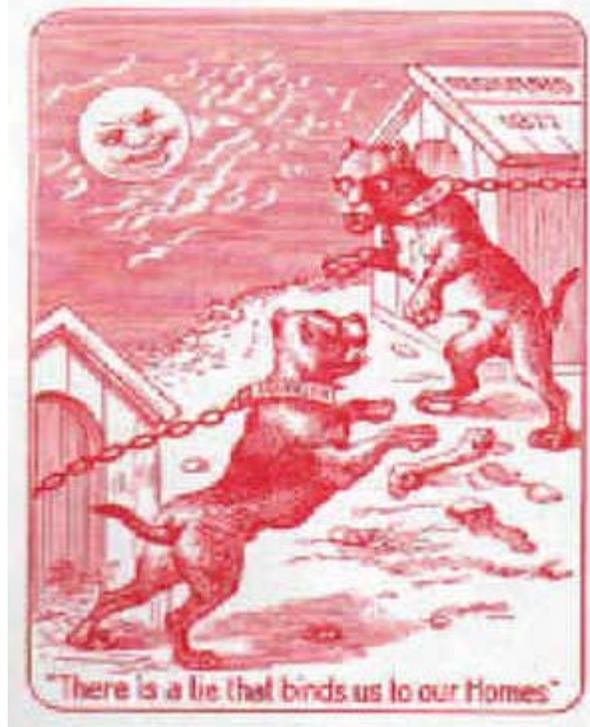
[page 69] If the strong ego-feeling passes from the etheric to the physical body, it not only effects a strengthening of egoism, but a weakening of the etheric body. Clairvoyant consciousness has to make the discovery that on entering the supersensible world, the necessary ego-feeling is weak in proportion as egoism in the experiences of the physical world is strong. Egoism does not make a human being strong in the depths of his soul, but weak. And when man passes through the gateway of death, the effect of the egoism which has been developed during the life between birth and death is such as to make the soul weak for the experiences of the supersensible world.

Here is the best description I have found of how elemental beings are related to human beings. This is something that has puzzled me since I designed the [Table of Evolution](#) which shows that in the Earth phase of evolution the four bodies of a human are: physical, etheric, astral and Ego, but the four bodies of an angeloi are: etheric, astral, Ego, and angelic body. Thus the lowest body of angels is the etheric body, which indicates this would be one of the beings one would experience in the elemental world.

[page 70, 71] In the elemental world beings confront the human soul who have developed within that world powers and faculties which man himself can only unfold through still having about him his physical body, in addition to his etheric body and the other supersensible principles of his being. The begins here alluded to have no such body with

physical senses. They have so evolved that through their etheric body they have a soul-nature such as man has through his physical body. Although to a certain degree they are beings of like nature to himself, they differ from him in not being subject to the conditions of the physical world. They have no senses of the kind which man possesses. Their knowledge is like man's; only they have not acquired it through the gateway of the senses, but through a kind of ascent, or mounting-up of their ideas and other soul-experiences out of the depths of their being. Their inner life is, as it were, at rest within them, and they draw it up out of the depths of their souls, as man from the depths of his soul draws up his memory-pictures.

While Steiner does not refer to these as angeloi above, in the passage below it is clear that he is referring to the hierarchy of beings above man, which is that of the angeloi or angels. Note how our etheric body is woven into the etheric body of the Earth. One of the favorite card decks when I was growing up was the Squeezers® Bulldogs. As a child I was taken by the drawing of the two bulldogs pulling on the chains of their cage while the Man in the Moon smiled upon them. The saying at the bottom intrigued me greatly and now I think I know why, "There is a tie that binds us to our homes." That tie is our etheric body, and it binds our etheric body to the Earth's etheric body as strongly as the chains bind the two bulldogs to the Earth.



[page 71] . . . these beings are a stage higher than man in the order of the universe, although they may be said to be, in the manner indicated, of the same nature as he. They constitute a kingdom above man, a hierarchy superior to him in the scale of beings. Notwithstanding their similarity to man, their etheric body is different from his. Whereas man is woven into the supersensible life-body of the earth through the sympathies and antipathies of his etheric body, these beings are not earth-bound in the life of their soul.

The importance of the Guardian of the Threshold is that it trains us to respect the boundary between the physical and supersensible worlds (elemental, spiritual, super-spiritual). Unless we are thus trained, we may drag into our physical consciousness the beings of Lucifer and Ahriman who have taken the Earth as their current home. Only through our experience with the Guardian of the Threshold are we able to distinguish accurately these two powerful beings from the other spiritual beings who have remained in their proper home.

Luciferic beings have beneficial effects on human beings when they help us to rise above hopeless entanglement with the physical world. That is a good in its proper time and place and therefore not evil.

[page 73] But when the human soul draws into the physical body the life which it should only develop in the elemental world, when it allows feeling within the physical body to be influenced by sympathies and antipathies which should only hold sway in the etheric body, then the Luciferic nature gains through that soul an influence which is opposed to the general order of the universe.

A popular expression these days is the "trophy wife". This refers usually to a rich man who has attracted to himself a beautiful young wife who looks like a movie star or model. The metaphor of trophy refers to

those heads of deer, elk or moose that hunters like to have mounted on the walls of their den to show off their prowess as a hunter. The hunter gets an enhanced feeling of self from showing off his trophy. This is an example of a good out of its time or place and therefore an evil due to Luciferic temptation.

[page 74] Love which has its basis in those qualities in the beloved being which are manifest in physical existence, keeps clear of Luciferic interference. But love, the source of which is not thus in the beloved being, but in the one loving it, is prone to the Luciferic influence. A being loved because it has qualities to which, as lovers, we incline by nature is loved with that part of the soul which is accessible to the Luciferic element.

Thus a trophy wife is a sure sign of a Luciferic temptation. Luciferic beings try to draw our love to the supersensible, but because they reside in the physical environment of Earth, we as humans may be tempted to re-direct our love to physical things. Instead of making us free, that kind of love places us in chains.

[page 74] We should therefore never say that the Luciferic element is bad under all circumstances, for events and beings of supersensible worlds must be loved by the human soul in the manner of the Luciferic element. The order of the universe is not transgressed until the kind of love with which man ought to feel himself drawn to the supersensible is directed to physical things. Love for the supersensible rightly calls forth in the one loving it an enhanced feeling of self; love which in the physical world is sought for the sake of such an enhanced feeling of self is equivalent to a Luciferic temptation. Love of the spiritual when it is sought for the sake of the self has the effect of emancipation; but love for the physical when it is sought on account of the self has not this effect, but, through the gratification gained by its means, only puts the self in fetters.

To sum up the effects of Lucifer and Ahriman: Lucifer wants us to aspire to the supersensible world, Ahriman wants us to recognize the importance of the physical world. Both of these goals are good and important to us humans, but it is up to us to keep the two in balance so that we do not go too far to one extreme or the other.

It is important for humans to have a physical body. Steiner tells us what would happen if humans had only an etheric body.

[page 78] Human will would remain only a weak, dreamlike faculty in the elemental world, human thought merely an indistinct, fleeting world of ideas. No feeling of the ego would come into existence there at all. For all these things it is necessary for man to be invested with a physical body.

In the chart at the top of this review, we showed an item called, "living thought beings". We live in a world of such thought-beings in our time between death and a new birth and those thought-deeds and thought-beings fill our permanent thought-entity which shapes our soul in our subsequent life. If one is appalled by the thought of spending eternity floating on clouds with nothing to do, it may be a consolation to know that one will be busy, as busy as one is prepared to be, in the time between death and a new birth.

[page 81] Man's life of thought is the reflection of this spiritual life of thought-beings. During the period through which the human soul passes between death and re-birth, it is woven into this life of thought-beings, just as it is woven into physical existence between birth and death. When the soul enters physical existence through birth, or rather through conception, the permanent thought-entity of the soul works in a shaping and inspiring way on the fate of that soul. In human destiny what has remained of the soul from the earth-lives preceding the present one, works in the same way as pure living thought-beings work in the universe.

A friend came to visit and, when he saw all the quartz crystals we have around the house, he told us that to

spirits these crystals are as visible as beacons of light are for us. Spirits use these to navigate. This brought home to me how invisible the physical world we live in appears to the spiritual beings in the supersensible worlds in which we are imbedded.

[page 82, 83] Seen from the spiritual world, the qualities, forces, materials, etc., of the physical world disappear as such, and are revealed as mere semblance. From the spiritual world man sees only beings, and in them lies true reality. . . . Indeed, both the physical world and the elemental world appear as the deeds of spiritual beings.

In olden days, the floors of homes were dirt and to keep the floor clean and warm, the material remaining after various grains were threshed were placed on the floor of the home. This worked well, but soon it was noticed that the threshing material kept falling out into the street whenever the door was opened, so homeowners placed a strip of wood to keep the threshing material from spilling out of the home. This strip marked the boundary between the inside and the outside of the home and it came to be called in English simply the "threshold" since its job was to hold the threshing material inside the home. We have walked back and forth over the threshold between our home in the physical world and the various supersensible worlds of the elemental, spiritual, and super-spiritual worlds with Steiner as our guide in the course of writing this review. He has introduced us to our Soul Captain, the Guardian of the Threshold, which each of us greets each night as we drop into unconsciousness as we sleep. He has explained what conditions we will find in the elemental world of transformations, in the spiritual world with independent beings on an island with us, and in the super-spiritual worlds with living thought-beings. He introduced us to two worthy companions in our Earth sphere of physicality known as Lucifer and Ahriman and warned us of the consequences of paying too much attention to either one of them, exhorting us to strive to maintain a balance of their forces in our lives. What next? The choice is up to us.

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. One can find several examples of "positive atheism" deprecating Rudolf Steiner's work on the spiritual world. This one website is, thankfully, no longer active, but here are some quotes from the defunct site describing Steiner as, "blithering away about a concoction of some sort", "showing us how to cure diabetes by dancing, as dance strengthens the ego", and "waxing racist by noting that the population on Atlantis, unable to speak, instead thought in pictures and communicated through telepathy." All very well said, and, rightly understood, describes eurythmy and Atlantis, if not Steiner, accurately.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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