

Blake's Four Fold Vision Explained

In a letter to Thomas Butts, Nov. 22, 1802, apologizing for delays in executing commissioned drawings Blake writes:

“But I will bore you more with some Verses which My Wife desires me to Copy out & send you with her kind love and Respect they were Composed a twelvemonth ago while walking from Felpham to Lavant to meet my Sister... .”

There follows a poem of 88 lines, rhymed couplets filled with Fairy elves, little devils, Angels, Silver Angels, Golden Demons, his dead father and brothers “hovering upon the wind” and “a frowning Thistle” in his path becomes “an old Man grey” who warns him and predicts trouble with characters of Blake's imagination – Theotormon, Enitharmon, Los the terrible – and even more trouble with his wife, sister and friends who don't understand him.

I struck the Thistle with my foot
And broke him up from his delving root
“Must the duties of life each other cross”
“Must every joy be dung and dross”
“Must my dear Butts feel cold neglect”
“Because I give Hayley his due respect”
“Must Flaxman look upon me as wild”
“And all my friends be with doubts beguild”
“Must my Wife live in my Sisters bane”
“Or my sister survive on my Loves pain”

And so the poem goes along, Blake griping aloud as he takes his walk, dealing with friends and family, demons and angels, until spirits he has named in earlier poems come back to bother him. It's hot and the Sun becomes Los the terrible. He kicks the thistle in his bad temper. Earlier in the poem:

A frowning Thistle implores my stay
What to others a trifle appears
Fills me full of smiles or tears
For double the vision my Eyes do see
And a double vision is always with me
With my inward Eye 'tis an old Man grey
With my outward a Thistle across my way

Many commentators have focused on this double vision as remarkable, the poet's gift, the explanation for Gregory Bateson's fascination with Blake, the key to participatory consciousness and release from alienation, but the double vision is only half of it.

The poem concludes with the six lines that I think summarize Blake's understanding of a four fold vision, lines that I like to say to myself at least a few times each day, lines that invite each of us to turn it over, surrender, let go and let Gaia, lines that invite each of us to transform reality and be a poet in our daily lives because it is just so easy and delightful. Given to us, in fact.

Now I fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And three fold in soft Beulahs night

And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newtons sleep

Blake explains twofold vision very nicely in the poem. Open your heart to nature, let plants and animals speak to you, let trifles fill you with smiles and tears, respond to the world in its minute particulars, the cosmos in a grain of sand, etc. Third and fourth folds need some explaining here with lots of help from Northrup Frye's great book *Fearful Symmetry* (1947).

Threefold "in soft Beulah's night" is Blake's take on primary process, the unconscious/nonconscious/preconscious, the dreamtime that the great Australian country and western singer Roger Knox sings about "I wish I was back in the dreamtime, with the dijerido a moaning in the night," the OM (Originating Mystery, the Open Mind, Old Mother Nature) coming through each of us from the dreamworld. In Blake's naming or personification of the life forces, Beulah replaces Mnemosyne or "Memory," the mother of the nine muses.

The fourth fold includes Newton's science and all the single vision knowledge available in the libraries and on the web. It includes constant double visioning in daily life. It includes the thirdfold -- all the resources of the layered unconscious (see Bateson's four kinds of necessary unconscious in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 2000, pg.128 following,). And best of all, the fourthfold is, in Blake's opinion supremely delightful, and, I would add,

it is given to you free for nothin'
now
this moment

I use the 4 E's or "for ease" formula to remind myself of a few things that are blended inside the delightful, given, *present moment* – Eden, Equality, Eternity, Essence.

Eden – we're not "fallen" or "corrupted" or "sinners (original or unoriginal)" or "guilty" or "incompetent" or "dysfunctional" or "attention-deficited" or [pick your own putdowns] *in the moment*

Equality – we all eat something, defecate, sleep sometimes, die eventually, and each of us has some superb equipment for making sense of the world *instant by instant*

Eternity – *this is it now*, we can't grasp or hold the deeper powers, we can only allow the powers to come through us; the very best scientific cosmologists are talking squarks, bosons, strings, big bangs, membranes, metaphors to nowhere in particular, and it's all speculation compared to what each of us knows *this instant*

Essence – that's all poetry is, playing with essences, wording elusive qualities, writing down a sliver or slice of what comes through you *during the pulsation of an artery*, distilling essences into quintEssences of EdenEqualityEternity *now*.

Blake is wonderful. Gave us this poem his wife told him to send to Butts. Gave us the tyger burning bright. Gave us songs of innocence and experience that are very easy to sing out loud any time any where in your own voice/melody. Try singing them and see. Gave us a marriage of heaven and hell with lots of great one liners to think about. There's a romping Nobodaddy poem where Blake is taking a dump under some poplar trees and manages to tie this guy Klopstock's intestines in knots at the same time, concluding:

If Blake could do this when he rose up from shite
What might he not do if he sat down to write

The poems, theories, praxis, proverbs, playfulness that spring from Blake's daily life are a treasure, but I find most of Bill's more ambitious work unreadable, incomprehensible, not so great. Too bombastic. Over the top allegorical. A Wagnerian sort of romanticism and gesamtkunstwerk that can be repulsive. And remember, Blake kicked that Thistle into submission in 1801, over 200 years ago. Blake's anthropocentrism, his anti-nature, anti-vegetative side, keeps me a few big steps from complete veneration of the master and "the imagination." A lot of contemporary suffering and ugliness can be seen as human imagination run amok.

Like any poet's work, sift through Blake to find what is useful for you. Those six lines work magic for me daily. I hope you will memorize them and let them work magic for you. If you say it aloud, "God us" turns into Goddess. The fourfold vision is *given*

a supreme delight

now

Pat Campbell:

"And twofold Always." William Blake's vision is profound: in the music we make, the poetry we write, the energy we offer and receive, how could we not pay tribute to nature and reveal our dreams? Children do. They write of flowers, trees, birds and insects, favorite pets, the horse of their dreams, rivers and the sea, dinosaurs and dragons. They delight in hearing Robert Frost's "The Runaway" about a colt, snorting, dipping his head, moving "like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes". Or William Shakespeare's "Song of the Camels" who know only the sand "and the cloudless sky. The mirage and deep-sunk well and the stars on high". Or Rudyard Kipling's "Seal Lullaby", the pup "asleep in the arms of the slow-swinging seas". Give them poems to grow by, and give them freedom to word-play, and children will write of the things that inspire them. Like the things of nature.

* See the collections, e.g. William Blake: The Complete Poems (edited by Alicia Ostriker, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977), And don't forget Blake the artist and illustrator! Blake's Illuminated Books, six volumes (edited by David Bindman, Princeton, JH: The William Blake Trust and Princeton University Press, 1991-95), S. Foster Damon's A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988) can be very helpful in deciphering a word or line of a Blake poem that is confusing. A more academic on-line archive supported by the Library of Congress and National Endowment for the Arts is <http://www.blakearchive.org>.