

*Tell, tongue, the mystery*

*Words during Lockdown*

*Pange lingua* is a long hymn attributed to the Medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, that celebrates transformation, specifically the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. It is sometimes sung as plainchant. A fragment:

*Tell, tongue, the mystery  
of the glorious Body  
and of the precious Blood.*

Bread and wine are not being shared now, in this transformational year of 2020, for public health reasons. Priests in empty churches tell out their prayers into empty space depending on quantum computations to connect to etheric flocks.

The Pope standing alone in the rain in St Peter's Square, sheltering beneath a turbulent sky, is already one of the iconic images of this new age unfolding around us.

He held a crucifix and an icon venerated during pandemic plagues through the ages including the Black Death.

The bubonic plague peaked in Eurasia and North Africa around 1350 originating from the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* carried by the tropical rat flea.

Bacteria are single-celled organisms. Our current pandemic is different, its origin being not bacterial but viral.

Viruses are said to be organisms at the edge of life, ancient as the earth itself, altering what they come in contact with, transmitting variations like notes in music down through the epochs. If trees and wheat and cats and humans have each evolved into a unique and complex symphony, a virus is closer to plainchant. Simple but effective.

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The word 'virus' has commonality in Latin, Sanskrit and ancient Greek, meaning poison. In Latin it is a mass noun, with no plural. The adjective 'viral' was first recorded in 1948, post-dating the Spanish flu pandemic (caused by the H1N1 influenza virus) by almost twenty years.

Viruses operate by finding a host where they can thrive, where they can write the code.

'Host' derives from the Latin *hospes*, meaning 'guest, sojourner, visitor, foreigner, stranger'.

Transformed bread in Roman Catholic Masses is called the Host. In this case, the word derives from the Latin, *hostia*, meaning 'sacrificial victim' but it is also linked to the idea of a stranger.

A host can be a multitude - a heavenly host, an army.

The 'Lord of Hosts' in the Bible can refer to angelic or earthly multitudes.

The Proto-Indo-European roots are in 'ghos-ti' and 'poti'. In 'ghos-ti' the idea is of a reciprocal relationship; the word has a forked etymological path meaning both 'guest' and 'enemy'. (That

‘ghos-ti’ sounds like a baby ghost is coincidental as ‘ghost’ comes from a different origin.) ‘Poti’ means ‘powerful lord’.

In the organic and technological sense, ‘host’ has come to mean a human, animal, plant, bacterium or cell (biological/electrical) being home to a parasite.

When they are not inside a host, biological viruses exist as submicroscopic particles. Sometimes the particles are covered by a coat of lipids. Inside, is a protein shell called a capsid. Contained inside are strands of genetic information: single stranded RNA or paired double-stranded DNA.

The aim of viruses, if such organisms at the peripheral edge of things can be said to have objectives, is to throw off their lipids and their capsids and replicate and replicate and replicate the inner genetic particulars they contain.

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Viruses affecting our bodies, our computers, are anthropomorphised into something we can ‘fight’ or ‘battle’ or ‘defeat’; our anti-bodies and our software pitted in a war against a merciless and unforgivable foe. Heroes and heroines are the people ‘on the front line’ – bus drivers, shop keepers, shelf stackers, hospital staff, care home workers.

An online meme: ‘Beatitudes for a global pandemic’.

‘blessed are the single parents for they are coping alone with no respite’

‘blessed are the refuse collectors for they will see God despite the mountains of waste’

‘blessed are those who are isolated with their abusers for one day – we pray – they will know safety’.

My sister says her sense of safety is fired up with sense of retribution as she deploys her hand-wipes. I too intend that my every spritz of bleach has the violence and precision of a gun.

Another emblem of the time: hanging out of the window banging a saucepan, hollering along with everyone else in the street, saluting the front liners’ fight against the leveller, the reaper, the invisible mutation.

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‘Pandemic’ is from *πάνδημος* meaning ‘of or belonging to all the people’.

Pandora’s box has opened. It belongs to all of us. Despite our individual isolations, this we share.

The wild god Pan stalks through ‘pandemic’ on his goaty hoofs, clip, clop, drinking and eating and revelling, ceding his special brand of panic.

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In his fishy aspect, sporting scales and a piscine tail, Pan is associated with the constellation of capricious Capricorn.

An astrologer studied the planets alignment in Capricorn which began this January. She could tell something super-big was coming, something like world war three or armageddon, but didn’t foresee it would be in the form of something so vanishingly tiny.

She spoke from her living room, Zooming to an audience scattered around the globe. The virus was visiting her house as she spoke. She motioned with her body to a room behind her, out of shot. The astrologer didn't say how she was related to the patient but that tiny motion of her body, indicating Presence, changed her presentation from something that was about other people to something about us.

From her book-lined room with its patterned wooly carpet, she conjured images of giant planets and an icy dwarf taking turns through the solar system. She talked about Persephone, consort of Pluto, rising from the dead.

Pluto and Persephone sinking and rising as breath through their heavenly underworld.

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A search online shows many stargazers, magi and scientists agree: present conjunctions are set to initiate cycles that will go on for decades to come.

It's all about transformation. Much of how this transformation unfolds depends on us, our collective consciousness now. We are at the pivot, the hinge. We can yet tip the axle.

We are the crux.

The decisions, the actions, the direction we take now and intentions we make in these current critical months will influence future epochs, the lives of our children and their children and their children's children.

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The physicist, Wolfgang Pauli, postulated the neutrino: sub-atomic particles that constantly flow through the universe, through the sun and planets and stars, through our skin and bodies and beyond and out the other side.

Late in his brief life, after a seminal visit to India, Pauli wrote a long letter to his friend and mentor, the psychologist, Carl Jung. They kept up a correspondence after Pauli's emotional breakdown in his late twenties. Together they searched for commonality in *physis*, nature, the body, and *psyche*, breath, the soul.

In his letter, Pauli wrote: 'Like all ideas, the unconscious is in *both man and nature*; ideas have *no* fixed abode, not even a heavenly one.' The root of it all is everywhere and nowhere. He quoted the alchemist Robert Fludd writing of God: 'the centre of all things – a centre whose periphery is nowhere.'

Elsewhere Pauli, whose discoveries fed directly into the development of A.I. and atom bombs, wrote: '...the anxious question presents itself to us whether... our western power over nature, is evil.'

He grieved and feared the consequences of the split between science and religion, the substitution of mathematical laws for the soul of the world.

Pauli went to India to visit the founder of the Indian atomic programme, Homi Jehangir Bhabha. Although he doesn't mention it in his letter to Jung, I like to imagine that Pauli and his wife Franca visited the Caves at Elephanta Island when they were staying in Mumbai. The Caves are a short ferry ride across the Arabian Sea from the affluent area of Malabar Hill where Bhabha lived.

Pauli huffing and puffing his way up the dust path, curious monkeys screeching through the palm trees. Mangos leaves and tamarind fronds brush against his face.

He looks at trinkets laid out on the ground on multicoloured cloths lining the way to the temple while his wife Franca looks on, checking her watch, wondering when they can get back to the mainland, feeling ill.

Breathless from the heat, Pauli's first sight of the Caves hewn by hand directly out of the basalt rock. The temple complex is laid out in the form of a mandala and dates to the 2nd century BCE, its iconography showing a syncretism of Buddhist and Hindu philosophies. The caves are full of carved figures: rounded limbs, thighs, heads turned just so, hands poised in mudras of acceptance, energy, fear, blessing. Mostly the sculptures are dedicated to the god Shiva.

Shiva The Destroyer. Transformer. Supreme universal consciousness. Auspicious. Sacred.

Shiva's partner, is Parvati, goddess of fertility and devotion. Divine strength. Power.

Shiva and Parvati: destruction and mercy, retribution and forgiveness embedded together in stone.

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On Good Friday, my cousin Zooms from Australia. Smoke is still lingering from the bushfires that licked the outskirts of Sydney in January.

I'm speaking to her from my east-facing kitchen, mid morning; she's talking to me from her living room at night. We discuss the relative direction of the rising sun in the Antipodes and decide it's east for both of us.

'It's Passover right now,' she says.

Plagues of darkness and fire, locusts and frogs, lice and flies: but the Lord will pass over.

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My Buddhist friend phones me on Easter Day from her recently purchased rural retreat in the highlands of Scotland.

She tells me she's growing courgettes and lettuce and beetroot in her large garden which looks over rolling land leading down to the sea. When she's not in the midst of gardening she's researching for a film she will make about climate change.

The district has one ambulance and one doctor's surgery; the nearest hospital is miles away. Just before lockdown began, sailors pitched up from Birmingham (sailors from landlocked Birmingham? - I'm sure that's what I heard her say), but they were sent back home by the local police.

But we agree it's not all bad. In some ways it's helping the environment. The plane-less air is clearer, the almost traffic-free streets calmer, the hush in the mornings pristine.

My friend tells me a friend of hers back in Edinburgh got the virus.

She felt as if her lungs were on fire. She sensed, lying amidst her crumpled sheets, the world is in flames.

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My venerable Chinese friend, secluded in a nursing home, texts me in response to the Easter card I sent him. The card was from a collection given to me as a Christmas present from another, younger Chinese friend.

Last December, 2019, Grace visited bringing flowers for my mother, the cards for me, before leaving for a holiday in China with her Scottish boyfriend, a gardener. When they returned in February, 2020, after Chinese New Year, her first words to me: 'It will come - the virus.'

The card I sent to my friend in the nursing home had a picture of plum blossom. He tells me that plum blossom is China's national flower for its 'fortitudinous character'; it blooms when the weather is at its most severe.

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The light of my phone is like moonshine spilling over the bedclothes. It's night and I'm using an online app to cast the I Ching.

My question: how to maintain a high level of consciousness during lockdown.

The result is Hexagram 3 "Sprouting" - coming from the source - changing to Hexagram 8 "Seeking Union" - where do you belong?

The changing line is the first one. It reads:

*'Encircled by stones*

*Fruitful to settle with constancy*

*Fruitful to establish feudal lords.'*

I don't really understand what it means but I know I am encircled by stones. I am settled with constancy. And I pray to my lord.