

The Enchanted Life

unlocking the magic
of the everyday

Sharon Blackie



An extract from
September Publishing

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2018 by September Publishing

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Illustrations by Leo Nickolls

Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed in Denmark on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Norhaven

ISBN 978-1-910463-88-8

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

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Why Enchantment, and Why Now?



1. Enchantment matters

The wind at dawn has secrets to whisper

Don't go back to sleep!

Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi

IMAGINE THAT YOU are entering a small wood on a Sunday morning in late spring; you've come here to walk. You have an immediate sense of wellbeing. How peaceful, you think, as you look around you; how pretty. The trees are lovely and the birdsong is beautiful. There are ferns under the trees, and bluebells. You turn your attention to them briefly and tell yourself how attractive they are. You check your watch as you set off down the gravelled track; you have half an hour for your walk before you have to head back home. You keep to the path; it rained last night and you don't want to get your shoes muddy. You shove your hands into your pockets; you keep your eyes straight ahead, mostly, but every now and again you look around you and tell yourself how nice it is to be away from the crowds and the traffic fumes.

After you've been walking for a few minutes, you start to think about other things. You can't help yourself; something in your head just takes over. You've been to mindfulness classes but it never seems to stick, and most of the time mindfulness seems a bit boring, to be honest. You hum the same notes of a tune over and over. You replay an argument you had with your husband yesterday and remind yourself how unreasonable he was – just how unreasonable he always is; the muscles in your stomach start to clench as you relive the irritation. You think of all the things you could have said differently, and refine your sentences until they're the deadliest of barbs. Suddenly someone else appears on the path ahead of you, walking towards you; you jump, and realise that you haven't taken in anything around you for the past several minutes. This is ridiculous, you think to yourself; I'm supposed to be walking through a wood, and you try to turn off the voices in your head. You begin to feel a little anxious, because you can't. Your mobile phone buzzes, and though you briefly sigh for the impossibility of

ever being truly lost in the world, you're really quite relieved to have the distraction of a text.

It starts to drizzle, and you sigh again and hunch down into your coat. You start to walk faster. So much to do when you get home, and although it's nice to have this break from the vicissitudes of real life, the truth is that you just can't afford the time, really. You start to worry about how you're going to pay for the haircut your teenage daughter wants, at the expensive new salon that just opened down the road. How she seems always to be asking for something you can't afford and how inadequate that makes you feel. How you're going to pay for the summer holiday abroad (and you shudder, remembering the crowds at last year's airports). Whether the interest rates are going to rise, in spite of all the government's promises, and then how will you pay your oversized mortgage . . .

Suddenly a large black bird (is it a crow, you wonder, vaguely? Maybe a raven . . .) flies across your path, right in front of your face. It settles on a low branch, looks you right in the eye and squawks. For a fleeting moment something in your head cracks open a fraction and you glimpse it – a sense of wonder, a sense that the bird is in some way interacting with you – but then you shake your head and tell yourself not to be so silly: it's just a bird, for heaven's sake; you're making things up – and all at once the feeling is gone. The bird flies off. You hurry on along the path, and leave the wood feeling vaguely dissatisfied, looking at your watch and your heart sinking as you realise how little of the weekend is left, and then it'll be Monday and you'll have to face the commuting crowds and five more days doing a job you hate before the weekend comes around again, and you have the chance to relax and take a nice walk in the woods.

Take two. Imagine that you are entering a small wood on a Sunday morning in late spring; you've come here to walk. If you brought a mobile phone with you, it is on mute: there's a time and a place for gadgets, and your attention is on what is actually here, right now in this moment, yourself in this wood. You close your eyes and listen. Rooks chattering high up in the canopy; the warning call of a smaller bird – three sharp notes in succession. A few trees away, another bird replies. News of your arrival is spreading through the wood.

The air is scented with bluebells, and you breathe in deeply. You are breathing in bluebells, you think, and you smile, because that means the bluebells are a part of you now – or are you a part of them? There are nettles under the trees and you have always loved nettles, ever since you heard the story of ‘The Wild Swans’ as a child, about the girl who had to pick nettles with her bare hands, and spin them into shirts to save her brothers who had been transformed into swans by a wicked stepmother. You bought a ball of nettle yarn which you found by accident in a wool shop you happened upon, a few weeks ago. You’re not quite sure what you’ll do with it, but you like to finger it, and remember that old story which even now pulls at your heart. It tells you that there’s magic in the profoundly mundane. You can’t see a nettle now, or a swan, without thinking of the girl in the story, locked into silence for all of the years it took her to complete her task. Love and endurance overcoming malice and injustice, and the wild magic of plants – and the one brother who had the unfinished shirt – the brother with one arm and one white wing, neither wholly man nor entirely bird.

But a nettle is a nettle as well as a set of associations: its growing tips make a fine and nutritious soup, and its fresh or dried leaves make a delicious tea. You don’t need to pick them here; there are plenty back in the wild edges of your garden, and in the city park.

You step off the path and into the trees. You’d never get lost; in any place the first thing you do is orient yourself in the world, as if there’s some internal compass inside you, just as you imagine migrating birds must have. Your own personal True North. And besides, like Hansel and Gretel, you’ve laid down a trail of imaginary breadcrumbs. Left a bit at the baby birch, right by the rock that looks like a giant tortoise. You touch everything, gently, as you walk. You are aware that under your feet the trees and plants are communicating and interacting with each other through a vast underground web of fungi which connect them. You once read that resources are shared through this network – carbon, water and nutrients. This isn’t just a wood; it’s a living, communicating ecosystem, and you are not in it but part of it. There is bluebell inside you. The rocks scattered through the wood are the protruding bones of the earth; the stream over there a vein, carrying its blood.

The stone in that small clearing – a beautiful stone, multiple shades of grey and brown, covered in ivy and moss – looks as if it has a face: head tipped back, two closed eyes and an open mouth, as if it's telling a story. You decide to call it the Story Stone, and next time you pass through the woods you'll remember it, and acknowledge it. You might even sit down and tell it a story yourself, some time. When there's no one else around to think you're crazy. Everything around you is vivid; all of your senses are fully engaged, and you feel at home in this wood. It knows you. You speak to the trees and stones each time you visit; they know your voice, and you watch the trees push out new branches and the lichens creep slowly across the stones, little by little, each year.

It starts to drizzle, and you lift your face to the water that brings this place – and you – life. It feels soft and clean. Suddenly, a crow flies across your path, right in front of your face. She settles on a low branch, looks you right in the eye and squawks. You stop, look right back at the crow and listen. *Crow*, you say, and *Hello*, and a whole other world opens up inside you, layering the richness of its symbols and images on top of the physical world around you. Badb and the Morrigan: all those powerful crow-goddesses in the old myths. Crow represents hidden knowledge, messages from the Otherworld; often it's a Trickster. Clever birds. Crows and humans have always lived together; is it any surprise that there are so many stories about them? You don't know what the crow is saying to you, but you know she is saying something. You know that she is counting you in.

You stand respectfully, drinking in the blue-black beauty of glossy feathers until the crow flies away again and then you walk on. And when you leave the wood to go home sometime later, you carry bluebell in your lungs and crow in your ears.

I suspect that most of us would recognise something of ourselves in that first account of a walk through the summer wood. I certainly do. I've been that person; spent a decade or more in that skin. Stressed, fragmented, disconnected. A curiously dissociated play-actor in a life I was never meant to be living. Contemporary life does all that to us – or so we imagine; the unpalatable truth is, we do it to ourselves. We made this world. We're caught up in a great, grinding machine of our own fabrication, and even if we're

lucky enough to catch a glimpse of another way of being, to make out in the distance the indistinct shadows of people who seem to be free, all too often we feel that we're powerless to extract ourselves from the mechanism which we imagine keeps us secure. We might not like it, we tell ourselves, but it's what we know. And aren't we mostly safe in the streets (mostly), and warm in our little house-boxes (if we can afford to pay the bills), and fed (yes, of course there are people who aren't, and of course we wish there was more we could do to help), and don't the trains still run (even if overcrowded and rarely on time), and when we're sick we can get treatment (even though, in some countries, only if we're lucky enough to be able to pay), and water comes out of the tap (let's not think about the chemicals), and the great (world-destroying) power stations provide electricity so that we can have our TVs for entertainment and our gadgets to help us manage our lives . . . The disconnection, the constant nagging sense of something critical missing in our lives, is just the price we pay for greater longevity, prosperity and health. It's not so bad, really.

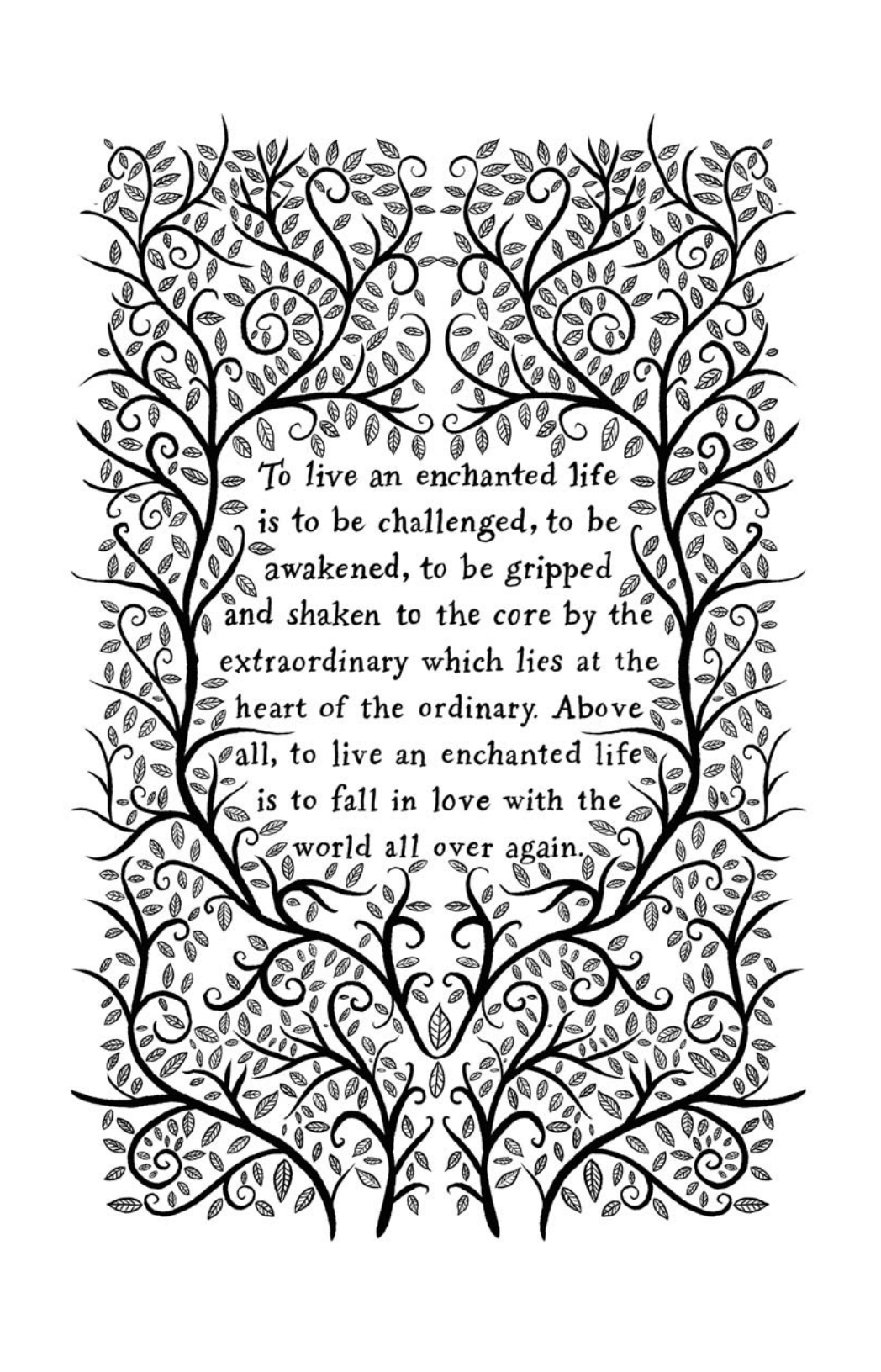
And in one sense, it's true: on average, human beings in Western countries today are safer, healthier and wealthier than in any other civilisation in the history of the world, and life expectancy continues to rise along with these objective markers of 'quality of life'. But there's a catch. The statistics may try to persuade us that, by these objective markers, our 'quality of life' is high – but when it comes to *subjective* markers, our own thoughts and emotions about the matter, a quite different story emerges. 'Life satisfaction' scores in many wealthy countries are surprisingly low, averaging just 5.7 on a scale from 0 to 10 in OECD countries.¹ And in the West, for several decades now there's been a relentless increase in mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety: a 2014 study by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS), for example, suggested that anxiety and depression affects at least one in five adults. Recently, a pre-existing trend towards alienation has intensified – alienation from ourselves, our fellow humans, and the world we live in. In a 2016 ONS report, around 40 per cent of adults reported that they did not feel a sense of belonging to the places where they lived, and in people under twenty-four the figure rose to a remarkable 50 per cent.²

We imagine we're thriving, but we're not. We have allowed ourselves, as the price we pay for so vigorously enrolling in the

prevailing Western cult of progress and growth, to become disenchanted with ourselves and each other, and with our lives. But as modern life becomes ever more mechanised, and the social, economic and political systems we once considered to be robust become increasingly fragile, we find ourselves thirsting for something more to hold on to, for new stories to tell about who we are and what our place in the world might be. We're yearning for meaning, for ways to feel at home in the world. We long to see it as we once saw it when we were children: a world that's full of mystery, bursting with possibility; a world that will challenge us to become all that we could ever hope to be. And just like the protagonists in all the finest old stories, even though we know that the journey through this world might not always be easy, we know that it will nevertheless be vital, vivid and rich.

But there's another, critically important, dimension to this problem: whether or not we imagine ourselves to be thriving, it's clear that the planet isn't. And that's because of us. Because our disenchantment with our own lives, with the systems and values on which human civilisation has come to be based, extends to the wider world around us. We've fallen out of love with the world. It's clear from the way we treat it. When you love someone or something, you treasure them, nurture them, take care of them – do all you can to ensure their wellbeing. Many of us might as individuals, but as a species, we don't do that for our planet any more. We might appreciate the continued existence of far-off wild places, and hope we get to visit them some day. We might value a nearby wood we like to walk in (or past), love our cats and dogs, light up when we watch TV documentaries of exotic animals in the jungles and savannahs, sigh over a beautiful sunset – but we long ago ceased to imagine ourselves as real and engaged participants in the wider cycles of life on this planet. Aren't we humans, after all? Aren't we uniquely possessed of reason and intellect – maybe even of souls – and so more valued than any other species on this earth?

Because of this sense of estrangement from the rest of the world around us – a separation that, as we will discover, has its roots in the rationalist classical philosophy on which contemporary Western culture was built – we treat the planet, and the other creatures which inhabit it alongside us, as mere resources to be exploited. And we've taken that exploitation too far. The oceans



To live an enchanted life
is to be challenged, to be
awakened, to be gripped
and shaken to the core by the
extraordinary which lies at the
heart of the ordinary. Above
all, to live an enchanted life
is to fall in love with the
world all over again.

are polluted and warming, the land is despoiled, the weather is wilder, the atmosphere is richer in greenhouse gases, and animal and plant species are dying out at an unprecedented and alarming rate – but the increasingly dire warnings from scientists and other experts about the consequences of human-induced climate change and environmental damage have little or no meaningful impact on the policies and practices of governments anywhere in the world. And not enough of us are holding them – or ourselves – to account. All of us, together, collectively, are perpetrating these acts of violence against the planet that gives us life. The pursuit of progress is our only religion; unending consumption is our primary motivator. No wonder our psyches are wounded. Our growing modern malaise – anxiety, depression, disease and dis-ease, a multiplicity of dysfunctions – springs in good part from our alienation from the natural order of the world and from our natural selves.

It can't possibly end well. Something has to change – for our own continued existence and wellbeing, and the continued existence and wellbeing of the planet. *We* have to change. We have to change the way we approach our lives, and to reconstruct our way of being in the world from the bottom up. We have to turn ourselves inside out.

That's what this book is about: learning to shrug off the chains of the old, sterile ways of thinking and being that have been instilled in us ever since we were children, and unburdening ourselves of the sense of alienation and dispossession that so often characterises our lives. It's about the everyday magic of transformation, as the first person in our fictional wood (let's call her Woman A) metamorphoses into the second (Woman B), so coming to feel a sense of wonder, kinship and belonging to the world. Above all, it is a practical guide to *re-enchanting* ourselves, and the world around us.

As a psychologist, I am very much aware that in order to begin thinking about how you might remedy a problem, it's important not only to correctly identify it, but also to understand where it came from. And so, as we make our way along the tangled path to re-enchantment, we will briefly encounter a few of the key thinkers, and brush up against some of the key ideas, that have been responsible for getting us into this mess in the first place. From ancient Greek philosophy to modern cognitive neuroscience, from Jungian psychology to anthropology, we'll craft an understanding

of how we came to so profoundly rupture ourselves from the living world around us – and we'll also run into a handful of more recent thinkers who are trying to show us how we might readjust some of our most fundamental perspectives on the way the world is, and our relationship to it. But at the heart of this book is a focus on the practical things we can do, the small and large changes we can make to the way we inhabit and experience the world, which will allow us to grow into a state of enchantment.

I believe that enchantment is an attitude of mind which can be cultivated, a way of approaching the world which anyone can learn to adopt: the enchanted life is possible for everybody. In this book I'll share with you my own experiences, and the experiences of several men and women from around the world, as they demonstrate how we can bring enchantment into every aspect of our daily lives. Because enchantment, by my definition, has nothing to do with fantasy, or escapism, or magical thinking; it is founded on a vivid sense of belongingness to a rich and many-layered world; a profound and whole-hearted participation in the adventure of life. The enchanted life presented here is one which is intuitive, embraces wonder and fully engages the creative imagination – but it is also deeply embodied, ecological, grounded in place and community. It flourishes on work that has heart and meaning; it respects the instinctive knowledge and playfulness of children. It understands the myths we live by; thrives on poetry, song and dance. It loves the folkloric, the handcrafted, the practice of traditional skills. It respects wild things, recognises the wisdom of the crow, seeks out the medicine of plants. It rummages and roots on the wild edges, but comes home to an enchanted home and garden. It is engaged with the small, the local, the ethical; enchanted living is slow living.

Ultimately, to live an enchanted life is to pick up the pieces of our bruised and battered psyches, and to offer them the nourishment they long for. It is to be challenged, to be awakened, to be gripped and shaken to the core by the extraordinary which lies at the heart of the ordinary. Above all, to live an enchanted life is to fall in love with the world all over again. This is an active choice, a leap of faith which is necessary not just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the wide, wild Earth in whose being and becoming we are so profoundly and beautifully entangled.

2. The unendurable everyday

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out,
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.

John Donne, from 'An Anatomy of the World'

I REMEMBER MY first experience with what I'd now call disenchantment: the first time I ever actually understood what it was, and all that it implied. It wasn't when, at the age of five, my great-uncle calmly informed me that Santa Claus didn't actually exist (I wasn't entirely sure I'd ever bought into the idea, to be truthful), or when, not so very long afterwards, a schoolteacher told me that there were no such things as fairies (that was just silly. Of course there were. I'd read *Peter Pan*, and I also knew perfectly well that, when she said those words, a fairy died). In fact, I retained a sense of that particular kind of enchantment all through a challenging childhood and well into my teenage years. I knew full well that the world was full of mystery. I discovered it under every leaf and stone in our tiny urban garden, and I fell headlong into it when I read the mythology, fiction and poetry which I loved. If we could imagine worlds filled with such wonders, I reasoned, then at some level they had to be real.

No, my first ever full-on experience of disenchantment came at the age of eighteen. It happened during one of the first lectures I attended after enrolling for a degree in psychology at a university in the north of England. I'd chosen to study psychology rather than literature, as I'd always imagined I would, in good part because I was afraid that that the obsessive textual deconstruction that seemed to characterise the advanced study of literature would take all the enchantment and mystery out of the great books that I loved. And by studying psychology, I believed, I would instead be delving into all the enchantment and mystery of the human mind. I was thrilled by the idea; as the only child from my impoverished working-class family line who had ever made it to university, I so badly wanted to learn, to be inducted into the magical world of academia.

And so it was with a strange sick feeling in my throat that I watched as a sardonic disbeliever-in-everything thoroughly

deconstructed the idea of hypnosis. It was a demolition job which involved a fair amount of showmanship, as the lecturer in question gathered a couple of giggling helpers from the admiring audience and demonstrated how to perform the Human-Plank Feat – once declared to be one of the ‘proofs’ that hypnosis was a unique state of consciousness in which people could be instructed to do things they normally wouldn’t dream of – and then proceeded to pick apart all of the ways in which humans indulged in ‘magical thinking’. This degree course, he informed us, would knock all of that kind of nonsense out of us, once and for all. It would show us how to think; it would show us how to recognise what was ‘real’ and what was just a figment of our imaginations.

It’s not that I didn’t want to learn how to think: I did. It’s not that I didn’t want to know that what once was held up as a ‘proof’ of the existence of an irresistibly suggestive hypnotic state wasn’t actually a proof of anything at all – anyone with halfway decent abdominal muscle tone could achieve it. I did want to know such things. But what struck me to the core were two fundamental aspects of his approach to the subject: first, his profound and gleeful contempt for people and the way they participated in and thought about the world; and, second, an absolute refusal to entertain any idea that couldn’t be empirically verified, and to dismiss it as ‘mere imagination’, as unreal. What was wrong with imagination? I was bewildered. With the obligatory exceptions of O levels in biology and mathematics, all of my education at school had focused on the arts. Imagination was life – it was everything. It was the best of us. So I wholeheartedly believed (and still do).

With that, the brain-washing began. A year into that degree, and I could hardly say the word ‘mind’ without shuddering. ‘Brain’ was fine, because it was a physical entity which we could break into and look at; and ‘behaviour’ was fine, because we could see it and objectively measure it (even if we couldn’t always *trust* it). Internal events, though, were another matter entirely. Thought and emotion? Well, if you couldn’t explain them in measurable behavioural or biological terms, you simply shouldn’t study them at all. You probably shouldn’t even use the words. Best, on the whole, to pretend they didn’t exist. People who talked about things like ‘mind’ and ‘consciousness’ – well, they were all a bit . . . flaky, to proper scientists like us.

The truth is, it was a fine enough education in its way. It was gloriously broad, as we delved into the relationship between psychology and disciplines as diverse as genetics, neuroscience, social sciences, ethology and linguistics. It was rigorously scientific, and the subjective nature of psychology meant that it was necessary to question everything, always to be aware of and challenge your assumptions. That was good, and I've been grateful, over the years, for that fine education in how to think. We humans need a hefty dose of rationality in our lives; it keeps us honest. I liked the rigour – but I didn't like the fundamentalism which presented science as the only true dogma, and I didn't at all like the ways in which we were actively and determinedly disenchanting, as lecturers wielded copies of B.F. Skinner's profoundly disturbing *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* as if it were their institutional, and very holy, bible.

It took a lot of years for me to recover from that reprogramming; a three-year PhD followed by a stint of postdoctoral research in behavioural neuroscience certainly didn't help. And yet I held on. Throughout it all, I lived a curiously double life: in my spare time I read and studied, just as I had always done, everything I could find about myths and fairy tales, and immersed myself in books and novels imbued with that sense of enchantment which was now sorely lacking in my own working life. I wouldn't, of course, have admitted to it under torture; the persona I presented to the world was always wonderfully . . . rigorous. I was a very successful neuroscientist. It wasn't until I was in my late thirties – all at sea, burned out from several years of corporate disenchantment after I finally left academia, and working my way through what seemed like the last in a whole line of early and mid-life crises – that I found a way to combine psychology with the mythology that I loved, and clawed my way determinedly towards a vision which could bring those two aspects of my own personality back together. Because an enchanted life recognises the need both for rigour and for the free-wheeling imagination. The one doesn't have to exclude the other. The world isn't black and white. A scientific approach is a valuable part of the way we come to understand the world; the problem arises when it presents itself as the only valid way.

But here's the question which consumed me during my university days, and which still nags at me today: how did we ever get to the stage where we thought this might be a good way to educate

a human being? Where did we acquire our determined worship of the rational and intellectual, our downgrading of the value of the creative imagination? And how did it so profoundly infiltrate our institutions?

The disenchantment of the world

If to be enchanted is to fully participate in the world, to be open both to its transparency and its mystery, then to be disenchanting is its opposite. To be disenchanting is to be shut down. As we'll see in a later chapter, our way of being in the world is naturally open to wonder and awe when we are children, but then we lose our facility for enchantment as we grow older, and learn to conform to the social and cultural codes which tell us we must actively *disenchant* ourselves if we want to be thought of as fully adult. My own experience, as a scientist-in-training, might have been extreme in its focus, and in its clearly stated intent to disenchant – but we're all subjected to the process of disenchantment in one way or another. Disenchantment is ingrained in our culture and, as we'll discover, it goes back a long, long way. This way of thinking won't be so easy to uproot.

So what is it, this disenchantment which ultimately replaces the instinctive, enchanted worldview that we possess as children? What does it actually look like, and how does it manifest itself in our lives and in the world around us? How does it happen to us?

It's just a bird, for heaven's sake

At the risk of seeming to over-simplify, to those of us in the English-speaking world, disenchantment arguably begins with 'he', 'she' and 'it'. Because what replaces enchantment is the intensely dualistic – 'us and them' – Western worldview which is instilled into us from the moment, as children, we begin to learn language, and are taught to label things and categorise them. The English language in particular forces us to adopt a position of separation and distance from the rest of the world as soon as we begin to use it. Only humans may properly be given the pronoun 'he' or 'she'. Everything else is an 'it'. An 'it' is usually an inanimate object – something which (even if it is capable of growing, like a plant) isn't alive in the same way that we are

– which lacks characteristics like perception, consciousness and volition. Even though we tend to agree that animals are not inanimate objects (though not all philosophers have been entirely convinced, as we'll see in a moment) nevertheless, in proper use of English, we don't talk about them in the same way we talk about ourselves. Sometimes it's acceptable to refer to a pet – an animal with which we have a personal relationship – as 'he' or 'she', but a quick online search of 'how to do grammar properly' resources for writers will confirm their advice that we should always refer to a wild animal as 'it'.

Already, we are separate. There's us, the humans, and there's the rest of the world. The one we are told is outside of us – which we are taught to think of as beginning where our skin ends. A completely different category: one giant, inanimate *it*.

This perspective – in which we are not participants in the world but mere observers of it, acting upon inert objects which are *other* than us – clearly distances us from our surroundings and the (non-human) beings who we share them with. It not only teaches us that this strange *it*-ness outside of us is less valuable than we are (not requiring of us the same linguistic courtesies, for example), but it profoundly reduces our sense of belonging to the world, for how can you ever belong to something from which you are so profoundly different, and to which you imagine yourself morally and intellectually superior?

Our first fictional walker in the woods, Woman A, displays just this kind of attitude. Everything she encounters is an object, something other than her, something to observe, sometimes admire, and perhaps classify (if she can). She walks apart on the man-made path, and engages with nothing that she encounters – a curious crow is dismissed as 'just a bird'. She is entirely wrapped up in her own head, in the experience of her own subjectivity. Woman B, on the other hand, treats everything she comes across as another being with whom she can have a meaningful exchange – whether it's a crow, a bluebell or a stone.

In most indigenous societies – and we'll explore this more deeply in the next chapter – the prevailing view of the world is animistic. The word 'animism' derives from the Greek *anima*, 'soul', and in such a worldview everything is alive – not just humans, not just animals, but rivers and seas, rocks and stones, trees and plants. Humans are a part of this world, just like all those other living

things. We aren't in charge, and neither are we alienated observers of an inert cosmos: we are all bound up in its unfolding, all of us in it together. A vast meshwork of humans and animals, rivers and seas, rocks and stones, trees and plants.

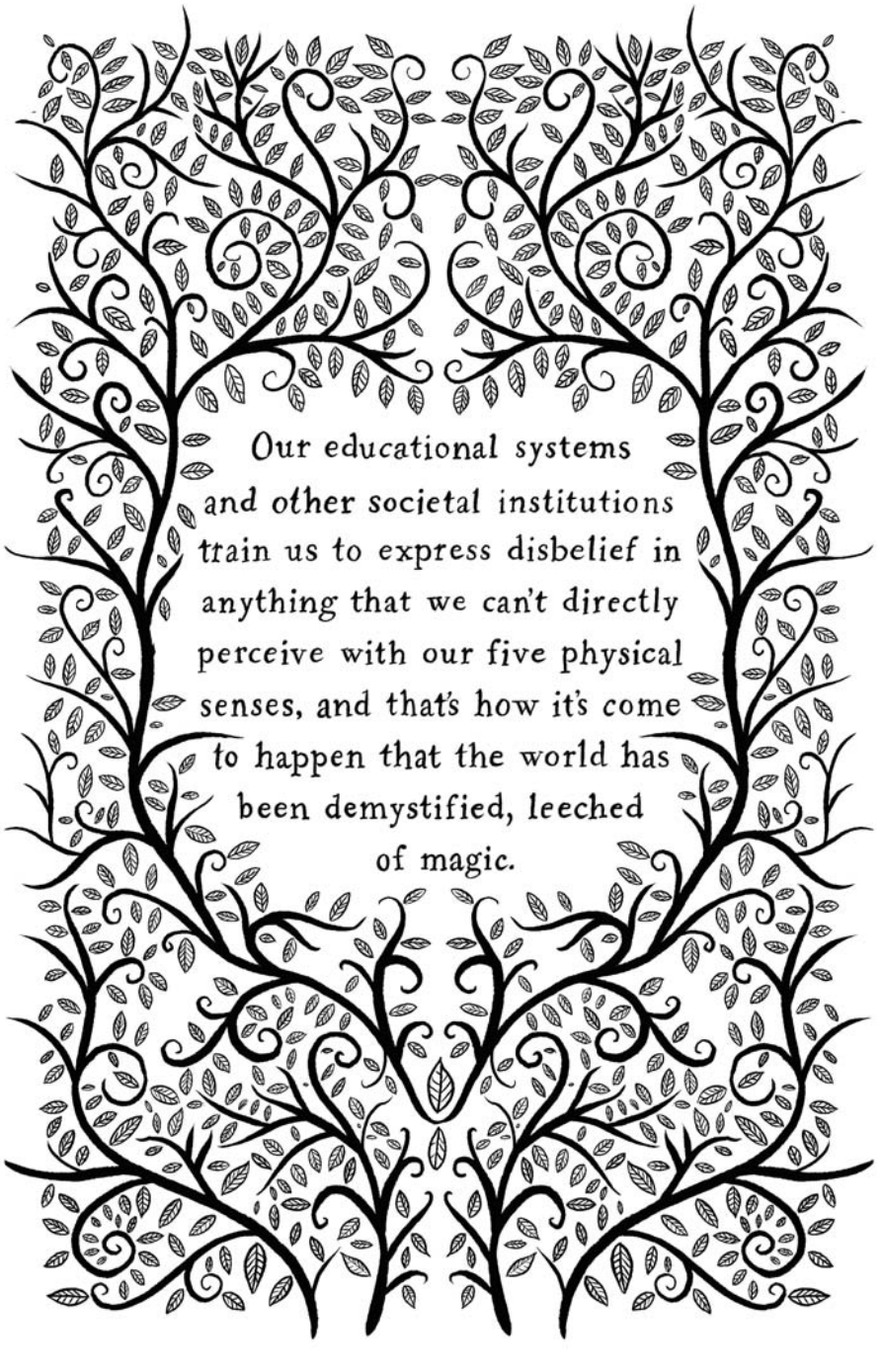
The corruptions of the flesh

It sounds like a much richer, friendlier way to live, to inhabit a world in which you are enfolded into a vast community of life, constantly surrounded by others with whom you can enter into relationship – but unfortunately this way of being in the world began to erode in the West a long time ago, as philosophers and other intellectuals increasingly began to promote the rational and intellectual above all other types of knowledge, and taught us that we should mistrust the evidence of our physical senses. Our detachment from the rest of the world around us is clearly expressed in the writings of Plato, a wealthy Athenian about whom little is now known, but who, along with his teacher Socrates and his most famous student Aristotle, laid many of the foundations for Western philosophy and intellectual practice as we know it today. Plato argued 2,500 years ago that humans alone possess reason and intellect, and because of this we're not only different from, but superior to, every other living creature that exists.

There we have it: in one fell swoop we are severed from the rest of life on this planet, completely alone in the world.

In contrast to the 'naturalist' philosophers who preceded him, Plato denied the reality of the physical world, arguing that the material world that we perceive with our senses is not the 'real' world at all, but only an image or copy of a real world which can only ever be properly known through the intellect. The physical is profoundly to be mistrusted; only reason can lead us to the truth.

And of course, it's not as silly an idea as it might seem; one of Plato's points was that the way the world is perceived is very subjective. You can argue as much as you like that grass is green, but if the person looking at it has a particular form of colour-blindness, then chances are they'll see it as grey. Which is 'real'? Unfortunately, though, Plato's rejection of the physical and veneration of the transcendental and intellectual passed directly down into later Western thought, and, for example, strongly influenced the doctrines of



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major religions such as Christianity. The body was scorned as a remnant of our ‘animal nature’, which we were striving to supersede in our pursuit of reason and intellect, so that we might grow closer to a transcendental, immaterial God. And so phrases such as the ‘corruptions of the flesh’ abound in medieval religious writings; only by negating the body could you hope to grow closer to God. That’s why certain religious communities, especially those of women, were taught to practise ‘mortification of the flesh’ – in its more extreme forms, a particularly unpleasant form of active self-harm which included flagellation – so that they might free themselves from ‘sin’.

Given that we experience the world and live in it as embodied creatures, none of this was ever going to help us feel a sense of belonging to the physical Earth which we inhabit right now. Unfortunately, it was never going to do much for the overall mental health of our species, either: denying what you are is the first step forward on a sure path to madness.

Many of us today are still embarrassed by our physical bodies and their perfectly natural functions. We concoct all kinds of strange words and phrases to gloss over or camouflage the process of eliminating waste from our bodies: in North America, for example, even the word ‘toilet’ has been exchanged for the bizarrely bashful and utterly inapposite ‘restroom’. As a teenager, I could hardly say the word ‘menstruation’ without blushing, and going into a shop to buy tampons or sanitary pads was positively excruciating. The sexualisation of the female body in particular means that nudity is seen as titillating rather than natural. We cover ourselves up so as not to be a source of ‘temptation’, and if we don’t and we are assaulted or raped, then we are just ‘asking for it’, because everyone knows that the female body is unbearably arousing and induces men to sin.

Most of us experience a sense of shame because we can’t live up to the cultural idea – and men, of course, suffer from body image issues just like women. The presentation of the ‘ideal man’ – tall, muscular, bronzed – is no more realistic than the presentation of the ideal woman. A 2017 article in *Time* magazine spoke of a ‘body image epidemic’ in American men – Dr Harrison Pope, director of the Biological Psychiatry Laboratory at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, said that the increasing equation of masculinity with muscularity has led men not only to feel more and more

dissatisfied with their bodies, but for around 4 million of them to use potentially harmful anabolic steroids to increase their muscle mass.³ The body image issue for lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual and questioning others is even more complex, with societal stereotyping adding to the problem, as individuals experience intense feelings of dissonance between who they perceive themselves to be and who they ideally would like to be.

The Chain of Being

Later, Aristotle – a man whose students were nicknamed ‘the Peripatetics’ because he was known for walking briskly around the school grounds while lecturing them, forcing them to trot along behind – formalised Plato’s ideas into a hierarchy of values. Plants were placed at the bottom of his value system, because they possessed only what he called ‘nutritive souls’, which were related to growth and metabolism. Slightly above plants in his hierarchy were animals, who in addition, he said, possessed ‘perceptive souls’ of pain, pleasure and desire. And firmly at the top of the ladder were humans – because, he believed, we additionally, and uniquely, possessed the faculty of reason. Later, this notion was expanded by other philosophers into what is now referred to as the ‘Great Chain of Being’, which proposes the following hierarchy: God at the top, followed by angelic beings – neither of whom occupied the realm of the material and so were infinitely superior to those who did – then humans, then animals, then plants, then minerals. Beings on higher levels of this hierarchy were believed to possess more authority over those in lower positions.

Although it might seem like a rather archaic idea to us now when presented in this fashion, the Chain of Being still informs the way we think about ourselves and our relationship to the rest of the world today. In a recent article in *Psychology Today*, a respected Harvard psychiatrist refers to all things which are not human as ‘lower life forms’.⁴ The Chain of Being certainly informs our exploitation of the environment, and we still often apply Aristotle’s value hierarchy in making judgments and choices – for example, when we make choices about what it’s okay to eat: humans never, animals sometimes (depending on whether or not you’re a vegetarian) and plants always (even if you’re the most radical of vegans) because, as

a vegan friend declared to me once, ‘Even if plants are alive, they don’t feel pain in the same way we do.’

Masters and possessors of nature

This sort of thinking pretty much held sway down through the centuries, through the Middle Ages and on into the Renaissance. In the early seventeenth century, it was further advanced by French philosopher René Descartes, who was perhaps best known for his most famous written line, ‘*Cogito, ergo sum*’ – ‘I think, therefore I am’. Descartes is believed to have been sickly as a boy, and to have suffered a nervous breakdown while studying law at the University of Poitiers. Then, having become disillusioned with the world of books, and in a move that might not seem entirely obvious for someone of such an apparently tender disposition, he decided he would be better served by seeing something of the world – and took himself off to join the Duke of Bavaria’s army. So it was, at the age of twenty-three, that he found himself ‘shut up in a stove-heated room’ while wintering with the army in the German city of Ulm. It was 10 November 1619, the vigil of the Feast of St Martin of Tours – a time of great celebration in the France of the day – and, during the course of the night, Descartes had three ‘big dreams’ which he later credited with determining the future course of his work. He immediately interpreted them as coming directly from God, and from that moment on, Descartes believed that he had a divine mandate for his ideas. Indeed, he was so convinced of this divine endorsement of his ‘mission’ that he shortly afterwards made a pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loreto to express his appreciation.

Descartes – clearly by then not a man particularly given to self-doubt – took from those dreams the message that he should set out to reform all human knowledge; he decided to begin with philosophy. Unfortunately for the future trajectory of Western civilisation, Descartes’ dream-God seems to have left him with the impression that our job is to make ourselves the ‘masters and possessors of nature’. This would be a desirable thing, Descartes wrote, because it would allow us to ‘enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth and all the goods found there’.⁵ But, it hasn’t quite turned out that way. As a consequence of our quest for mastery and possession of nature

we are, like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, much more likely to have sown the seeds of our own destruction.

Descartes also extended the Aristotelian view that, as well as being the only creatures who possess reason, humans are unique because they alone possess souls and 'mind'. Animals, he declared, have neither soul nor mind; they have no self-awareness or volition; they're insentient and feel no emotion. Although they might act as if they're conscious, they're really not: they are nothing more than biological machines, programmed to behave in wholly predetermined and highly restrictive ways. The entire non-human world is bereft of animating force, insentient, purposeless and completely lacking in intrinsic value. We can do what we like with it.

Again, chances are that many of us, when presented with such a bald statement as 'We can do what we like with it', would flinch or demur. We don't think like that any more, we might say: we've moved on since then. And yet, many of us don't think twice about killing and concreting over fertile fields and healthy forests to create our cities, or injecting liquid at high pressure into subterranean rocks to force open fissures so we can extract oil or gas, or keeping vast numbers of living animals confined in cages throughout the entire course of their drastically abbreviated lives so we can slaughter them en masse and buy their flesh neatly wrapped up in plastic in our supermarkets and not have to think about where it came from. Aren't we humans, and don't we need more houses and more power and more food for the hungry (human) masses? Don't we have more right than any other being to the space, and the resources of the planet? (And for sure, hardly anyone ever thinks of asking a stone on a beach whether it would be okay to remove it from its natural environment, take it home with us and 'display' it on an indoor windowsill.) Whether we know it or not, the choices we make as individuals, as well as the practices of our civilisation, are still driven by ideas concocted hundreds of years ago by wealthy, educated men such as Plato, Aristotle and Descartes.

Too enlightened for our own good

While Descartes was working towards his vision of mastering and possessing nature, Europe was in the throes of the Scientific Revolution: a term used by historians to describe the emergence of modern science,

when developments in fields of study like mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology and chemistry were profoundly transforming our views about the nature of ourselves, and the world. Francis Bacon, one of the early founders of the scientific method, was an influential contributor to the Scientific Revolution in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He strongly believed that the only valid approach to science was empirical: in other words, you can only properly test an idea by observing, experimenting and measuring, and if you can't do that, it's not a proper subject for study. Thinking about something and reasoning about it just isn't good enough, and older forms of knowledge such as intuition are completely beyond the pale.

Bacon was originally a statesman who, after becoming Lord Chancellor, was subsequently accused of accepting bribes, and was impeached by Parliament for corruption. With his political career in shreds, he decided to have a go at philosophy. In the *Novum Organum*, published in 1620, he suggested that humans could achieve power over the world by seeking knowledge of it – and so give birth to the 'Empire of Man over creation'.⁶ The same fundamental idea: humans better; humans first. Unfortunately for Bacon, in the expression of his own individual Empire it was 'creation' which had the last laugh. In 1626, while performing a series of experiments to test the effects of cold on the preservation and decay of meat, he stuffed a hen with snow and promptly caught a chill. He soon developed bronchitis and, a week later, died.

The theories of Descartes and Bacon, along with others which were developed during the Scientific Revolution, influenced the intellectuals whose ideas, taken together, ushered in the period of history that we now call the Enlightenment – and which is sometimes called the Age of Reason. During this period (the Enlightenment is usually considered to have lasted through the eighteenth century) there were also major challenges to religious beliefs and practices; at the same time, there was a growth in the doctrine of Humanism, which emphasised the primacy and centrality of human beings in the world, instead of God. The old religions were held to be mere superstition; the new, true religion was founded on the application of reason and the acquisition of knowledge – but only if that knowledge could be verified empirically.

This cultural worship of reason and empiricism means that our educational systems and other societal institutions train us to

express disbelief in anything that we can't directly perceive with our five physical senses, and that's how it's come to happen that the world has been demystified, leached of magic. We might, deep down in our hearts, believe that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in the empiricists' philosophy, but most of us probably feel we'd be wise not to talk about them in public. I've been a recovering scientist now for thirty years, and I still find myself flinching if ever I should happen to use words like 'holy', 'sacred', 'reverence' or 'spiritual'. I'm not entirely sure I won't someday be burned at the stake if I confess that there's something in me which believes the old gods are alive, still, and walk the land, if only you know where to find them . . .

And yet, 'official' cultural norms aside, many people in the West have their own antidotes to disenchantment. Belief in protective icons and rituals is still strong. Nearly 30 per cent of Americans say they have felt in touch with someone who has already died, almost 20 per cent say they have seen or been in the presence of ghosts, and 15 per cent have consulted a fortune teller or a psychic, according to a 2009 Pew Research Center survey.⁷ As many as 72 per cent believe in Heaven, 58 per cent believe in Hell, and 83 per cent are absolutely or fairly certain that God exists.⁸

Dogma and demiurges

And on that note – it's not just scientists and philosophers who laid down the script for our disenchantment: religion was influential too. This might at first seem like an unlikely idea, because ever since the Enlightenment, critics have usually associated religion with exactly the kind of 'irrational' thinking that's sometimes linked with the use of words like 'enchantment'. But many religions, in their dogmatic adherence to one particular way of seeing the world, relieve us of possibility and so fetter our imaginations. Wonder and awe, they tell us, can be turned only in one direction: never onto what is 'worldly', but always in the direction of God.

In many monotheistic religions, to love God automatically requires a rejection of the physical world. Some strains of Christian thought, for example, involve a profound hostility to the physical, the here and now, and value only the transcendental – the unearthly – and the notion of an afterlife far away from the 'corruption' of

material things. We find some of the most striking examples of such beliefs in Gnosticism, a religious perspective adopted by some Christians in the first and second centuries AD. The Gnostics believed that the physical world was evil because it was created by the Demiurge: a malevolent 'emanation' of the One God.

The Cathars, recently popularised (and mostly romanticised) in a series of movies and novels such as Kate Mosse's 'Languedoc' trilogy,⁹ were members of a Gnostic revivalist sect which flourished in northern Italy and southern France between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. They're now remembered primarily because of a prolonged period of persecution by the Catholic Church, which didn't recognise their beliefs as properly Christian (especially their belief in two Gods – one good and one evil) and so condemned them as heretics. The Cathars believed that the world was in fact created by Satan, and so this world, this Earth, was inherently tainted with evil. All physical matter was created by this evil God, and because of that, the Cathars also believed that all reproduction – including human reproduction – was a sin.

So there we have it: a millennia-old tradition of Western thought which perceives the physical as bad; the intellectual, rational and transcendental as good; and humans as superior to and masters of the rest of the world – which, by the way, is filled with mindless creatures and objects which have no awareness or agency of their own. And so which have no meaning or purpose at all other than as objects for us to act on, use or consume. Humans, so uniquely clever but so uniquely alone, plonked down by virtue of some evolutionary accident on the hard surface of a largely inanimate planet, completely at odds with the physical bodies which are our only means of perceiving, experiencing and living in the world. Nothing else to have a proper relationship with, nothing to look up to and, as atheism continues to gain ground over religious faith, nothing to consider sacred beyond ourselves.

No wonder we're alienated and depressed.

In the early twentieth century, German intellectual Max Weber, who is now recognised as the founding father of modern sociology, coined a term which he used to describe these multiple historical processes through which a sense of wonder at the world, a sense of all life as not only redolent with meaning, but as sacred, began to

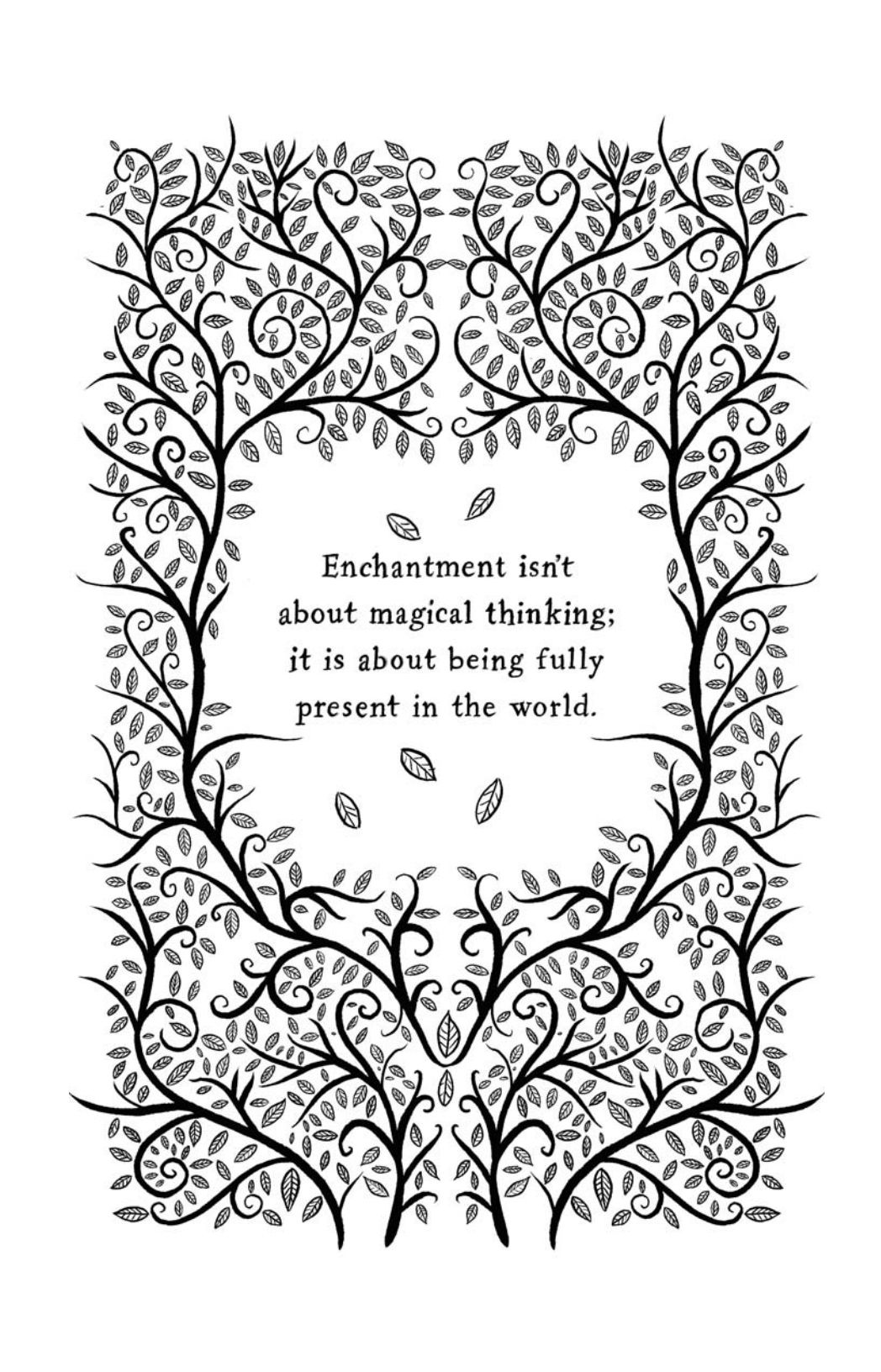
lose ground. ‘The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”,’ Weber wrote.¹⁰ But of course it is not the world which is disenchanted: it is ourselves.

Each of us, at some level, in some way, has an instinctive understanding of the many different forms which that disenchantment can take; there are so many ways in which we have disenchanted ourselves. But in this book we will explore acts of *re-enchantment*: antidotes and alternatives to the centuries-old deadening, new ways to bring ourselves back to life. New ways to come home to ourselves, and to rediscover our place in the world.

The hymn of the pearl

There is a story contained within a hymn in the Gnostic Acts of Thomas, one of the apocryphal New Testament gospels (those which were left out of the modern canon and didn’t make their way into the ‘official’ Bible). I heard it many years ago, but never could remember where it came from, and what little of it I recalled was never enough to identify it to other storytellers I asked. Recently, I happened across it again, by chance – if you believe, which I do not, that stories ever come to you by chance. But we’ll come to the hidden lives of stories in another chapter. For now, I’d like to share this particular story with you; it is called ‘The hymn of the pearl’.

Once there was a boy, the son of a king of kings, who lived happily in a house of great wealth and luxury. But his parents decided to send him on a journey. Equipping him with gold, silver and precious stones, they removed his clothing – the glittering robe and purple toga which he loved, and which suited him so well. And then they made a pact with him, and wrote the pact in his heart, so that he should never forget it. ‘Go west,’ they told him, ‘and bring back to us a uniquely beautiful pearl which lies on an island in the middle of the sea, guarded by a fierce, roaring serpent. This pearl is yours. If you do this, then when you return to us you may have your glittering robe again and your favourite purple toga. And you will inherit our kingdom together with your older brother.’



Enchantment isn't
about magical thinking;
it is about being fully
present in the world.

So the young boy travelled west, accompanied by two guardians – for the way was long and hard, and he was very young to travel it. After passing through many lands and seeing many wonders, he eventually came to the island he had been told about: an island in the middle of the sea where the serpent lived. Once they had arrived safely on that island, his companions left him. And so the boy asked some questions, and discovered where the serpent made his home; and he remained on the island for a while, planning to wait until the serpent fell asleep (which he did rarely) so that he could take the beautiful pearl from him. But while he waited he became lonely and missed his family; and so when a local boy made friends with him, he shared with him the gold and silver and jewels that his parents had given him, and began to dress like him in order to better fit into his surroundings, and not to be treated like a stranger.

Although he had been warned by his parents not to eat the food of these people, most of whom were slaves, he was hungry as well as lonely, and he gratefully took their food when it was offered to him. And so it happened that, clothed in the garments of this strange country, and partaking of its food, he forgot that he was a son of kings, and began to serve the new country's king: the king of these people, who were slaves. And he forgot his pearl, for which his parents had sent him, and it was as if a veil covered his eyes and he fell into a deep sleep. So he remained for many years.

When years passed and still their son did not return home, his parents understood what must have become of him, and they brought together all of the nobles in their kingdom so that together they could make a plan to rescue him. His family wrote a letter, signed by all the nobles of the kingdom, reminding their son that he was a son of kings, and asking him to free himself from the slavery of the country where he now was – and to remember his pearl, for which he had been sent. Remember also your glittering robe, the letter exhorted him, and your purple toga, and come back to your family and your home!

The letter was given to an eagle, and the king of all birds flew west and soon found this boy who was now a man, and landed beside him as he slept. When, startled, he awoke, the eagle spoke to him and dropped the letter at his feet.

And the man read the letter and remembered that he was of noble birth; and he remembered his pearl, for which he had been

sent to this strange country. The veil fell away from his eyes. And so he left his room and went at once to the place where the terrible roaring serpent lived, and he sat down at its feet and set about the process of charming it. He sang and he crooned, and eventually he lulled the serpent to sleep. Once it was safely and soundly slumbering, he snatched away the pearl which lay in the centre of the spiral created by its coiling body. He cleaned his filthy clothes and set off across the sea, embarking on the long journey east.

Just as he was approaching the gates of his family home, servants came out to him, bearing the bright robe and the purple toga which once he had worn. He hardly remembered them now, for he had left his home many years ago, when he was a child – but as soon as the clothes were placed back into his hands, all of a sudden they seemed like mirrors of his true self. And so the man put on his old robes – the beautiful, richly coloured, glittering robes he had worn as a child, but which had grown along with him – and returned home, bearing the wondrous gift of the pearl which he had wrested from the terrible, roaring serpent who lived on an island in the middle of the great western sea.

If you're not used to working with stories of this kind, it's easy to become distracted by their literal content rather than seeing them as metaphors whose function is to shed light, as simply and as briefly as possible, on the complexities of the human condition. You could, for example, focus on the wealth and privilege of the prince's upbringing and lose sight of the fact that, in story terms, this is simply a way of indicating that he was a loved and cherished little boy, and that worldly wealth is often a metaphor for spiritual wealth. This story, then, coming out of a Gnostic text, is usually interpreted as metaphorically reflecting a Gnostic perspective on the human condition: that we are (good) spirits lost in a world of (bad) matter, and that we are forgetful of our true origin as inheritors of the kingdom of God.

But here's the thing about stories: they won't be confined and they won't be constrained. The best thing about stories is that they have lives of their own, and sometimes they conspire with you to subvert the 'official' meaning. So this story presents itself to me in another way. We have indeed forgotten who we are. We've travelled a long way from the natural world that is our home, and

the sense of enchantment which is reflected in the glittering robes and brightly coloured togas we once wore there, when we were children. We've all felt it: that nagging sense of something missing, something fundamentally wrong at the heart of our lives, a sense of profound disconnection from the wider world around us. We feel it in our burned-out, stressed-out bodies, in our anxiety-ridden thought patterns, in our broken and dysfunctional relationships, in the sense of futility which haunts our days, in the breakdown of communities and the increasingly frightening breakdown of social order, even in countries we've previously believed to be immune. Because we have been scared, hungry and alone, we've adopted the customs of this new country and put on tainted clothing; we've come to worship a new king: a king who is a slave-maker. We've taken it all too literally and forgotten about the metaphor, forgotten that it's supposed to be spiritual wealth we're acquiring, not just more *stuff*. We've fallen asleep. We've forgotten where we came from, and where we truly belong; we've stopped believing that there is anything beyond us, maybe even that there's something greater and worth fighting for. More than this, though, we've forgotten our calling: forgotten that the purpose of the journey we're on is to discover the rare pearl which was always intended to be our unique gift to the world we've left behind.

It's time to remember who we are. In our hearts, we've known for a long time that something is wrong. We've seen the veil shifting, caught glimpses of the finer reality which lies behind it. It's time to finally wake up, read the letter, set off on the long journey home. It's time to change.



- ✿ List the ways in which your own life has become disenchanting – the parts of your life in which you have a sense of something out of kilter. Think about:
 - Your relationships – friends, partners, parents, children, colleagues, community.
 - Your health, both physical and mental.

- Whether or not you feel comfortable in your physical body.
 - Your job, and your hopes and expectations for the future.
 - The place you live – your accommodation and the wider location in which it sits.
 - Your relationship (a sense of belonging or of alienation?) with the world around you, and with the non-human others you share it with.
 - Whether or not you have a sense of meaning in your life.
- ✿ Categorise your disenchantments according to whether these are things you want to change, and whether you believe you have some power to change them, or not.



Change, and the end-of-history illusion

To come right out and call for change begs some important questions. What kind of change, in who (or what), and how? Well, when it comes to change, I have one foundational belief: that for most of us, no matter how badly we feel drawn to do it, changing the world isn't an option. We don't usually have that kind of influence or that kind of power. But changing ourselves is very much an option, and I believe that if enough of us change ourselves in the same ways, then we are going to influence and create changes in the people around us, and so change the world. This kind of fundamental, grassroots change isn't just about critical mass: it's about the strong bonds and connections which can be made among people who share the same values. That's how most of us contribute to the changing of the world. It starts with ourselves.

If we can create a shift in the fundamental ways in which we see and approach the world, so that we come to feel again that sense of wonder, awe and belonging that we felt when we were children, then we will dramatically enhance the quality of our own lives and

increase our sense of wellbeing. But more importantly – those internal changes will spark off wider and more enduring changes in our behaviour and our actions, and lead to an entirely new relationship with, and sense of responsibility for, the living world around us.

Changing ourselves, of course, isn't always easy. Sometimes, even if we can see exactly what it is that we need to change in our lives, we can't necessarily see the steps we need to take to achieve it. To return to our fictional example: if you are like Woman A, how exactly do you transform yourself into someone who is more like Woman B? What do you have to do? How do you actually get to be like that? What are the steps you can take which will create that kind of change? Is it even possible?

Sometimes, the extent of the problem, and the extent of the change that seems to be required to address it, can make us feel hopeless. But humans are made to grow; we're made to change. Every one of us is constantly changing. Biologically, we're doing it every day of our lives. We slough off old cells and our body makes new ones; we cut our hair and it grows back again. Our brains are inherently 'plastic' – they continue to develop as we go through life, as we grow and learn from our experiences. Let's just take the example of the prefrontal cortex – the section of our brain which is deeply involved in mediating our thoughts and actions, our plans and decisions, and key aspects of our personalities. This region, and the wider neural networks by which it connects to the rest of the brain, shifts and changes for as long as we are alive. This underpins our shifting sense of identity as we grow older. We are hard-wired to change.

But, as with so much in human behaviour, change is rarely quite that simple. Psychological research carried out at Harvard University, for example, showed that at each stage of our lives we consistently doubt our ability to achieve change. The researchers called this phenomenon the 'end-of-history illusion'.¹¹ When we look back into the past, their study tells us, we readily acknowledge how different we once were, and how much we have changed in the intervening years. But when we imagine our futures, we just can't believe that we'll carry on changing in such fundamental ways.

The subjects of the Harvard research were 19,000 people aged between eighteen and sixty-eight, and most people, in each of the age groups studied, accepted that they'd changed substantially in

the past decade, but rated as extremely low their likelihood of changing much in the decade to come. The researchers drew the following conclusion: 'People, it seems, regard the present as a watershed moment at which they have finally become the person they will be for the rest of their lives.' The Harvard team noted that this has practical consequences for important decisions we make (or perhaps fail to make) about the future. Or, as Daniel Gilbert, one of the study's authors, said to the *New York Times*: 'At every age we think we're having the last laugh, and at every age we're wrong.'¹²

Sometimes, change can seem like a caving in, a betrayal of the person we once thought we were and the beliefs we once held. I remember as a teenager, absolutely convinced that I would be a born-again evangelical Christian for the rest of my life, I was utterly furious at my mother for insisting that I'd soon 'grow out of it'. Change was for dilettantes, for flibbertigibbets, not for serious, thoughtful people like me. At fourteen, brimming over with hormone-inflamed passion, I was absolutely convinced that change was the opposite of, and a deadly threat to, commitment. I would love God forever, just as I would love Bryan Ferry forever. (Whereas, of course, neither love outlived my fifteenth birthday.) Because something, surely, had to last. I was tired of change. My adolescent body was changing by the day; my emotions were changing by the minute – I badly needed something enduring to cling to. God and Bryan Ferry would do.

Just as it was to me as an adolescent, then, change can be threatening or frightening. And so maybe the end-of-history illusion is simply a way of protecting ourselves from the anxiety that anticipated change can generate. Because of that anxiety, so many of us embrace change only when we have to: when we are diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or with anxiety or depression. When we are divorced or lose a loved one in some other way. But we can also embrace change when we see something we want, badly. When we see a light shining in the distance which encourages us on. When we climb to the top of one mountain range and see another in the distance, and wonder what is beyond.

I believe that the enchanted life is something worth wanting, badly. Something worth the risk of changing for.

Here in the West, so many aspects of our lives are aimed at protecting us from risk and change, and instead establishing a state

of what we imagine to be permanence. We manage the minute details of our lives so that we can stay safe – which usually means staying put. We embrace repetition and routine. But when we insist on permanence, when we cling tight to what we know, when we resist change, refuse the journey – we are in a very real sense refusing life. Life is an act of creation, of ongoing transformation. The world changes with every cycle of the seasons. We change with every cycle of our lives, from birth through adolescence to adulthood and, finally, to death. And perhaps, in the end, clinging to permanence is a way of protecting ourselves against death – an impossible feat, but one which we blindly pursue, anyway.

Change is possible, and change is life.



Confronting our fear of change

It's important to understand that there's nothing intrinsically wrong with fear; fear is a natural part of life. None of us are fearless. The problem comes when you believe that the presence of fear means that what you're contemplating is dangerous. It isn't, always. We don't begin the process of re-enchantment by freeing ourselves of fear; that's not possible. We do it by accepting that change can be frightening, and resolving to change anyway.

Here are some of the reasons why people might be afraid to change, to begin to reverse the process of disenchantment and to live a more enchanted life. Which of them do you recognise in your own life? Are there others, not listed here?

- ✿ Fear of the unknown.
- ✿ Fear of being different from other people.
- ✿ Fear of ridicule or rejection from friends and family.
- ✿ Fear of not being taken seriously, of being thought to be foolish.
- ✿ Fear that you lack imagination.

- ✧ Fear that you have too much imagination, and are deluded!
- ✧ Fear of change, because sometimes it's painful.
- ✧ Fear that we'll have to give up something valuable.
- ✧ Fear that we won't be as safe or secure.
- ✧ Fear that our lives up until now might have been meaningless.
- ✧ Fear of giving up control, represented by the status quo.
- ✧ Fear of losing one's boundaries.
- ✧ Fear of failure – of feeling that you're not capable of change after all, and that you'll never be able to live a more enchanted life.



What is enchantment, anyway?

In this chapter, we've explored the nature and onset of our disenchantment, and it's certainly a concept which has been studied and analysed in many different ways, over the years. Economists, philosophers and cultural commentators have picked it to pieces using the theories that are beloved of their own disciplines, often taking Max Weber's ideas as their starting points; theologians concerned about the secularising of the world have put their own more religious spin on the term. But although there's been a good deal of focus on *disenchantment*, there has been relatively little analysis of the state of enchantment itself. What does it actually mean, to be enchanted? How do you do it? What are the components of an enchanted frame of mind? What is actually going on inside us when we're enchanted – what is the lived experience of it for us as individuals? As a psychologist, these questions interest me much more. And as a human being planted in a world which is in various and varying states of growing crisis, they seem to me to be infinitely more essential.

When we turn to the usual sources of definitions for clues about what enchantment is, they offer us very little help. The Oxford Dictionary¹³ provides two possible meanings, which are echoed in other major dictionaries in the English-speaking world:

1. A feeling of great pleasure; delight
2. The state of being under a spell; magic

In other words, the word as it is commonly used today is associated either with the practice of magic, or with a feeling of pleasure at something which is charming. But if we return to Weber's idea of disenchantment as characterised by 'rationalization and intellectualization', as a stripping away of everything that we once held sacred in the world, then we approach much more interesting territory when we begin to think about what the opposite of that state might be.

I believe that the state of enchantment has four major components:

1. It is founded upon a sense of fully *participating* in a living world – a feeling of belonging rather than separation.
2. It incorporates feelings of *wonder*, and curiosity. To be enchanted is to be comfortable with the fact that not everything can be explained; to tolerate, even welcome, the presence of mystery.
3. Enchantment is not all in the head, it is very much a function of our lived, *embodied* experience in the world.
4. Enchantment is an emanation of the *mythic imagination*, and is founded on an acknowledgement of myth and story as living principles in the world.

In the next part of this book we'll examine these ideas, and meet some people who are putting them into practice in their daily lives and their work. And then we'll explore the changes, great and small, which each of us can make – whoever we are, wherever we live – to bring a sense of enchantment to the way we approach the world, every single day of our lives.