

## **Forum on Cross-Cultural Inspiration**

San Francisco, January 2007

### **Understanding Our Moment in History**

**Richard Tarnas**

A mood of universal destruction and renewal . . . has set its mark on our age. This mood makes itself felt everywhere, politically, socially, and philosophically. We are living in what the Greeks called the *kairos*—the right moment—for a "metamorphosis of the gods," of the fundamental principles and symbols. This peculiarity of our time, which is certainly *not* of our conscious choosing, is the expression of the unconscious human within us who is changing. Coming generations will have to take account of this momentous transformation if humanity is not to destroy itself through the might of its own technology and science. . . . So much is at stake and so much depends on the psychological constitution of the modern human.

C. G. Jung  
*The Undiscovered Self*

Planetary democracy does not yet exist, but our global civilization is already preparing a place for it: It is the very Earth we inhabit, linked with Heaven above us. Only in this setting can the mutuality and the commonality of the human race be newly created, with reverence and gratitude for that which transcends each of us singly, and all of us together. The authority of a world democratic order simply cannot be built on anything else but the revitalized authority of the universe.

Vaclav Havel  
*The Spiritual Roots of Democracy*

In my session at the Forum, I hope to shine a light on the dramatic threshold that the global community is now facing, by taking a deep look at the evolution of humanity's self-understanding and world view, and then focusing our attention on the set of assumptions that has most decisively shaped our present world, that of the modern West.

We find ourselves at an extraordinary threshold. One need not be graced with prophetic insight to recognize that we are living in one of those rare ages, like the end of classical antiquity or the beginning of the modern era, that bring forth, through great stress and struggle, a genuinely fundamental transformation in the underlying assumptions and principles of the cultural world view. Amidst the multitude of debates and controversies that fill the intellectual arena, our basic understanding of reality is in contention: the role of the human being in nature and the cosmos, the status of human knowledge, the basis of moral values, the dilemmas of pluralism, relativism, objectivity, the spiritual dimension of life, the direction and meaning—if any—of history and evolution. The outcome of this tremendous moment in our civilization's history is deeply uncertain. Something is dying, and something is being born. The stakes are high, for the future of humanity and the future of the Earth.

No recital is necessary here of the many formidable and pressing problems—global and local, social, political, economic, ecological—facing the world today. They are visible in every headline in our daily news, monthly journals, and annual state of the world reports. The great enigma of our situation is that we have unprecedented resources for dealing with those problems, yet it is as if some larger or deeper context, some invisible constraint, were negating our capacity and resolve. What is that larger context? Something essential seems to be missing in our understanding, some potent but intangible factor or set of factors. Can we discern the more fundamental conditions in which our many concrete problems might ultimately be rooted? What are the most important *underlying* issues that confront the human mind and spirit in our era? If we focus particularly on the “Western” situation, centered in Europe and North America though now affecting the entire human community, we can observe three especially fundamental factors:

- 1) The profound metaphysical disorientation and groundlessness that pervades contemporary human experience: the widely felt absence of an adequate, publicly accessible larger order of purpose and significance, a guiding metanarrative that transcends separate cultures and subcultures, an encompassing pattern of meaning that could give to collective human existence a nourishing coherence and intelligibility.

- 2) The deep sense of alienation that affects the modern self: here I refer to not only the personal isolation of the individual in modern mass society but

also the spiritual estrangement of the modern psyche in a disenchanted universe, as well as, at the species level, the subjective schism separating the modern human being from the rest of nature and the cosmos.

3) The critical need, on the part of both individuals and societies, for a deeper insight into those unconscious forces and tendencies, creative and destructive, that play such a powerful role in shaping human lives, history, and the life of the planet.

These three conditions are all connected. They surround and permeate our contemporary consciousness like the atmosphere in which we live and breathe. From a longer historical perspective, they represent the distillate of many centuries of extraordinary intellectual and psychological development. The compelling paradox of this long development is that these problematic conditions seem to have emerged from, and be subtly interwoven with, the very qualities and achievements of our history that have been most progressive, liberating, and admired.

During my opening session with the Forum in January I would like to summarize in very broad terms the philosophical, religious, and scientific impulses that, over the centuries, gradually brought forth the world and world view we inhabit and strive within today. From that historical background, we can perhaps glimpse more precisely the challenges and the future potential of this extraordinary moment in the evolution of the Earth community.

If in preparation for our time together any participants would like to explore some of what I've already written on this topic, here are five relatively brief pieces that set out in more detail the themes I would like to address with you in January.

Chapters from *Cosmos and Psyche* (Viking, 2006):

“The Birth of the Modern Self”

“Two Paradigms of History”

“Forging the Self, Disenchanting the World”

Epilogue to *The Passion of the Western Mind* (Ballantine, 1991)

“Is the Modern Psyche Undergoing a Rite of Passage?”

(lecture/essay published in several journals and anthologies)