

# WYRD

## ALLIES

harnessing the chaos in your  
relationships

Tom Graves



# Wyrd Allies

Harnessing the chaos in your relationships

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# Sampler edition of 'Wyrd Allies'

by Tom Graves

This sampler-edition ebook of *Wyrd Allies* is based on the first edition of the book, as published by Gothic Image in 1996. Chapters highlighted in **bold** are included in this sampler-edition.

See the **Synopsis** for more detail on the full content of the book.

- **Introduction**
- **1: A hint of weirdness**
- **2: Weird is a noun**
- **3: Round and round the garden**
- **4: Fear and power**
- 5: Danger - children at play
- **6: I and We and I**
- 7: Boundaries
- 8: A problem of fate
- 9: Subject and object
- 10: Blame and responsibility
- **11: Use and abuse**
- 12: Asserting 'I'
- 13: Sympathy and empathy
- 14: Allies in wyrdness
- 15: Soul-mates and cell-mates
- 16: Wyrd sex
- **17: Girls and boys**
- 18: Trust and commitment
- 19: A wyrd world of allies

- 20: Sharing the wyrd
- Further reading

## **Wyrd Allies**

*Harnessing the chaos in your relationships*

by Tom Graves

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# Synopsis

(Note that this ebook edition reinstates the original two ‘book-end’ chapters – ‘1: A hint of weirdness’ and ‘20: Sharing the wyrd’ – that were missing from the 1996 Gothic Image edition.)

## Introduction section

This section provides the lead-in to the book.

**Introduction** – In which the purpose and aims of the book are introduced, including suggestions on how best to use the book as a practical tool for interpersonal development.

- Using this book

**1: A hint of weirdness** – In which the narrator, Chris Kelley, is introduced, and in turn introduces, through personal experience, some of the main themes of the book.

**2: Weird is a noun** – In which concept of ‘wyrd’ is introduced, and linked to some common themes of personal development - in particular, the centrality of fear as a personal issue, and the importance of personal choice and personal responsibility.

- Wyrd is a story
- Wyrd is everyone
- Wyrd is a feeling
- Wyrd is an awareness



## Background section

This section looks at the pressures and issues which apply in all kinds of relationship, and at learned habits of relationship which cause interpersonal difficulties.

**3: Round and round the garden** – In which is explored the common experience of life and relationships forming themselves into repetitive patterns and weird loops; by re-viewing these as the results of lack of awareness of feedback from ‘the wyrd’, a way out of the loops can be found.

- Running nowhere
- A garden-full of advice
- A royal muddle

**4: Fear and power** – In which the weird relationship between fear and power is examined; by understanding the weird nature of fear, and creating a practical new meaning of power, both can become constructive aspects of relationship.

- A problem of power
- A problem of fear
- The weird fear of power
- The weird power of fear

**5: Danger - children at play** – In which the focus is placed on the subtle distinction between ‘childlike’ and childish’ - leading to the recognition that childishness is common in all relationships, and that it is, in essence, an evasion of personal responsibility which helps no-one.

- The centre of the universe

- Playing fair
- Playing foul
- The quest for the Inner Adult

**6: I and We and I** In which is explored the weird notion of 'I', and the even weirder experience of 'We' that occurs in every relationship.

- Which I is We?
- Listening to We
- The circles of We
- The interweaving of We

**7: Boundaries** – In which are examined the weird interactions between the boundaries we construct to protect our sense of 'I', and the boundaries others construct to protect theirs.

- Boundary, barrier and wall
- My fortress, my prison
- Negotiating the boundaries

**8: A problem of fate** – In which there is a recognition that some issues are indeed our 'fate', our *wyrd* - and that by working with them, rather than fighting against them, we can use them to learn more about ourselves and our relationship with others.

- Lessons in the weaving
- *Wyrd* and *geis*
- Every *wyrd* has an ending...
- ...but there's always a choice!

## Tools section

This section examines some tools and perspectives which can be applied to particular issues in relationships.

**9: Subject and object** – In which are examined that problems that arise from viewing others as ‘subjects’ - extensions of oneself - or ‘objects’; with awareness of their weird nature, though, these viewpoints can become constructive tools within relationship.

- Everything’s an object
- Everything’s my subject
- Everything’s weird

**10: Blame and responsibility** – In which are explored the subtle distinctions between responsibility and blame - leading to new possibilities for constructive action.

- Blaming the world
- Blaming ourselves
- The gatekeeper and the judge
- Dancing with responsibility

**11: Use and abuse** – In which are examined the weird ways relationships can so easily descend into abuse; by understanding the fear of weird that so often underlies abuse of self or others, relationships can once more become based on ‘use’ through mutual respect.

- Use and power
- Context and consent
- Threads of abuse

**12: Asserting ‘I’** – In which it is demonstrated that the only way to avoid the twin traps of passivity - ‘fatalism’ - and aggression is to fully understand the weirdness involved in asserting ‘I’.

- ‘I’ is a choice
- ‘I’ is a boundary
- ‘I’ is a feeling

**13: Sympathy and empathy** – In which it is shown that sympathy is not the same as empathy - and that only with genuine empathy is true relationship possible.

- Sharing the passions
- Twisted sympathies
- Choosing sympathy

## Context section

This section explores ways in which the awareness developed in the ‘Background’ section, and the practical tools examined in the ‘Tools’ section, can be applied in the everyday context of relationships.

**14: Allies in wyrdness** – In which the usual notions of ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ is quietly replaced by a more useful, if wyrd, concept of ‘allies’.

- Discovering allies
- The wyrdness of allies

**15: Soul-mates and cell-mates** – In which it is shown that, by a weird twist, the desire for ‘soul-mates’ can easily lead to being trapped with ‘cell-mates’; yet there is another wyrd twist through which we can, instead, accept everyone as our true soul-mates.

- Heart and soul
- The chosen ones
- The love connection

**16: Wyrd sex** – In which the spotlight is placed on the weirdness of sex and sexual relationships; it is suggested that whilst many seem to clamour for ‘weird sex’, few fully understand its wyrd possibilities!

- The weirdness of sex
- The dance of Pan
- The power of sex

**17: Girls and boys** – In which it is demonstrated that, with awareness, social constructs of gender and the genuine differences between the sexes can be changed from weird problems into wyrd yet practical tools.

- Nature?
- ...or nurture?
- Nurturing the wyrd

**18: Trust and commitment** – In which, by understanding their weird nature, we come to a realistic understanding of what trust and commitment mean - and what they truly ask of us in relationships.

- Commitment
- Trusting ‘I’
- Trusting ‘We’
- Trusting the wyrd

**19: A wyrd world of allies** – In which the previous explorations of ‘wyrdness’ are extended into all kinds of relationships with the wider world - creating the awareness that everywhere we go, we have a wyrd world of allies to help us.

- A world of confusions
- A world of power
- A world of choice

## **Wrap-up section**

This section provides a closure for the material in the book, and resources for further study.

**20: Sharing the wyrd** – In which Chris Kelley sums up the difference in experience that has come from applying the concepts and tools explored in this book.

**Further reading** – Books on wyrd, self-exploration, philosophical perspectives, and fiction on wyrd and geis.

# Preface

Every book - especially one of this nature - is the result of interactions and ideas created by and between many different people. What follows is my own interpretation of what I've seen and shared with others, but I do need to acknowledge that others have contributed to this - sometimes consciously, in some cases not.

Writers whose ideas I've used or adapted include Douglas Adams; Eric Berne, John Bradshaw; Bryan Branston; James Burke; Joseph Campbell; Marion Campbell; Lewis Carroll; Carlos Castaneda; Jeremy Cherfas; members of the Conflict Resolution Network; members of the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project; Paul Feyerabend; Kate Fillion; Ian Fleming; Betty Friedan; Alan Garner; James Gleick; Germaine Greer; John Gribbin; Douglas Hofstadter; Robert Hughes; Susan Jeffers; Thomas Kuhn; Carol Lee; Ursula Le Guin; Hugh Mackay; George Orwell; Terry Pratchett; Starhawk (Miriam Simos); Ann Summers; Glen Tomasetti; Gerald Weinberg. In some cases the ideas I've 'borrowed' have been taken into very different contexts from the original, but I believe - or hope! - that in each case I've done so with the respect that their ideas deserve.

Friends, colleagues and others who've provided ideas and feedback include Roy Bailey; Coral Baragwanath; Graeme Burnett; Cass Carter; Bob Dingley; Bonnie Gibson; Valerie Graves; Hanson Jeong; Dess Kammason; Marina Moss; Cindy Pavlinac; the People's Equality Network crew, particularly Don Bruce, Ray O'Sullivan and Ian Young; the People Knowhow crew, especially Diana Coverdale, Annie Davies-McCubbin, Roger Harman, St-John Miall, Robert Prinable and Gai Roper; Susannah Sabine; Soni Stecker; John Venables.

Particular thanks are due to Linda Moore and Catherine Caulwell, both of whom spent much time tossing ideas and practical examples



back and forth across the world; and to Frances Howard-Gordon, who did likewise, and was also my editor and publisher. Other than these authors and others mentioned above, all personal names in the 'narrative' section of the text - all except the 'Introduction' chapter - refer to fictitious characters, such as the imaginary narrator Chris Kelley. Although most stories and examples are based on real-life incidents, they are in most cases adapted from the experiences of many different people, and are not intended to refer to any actual person, alive or dead.

# Introduction

People are weird. It doesn't take much of an understanding of reality to know that. Sometimes, without warning, unexpected troubles or unexpected enemies appear, to turn our life into turmoil; and in the midst of hard times, unknown allies arise to help restore some sense of calm and self, of meaning and purpose. The weird part, and the one we'll usually fail to notice, is how often the 'enemies' and the 'allies' turn out to be the same people... and that the only real 'enemy' we have is ourself...

A key part of what's generally called 'personal growth' is learning to come to terms with that fact - coming to terms with our true selves and our true relationships with others. But it's often hard to see - and even harder to accept. And there's a hint of weirdness that can make it even harder: at times it can seem that the whole world is against us, thwarting us at every turn; while at others everything can seem impossibly smooth and easy - for a while at least... Just when we're certain we really know someone, they change - or perhaps we change - and we're faced with new challenges and new choices in relationship with them. The same issues, the same problems, the same fears, the same joys, all keep weaving through our relationships with others, always wearing similar yet strangely different faces. And as we work on our path of personal growth - expanding our awareness of ourselves and our hidden choices - everyone we meet, it seems, acts as a weird kind of mirror, showing us not only themselves, but the results of our own choices too.

There's always a choice in any interaction with others; but there's also always a twist, an uncertainty, a subtle chaos that underlies even the most ordered of relationships. That uncertainty is what keeps relationships interesting, but it does also add to the difficulties! In our less happy moments, relationships might seem like

nothing but a series of tests and trials: yet if we've had more than a passing involvement with personal growth, we'll know that most of life is like that anyway - and relationships are no different... The only difference is that the issues are interpersonal rather than personal - and even in that there's a weird sense in which they're the same anyway.

So it's to this weirdness in the process of interpersonal growth - accepting the weirdness in our relationships, and working with them rather than trying to fight against them - that this book is addressed. It extends into the interpersonal realm the exploration of personal work and personal awareness described in *Positively Wyrd*, the previous book in this series. Like its predecessor, this book is also addressed to the realities of the process and its often uncomfortable twists and turns: as such, it develops a rather different sequence of approach to issues. In particular, there's an emphasis on some intermediate stages which are often missed out in existing descriptions - such as a detailed exploration of personal power and personal responsibility, and of the subtle and self-destructive traps of the 'blame-game'. And there also some guidelines on how to work with the bad times - and how not to get lost in some illusory 'good' ones.

As with the previous book, all the text after this introductory chapter is framed as if spoken by an imaginary narrator, named Chris Kelley. Throughout this book, after the beginning of the next chapter, 'I' is Chris Kelley, not me (Tom Graves). 'Chris' is in fact a composite, whose life is drawn from the real-life experiences of many different people - both men and women. One reader commented, about an incident of Chris' in *Positively Wyrd*, "Your narrator, I *really* identified with her there - it's something which *only* happens to women: but in fact the real-life story behind the incident was actually a man's... So I'd argue that despite the strong emphasis on gender in so many current books on interpersonal issues, we do all have the same human needs, and, for the most part, the same human problems: which is why you'll find that although Chris should be readily identifiable as a person, Chris' sex

(and, for that matter, sexual-orientation) is intentionally uncertain - and likewise that of many of the people with whom Chris interacts. Make your own choices on this - but remember there's always a twist...!

So although this introduction is somewhat formal, the rest of the book is not. The stories that Chris tells are highly personal, and illustrate clearly the intensity of *feeling* of many of these states - so if you find yourself in the same kind of emotional spaces or practical predicaments that this imaginary 'I' describes, you'll know you're not alone in that experience. We've all been there too: sometimes that fact alone can be a great deal of help in some of the darker times...

The aim of personal growth is to create constructive changes within ourselves and the ways in which we relate to the world at large. But since nothing changes without our choosing to be involved in the change, there's also a strong emphasis in this book on the practical: examples to put the concepts into practice will be found on almost every page. As with *Positively Wyrld*, these typically consist of a personal experience from Chris that illustrates the point being made, followed by some suggestions about how to put this into practice, and questions about the resultant experience - questions to which only *you* have the answers - to help you explore the issues in your own personal context. All of these examples have been tested in practice, by myself, friends and colleagues as well as many others, and often over long periods of time: they work. Whether they work for you in the same way is up to you to decide, based on your own experience: but unless you do try them for yourself, you'll never know!

This book develops a sequence of observations and changes, starting with relationship to self, moving onward to close and intimate relationships, and onward to relationships with the world in general. Be warned, though, that the sequence may not always be what you expect: some themes are threaded throughout the book, twisting

and looping back in ever-changing forms, so the apparent repetition that occurs in many places is intentional, and is not simply due to poor editing! One of these themes is the problem of blame, which weaves through most relationships in its own weird way: an example 'sets the stage' in the first chapter, which opens the way toward the subtle freedom that can be found from a better understanding of the original meaning of 'weird' - another central theme of the book, explored in depth in the chapter which follows.

The next section, consisting of roughly a third of the book, looks at the kind of pressures and issues which apply in all kinds of relationships. We learn to watch how our own fears and confusions, and the habits we've been taught from childhood onwards, can dominate our relationships with others, and even with ourselves - and how we can begin to reclaim real choices in this. We explore the weird boundary between 'I' and 'not-I'; and we begin to discover that whilst there *is* such a thing as 'fate', we do have choices even in this - although there's always a twist in what happens next...

The third section is concerned mainly with practical tools: it consists of five chapters, each of which focusses on a specific problem-issue in all kinds of relationship. We observe the strange confusions that arise from some common ways of relating which view others as 'object' or 'subject'; we explore ways to break free from the destructive pervasiveness of blame; we look more closely at what exactly we mean by 'I', and its weird relationship with others. And we learn to become aware of the subtle boundary between use and abuse of both self and others; and also the subtle distinction between sympathy and empathy, without which no true relationship is possible.

In the final section we start to put into practice this new experience of ourselves and the true 'weirdness' of relationships. We find a new understanding of sex - in all its senses - and strange meetings with 'soul-mates'; we explore a new world of trust and joy, in commitment to ourselves, to others and to the wider world. We

learn to recognise the allies that we already have in this; and discover that we can create, in any relationship, the allies we truly need. There's always a twist, perhaps, but in every relationship we always have choice, and the power to choose. And that choice, and the responsibility for that choice, are always ours: it's up to us to build the relationships we need.

## Using this book

In keeping with the nature of 'weirdness', this book can be read in a number of different ways, depending on what you need from it. At one level, this is, of course, a perfectly ordinary book, developing a sequence of ideas with a beginning, a middle and an end. So if you want, you can read it in the usual way, from cover to cover: but you don't have to do this in order to make use of it.

For example, if all you're interested in is ideas, you might choose to skip over all the 'boxes' of practical material. In theory it might seem to make little difference, because the ideas and concepts are mostly explored in the main text. But the boxes provide the context in which those ideas make practical sense: and since that's the main point of the book, I wouldn't recommend ignoring them.

At the other extreme, you could skip over all the main text, and read only the 'boxes': that'll work too, but you're likely to miss out on understanding why the practical material works in the way that it does. Without that understanding, you may well be able to create *some* useful changes in your relationships, for a while: but in time you'll find yourself reverting back to the same old loops and patterns in which you were caught before. So I wouldn't recommend doing that either.

What I'd recommend instead, from many people's experience with the previous book in this series, is to use a combination of all these methods. Read the first two chapters carefully, to give you a general

idea of what the book is about; then skim through the whole of the remainder once, fairly quickly, stopping only to read in detail a few passages that particularly catch your eye. That'll give you enough background information such that the practical material will then make practical sense, whatever you do next. Once you've done this, go back to the beginning again, and as you read each section of the main text, try out the practical examples described in the respective boxes. You don't even have to do this in sequence: for example, as the whim takes you, dip in at random anywhere in the book, to find an idea or a practical piece - you'll usually find it has some apposite comment on your current situation. Use this book to work with the weirdness of change, the weirdness of relationships: that's how it works best.

A word of warning, though: once you start to put the material into practice, take it *slowly* - don't rush. Experience suggests that, beyond that first couple of introductory chapters, it's best not to try to work with more than a single section - two or three pages - a day. Change, while valuable, can also be uncomfortable and even frightening, to yourself and to others: and the practical material in this book, if it's used properly, does trigger real changes in the way we view and work with ourselves and each other. If you try to rush it, or force the pace of change, you'll either miss some key points and find yourself back in the same old loops, or else you'll give yourself - and others - an unnecessarily rough time. So don't do it. Just take it slow: "beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle on yourself" - and on others too!

Whichever way you choose to use this book, welcome to a different world: at times a weird way of relating with others, perhaps, though one that turns out to be far more practical - and more empowering for everyone. It's a world in which we do have choices in our relationships - and yet, somehow, there's always a weird twist of fate in everything that happens...



# 1: A hint of weirdness

*When first we meet Chris Kelley, our narrator is in reflective mood, looking back at the strangeness of an ordinary-seeming day:*

It's odd. Strange. I just don't understand it. How can Jean be so much like my aunt in her clever little put-downs? The same expression on her face; the same sarcastic tone of voice; exactly the same words: "Yes, dear. Very nice, dear." The same old stuff, all over again... Could almost believe they're the same person... or clones of each other, at least... Weird... almost enough to make me believe in reincarnation, or something like it...

And Peter: he's exactly like uncle George was, all those years ago - even looks like him, for heaven's sake! Thinks he's in control of everything, thinks he's the one who's in charge: but he's absolutely under her thumb, and she's hurting him a lot. How he and Jean can live together - how they can stand each other! - I just don't know. Why does she do it to him? Why can't he see it? That's weird, too...

Damn! Forgot to mail those papers for Mary again - she'll be livid. Again. I always keep promising to do things for her, trying to keep her happy, and I always keep forgetting. And she's always furious with me the next day. Don't know why I keep not doing what she wants - I don't choose to do it to her, after all... do I? And she's so rude to me - always blaming me for messing up her folders and so on, when I haven't been anywhere near them. Blames me for everything, that woman. She's crazy. Drives *me* crazy... now I'm angry about it - angry about her. Damn!

I'm fed up with Charlie, too. Blames me for losing that client, when he knows damn well that it's all his fault. Why do I always get the blame for other people's blunders? Charlie screws up all the time,

and blames everyone else for it; but he's always so damn smug and patronising whenever he finds I've made even the smallest mistake. He's as bad as Mary - or Andrew, for that matter.

Oh Gawd. Andrew. Just wish he'd stop trying to be so nice to everyone - the creep! We all know he's meant to be prying into our work - it's his job - but no-one likes it: and his endless attempts to be 'nice' just make it worse. When David did that job, he genuinely was nice about it; but with Andrew it all seems so false, so faked-up - it just doesn't ring true. And it's weird how he's the only one who can't see that it just doesn't work - and wonders why nobody trusts him.

And Kaye said that Nicky was through the office again today. Just when I was out, of course. Again. Every time. And every time I get to go to their office, Nicky's out on emergency, or stuck with a client - or stuck in yet another meeting, poor thing! Why does that always happen? Why do we never get a chance to meet again? Life's just not being fair... I really fancy Nicky - how long ago was it we last met? two years ago? three? Gawd... Be good to have a chance to talk, to get together again; I do think Nicky fancies me too, but it'd be nice to have any chance to know! Can just see the headline now: "star-crossed lovers fated never to meet" - hah! Weird...

All these people: so many hassles, and I just don't seem to have any choice in what to do about them. It's weird... it's all weird... everything's weird... Seem to use that word a lot... 'weird' itself is pretty weird, come to think of it...

But Tom says that 'weird' is a noun, not an adjective: "it's like a quirk of fate", he says, "but it's not an attribute of something, it's an event - a kind of weaving-together of choice and chance". "There's always a choice, there's always a twist", he says; "sometimes we can't see the choices we do have because they're hidden in the twists, hidden in the weavings of the weird". He's weird... sounds like he's twisted! Oh... don't know, though... maybe he's got a point there... looking back at today's stuff, it does seem a bit like that.

Might be worth looking at a bit more closely in that way... might be weird, but it might make a bit more sense. Let's see what happens!

## 2: Weird is a noun

“Weird is a noun”. I’m surprised to find that it *is* what the dictionary shows, too: it’s from the Old English word *wyrd*, “the principle, power or agency by which events are predetermined; fate, destiny”, and also “a happening, event, occurrence; predetermined events collectively”. The dictionary also notes that the adjective use of ‘weird’ as ‘strange’ is relatively recent - it only started a couple of hundred years ago, picked up by Victorian scholars from Shakespeare’s description of the “three Weird Sisters” in *Macbeth*. But ‘weird’ the noun, ‘weird’ the event, is an idea which goes back many centuries, even thousands of years. Those three weird sisters weren’t only strange: they *were* the *wyrd*, “the power by which events are predetermined” - though it’s obvious they are also weird in that sense of strange.

Fascinating. So what? How is that supposed to help me sort out my hassles with everyone else? Judging by the chaos in my life, most events certainly aren’t ‘predetermined’ by me... are they? And if my problems really *are* predetermined, really *are* prescribed by fate or destiny, where does choice come into it? If there *is* a choice, where does fate - or *wyrd* - come into it? And what’s that about “there’s always a choice, there’s always a twist”?

Stop for a moment, and think about some of your own relationships with others. Some are probably all too predictable - predetermined indeed! - with the same comments and same responses coming up in the same context, time after time after time. By contrast, some of those relationships might seem chaotic, completely unpredictable, uncertain, even unsafe. And some may seem to be stuck in repeating loops or patterns of frustration, with blame and bickering endlessly echoing

back and forth. In each case, where are the choices? For that matter, who seems to have the choices there? You? Or only others? Or what?

It would probably be worthwhile to write some notes to yourself on this, to come back to later in the book.

But from that description, whatever wyrd is, it obviously affects everyone. It's also about feelings - that feeling of 'weirdness' that comes up so often in so many of these situations. If there are choices involved - those "choices hidden in the weavings of the wyrd" - then it's also about awareness: awareness of what really *is* 'predetermined' and what isn't. And there's evidently a story behind it: so that's probably the best place to start.

## Wyrd is a story

Imagine the weird scene as Shakespeare describes it in 'Macbeth': on a dark, bare heathland stands a single huge tree, the wind twisting and turning in its leaves and branches. Beneath the tree, there stand three 'secret, black and midnight hags' - or as Holinshed, Shakespeare's source for the story, put it, 'weirdly sisters in straunge and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world' - stirring a cauldron, casting men's lives into the roiling waters above the fire. As Banquo and Macbeth enter the scene, the women each greet Macbeth in turn: "All haile, Makbeth, thane of Glammis!" "Haile, Makbeth, thane of Cawder!" "All haile, Makbeth, that heereafter shall be king of Scotland!" And as Shakespeare's play shows, all these greetings come true: but there is also a certain amount of twist in that story...

Just a story... or a bit more than a story? Holinshed's *Chronicles*, first published in Shakespeare's time, purports to be a genuine

history of Scotland: Macbeth, Banquo and the others were real people, and Shakespeare's play is based - with a fair amount of poetic licence - on what seem, from historical evidence, to be real facts. That much is known. But who were these 'weird sisters'? And how come they're supposed to be able to control, or direct, people's lives in this strange, twisted way?

To answer that, we need to go a little deeper into the myth behind the story. It's actually a variant of the common myth of the three sisters of fate - called the Moirai by the Greeks, the Parcae by the Romans, or the Nornir in Old Norse. The Greeks named the three sisters Clotho (from whom we get the word 'cloth'), Lachesis and Atropos (whose name literally means 'one who will not be turned'). Individually, they are blind - hence 'blind fate' - though they share one eye, passing it endlessly between them; yet they see the weavings of the world with different eyes. And they're the weavers of the fabric of human lives: one spins, one weaves, one cuts. In the Greek story, though, there's no choice: although the cross-warp of 'blind chance' holds the fabric together, each thread of life within it is predestined, 'meted out' - and the fates will not be turned. Life *is*: and the only choices are held in the mysterious hands of fate.

Would you say that's true for you - that for much of the time you seem to have no choice, that "the only choices are held in the mysterious hands of fate"? How do you *feel* about that?

And what happens if you try to "wrest control of your life from the fates"? Does it work - in other words do you gain absolute certainty, absolute predictability in your life? If not, what *does* happen then?

The Greek story has a certain amount of truth, but it's not really

enough. We do always have some choice in what happens to us - even if the choices we make usually turn out to be the wrong ones! The Nordic version of the same story gives it a slightly different twist - which is where 'wyrd' comes in.

*Wyrd* - or rather *Urðr*, in the original - is actually the name of the first of the three sisters; the others are *Verðandi* and *Skuld*, and their names roughly translate as Past, Present and Future. So these three 'maidens from Giantland' - as the Nordic myth describes them - are not only the weavers of the fabric of life, they're also the sisters of *time*. The crucial difference in the Nordic story is that, unlike the Moirai, the 'sisters of wyrd' weave a fabric of *life*, not *lives*. Each life is not a single, isolated thread on a flat cloth, but a pathway of *choices* in something more like a Celtic knotwork - infinitely interwoven within itself, yet it has a pattern and a structure all its own. Where the Greek story of the Fates has rigid rules and harsh retributions, the story of the Weird Sisters is more like modern chaos theory and fractal topology: everywhere there is 'self-similarity', with patterns of "sudden leaps and jagged edges" which never quite repeat, but appear on many different levels and areas at once. Douglas Hofstadter described chaos theory succinctly: "it turns out that behind apparent order lies an eerie kind of chaos; but behind that chaos lies an even eerier kind of order" - and he could just as well have been describing the concept of wyrd. The wyrd - the world of those Weird Sisters - may look chaotic at first: but behind the surface chaos it does indeed have its own "even eerier kind of order"...

"Behind apparent order lies an eerie kind of chaos; but behind that chaos lies an even eerier kind of order". At the time things happen - all those strange twists and turns in our lives - we're probably only aware of the chaos! But looking back, can you perhaps see in the pattern of your life "an even eerier kind of order" - or at least a thread or two of continuity, seeming



to push you along a particular path? What's happened in your life - particularly those "sudden leaps and jagged edges" where, in a brief space of time, your life has changed its whole direction? That's *wyrd* - that's what *wyrd* is...

Who else was with you at those times? Who else was involved in these sudden twists of fate? What part did you think then that they played in this? Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, what part do you now think they played?

And what part did fate, coincidence, providence - call it what you will - play in those changes? Because that's *wyrd* too - that's what *wyrd* is...

Each thread within the fabric of *wyrd* is not a single person's life, as with the Fates, but more a stereotype or archetype: what a life would be like if *one* choice was followed from its beginning all the way through to its logical conclusion. Every thread, every choice, has its denouement, its often ignominious ending: even the 'good' and 'moral' choices, as the Greeks used to warn, often fade away into 'hubris', the pride that comes before a fall. So unlike the story of the Fates, our life-path within the *wyrd* is not a single, fixed, predetermined thread, but instead consists of a endless series of choices, moving our life-path from thread to thread - and trying not to be misled into poor choices or trapped in 'self-similar' loops by the twisted confusions of the *wyrd*. No-one can ever truly control what happens, to themselves or to anyone; but with awareness we can each *direct* our path through the *wyrd* - that distinction is subtle, but vitally important! At every moment, there's a choice: to stay on the current thread, the logical extension of the current choice; or to move off onto any one of a myriad of other threads, other paths, that intersect with this one, here, now. So what choice should I make? What do I do now? Which way do I turn? There's always a choice, there's always a twist: yet it's the interweavings of those twists of 'weirdness' that make the choices possible - if we

can allow ourselves to see them.

And there's a further twist, because each thread not only passes through everyone - or everyone through each thread - but also through everywhere, and everywhen: every choice has its echoes in every place, and every time. In the Greek story this aspect of the weaving is maintained not by the Fates, but by Pan, whose name literally means 'everywhere'. Yet there is no such separation in the Nordic story: the *wyrd* is all of these. The Sisters of Weird are the spinners and weavers of the *wyrd*'s fabric; as the 'sisters of time', they control - or choose - the everchanging nature of Now; and they also keep watch over the world itself - the tree they stand beside is Yggdrasil, the World-Tree, which they tend constantly with water from the world's well. Even the name of the first - and originally the only - sister, Urðr, echoes this interweaving of everywhere: in Scottish the 'ð' or 'eth' in her name is hardened to a 'd'-sound, giving us the word 'weird'; but in Old German it was originally softened to a 'th'-sound, becoming the name of an important deity, Erthe or Eartha - the goddess of the earth, the goddess of everywhere. The *wyrd* is everything, everyone, everywhere, everywhen.

The other crucial difference between these two stories is in the way they view relationship. As far as Fate is concerned, relationship might as well not exist: each life is a distinct, separate, isolated thread, and such connection as it might happen to have with any other is fixed by the weavings of 'blind chance' - there's certainly no choice about it. But the *wyrd* is a fabric of *life*: an infinity of lives, each choosing their own path within a roiling, seething, effervescent interweaving of choices and chances. So every life, every choice, affects everyone and everything within the *wyrd*, everywhere and everywhen: everyone is on, or in, the *same* interweaving. Two people, following the same path - the same choice - compare notes on their experiences: for each of them this new information leads to further choices - and, of course, to further twists. So every moment is the interweaving of every choice,

everywhere, everywhen; the wyrd, quite simply, *is* relationship, with everyone.

## Wyrd is everyone

The threads of wyrd are archetypes, human characteristics: every one of them passes through everyone, everywhere, creating a web of connections which Carl Jung described as 'the collective unconscious'. More accurately, it's a kind of collective *sub*-conscious: most of the time we're aware only of the handful of threads that form what we each tend to think of as 'I' - or at least the 'I' that we present to others - yet within each one of us is *every* thread, *every* characteristic, *every* human possibility. And we share all of these with everyone else: the wyrd is everyone.

I'm walking down the street, in the centre of the city, not particularly thinking of anything. Quite without warning, quite unbidden, a sense of *knowing* arises: I know that I *am* everyone - share humanity with everyone - and everyone *is* me. There is no separation between us, no distinction between us, no boundary between us - and yet I'm still 'I'. And the moment fades, and there's the street around me, and there are all the other people in the street, entirely separate, living their - our - own separate yet interweaving lives. A brief moment of weirdness, illustrating once more for me the nature of the wyrd.

When do you find yourself *knowing* that sense of connection with everyone? What feelings arise when it happens? If you think that you've never known this - that you feel only your isolation, your separateness from others - how do you think it *would* feel if you became aware of this sense of connection?

Each 'I', in this sense, is no more than that set of threads which we choose to present as 'I' - our character, so to speak, or, in Jung's terms, our 'persona' - literally, a mask, 'that through which I sound'. *Every* thread passes through us, but usually we're only aware of a few - and are either unaware of the rest, or like to pretend that they *don't* pass through us!

I'm not keen on the idea that *every* thread, every human characteristic passes through me: "I'm not bitchy and vindictive - *am* I?" But then if every thread *does* pass through me, that includes all the 'good' characteristics that I think only other people have: "I'll never be as confident as she is - will I?" The wyrd weaves in both directions: ultimately, we each choose our own 'I'.

If every thread, every human characteristic passes through you, which ones would you prefer to say aren't part of you? Bitchiness? Vindictiveness? Cruelty? Callousness? What else?

And which threads do you think aren't 'you' which you'd like to be so? Beauty? Charm? Confidence? Certainty? Strength? What else?

What if all of these were part of your 'I' - right now? In what ways would you feel different? And if you're not aware of these characteristics in you now, what would happen to your sense of self, of 'I', if you did accept them as part of 'I'?

In the short term, our 'character' - made up of the threads that are visible on the surface - is fairly stable. Over time, though, it does change - sometimes a lot - because our choices change: and yet it's always the same 'I'. So 'I' is not that which changes: 'I' is that which *chooses*.

Yet as we choose, so does everyone else; and every choice changes the choices for everyone else. Every choice we make echoes up and

down the threads, affecting everyone: although in itself each thread may be fixed, and the path it defines predetermined, the wyrd itself - the interweaving of choice and chance - is anything *but* fixed. “No-one is an island, intire unto itself”: whether we ‘choose’ so or not, we’re *always* in relationship - with everyone.

Within the context of the wyrd, each ‘I’ is like a nexus or clustering of the threads - the *same* threads. Every thread passes through everyone: which we means that we always have access to *every* possible human characteristic, human feeling. And it also means that we can always reach inside *ourselves* to understand others - which sounds weird, perhaps, but it works.

We can see *why* it works by using a slightly different analogy for ‘I’. From a basic perspective, there’s a clear boundary between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ - in other words everyone else, everything else. It’s like a wall around our sense of self: a wall or ‘boundary’ which sometimes - often, perhaps - we feel we have to defend.

Are you aware of a kind of wall or boundary which you maintain around you, protecting your sense of ‘I’? How does it feel when someone or something comes too close? How do you respond when someone intentionally, or even accidentally, breaches that boundary?

But for an analogy, take a strip of paper - an inch wide by twenty inches long, perhaps - and join the ends flat together to turn it into a loop, a circle. Imagine that this forms the boundary between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, with a definite inside - ‘I’ - and an equally definite outside - ‘not-I’. Nowake the loop apart, and give the strip of paper a *half*-twist before joining the ends together again, into what’s called a Möbius loop. It’s twisted, like the threads of wyrd, but it’s still a loop, a circle, forming a definite boundary. Or not so definite a

boundary: there's still an inside - an 'I' - and there's still an outside - 'not-I' - but there is also no boundary, because somehow the inside of the strip becomes the outside becomes the inside. (Follow the side of the strip with your finger if this isn't obvious.) There is a boundary, but the boundary blurs - and there's no break, no specific point, at which it does so. Weird.

We can take this analogy a couple of steps further. Take a pair of scissors, and cut *along* the middle of the strip of paper. You'll notice that if you start cutting on the outside of the circle, at some point you'll find yourself cutting from what seems to be the inside, but just keep going till you come back to where you started. As you complete the cut, the circle falls apart - not into two circles, but into a single larger one with *two* twists. So once more cut along the middle of this longer strip of paper: and as the cut completes this time, it *does* fall into two circles - but interwoven with each other, and each with a single twist. We're back where we started: except now we have two interlocking circles where before we had one. So the more we divide this strip - this thread of wyrd - the more we create a web of interlocking, interweaving threads, creating a more and more tightly defined boundary that is also, at the same time, no boundary.

So imagine, then, that this boundary between 'I' and 'not-I' is made up, not of a single strip of paper, but of an infinite number of threads of wyrd, all with the same twisted property, where somehow the inside becomes the outside becomes the inside, where 'I' *interweaves* with 'not-I'. *That's* wyrd: that's what wyrd *is*.

We interweave with everyone through the wyrd: its twisted threads create choices that allow us to relate to others in many different ways. However strange or difficult a relationship may seem, there's always a choice we can take which can make it work for everyone. But to find this we first need to understand the twisted nature of the wyrd: and perhaps the best way to start is to remember that 'weird' is also, and always, a *feeling*.

## Wyrd is a feeling

Strange. Peculiar. Odd. Uncertain. *Weird*. They're all words to describe a particular, almost indescribable feeling. There's often a hint of fear, of panic almost, in that feeling, but there's also exhilaration, excitement, even elation. A very strange feeling...

Something's weird, you say. Where do you *feel* it?

Go back through some memories of events or situations - or even people - that you'd describe as weird. Explore the feelings you associate with each - "it sent shivers up my spine", perhaps.

Having done that, notice the circumstances where that same feeling comes up in your everyday life. What does that tell you about 'weirdness' itself?

That feeling is also one of the hallmarks of wyrd in action: a signal that we can *know* we have new choices, that we're being presented, in the moment, with the possibility of looking at ourselves, or our relationship with the wider world, in a different and more empowering way.

Perhaps the greatest problem here, though, is fear. There's always *some* fear that comes up whenever we meet the wyrd - mainly because, being wyrd, it weaves its way past that carefully-constructed boundary around our sense of 'I'. In that moment of weirdness, we're being shown something that we don't usually see, and usually don't want to see - especially about ourselves. The feelings that come with that are not exactly pleasant... And yet if we don't accept what's being shown to us by the twists of wyrd - if we hide from it in embarrassed, angry fear - we won't be able to see that we're also being shown *choices*: new ways to understand and express our own



power. Power - 'the ability to act within the world, as an expression of our own choice' - is inextricably interwoven with fear: "where there is fear, there is power; where there is power, there is fear", as the old witchcraft saying puts it. But if we hide in fear from what the wyrd shows us about our own power - our own choices - we can hardly complain if we end up feeling powerless...

What are you afraid of? What do you fear? Why?

In what weird ways do the weavings of the world remind you of that fear? When that fear returns - if only for a brief moment - what do you feel?

Our fears reduce only when we face them, and usually grow when we refuse to face them: that's one of the standard lessons in all forms of what's called personal growth. And a certain kind of wry humour can play an important part in this: by its nature, humour is weird, yet it's also one of the ways in which we come to allow ourselves to face our own fears. The weirdness of humour is that it juxtaposes different ways of looking at a particular issue - particularly, ways which we wouldn't usually allow ourselves to see. In the midst of the laughter, it's often easy to miss that the twists of humour conceal choices: what it's really showing us is that the way we see the world is the way we choose to see it - and that other ways of seeing it can allow us to reduce the fears we all have about it.

Another chaotic mess of confusion and blame: no choice... I can't face it... it's so bad this time I just don't know whether to laugh or cry...

Yet even here I *do* still have a choice - namely to laugh, or to cry. Which would be more useful? Which would be empowering? An interesting question...

When you're as overloaded emotionally as that, which do you choose? What happens with each of those choices - what do you feel in each case? And notice, no matter how powerless you feel, that you still have the power to make that choice...

That's what personal growth is about. But when we're working on our relationships with others, it's not just personal growth we're concerned with: it's also *inter*-personal growth, the development of shared feeling and shared awareness. One of the aims of interpersonal growth is to become personally familiar with another feeling: "je ne regrette rien" - no regrets, no anguishing about what 'could' or 'should' or 'might' have happened, but simply an acceptance of what *did* happen, and an acknowledgement of what we and others learned from it. A quiet state of active acceptance, yet active involvement, that's described as both non-attachment *and* non-detachment. Yet we won't be able to reach that state without awareness: awareness of ourselves, awareness of others, and awareness of the twisted nature of the wyrd and its choices. With awareness, the wyrd provides us with awareness of *itself* - and of the empowering choices that lie within its twists.

## Wyrd is an awareness

"Evolution is chaos with feedback", wrote one of the early researchers on the mathematics of chaos. *Life* is chaos with feedback: but if we're not aware of the feedback, all we'll see is the chaos...

The usual approach to chaos is to try to take control, to reduce it to some kind of order, a predictable pattern. Then, we hope, it will all make sense - somehow. Many personal development programmes aim, or at least claim, to show how to “take control of your life!” - which is unfortunate, because Reality Department is, by its nature, inherently chaotic, and hence true ‘control’ is impossible, a myth. Any semblance of order we try to place on reality - such as the simple concept of cause-and-effect, or a more sophisticated concept such as the Indian notion of ‘karma’ - is exactly that: a semblance, an illusion, not the thing itself.

One of the common misunderstandings about modern chaos theory is the assumption that it makes the unpredictable predictable at last. It doesn’t: all it does is make predictable the *degree* of unpredictability - within those bounds, chaos remains as unpredictable as ever. Even a simple coin-toss is completely unpredictable: no matter how many times it’s come up heads or tails before, there’s always an exactly even chance as to which way it will land - a mistake that has cost many gamblers dearly... And no matter how much we may talk about the ‘laws’ of science, or psychology, or economics, or whatever, in reality there is only one true law: the weirdness of Murphy’s Law - “if something can go wrong, it probably will”. Ultimately, all the other so-called ‘laws’ are only guidelines, patterns of high or even very high probability: but Murphy’s Law really is a law - the only law in town.

“If something can go wrong, it probably will”. What’s your experience of Murphy’s Law: the car refusing to start on the one morning you’re in a hurry, for example?

Remind yourself of some other examples of your own. What do you feel when this happens?

The twist is that Murphy's Law is so much of a law that it normally applies to itself: "if Murphy's Law can go wrong, it probably will" - which gives us the illusion that the other 'laws' are real. The apparent predictability of scientific law and social custom occurs because the unpredictabilities tend to cancel themselves out - but it's essential never to forget that the uncertainty is *always* there, and can never be 'legislated' away. We may think things 'ought to' or 'should' work in the way that we want them to: but sometimes this just doesn't happen - period. We may think people 'ought to' or 'should' always do exactly what we want them to: but sometimes this just doesn't happen - period. It's then interesting to note how we respond to the 'failure' of the world in general to conform to our expectations...

"Damn! Kaye promised she'd update the report for me while I was stuck with that client. But Mary says she's gone home, says she's feeling ill - blast her, I need that report, right now! Why does she always let me down just when I really need her help?"

What's your experience of Murphy's Law with *people*: particularly where you've depended on someone, and they've unintentionally let you down. What do you feel when this happens?

Anger. Irritation. Blame - "it's *their* fault it isn't working!" Common though these are, none of them help to resolve anything - in fact, they almost always make it worse. And they also conveniently block the awareness that the world *has* worked perfectly well, in its own way: it's *our* expectations of it that haven't...

Being more realistic about what we expect from the world will help. Being more aware of our own involvement in the weavings of

the world will help. And so too, especially, will an awareness and an acceptance of the ways that the world *does* work. For example, there's another twist that we might call 'inverse Murphy': "things *can* go right - if you let them". The uncertainties of Murphy's Law can work both ways, to our advantage as well as to our detriment: and if we only allow things to work in the ways we expect, can we honestly complain when things don't seem to be working out for us?

"Things *can* go right - if you let them": what's your experience of 'inverse Murphy'?

What do you feel when something works in a way that you didn't expect? Are you pleased that it's working? Or annoyed, angry, even frightened, perhaps, that it didn't work in the way that you expected? What else?

So it's useful to develop a shift in awareness: when things don't work out in the ways that we expect, it's not so much the world 'going wrong', but a warning that our expectation of the world is wrong. Life is 'chaos with feedback': so what we get back from the weird chaos of the world is its feedback, its response to us. And it's up to us to notice it, accept that that's what it is, and work *with* it - not complain about it! With that awareness, every 'failure' instead becomes a *lesson*, reminding us that the world, and our relationships within it, can work for us - but only if we let them.

It may seem weird... wyrd... but it *does* work. It's often difficult, though, to see that most of what happens 'to' us *is* feedback from the wyrd. We choose, and something happens; but the 'feedback' often isn't as simple as cause-and-effect, because every choice echoes up and down the wyrd, often coming back to us from the most unexpected directions. At times, the ways in which the wyrd

‘responds’ can be very strange indeed... and it’s up to us to recognise them, and make use of them as best we can.

That’s what we’ll explore here. And the first stage is to look at one of the most common experiences of ‘wyrdness’: the repeating patterns and loops into which our lives - and especially our relationships - tend to get stuck. Round and round the garden, getting nowhere slowly... that’s the feeling. So when that feeling comes again - as it so often does, for all of us - it’s time to look more closely at what’s going on, in our interaction with others, and with the wyrd.

## 3: Round and round the garden

Every now and then, that strange yet familiar feeling returns: *déjà vu*, it's called... Been here, done that, I'd thought - but now I'm back here again. Again. And again. "Round and round the garden, *like* a teddy bear...": those weird loops keep happening in my life. The same issues come up again and again with different people, in different places, in different contexts; exactly the same words, even. I do understand that there's no way those people could have known that those words have specific - and painful - meanings for me, that just that gesture brings back memories that I really don't want to recall; and yet... *how*? How does it happen? More to the point, *why* does it happen?

I've been on a long trip with a colleague, and she's been asking me detailed questions every inch of the way: every time I stop for breath, for a pause, she sends another question hurtling at me. We reach our destination; are greeted by my colleague's partner. "I'm exhausted", she says to him, mockingly, "Chris was talking at me *all the way*, and I couldn't get a word in edgeways!" Suddenly I'm furious: *she'd* been pestering *me* all the way, and now she's mocking me for answering her questions! And yes, I do have some reason to be upset - but not that much. By the time I cool down a bit, I realise it isn't much to do with her at all: what really hurts so much is that it's an exact repeat, even to the same words, of what happened so often back in school and at home - answers being demanded, and being mocked for answering as demanded. That all happened many years ago, in another country, and with other people: yet here it is again, now, in this moment.

Weird...

What issues keep returning for you - wearing different faces, different places, but still the same thread? What do you feel when they return? And how do you feel towards the people who - usually unwittingly - bring these threads back into your life?

About all I can answer is that it *does* happen - a lot. And a lot more than I'm willing to admit: allow myself to notice, and it becomes clear that life is full of these weird loops. If all these things which happen to me are supposed to be the results of my own choices, then what on earth did I choose? It's crazy, frightening: better be careful not to notice it too much, or ask too many questions about it, because that way madness lies - that's what it feels like, anyway. Almost like something out of one of Lewis Carroll's stories: a garden full of strange characters and even stranger experiences, all woven together with a thread of logic so twisted that it *almost* seems to make sense... in *a* sense, at least.

Round and round the garden... a garden full of Carroll's weird characters... that's another analogy that's worth exploring for a while. So imagine walking in a quiet park-like garden: you hear voices in the middle distance, and you begin to move towards them...

## Running nowhere

Turning a corner past a clump of bushes, you walk almost straight into a bevy of some of the strangest-looking people you've ever seen. They look like animals, or birds, and sound just like them too - but they're all human-sized, and they're all fully dressed in normal, if outdated, human clothes.



Slightly off the thread, perhaps, but do some people remind you of particular animals or birds? A fox, perhaps, or a rabbit; a mouse or a rat, a pig, a hawk, a swan, a startled deer? What are the characteristics - appearance, mannerisms, habits - which these people seem to you to share with the respective animal or bird?

Given that you *choose* to perceive those people that way, *why* do you do so? What difference does it make? How does it change the way you relate with them?

The same threads, or characteristics, are present in everyone: all that changes is the degree to which they're visible - or that we choose to see them. If so, what makes it easier for you to see them in some people, and not in others - especially yourself?

It's a caucus-race, they say - whatever that is - and they want you to join in. They're so enthusiastic about it all that it's obvious they wouldn't be able to notice even if you said "No"; and suddenly they, and you, are all off in this race. Or dance. Or something. It seems to consist of running madly round in circles, bumping into each other, making lots of loud noises, jumping up and down in wild excitement - a kind of cross between a stock-car race and the mad circus of the Stock Exchange. Just as suddenly, it all stops: everyone flops onto the ground in whatever way they can. Everyone has won, apparently; but now they're all looking at *you*, because they seem to think that *you're* the one who's going to give everybody prizes...

The caucus-race sounds crazy, but there's no shortage of everyday examples: is your workplace one, perhaps? Do you feel you have to join in with everyone else's mad dance, even when you don't want to? Why? And what happens when they

make it clear that they're all expecting some kind of prize or 'gift' from you?

A few mumbled apologies, and you're on your way again: they're so engrossed in their game that they've forgotten you already. You've barely made your escape, though, when it becomes clear that you're not going to get away *that* easily... Striding towards you, from the other direction, is a tall, spiky woman, dressed all in dark red - *everything* about her is the same dark red, from her shoes and her long dress to her hands, her face, her hair, and the pointed crown she wears on her head. "If you're going to get anywhere", she snaps at you, "you've got to *run*!" She grabs hold of your arm, and starts running, dragging you with her - without asking where you want to go, of course. "Faster!", she yells, "Faster! Faster!" You're both running so fast that everything's a blur - but she still wants you to run faster than ever. Exhausted, you stop - and realise that you haven't moved an inch. You're in exactly the same place where you started: all that running, just to stay still! "Of course!", snaps the Red Queen. "What did you expect? If you actually want to move somewhere else, you have to run *much* faster than that!" And with that comment, she vanishes: presumably she can run fast enough to get away from here...

Having to run ever faster and faster, just to stay still: how often has that happened in your life? What was the context? Who are the people with whom you find yourself doing this?

When you *know* you've run - or worked, or whatever - as hard as you can, and somebody tells you "that's not good enough - you'll have to do better than *that*!", what do you feel - towards yourself, and towards them?

Over to the left you can hear the clinking of china and cutlery - it's obvious that that's going to be the Mad Hatter's tea-party, and it'd be best to watch from a distance! There are quite a few people there, and they seem to be playing a strange variant of 'musical chairs': running round and round the long table, chanting something, then all suddenly sitting down and shouting and pointing at the one who hasn't found a chair. You get a little closer to hear what's going on - taking care to keep out of sight! - and hear them chant, over and over, as they run: "round and round in the usual old game - I take the credit and you take the blame". Then when they stop, they shout "*It's all your fault!*" - and the hapless victim runs off into the bushes, head hanging in shame and despair. Not exactly a pleasant game - but a disturbingly familiar one...

"Round and round in the usual old game - I take the credit and you take the blame": that ever-popular pastime called 'passing the buck'! How often have you found yourself caught in one of these 'blame-games', where everyone is trying to grab the credit if it works, but set someone else up as the scapegoat in case it doesn't? What were the circumstances? In what ways - and why - were you involved?

If you found yourself being set up as the scapegoat, how did it feel when all the blame was dumped on you? Were you able to see it coming? And if you did, why weren't you able to pull out of the game in time?

On the times when you managed to avoid being the scapegoat, what did you feel when someone else was landed with everyone's blame? How did you feel towards the scapegoat - and towards yourself?

Time to get away from here. But you find that you can't: there's something weird going on - the path seems straightfoward enough,

but somehow it must have a hidden wriggle or twist, because whatever you do, you keep coming back to the same place. Who can you turn to for help? Not the Mad Hatter - that's for sure! Perhaps the gardener you can see over to the right, crooning his little rhyme: "he thought he saw a banker's clerk descending from a bus; he looked again and found it was a hippopotamus... if that should stay to dine, he said, there won't be much for us..." Oh. Perhaps not the gardener, then... But there must be *someone* in this mad garden you can turn to for advice - musn't there?

## A garden-full of advice

"Depends what you mean by *someone*", says a quiet voice just beside you. But there's no-one there, in amongst the mass of flowers: no-one you can see, anyway. "I don't think it knows we can talk", says another voice. *Who?* The flowers, of course... this is getting crazier every minute... "If you want to get out of the garden", says another of the flowers, "it's no use going the way you expect - life's never as simple as that! When you're stuck, and can't get to where you want, you have to walk *away* from it instead - keep your goal in mind, but walk the other way!"

The flowers' advice - "keep your goal in mind, but walk the other way" - may seem a little crazy, but it's another variant on 'inverse Murphy': if things aren't working in expected ways, allow them to work in unexpected ways! Sometimes - often - this weird approach to problems does work out: when has it happened in your life?

What do you feel when you're stuck, and someone gives you apparently nonsensical advice? Where do you feel this

feeling? And what do you feel - about them, and about yourself - when what they advise turns out to be right?

You're thinking about whether to put this crazy advice into practice, when you're startled by a loud yell from behind. "Ahoy! Check!" comes the yell again, as a man on horseback canters up to you, and promptly falls off. As he picks himself up off the ground and dusts himself off - white armour clanking as he does so - you notice that his horse is festooned with an incredible amount of junk and jetsam: tattered bags and bits of old rope, a piece of fence, a wooden sword, a tin dustbin-lid, even the wreckage of what appears to have once been a beehive. "Ah, I'm glad you noticed that", he says, pointing at a small object you hadn't yet noticed, "it's my own invention." You look at the tangled mass of wire, in the midst of which is a tiny piece of cheese: is this some kind of mousetrap? "It's to prevent mice from climbing on the back of the horse when I'm sitting on it", he says with pride. But mice wouldn't do that anyway, would they? "Ah, but they *might*, you know. So I invented this, just in case!" Oh, no, not another one...

Who do you know that's an inveterate collector of 'unconsidered trifles', their pockets and bags kept full of all sorts of unlikely items 'just in case'? Do you, perhaps? If so, what are all these items? How often - if ever - have you used them for the purpose you expected? How often have you used them for a purpose you didn't expect?

The White Knight was in some ways Lewis Carroll's self-portrait: a shy, timid man, he too used to travel around with all sorts of toys and trinkets in his pockets, with which to start up a conversation with a child and her parents. You've probably shared with others quite a few of your own collection of items:

a pin or a pen, perhaps; a tissue or a piece of candy. What conversations or other weird twists have ensued from that simple choice to share something with strangers?

It's clear that you're about to receive a long lecture on the climbing habits of mice and the finer points of mousetrap design, but instead you both see a glint of red armour in the wood beyond. The White Knight leaps into action... sort of... it takes him some time to struggle into the saddle, and he falls off three times even before he gets to the trees... As he vanishes erratically into the shadows, you can still hear his thin voice calling out the challenge, "Ahoy! Ahoy! Check!"

Shaking your head in disbelief, you wander off to the side, and hear two more voices in earnest discussion. One seems a little upset: in fact, it's the Mock Turtle, sobbing sonorously at the Gryphon, who in turn is paying little attention to anyone but itself.

The Gryphon and the Mock Turtle: two more archetypes - two more threads of the wyrd!

Who do you know who, like the Mock Turtle, is constantly crying and complaining, trying to claim what John Bradshaw described as "that special attention which is the prerogative of the miserable"? Does this habit of theirs make it easier, or harder, to relate with them?

And who do you know who, like the Gryphon, are so full of themselves that they're interested only in reflections of their own ideas? How do you relate *with* them - rather than being talked *at* by them?

How often do you find yourself meeting up with people like

these - people who demand your attention, but rarely if ever reciprocate? When you find yourself sucked into their space, how do you feel, towards them, and towards yourself? How did you come to be trapped there? And how, at last, did you break free?

Whilst you're there, how easy is it to notice that, in the midst of the constant stream of "me! me! me!", there *is* useful information for you? If you *did* notice it, what did you learn?

Self-centred though they may be, they don't seem quite as mad as the others, so you walk up to meet them. Their conversation - if that's what one would call it - seems at first to be about school, because they keep on talking about lessons. But it turns out that the conversation's more about the lessons of life itself - which is why the Mock Turtle's tears are flowing. "I'd... be happier... if... the same old hurts didn't... keep... coming back", it says, sadly. "Ah", says the Gryphon, "that's the point about the lessons, you see. Everything that happens is a lesson: we're supposed to learn from them. Don't know *why*, but we are - call it fate, if you like. If you don't understand what the lesson *is*, old thing, you get to do it again. And again. And again. The lessons tend to come back anyway, but each time you grasp a bit more of it, it doesn't come back so hard. The whole idea, y'see, is to get the lessons to lessen. Hah! Rather proud of that," it says, turning to you. "Clever pun, don't you think: 'get the lessons to lessen'?"

Whatever you may think of the Gryphon's attempts at humour, it may have a point. If, as it suggests, most things which happen to us are more like 'lessons' from the weavings of

the wyrd - happening not so much 'to' us as *with* us - then it's up to us to understand what that lesson is: or it'll simply come back again. More to the point, we bring it back again, in order to find out what it is we have to learn. In my own case, one of the 'lessons' was about having consciously played the scapegoat role, in order to keep others 'happy': it's taken many repetitions of that particular 'lesson' before I finally understood that my playing that role wasn't helping anyone - least of all me...

Are you aware of some of your own 'lessons'? For examples, look at some of the repeating patterns and loops that have happened in your own life. How many not-quite-repeats of the loop did it take before you began to understand the lesson? And what did it take for you to 'get the lessons to lessen'?

Enough 'advice' for the moment, perhaps? It's obvious that the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle will continue talking at each other all day, and they'll do it whether you're there or not. So you wander away, back towards the trees, and see another figure in white, lying on the ground, apparently sleeping - and wearing, like the Red Queen, a crown.

## A royal muddle

Whoever it is, it's snoring loudly; or rather *he's* snoring, because his small, straggly beard and moustache are just visible. Twitching slightly: presumably he's dreaming. "Dreaming about *you*", says a sharp voice in your ear - which turns out to be that of the Red Queen again, irritable as ever. "You're only a figment of his imagination, a character in his dream", she says; "when he wakes up, you'll vanish, as if you'd never been." And she moves as if to wake him...



“Last night”, wrote one of the old Zen poets, “I dreamed I was a butterfly. Or is it that it’s *now* that I’m asleep, and that I’m a butterfly dreaming I’m a man?” There’s no way we can tell: dreams have their own weird reality. And yet the existential anxiety this creates is all too real: Who am I? *What* am I? How can I prove that I exist? Perhaps this is one of those ‘lessons’ that we’d like to lessen...

Is this an experience with which you’re familiar? If so, under what kind of context - and with whom - does it tend to arise?

And who do you know that, like the Red Queen here, deliberately plays on your fears? Why do they do it? If you do it to others, why do *you* do it?

Looking pleased at your obvious discomfiture, the Red Queen leaves the White King to his snoring, and returns to talk at you. “You’ve been talking with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, I see - not that those idiots know anything of course.” You mention that the Gryphon had some interesting comments to make about the lessons of life. “Lessons? What do they know about *lessons*? Why, in *my* school they taught us *everything* there is to know about arithmetic: I doubt if they taught you that.” You attempt to murmur that, yes, you did indeed study arithmetic at school, and a great deal more besides, but the Queen quickly cuts you off. “Prove it! Divide a load by a knife - what’s the answer? Can’t say? There, you see, I knew it. Useless! Doesn’t know any arithmetic at all! The answer’s *sliced bread*, of course!” And with a patronising - matronising? - smile, she vanishes again.

You’ll know, in a matter of moments, that nothing you say here would be right: nothing is going to shift the Red Queen’s

smug certainty in herself. It really doesn't matter whether she's right or wrong, because you're the one who'll take the blame in any case: you know she'll always be able find *some* way to twist whatever you said, to make you out to be the fool every time...

Familiar, perhaps? Who do you know that's like this - constantly constructing put-downs so as to prop up their delusions of their own superiority?

Placating someone like the Red Queen doesn't work: they simply take, and never give in return. Responding aggressively to their selfish rudeness doesn't work either: you'll get hit with a torrent of righteous indignation and blame. Since almost everything they do is based on setting up a 'no-win' for others, if you play the game their way, you'll always lose. So how do you create a relationship with them in which everyone *does* 'win'?

A sigh of relief: she's gone. But you hear a rustling noise; you look up, and there in the tree above you is an enormous cat. Grinning. At you. Showing all its many sharp teeth, yet with wry amusement, as if it knows something you'd rather it didn't. It makes a most peculiar sound in its throat - a cross between a yowl and a purr, but with a hint of words - and then fades away, leaving behind only its grin. A cat without a grin, yes; but a grin without a cat? What's *that* supposed to mean? Weird indeed...

Confused, you walk round a corner and there in the distance are a group of very thin people - thin from the side, at least - apparently painting a rose-bush. Not painting a picture of the bush - painting the bush itself... *why*? You walk a little closer.

They're thin, these people, yet wide - almost like playing-cards with head and limbs attached. And they *are* putting paint onto the roses, as quick as they can. They see you; jump up and down in evident panic, trying to hide the paint-brushes; and then realise that you're

not who they thought you were, and go back to painting the flowers again, even more hurriedly than before. What are they so frightened about? Intriguing... weird...

You walk right up to them, and ask what they're doing. "Oh, you gave us a fright then!", says one - literally One, it has a single bright red heart-shape on its flat back, whilst others have more. "Thought you was the Queen, like. What're we doin'?" Correctin' a little error like wot Three done. Queen wanted red roses, din't she? Three thought 'e'd planted a red one, but when it grewed, the flowers come up white. She won't like that, will the Queen: have our heads off if we ain't careful... Oh no! 'Ere she comes!"

And here she comes indeed: not the Red Queen, but the Queen of Hearts, with her full entourage - including the Executioner, his axe at the ready. "*What* is the meaning of this! There shall be no mistakes in my realm! Off with their heads!"

I can remember, all too vividly, a real-life example of the Queen of Hearts: a senior sales manager from head office of a large supermarket chain, visiting a local branch. "We have a national special on strawberry gateau", he yelled - he never merely spoke to anyone if he could help it; "*why is it not on display?*" "We don't *have* any", said the branch manager, "Distribution haven't sent us any yet". "That's *your* problem!", shouted the head-office man, "I want it on display, and I want it there now!" Terrified, the branch manager turned to the warehouse supervisor: "Ah... ah... get the strawberry gateau on display - quickly!" The supervisor in turn started to say, "but we haven't got any in stock"; then realised that her manager knew that too, so turned to the nearest junior staff member and said loudly, "get the strawberry gateau from stock - now!" The junior took only a moment to realise what was going on, and then took the only sensible action under those circumstances - he ran to the warehouse, and hid, until the visitor had gone!

Who do you know that, like the Queen of Hearts or the head-office man, tries to rule by fear and intimidation? How do you work with - or in any way relate to - such people? What effect does their bullying have on other people's relationships with each other? And what effect does it have on everyone's ability to get the job done well? In that sense, does the bullying 'work'? If not, what *does* the bullying do?

The painters try to hide behind you, but they're quickly caught, and dragged away. There is the terrifying 'crunch' of an axe hitting something that isn't wood... And now, for the first time, the Queen turns to notice you. "What is this... thing... this..." - she looks you up and down, in evident disgust - "this *thing*?" She looks round angrily at her terrified entourage, then back at you. "*What* is it doing in my realm? Take it away - at once! Executioner!", she screams, at the top of her voice, "Executioner! Off with its head!"

This madwoman screaming at you, and people beginning to move towards you: they're so frightened of her that it's clear they'll literally do *anything* - even "off with its head!" - just to keep her quiet... You're terrified, panicking, you want to run away, anywhere but here... But for some weird reason you remember the flowers' advice - "go the other way!" - and you go *towards* the Queen instead...

It works!

Either you've vanished, or they vanished: it's impossible to tell - whichever it is, you're free, and out of the garden at last.

You still feel a few of the effects of the fear the Queen of Hearts set out to create in you: sweating hands, pounding heart, and so on. But they're fading too, like the last vestiges of the Cheshire Cat's grin. Stuck in her bullying, she probably thought that fear *is* power - that others' fear is *her* power; yet by facing that fear, and coming

towards it in a different, and perhaps weird way, you found your *own* power to break free from hers. Where there's power, there's fear; but by facing our own fear we can find that where's there's fear, there can also be power - our own power. So fear and power, and the weird mistakes we all make about them, are what we'd better look at next.

## 4: Power and fear

Free of the confusions and craziness of the imaginary garden, and back in the ordinary - sometimes mistakenly called 'real' - world, it's time to stop and think for a while: look a bit more closely at what we saw there.

Imaginary though they all were, each of the characters in the garden would also have been recognisable - perhaps all too recognisable - in examples of people you know in your day-to-day world. In their own different ways, each of those characters - even the Mock Turtle - thought that they were being powerful: that what they were doing was the right way, or even the only way, in which they could get what they wanted in the world. A few of them - the Queen of Hearts especially - were playing on other people's fears, and probably thought that fear - other people's fear, at least - was 'power'. Some of the others - such as the White Knight, and the mad gardener whom we quietly avoided - were away in their own private worlds, with only a tenuous grasp on what was actually happening around them. And some - like those at the caucus-race, or around the Mad Hatter's table - had a kind of shared world, with mutually-agreed rules, but which in practice perhaps had even less of a grasp on reality. The results are chaotic: the same destructive patterns, the same habitual responses, repeated - with minor variations - over and over again. Round and round the garden...

Some people may - and evidently do - choose to be caught in loops like these: and if we're not careful, they'll often to drag us in to join them. We don't *have* to join them: but sometimes it can seem that there's no choice - and very often others will try very hard to make it seem that way. The way out of those loops is to recognise that they *are* loops in the weavings of the wyrd, and then notice the twists - like the flowers' advice - which open up hidden choices

that allow us to move to alternative paths. But first we need to see that, no matter what it may look like, we *do* always have a choice: and to find this we need to understand more about power and fear, and the weird interactions between them.

## A problem of power

What *is* power? Most people would say that they want it, that someone else has it, but don't ever seem to be able to say what it is. Power is apparently linked in some way with money, or with a supposed 'right' to bully others, or to offload work onto others; but then we come across some chance encounter which triggers what we could only call powerful changes in our lives, but which has little or nothing to do with money, or bullying, or anything other than the weirdness of the moment itself. Power is... something... but it's surprisingly difficult to pin down exactly what that something *is*.

What, to you, *is* power? Who has it? Where does it come from? Where does it go?

What is *your* power? Where does it come from? Where does it go?

What happens to your power when you're with others? With whom, and under what circumstances, do you seem to gain power? With whom, and under what circumstances, does it seem to fade - or be taken from you?

It might be worthwhile to write down some notes on this, and review these questions often as you go through the book.

Whatever definition of power we choose, it *is* still a choice - which means there's also a twist attached to that choice. As with all

other definitions, how our choice of how we define 'power' also determines how we perceive it - and how we experience it.

For example, there's the so-called 'common-sense' notion that power is a kind of limited and rare commodity: some people have it, and most don't, but everybody wants it. If that's how power is perceived, *all* transactions between people are described in terms of a 'zero-sum' of power - the old Marxist concept that "it is in the nature of power that it is impossible for one to have more without others having less" - and hence *all* relationships are viewed in terms of 'win-lose'. If that's what I believe, then I'll also believe that the only way I can win is to make sure that you lose. So if you hold the same concept of power, we're set for a life-time of struggle... and even if you didn't hold it to start with, you probably would quite soon, because you'd get very annoyed, very quickly, at my constant attempts to prop myself up by putting you down.

"It is in the nature of power that it is impossible for one to have more without others having less": in what ways is that true in your own life? In what ways is it *not* true?

Is there a difference in the meaning of 'power' in each case? Or is it more a difference in what you - or others - choose to perceive as 'power'?

How do you relate with someone who regards that definition of power as true - someone who constantly attempts to prop themselves up by putting others down? In what ways, and under what circumstances, do *you* attempt to prop yourself up by putting others down? How do others relate with you when you do this?

The twist in 'win-lose' is that since everyone's energy is expended on struggling to be 'the winner' - and especially in trying to avoid



being 'the loser' - *nobody* ever really 'wins': all that happens is that an increasing number of people spend ever-increasing amounts of energy going nowhere, 'round and round the garden'. Since one of the most popular means of gaining 'power' is to manufacture fear in one sense or another, it's all too true that "where there's fear, there's power; where there's power, there's fear". But the supposed 'winner's feeling of having gained power over others masks the reality that *everyone* loses - and in practice, even the most definite 'final victory' can be very short-lived...

Each concept of power is a thread of the wyrd: each has its own path, its own consequences, its own dénouement. So we can change our experience of power - and other people's experience of power, when in relationship with us - simply by changing the way *we* choose to perceive it. If we perceive power as a fixed commodity, that's what it'll be; if we treat every relationship as a 'zero-sum', that's what we'll have. And if, as the slogan for one of the *Godfather* films put it, we base our life on the notion that "true power cannot be given - it must be *taken*", we will, in the usual weird way, find plenty of people who are willing to play: there'll be a few who'll accept it as their fate that they have to lose to us, but there'll be many, many more who are also trying to 'win' that much-prized feeling of power - and are all too willing to fight us for it... In a very real sense it *is* true that "life doesn't have to be struggle" - and that if it is a struggle for us, it's probable that our past and present choices have helped to make it so.

There's always a choice, there's always a twist: we don't have much choice about the twists, but we *do* have choice about the choices. So we can choose, for example, to perceive power not as a finite commodity, but as something which is variable and volatile, something which is created - or destroyed - *by* us, or in the space *between* us. Power - or the lack of it - depends on *us*, and how we relate with each other. In this sense, when people relate with each other, there's a whole spectrum of power-transactions from 'win-win' to 'lose-lose'; in this sense, 'win-lose' is seen as a special

case of 'lose-lose', in which the illusion of gaining at one level masks an overall loss at another. The constant 'win-lose' battles for power-over and power-under - manipulation, deceit and so on - are replaced by stronger need for power *with* others to help us find, and share, a deeper and more personal kind of power-from-within. The struggles still exist, in a sense: but rather than being *against* others, they're more *for* understanding - especially understanding of ourselves, and of what our own power *is*.

The 'power-games' of power-over and power-under are probably all too familiar: but what is your experience of power-with - a power that exists *because* it's shared with others? In what ways does this kind of power feel different from power-over and power-under? What difference does it make to your *own* sense of power - your own power-from-within? With whom, and under what circumstances, does this sense of power-with arise?

Even if - or perhaps even *because* - this concept of power-with seems alien to you, experiment with it for a while. Assume that in every interaction with others, it's always in part *your* choice as to whether it will be 'win-win', 'lose-lose', or the illusory 'win-lose' - and that you *always* have that choice. What difference does this make to the way you perceive those others? What difference does this make to the way they interact with you? If, in some weird way, you find yourself interacting with different people, in what ways are they different from the type of people you meet when you assume that 'power cannot be given - it can only be taken'?

Despite the damage it causes, 'win-lose' can sometimes seem easier than the constant search for constructive solutions that 'win-win' demands... Why is this? What's the difference in what 'win-win' asks from *you*?

This description also matches more closely with the physics definition of power, where ‘power’ - or, more accurately, ‘potential’ - is “the ability to do work”. (In ‘win-lose’, by comparison, power often seems more like “the ability to avoid work” - which is probably why so little actually gets done!) That bald physics definition, though, applies mainly to machines, which work in only one way, and which have no choice in what they do. By the time we apply it to people, we’d have to expand that physics definition somewhat: we’d have to say that power is “the ability to do work, as an expression of *choice*”; and not only is the definition of ‘work’ entirely open, but there is also no distinction between ‘work’ and ‘play’. This may take a bit of explaining...

First, power may be the ability to do work, but work itself is not power: without awareness, that mistake leads inevitably to the illusion that work itself is freedom, that ‘arbeit macht frei’ (‘work makes freedom’) - the slogan over the gates at Auschwitz... If the work is not done by choice, there is no power: being forced to do someone else’s work rarely *feels* like power, at any rate! In practice, that’s what ‘win-lose’ is really about: people not so much searching for any real power, as trying desperately - at any cost, to anyone - to avoid the terrifying feeling of powerlessness.

“Power is the ability to do work, as an expression of choice”: what’s the difference you feel between when you’re doing something you choose to do, and something that you don’t?

There’s an odd sense in which power and time interweave: the sisters of *wyrd* are the sisters of time. So does time seem to go by faster when you’re doing what you want to do, or when you’re doing what you don’t want to do?

Next, it's essential to understand that the meaning of 'work' is entirely open: for example, to dig a ditch, to solve a complex equation, to calm a fractious child, and to reclaim hope from despair are all *work*. In physics, 'work' is defined as "the rate at which energy is expended": energy is certainly expended in all those examples of work, so that definition would still apply! But they're different *kinds* of energy: physical effort, mental effort, emotional effort, and what would probably be called a spiritual effort - where 'spiritual', in this sense, has little to do with religion and the like, but is more 'a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of self and of that which is greater than self'. Even in physics, there are different types of energy - electromagnetic, gravity, weak nuclear, strong nuclear - which interact with each other and in some ways change into each other; in the same way, those different kinds of human energy interact with each other and in some ways change into each other - they change *through* us, as an expression of our choices. Our power exists through the work we choose to do, in whatever form we choose.

We each have our own choices in the wyrd, our own preferred ways of working in the world: so what *form* does your power most easily take? Do you find it easier working with machines than with people, perhaps? Do you prefer the challenge of a technical problem to the challenge of keeping the house tidy and clean? Would you rather face the rigours of a mountain-climb than face the rigours of exploring your own sense of self?

Although you'll find some forms of work easier than others, we all have to do most of them at some time - especially the mundane tasks like tax forms and the weekly washing. Where do you find your own power in these other forms of work?

The last point is perhaps the hardest: the idea that, as far as power is concerned, there's no distinction between work and play. Children don't distinguish between them: a child's 'work' *is* play - and there's usually plenty of energy being expended! It's in children's play that they develop their many skills, and come to understand their own 'ability to do work, as an expression of choice'. But by the time we get to adulthood, somewhere the idea creeps in that work isn't supposed to be enjoyable, isn't supposed to be meaningful to us, whereas what we still call 'play-time' is: hence the common notion, as a friend put it to me the other day, that "work is what I do to pay for my play". If we're doing work that has no meaning to us, no purpose in itself, we're not exactly likely to feel powerful about it...

What, to you, is 'work'? What, to you, is 'play'? What form - if any - does your own sense of power take in each of these?

Do 'work' and 'play' ever coincide, as far as you're concerned? If so, how, and in what way? And who are you with, when - or if - they coincide?

"Work is what I do to pay for my play" - is that close to your own attitude to work? If so, how can you *create* a sense of being powerful at work? And in those times when work *does* seem also like play - especially with others - what happens to how you feel about your work?

Yet in its own weird way this attitude to work is just as much of a choice as is the notion of 'win-lose' - and with much the same results. In terms of the wyrd, if we choose to view work as boring, disempowering, something we have to do in order to pay for what we *really* want to do... well, that's what we're likely to get, because that is what we *choose*. And just as with 'win-lose', we're likely to meet up with people who'll help to reinforce that choice.

We can choose to view work in a different way: for example, as Joseph Campbell put it, we can choose to “follow our bliss”, or as Castaneda’s perhaps imaginary ‘teacher’ Don Juan put it, we can “choose a path that has heart”. And if we do that, we’ll find people who’ll help to reinforce that choice, too. It’s up to us: we always have that choice.

But the twist is that to make that change happen, we also have to change our choices about power, and about work. And to do that, we have to face the real issue behind all of this: an infamous four-letter word called ‘fear’...

## A problem of fear

Here we need to return to that idea that ‘where there’s fear, there’s power’. When we’re afraid, we lose our power - we lose our ability to do work, for the simple reason that we’re too busy being afraid to do much of anything else...

When you were a child, what were you afraid of? Who were you afraid of? Why? What led you to be afraid? And how much of what you feared did actually come to pass?

What are you afraid of now? *Who* are you afraid of? Why? How much - if ever - does what you fear actually happen to *you*?

What are you afraid of in yourself? Are you afraid of what you might do with your anger, perhaps? Explore those inner fears a little...

Fear is a useful and natural tool: it always has something to tell us about the way we interact with the world, and we often do need

to listen to what it has to say. But it can easily become a hindrance rather than a help, for a number of reasons: when we *don't* listen to it, for example - and hence get damaged; or when we pay too much attention to the feeling of fear itself, rather than listening to what it's trying to tell us; or when others set out to augment our natural fears, in the hope that this will allow them to 'take away' our power. The idea there seems to be that, if we lose our power to fear, then if we can be induced into feeling afraid, that power will be lying around - so to speak - for someone else to claim. Where there's fear, there's power; and I'll have it from you, thanks...

Fear is natural. What *isn't* 'natural' is the way in which so many people - especially those focussed on a 'win-lose' model of power - deliberately set out to make others frightened. In some ways our whole society is based on this: "do *you* have enough insurance?" asks a television advertisement; "shouldn't you be afraid of going out at night?" asks an apparently well-meaning relative. Often it's dressed up as 'for your own good' - "don't go near the dog! all dogs bite!" - but sometimes, as with the sales-manager's shouted demands for the strawberry special, there's not even an attempt at disguise: it's just plain ordinary bullying. "It is in the nature of power that it is impossible for some to have less without one having more, so the more powerless and afraid I can make others feel, the more powerful I'll be": that seems to be the idea, anyway.

We've already looked at the problems of relating with those who bully others in the belief that 'where's there's fear, there's power': but how much do *you* do this? How much, for example, do you set out to make children frightened of something 'for their own good'? *Why* do you do this? Do you feel more, or less, powerful when you see that they're now more afraid?

It isn't likely to be comfortable to face this, or to admit to doing it at all, but face it anyway... what do you find out about

yourself? If you can acknowledge it as something that you do, what do you feel when you face this fact?

Who do you do this to? Children? Adults? Work colleagues? Your partner? How do others relate to you when you try to make them fearful?

Fear *always* exists, in all of us; no matter what may be claimed, no-one is ever truly without fear. (Even the ‘common-sense’ idea that men are naturally less fearful than women is wrong: in reality, most men are haunted by the fear of the abuse they’d get if they fail to *simulate* ‘fearlessness’...)

And there’s a simple twist: if we face fear, it shrinks, though never quite disappears; but if we refuse to face it, it grows - and the wyrd, obliging as ever, keeps coming back with ‘lessons’ to remind us of the fact. So up comes another common notion: the idea that, rather than facing the fear ourselves, we can *export* it to someone else: then it’s their problem, not ours. I’ll take your power, and you can have my fear: that’s a fair exchange, isn’t it? That’s part of what the desire for ‘power’ is really about: because if I’m truly ‘powerful’, I’ll always be able to find someone whom I can force to face my fears for me...

We’ve seen this already, for example, with the sales manager and his demands about the strawberry special: he exported the problem - and his unadmitted fears - by yelling at the supermarket manager, who ‘passed the buck’ to the supervisor. She in turn passed it on, quickly, to the junior, who ‘solved’ the problem for everyone by running away in a panic. We could note that nothing was actually *done* - no cake was displayed, because it didn’t exist - so if power is ‘the ability to do work’, *no-one* was actually powerful. In this sense, it might be more accurate to say that “where there’s fear, there *isn’t* power”...



We'll be looking at this in more detail later, but for now, who do you know who routinely tries to use their supposed 'power' to attempt to export their fear to others? What are they afraid of? In the short term, and individually, it may *seem* to work: but what effect does it have on the people around them?

What fears of your own do you try to export or offload onto others? How do you do this? Does it work - or do the fears quietly come back to haunt you later in some weird way, 'large as life and twice as natural'?

This idea that fear can be exported is so common, and so pervasive, that most people think it's natural, normal, just the way things are. But it's not: it's just another choice - another thread of the wyrd, with the usual weird twist in its tail. So we *can* choose to look at fear in a different way: a way which accepts that fear *is* normal, and a way which can be more empowering for *everyone*.

As usual, we can find that choice by watching for a twist of wyrdness hidden in the usual ways of looking at the world. The twist here comes from noticing that our fears - whatever those fears might be - often grow when we refuse to face them, and certainly *do* shrink when we do turn round to face them. Hence we arrive at the 'win-win' version of that phrase about "where there's fear, there's power": we find our power - both our own power-from-within, and the power-with that we share with others - by facing our own fears, and helping others to face theirs. Fear itself has its own weird power: and as we come to respect it within ourselves, we begin to find out more about what our own power *is*.

## The weird power of fear

Trying to export fear to others often *feels* powerful, but isn't; facing fear means that we have to face the terrifying feeling of powerlessness, and yet it's one of the most empowering things we can do. Weird... wyrd...

In the same way that fear and power are closely interwoven, so too is fear deeply interwoven with the wyrd. Perhaps the most common *feeling* of fear is what we call 'panic' - everything comes together all at once, and there's a desperate need to be anywhere but here! Yet the 'pan-' prefix literally means 'everywhere': so what we're doing in panic is trying to run away from interweaving of everywhere, everyone, everywhen - running from Pan, running from the weavings of the sisters of wyrd. But there's nowhere to run, because everywhere is already *here*, and at the same moment 'here' *is* everything, everywhere. No boundaries, no limits: no 'I', just a swirling, chaotic sea of 'is'-ness, in which we're about to dissolve into nothing - that's what it feels like. No wonder it's frightening...

And yet 'I' is always here: 'I' is not that which changes, 'I' is that which *chooses*. So we *always* have the choice to stand our ground, to accept the fear, acknowledge the fear, but turn round and face it. And in the act of turning round, the act of *choosing*, the fear shrinks - and we find that we *do* have the power to face it. Fear itself *changes* into power, simply by turning round and facing it.

"Fear itself changes into power, simply by turning round and facing it": what's your experience of this? Remind yourself of some of your old childhood fears - fear of the dark, perhaps: how did they come to fade? What - if anything - did you do to make them fade?

How did others help you to face those fears? In what ways

have you helped others to face *their* fears? In your experience, what works for this? What doesn't?

Fear isn't rational: it's a response to something - anything - that seems to be a threat to our sense of being. But then power isn't exactly rational either - and neither is the wyrd. Facing facts - acknowledging what's *actually* happening, rather than only what we think is happening - is an important part of facing fear, and of reclaiming our power, but that kind of rationality alone is not enough. We do need to accept that fear *is* weird, and that the wyrd itself brings its own fears - especially in our interweavings with others.

For example, if we involve ourselves in personal growth, exploring our personal power, we're likely to find that some of those around us - perhaps even those closest to us - become noticeably nervous about what we're doing. And they may well indulge in power-over or power-under - usually mild at first, but sometimes definitely not - to try to stop us: because as we make different choices, their world suddenly becomes uncertain, and *feels* unsafe. In other words, they're afraid. Making different choices brings up others' fear - not from something we do, but simply from who we *are*. That can make life difficult at times...

One friend commented that, as a teenager, he found that some people seemed to be unnaturally afraid of him. Often, on a night-time street, women would even cross to the other side of the road, and then re-cross when he'd gone past. It was upsetting, he said: "it felt like I was seen as some kind of monster, a leper, an unwanted outcast. I hadn't done anything, and they were treating me like that! Eventually I realised it was because they were frightened of *me* - solely because I'm

tall and male. But I can't help being who I am - and it still hurts when they do the same now..."

Have you had the experience of others being afraid of you, not because of anything you've done, but simply because of who you *are*? If you have, how do you feel about that? How do you cope with the reality that there's little or nothing you can do about it - because it's *their* fear, not yours?

Another part of the weirdness is that we can find ourselves in a kind of unconscious connection with others - resonating with their wyrd, if you like. Without knowing it, we'll find ourselves doing exactly what others most fear, or most desire; or without knowing it, they'll be doing exactly what we most fear, or most desire. It can feel so uncanny - so weird - that some people even imagine that we must have some kind of strange powers, to make this happen to them. We don't: all we have is an accidental weaving of the wyrd, working in its own weird if entirely normal way. But when people are confused about that kind of power, they either hope that we'll be able magically to take away all their fears - the old 'guru-game', described in Christian terms as 'the one who dies to take away our sins' - or else drift off into the old habitual 'win-lose' thinking. Afraid that because we seem to have some kind of strange power that they don't understand - can't rationalise - we must therefore be aiming to have power over them, they start to attack us for what are actually the results of *their* fears. That's not exactly fun either...

For me, this has been so common that, unpleasant as it is, I've had to accept it as part of my wyrd. I walk into an office, and casually ask a question: it turns out later that it's been the one question everyone's been avoiding - which is why I'd had an entirely unexpected and unwarranted torrent of anger

and blame thrown at me. And there've been so many would-be partners with whom, quite unconsciously, I've done just what they've most desired: hence they first assumed that I must be their one and only god-given 'soul-mate' - and then reacted violently when their delusions finally disintegrated, and discovered that I'm no omnipotent 'saviour', but just a perfectly ordinary human being with troubles of my own. *No fun... not fun at all...*

What kind of unconscious connections have you had with others? When you became aware of it, what was the feeling of the power - the ability to *share* work - that you sensed there? What happened - both to that feeling of power, and to your relationship - when either or both of you became aware that this sense of connection could not last indefinitely?

Power is weird; and one of the key sources of our power is through the wyrd itself, our connection with everyone. Our fears block our access to that power: when we face the fears - and the weirdnesses with which and through which they interweave - we start to discover that we do have a very real power, a real 'ability to do work' as an expression of what we choose.

But here we run into an even stranger problem: once we begin to grasp the weird nature of power, we discover that most people have an even weirder fear of power itself - even though it's the one thing they keep saying they want. Something doesn't quite make sense here... something else we need to understand before we can move on.

## **The weird fear of power**

Power is the ability to do work, as an expression of choice. So at first it'd seem obvious that when someone says "I want to be

powerful”, or “I want *you* to be powerful”, what they want is to express their choices in action, or for us to do so. But it doesn’t quite work that way... what they’re more likely to mean is that *they* don’t want to feel *powerless* - which is not the same thing at all. Given the usual fears about ‘win-lose’ - and the assumption that someone who’s finding their power will inevitably strive for power-over others - relationships can become strangely strained whenever one person starts to change: “he always used to be able to talk”, said a friend, “but in the past year it’s almost as if he’s afraid of what I’ve been learning and trying to express, while because of this fear, or criticism, or whatever, I’ve become less willing to express it, particularly when I’ve found understanding elsewhere”. End of relationship - very quickly, in some cases - unless *both* parties come to realise that someone’s succumbed to the weird fear of power: and need to work to find their power-*with* each other to create their relationship anew.

Who’s afraid of your power, your expression of choice? In what ways do you change your choices, and hold yourself back, because you know others are afraid of you - or try to pull you down, which comes to much the same thing - when you express your choices in the world?

Whose power are *you* afraid of? What are you afraid that they would do? In what ways do you try to pull others down, or restrict them, because you’re afraid of their power, their ability to express themselves?

We’re afraid of other people’s power; we’re even afraid of our own power. A colleague asked a group of business-people to describe their greatest fears: ‘fear of making a mistake’ came at or near the top of the list for every one of them. If no-one’s willing to make a move, for fear of making a mistake, is anyone actually being

powerful? No-one's 'taken' anyone else's power - but where has it gone? Into thin air, apparently... or back into the wyrd?

A while back, I taught myself juggling: no particular reason, it was just a fun thing to do. But it was fascinating to see how many people, when I offered to show them how to do it themselves, backed off, almost in panic, saying "no, no, I can't do that, I couldn't do that!" Their fear of making a mistake - or being seen to make a mistake - was so strong that they wouldn't even try.

What do you prevent yourself from learning to do, for fear of failure? What do you feel when you see someone else doing what you'd like to do, but are too afraid to face all the mistakes you'd make as you learn to do it yourself?

"If I can't do it, nobody can!" - do you find yourself putting others down if they can do things that you as yet can't? If so, how? Why? What are the feelings that lead to this?

And, equally common, there's even a weird fear of success: even if we *do* get right, it still feels wrong... Or we're told by others that we ought to feel wrong about it: because *they* don't like anyone else having a 'power' that they won't let themselves have...

"Huh! Setting yourself up as teacher's pet, are you, Chris? Trying to make out you're better than the rest of us, hey? Well, don't bother trying to follow *us* around, you smart-ass..." I want to do the work, and I want to get it right; but if I want any friends at all, looks like I'd better not be seen to do so... And even when I *do* get it right, I always seem to be lumbered with extra work - more like a punishment than a reward! Just not fair... no point... Getting it right just doesn't seem worth

it...

In what ways do you hold yourself back, for fear of success as much as of failure? What are you afraid will happen if you *do* 'get it right'?

It's not just other people's put-downs that are the problem - though it'd always be easy to blame them for everything! What we're more likely to be afraid of is blame itself: and since most people confuse responsibility and blame, most are afraid - if not terrified - of the sense of responsibility that inevitably accompanies 'getting it right'. "Round and round in the usual old game - I take the credit and you take the blame": everyone wants the credit of having done something - whatever it is - but no-one wants to face the risk of getting the blame if it doesn't work out as intended. And since the *wyrd* all but guarantees that nothing ever quite works as intended, the possibility for blame is always present - especially if someone else can grab the credit by doing so...

That's the way that those loops of *wyrd* get formed: by placating others, rebelling against others, avoiding responsibility, or trying to cover up for our own fears or someone else's, *everyone* gets dragged into some kind of 'game', seemingly trapped into going 'round and round the garden'. The way out is to notice those 'lessons' that come weaving back on the *wyrd*. But first we have to notice them: and that usually needs an almost childlike awareness of the weavings of the world. Yet a childish evasion of responsibility is the source of most of the problems in the first place: 'danger - children at play'! So before we can move on, we need a much better understanding of the difference between childish and childlike - and that's what we'd better look at next.



## 6: I and We and I

What am I? I am... something... I... whatever 'I' is, I suppose. "I think, therefore I am"? Not really: it would be just as true to say "I relate, therefore I am" - and certainly far closer to many people's experience. "I am a rock, I am an island"? Makes a good song, but it doesn't work out that way in practice: in fact, it would probably make more sense to say that I'm the sea - part of the sea, in the sea, an expression of the sea as a whole. The sea of wyrd, that is... and in that weird sense, 'I' is not that which changes: 'I' is that which chooses.

So we can choose to think of 'I' - or experience 'I' - as a thought, a relating, a rock, an island, an amorphous sea, or anything else: it's up to us. Each choice of 'I' is a thread, a path with many possibilities and an ultimate ending - and many, many interesting twists upon the way...

But if that's 'I', what is 'We'? If We is what happens between us, between your 'I' and mine, then where - if anywhere - is the boundary of We, the boundaries between I and We and I? Weird... wyrd... 'wylder', perhaps?

### Which I is We?

"'I' is not that which changes: 'I' is that which chooses." Yeah. Sure. If you say so. No problem.

Hey, *wait* a minute... that's not right! What about the times when it *isn't* my choice to change: like when I have to do what others tell me to do? Or the different things I find myself doing when I'm with other people? Who's doing the choosing there - because it certainly isn't me... is it?

I'm at a summer festival, way out in the country, with a few hundred other people. It's hot - very hot - and the river is cool and inviting. No-one swimming is bothering to wear any kind of costume - in fact fewer and fewer people seem to be wearing any clothes at all. After the swim I don't bother putting my clothes back on: it feels odd, strange, *wrong* at first; then by the end of the long hot day it seems equally strange - unnatural, almost - to be putting a few light clothes back on again, for the cool of the evening. And I notice a sign at the festival exit: "Clothing tips for leaving the site: *Clothes!*" I'd almost forgotten that 'out there' everyone - including me - *does* usually wear clothes in public: indeed, anywhere but here I'd be in deep trouble if I didn't! Yet here, for this brief time, I'm in a different community, with a different set of rules: and I find that *I've* changed to match. Weird...

In what circumstances do you find yourself changing your 'normal' habits, your usual 'I'? What changes? How much do you choose to change, and how much is it a change that 'just happens' because you're in a different place, or with different people?

Who are you with at these times? (Are you at a party, perhaps? A conference? On holiday? A football crowd? A mob of shoppers in the 'Sales' season?) Perhaps more to the point, who are *you* at these times?

We *do* change in different circumstances, and with different people: our behaviour certainly changes, though whether that's truly 'I' is another matter... The issue is more about choice, about whether we choose to change our surface 'I' in response to the changes in our surroundings - and the answer to that question would have to be 'Sometimes'! Sometimes we do consciously choose to change, to 'fit in' with what everyone else seems to be doing - which in itself can cause problems, for us or for others; and sometimes we change

more 'by default' for much the same reasons, but without really being *conscious* that we've chosen to do so.

A simple illustration of this: note the differences in your behaviour when you're with your family; your friends; your work-colleagues; clients; shop-assistants; the cleaner; government officials; police. Who are you when you're with each of these groups of people? What is your 'persona' - literally, the mask 'through which you sound' - in each case?

What happens when someone you know well from one context appears unexpectedly in another: bumping into a client when you're out drinking with friends, perhaps, or meeting someone from work when you're away on vacation? What happens to your sense of self when you're in this kind of mixed-up context? (A sense of "Which 'I' is me?", perhaps?) In what ways do you become confused about the 'proper' way to respond to them?

Even when we 'have to' change our behaviour to suit others - pandering to a bullying boss, perhaps - it *is* still a choice: there'd be different consequences for choosing to do otherwise, of course, of which we're no doubt all too aware - but the choice *is* ours. That's important, because if we say they've 'made' us or 'forced' us to change our behaviour, we've surrendered our power of choice to them. They haven't 'taken' it from us - though no doubt in many cases that's what they'd want us to believe... A central part of reclaiming our power *with* others is in becoming more aware that our power to choose our 'I' actually resides in us - and nowhere else. The hard part is in taking responsibility for that fact: it always seems *much* easier to hide from responsibility with that ever-popular excuse, "oh, sorry, I wasn't myself there...", or - even more popular - to blame others instead!

The temptation to duck that responsibility is always strongest when there's a lot of weird energy flying around. 'Being in love' (or, as the veteran feminist Glen Tomasetti wryly put it, being caught up in 'romanticised lust') is one obvious obvious example; so too is the bizarre behaviour - and even more bizarre childish language - many people indulge in when they're around newborn babies! But perhaps the strangest twists in behaviour occur in religious or supposedly 'spiritual' settings: in some cases people literally 'abandon themselves' to whatever happens to be going on... infamous examples of which include the ritualised murders committed by the original 'assassins' - Arabs caught up in an hashish-induced 'religious experience' - and 'thugs' - devotees of an obscure Indian cult known as 'thuggee'. I remember one well-known Indian 'guru' being very careful to point out that the 'weird energies' that his followers experienced around him - and which they inevitably attributed to him - were, strictly speaking, entirely their own: he provided conditions under which people could become aware of their own power - conditions which were as safe and stable as he could provide, which was by no means easy - but he could not and would not take responsibility for what was, he reminded them, *their* choice of what to do with that power.

'We' is the interweaving of 'I' and 'I' (or, when many people are involved, at least as many 'I's as there are people); 'We' is a kind of compound-'I' created by many people's choices interweaving and echoing along the threads of wyrd. In the guru's example, he was being responsible for his own 'I', and for its part - *his* part - in the 'We' being created at that gathering: but precious few other people there were doing so... If no-one (or almost no-one) is taking responsibility for their own 'I' - as is often the case with any large crowd - then which 'I' is 'We'? Without awareness, and without responsibility, 'We' could be *anything*: often that which is least conscious, and most suppressed and denied - as we can see all too clearly in many large crowds... But we can begin to have choice - and a better awareness of our own choices - by noticing how we

change in the company of others: by listening to 'We', we gain a better understanding of 'I'.

## Listening to We

'Listening' is far more than just hearing what someone says: it's about being aware of the whole of the communication, and being an involved - and often active - part *of* that communication. ('Communication' itself literally means a 'one-ness', an acknowledgement of the interwovenness of each other on the threads of wyrd.) Words themselves can easily go 'in one ear and out of the other': it's the communication as a *whole* - the words, the tone and pitch of voice, the 'body language' and everything else - to which we need to pay attention in listening. The first part of listening to 'We', then, is that we need to become more aware of the *dance* of 'We'.

In 'body language', every movement - or even absence of movement - is an expression of self, a phrase in a choreographed dance. When we're with others, this becomes a ballet, an interweaving *with* each other in a literal, physical expression of the wyrd. Often the movements are subtle, minimalistic; sometimes they're wild and free; but they're always there - and are always seen, or heard, or sensed.

What are *your* dances with your colleagues, your friends, your family? With whom are your movements subdued, stiff, formal - even timid? With whom, and when - if ever - are you able to be wild and free? Whose movements are stiff, formal, subdued with *you*? What are *your* choices in this dance? What are theirs?

You're also, often, alone on the stage of life: what does your 'solo dance' look like? When you listen to your own body-language, what do you learn?

In some ways this is easier to notice when there's *only* the dance, and nothing else. Even when there's no verbal component to the communication, there's still always communication...

I wander down a crowded street, and find myself swerving to the side as a man walks straight out a shop, looking the other way; then I find myself slowing down automatically, in a kind of sympathy, as an old woman painfully crosses the street in front of me. In principle, all I'm doing is walking down a street: and yet there *is* a kind of dance that's happening here - a dance that involves everyone as 'We'.

What is *your* dance when you're in a street-full of strangers? What moves are *your* choice? And which moves do you make as a response to *others'* moves in this wider dance? What do you feel when you change your intended moves - change your choices - in order to accommodate others'?

Adapting ourselves to others is still a *choice*; especially, adapting ourselves for the approval of others, or to keep others 'happy', is still a choice. And if we're not aware of the choices we make - if we've abandoned our awareness to the 'senses taker' of habit, for example - then we have, in effect, lost that choice. If we abandon that choice, we in effect abandon 'I' - and then can't exactly be surprised if we repeatedly find ourselves engulfed in whatever 'We' happens to be passing by... So another central part of listening to 'We' is learning to listen, very carefully, to 'I'.

One of the weirder paradoxes of 'We' - and one that illustrates well the nature of the wyrd - is that whatever is not being expressed by someone invariably ends up being expressed elsewhere by someone else. It's as though unexpressed anger, for example, has to come out *somewhere*: a kind of automatic, unconscious version of what's known in psychology as 'projection', but projected out

to the wyrd in general rather than onto a selected individual who can be blamed for it. By becoming aware of what *is* our choice, if we find ourselves doing or feeling something that is *not* our choice, then it's probably coming not from us but from 'We', our interaction with others through the wyrd. The computer consultant Gerald Weinberg, borrowing from fellow-consultant Nancy Brown, describes this awareness as 'listening to the inner music': when we're with someone else, and there's a kind of dischord in the inner music, it's time to bring it into conscious awareness - and, if appropriate, conscious action.

I'm talking with a staffer at a client's office, and something's odd. He's talking about his poor relationship with some of his own staff, but his body-language is completely relaxed; then he talks about his excellent relationship with his boss, and yet he's tense, nervous, his voice slightly strained - and *I'm* unaccountably feeling angry. Something wrong here... I pluck up the courage to mention that I'm feeling angry about what he's saying, and I don't know why: there's a moment's stunned silence, and then he tells me the truth - he's terrified of his boss, but has been too frightened of possible repercussions to be able to admit it to anyone. Ah... *that's* what it is... *now* we have a chance to resolve where we've been strangely stuck with this client!

Where have you noticed a similar dischord between what was being said and what *you* felt? Were you able to say what you felt? If so - or, equally, if not - what did 'speaking your truth' ask of you in those circumstances? If you did speak up, what happened?

But this only works when we're rigorously honest with ourselves about what *is* our 'stuff', and what isn't... If we're not, we'll end up 'projecting', onto others, what are actually our feelings that we

want to pretend we don't have: for example, we'll say that *they're* the ones who are angry, not us - because it's too dangerous for us to admit, even to ourselves, that in reality *we're* the ones who are angry. That dishonesty - that *self*-dishonesty - is where the whole mess starts: it always seems *much* easier to blame others than to face the responsibility for our own issues ourselves...

This is why the sociologist Hugh Mackay describes true listening not just as an act of generosity, but an act of *courage*. To be rigorously honest about our own web of beliefs and assumptions - what Mackay calls 'the cage' - is embarrassing, disturbing, even frightening, and always real work: as Mackay put it, "if you're not sensing the strain involved in stepping outside of the cage to listen, then you are probably not listening fully, openly, non-judgementally".

Making a mistake at this point, and projecting my own issues back onto the other person, is a *really* quick way to turn a confusion into a flaming row! The only way out, when this kind of dischord happens, is for me to state what *I* feel - and nothing else. Especially, I have to be *very* careful to phrase it so that it doesn't sound like a criticism. In that instance, I said something like, "excuse me, but I'm getting confused here - I don't know your boss that well, but I'm feeling... sort of... angry... when you were talking about her, and I have no idea why. Can you help me on this?" By putting the responsibility - if any - for the confusion on me, I've made it safe for him to open up, and be clear about the 'We' that's happening between us. But to say this, I have to face all sorts of fears of my own: Am I imagining all this? Have I been projecting my own stuff onto him here? Is he going to clamp down tight - or even explode? More to the point, have I blown it with this client by telling *my* 'truth'?

What's your own experience of this? With whom do you feel safe enough to be fully honest about what you feel? (If



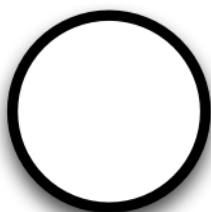
the honest answer to that last question is ‘no-one - not even myself’, you’d be far from alone in this! But notice that you *were* able to be honest about that at least: what difference does that make?)

But if what I’m ‘listening’ out for in myself, in these situations, is actually someone else’s feelings - someone else’s anger, perhaps - then what on earth is ‘We’? If I’m finding myself angry because someone else is, but isn’t admitting it, then where - if anywhere - is the boundary between my ‘I’ and theirs? Weird? Too right it is...

## The circles of We

At this point it’s obvious that we need some kind of model or analogy, to clear away some of the muddiness of these confusing experiences! So let’s go back to the beginning, to that analogy of the Möbius loop as a boundary between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. Because of the twist in that loop, the inside becomes the outside becomes the inside again; there is a definite boundary, and yet at the same time there is no boundary. That’s *wyrd*...

Let’s hang on that that analogy for a while. First there’s ‘I’, all alone - literally, ‘all-one’ - a single circle, or a single loop:

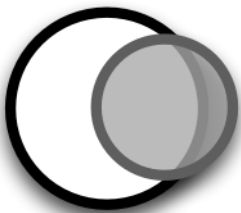


Along comes someone else. From my perspective, that's another person, a 'Thou'; but from *their* perspective, they're also 'I', so now we have two circles, two loops:



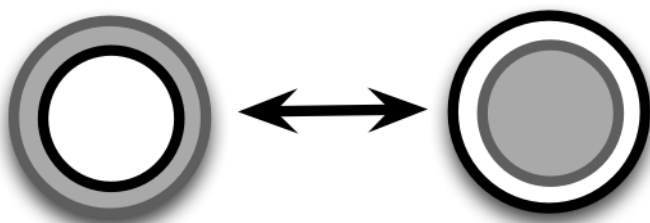
And that's what we'd have if it *was* true that "I am a rock, I am an island": two entirely separate 'I's, never communicating in any way at all. But we do know, from those weird experiences, that there is always some kind of interweaving or overlap. The threads of *wyrd* pass through every point; every choice echoes up and down the threads; there is a boundary between 'I' and 'I', and yet there is no boundary. That area of overlap, we could say, is what we experience as 'We': an area where we *both* experience that we have choices - *if* we allow ourselves to do so...

So in the classic concept of dependence, one person has all but abandoned their 'I' in favour of what they believe 'We' to be:



That 'included' space feels protected - for a while... and also apparently in control of the other person, because there's so much overlap. The assumption is that because the entire focus is on 'We',

there *is* only 'We' - neither 'I' exists, or needs to exist, since each is submerged into the sea of 'We'. But since there *always* 'I', and 'We', and 'I', with no boundary between them, and yet always a boundary, it's as unrealistic as the 'island I' concept. No matter how much we might like to abandon our 'I' into someone else's care - in effect, to try to return to the 'centre of the universe' feeling back in the womb - we are different from everyone else: and if we try to pretend otherwise, there's going to be trouble eventually. By the time we get to classic codependency, the two parties are oscillating between the 'enclosed' and 'outside' positions:



The inner 'I' of the pair is enclosed, protected, yet trapped - there's a sense of being stifled, a need to break out; the outer 'I' feels clung to, is forced to take responsibility for both, and loses the sense of comfort and protection that occurs - for a while - in the 'enclosed' position. So the two end up continually changing places, via any - or many - of the classic 'push-pull' dynamics: clingy, then withdrawn; responsible, then childish; overpowering, then manipulated; demanding commitment, then fleeing from commitment; and so on. What's interesting is that whilst each 'I' is unstable - sometimes very unstable - their 'We' is not: it remains constant, or at least relatively so. Despite all the turmoil, the characteristics - the threads of the wyrd - that are emphasised in their 'We' remain much the same throughout: all that changes is which 'I' of the two is acting out each characteristic...

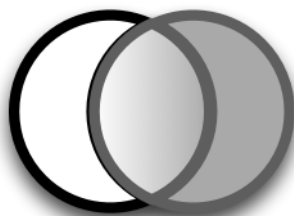
Who do you know whose relationship works in this way: their 'We' is relatively stable, and each 'I' orbits around it in endless instability? Have you been in that kind of relationship yourself? If so, what kind of awareness did you need, about your own 'I', the other person's 'I', and your 'We', in order to change that pattern of instability?

The same codependent Parent/Child pattern also happens on a familial and societal level: adolescents rebel against their parents' authority, and become parents themselves; some self-declared Parent-organisation - the Church, the State, the Party, Big Brother or, at present, the Big Sister which feminist writer Anne Summers describes as 'God's Police' - defines itself as the 'protector' of the people (at a price, which is subservience...), people submit, and then rebel, and the same old revolution creates its own new Parent-figures. In what ways do you find yourself dragged into these larger-scale codependencies? How - if at all - can you break free, to express your own choices as 'I', yet still be part of the greater 'We'?

There's a real human need for 'We' - that spiritual need for 'that which is greater than self'. In dependent relationships - and especially in codependent relationships - what's missing is awareness: the apparent need to hold onto 'We' at any cost is allowed to take priority over almost any awareness of the *personal* choices of 'I'. That creates the tension, because every now and then one or other party will notice that what they're doing is not what they choose; but since their definition of 'We' must remain unchanged, the other party finds that their behaviour is *automatically* changing to compensate. That person then realises that this isn't what they want either, but equally clings to 'We': so round and round the garden they go...

Independence - "I'll never be in relationship again!" - looks like an

alternative, but isn't, because it happens to be impossible - the wyrd makes certain of that... *Inter-dependence*, however, is a genuine alternative:



Each 'I' is seen as having the same size, the same priority - "the needs, concerns, feelings and fears of [each person] are of exactly equal value and importance"; there's a full acknowledgement of both 'I' and 'I'. That each has choices that may vary from the shared choices of 'We' is also fully acknowledged: in a classic magical perspective, the old Christian symbol of the 'vesica piscis' (or fish-bladder shape) between them, is created because the circumference of each one exactly touches the centre of the other. The commitment to 'We' is still there, but it is, if anything, stronger than in a dependent relationship; and it changes dynamically, both as the choices of each 'I' change, and as their shared choices for 'We' change.

Most of all, a stable and constructive 'We' depends on awareness: awareness by each 'I' of their own choices, for themselves and for their 'We'; and awareness also of the natural weirdness in the interweaving threads of 'We'.

## The interweaving of We

'We' is the interweaving of 'I' and 'I'; 'We' is a kind of compound-'I' created by and between us. 'We' is not that which changes; 'We' is that which 'I' and 'I' *chooses*. And it has characteristics of its

own: so much so that a company, for example, is legally a separate entity, a 'person' in its own right, and *defined* as a chosen type of relationship between people. A company's 'purpose statement' is a formal statement of the choices - the function and direction - that make up that 'We'; and if we take up a job with a company whose purpose is unclear, or which clashes with our own choice for 'I', there's going to be trouble... usually for us, since the company's 'We' is considerably larger, and naturally tends to subsume others' choices into itself. In fact *any* large group tends to develop its own 'We', its own direction, its own habitual choices: the 'We' of a football crowd is usually noisy and territorial, whilst a crowd of shoppers out bargain-hunting in the 'Sales' season has a 'We' that's usually quite a bit quieter, but can be *very* possessive...

So we need to understand the boundary between 'I' and 'We' and 'I'. The problem is that there isn't one as such: there is a boundary between each, but the boundary blurs, because our *own* boundaries are blurred, and overlap with everyone else.

To experiment with this, choose a quiet corner in your favourite people-watching cafe. Relax; close your eyes, and allow yourself to become aware of the space around you. Feel the limits of your physical boundaries: become aware of your fingers, your toes, your scalp, your stomach, your backside resting on the chair. And pull your awareness of 'I', steadily inward, tighter and tighter, until it forms a small ball - the smallest space that 'I' can occupy. (Where does this tighter awareness settle? Around your heart? Within your skull? Just above your stomach? Or where?)

Then slowly, steadily, expand your sense of 'I' again, out beyond your skin, out beyond the table you're sitting at, until it fills the whole space of the cafe - you can still hear people talking, sense people moving, but they're now *inside* the space occupied by 'I'. (Note that this is *your* choice, under *your* direction: if at any point it feels too disturbing

or uncomfortable, quietly withdraw your sense of 'I' back towards your physical 'I', and wait until you do feel more comfortable - more certain of your sense of 'I' - before starting again.) Keep expanding, until the traffic outside is enclosed in 'I'; keep expanding until the whole town or city is inside your 'I'; and keep going; and keep going...

At some point, begin to contract 'I' again, slowly, steadily, until you return 'I' to a comfortable, manageable size. (What space do you now occupy? Is the boundary exactly at your skin? Or larger? Or smaller?)

And with that awareness, where exactly in that whole process was the boundary of your 'I'? It overlapped with the 'I' of many other people: where - if anywhere - were the boundaries between 'I' and 'I' and 'I'?

The boundary - whatever it is - denotes the limits of what we might call 'personal space': which takes us straight back to that 'I'm the centre of the universe' problem. If I expand my sense of personal space right out to infinity, then I'm again 'the centre of the universe': everything is me, everything is mine. But it includes, or overlaps, or interweaves, with everyone *else's* personal space - which also, in principle at least, stretch out to infinity. Reality Department requires us to share, whether we like it or not: so what we sense as our boundaries denotes the limits of 'me, mine', outside of which we feel comfortable sharing, but within which we don't *want* to share - or don't feel *safe* in sharing.

Still sitting in the cafe, choose a table where people have to come close to you regularly - to get to the counter, for example - and once again become aware of the feel of 'I'. Focus for a while on an image of a time when you felt entirely safe; notice the feelings that accompany that state. When you're

reasonably certain that you could again recognise that state by the feelings that arise within you then, remind yourself instead of a time when you did *not* feel safe - not so much fear, or danger, as a sense of uncertainty, of unsafety - and note carefully the feelings that accompany *this* state.

Relax; this time you don't need to close your eyes, but remain as aware of yourself as if you had. Pick out someone as they come through the door, and feel your own response to their presence as they move past you. At some point, as they come closer and closer, you're likely to feel a shift within you - that sense of 'unsafety', as their 'I' comes too close for your own comfort. How far away from you does this happen? How much does it change with different people? (A hint: some people will never get close enough to you here for you to feel unsafe, and with a few others you may even feel unsafe as soon as you pick them out.) As soon as that sense of 'unsafety' occurs, 'disconnect' from them by refocussing on your own sense of 'I', and start again with someone else. What do learn, about yourself, and your previously unconscious interactions with others?

Like 'I' itself, every boundary is a *choice*: do I, or We, choose to feel open to - overlap with - this person's 'I', or not? At this moment, in this circumstance, are their choices - or what I sense as their choices - compatible with mine? The point at which the answer changes from 'Yes' to 'No' is what we *feel* as our boundary. When someone else's choices, for whatever reason, happen to pass that point, we then have another choice: to pull in our 'personal space' to a smaller boundary; to accept the feeling of 'unsafety', and work with the fears that arise with it; or to blame the other person entirely for the transgression, and try to force them to change *their* choices, so that we don't have to take responsibility for ours. In these paediarthal days, where so many people are taught that safety is their 'right' but never their responsibility, guess which of these options is more



popular? Time to look more closely at boundaries!

# 11: Use and abuse

We're not alone: we share this world with others - many, many others, human and otherwise. And there are many things that we simply cannot do on our own (one of the more obvious being reproduction, which at *some* point must involve both a male and a female of the species!), and many others which we'd prefer not to do on our own. Some of our 'use' of those others can be difficult for us to face: for example, like every animal, we survive by killing and eating something else - even vegetarian humans and other herbivores do this, although the fact of the killing is often sidestepped because plants show no easily-visible emotions...

We *use* others, and others use us: it's a fact of life - a normal and necessary part of life - and we don't have much choice about it. Where we *do* have choice is in *how* we use, or are used: a choice as to whether our use of, or by, or *with* others oversteps a subtle boundary, and becomes abuse.

Abuse isn't something that 'just happens'. It isn't even something that 'just happens' *to* us. It's *always* linked to a choice on our part: true, it's often the result of a choice to evade responsibility, or a habit of evading choices, but even that, as we've seen earlier, is still a choice. The wyrd passes through everywhere, everyone, everywhen: every thread, every moment, is made up of *choices* - and those inevitable, inexorable twists... So it's up to us: whether we use, or abuse, is up to us - and we're always responsible for that choice. That alone can be hard enough to face: yet facing the other side of that coin - that's it's just as much up to us as to whether we're used, or abused - can be the harshest twist of all.

The problem of abuse - and particularly our own involvement in it - is probably going to be the most uncomfortable part of the wyrd that we'll ever face. There'll be parts of this section that you certainly

won't want to look at - other than to blame others for it (or me, perhaps). But it *is* important to face this: because it's in this one issue that most of us so easily lose most of our power. Only once we understand what's going on, and our own involvement in it, do we start to reclaim our power - our power of choice, our power with others, and our own power-from-within.

## Use and power

The boundary between use and abuse is essentially a problem of power - power-with and power-from-within being on one side of the boundary, and power-over and power-under on the other.

To make sense of what's going on here, you'll need to have a *practical* grasp of the issues about power and fear that we looked at earlier. It might be a good idea to stop for a moment, to go back and review the practical examples in that section, before moving on.

The problem is that we *want* to be used: it's more than just a want, it's a deep spiritual need, a central part of that 'sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of self and that which is greater than self'. Being used - especially, being acknowledged in practice for what we do and how we express who we are - is essential to our well-being: so much so that for many men, and now increasingly for women too, the loss of employment can literally take away their reason for living. But we want to be used *appropriately*; we want to be used with respect, with honour, with integrity; yet we live in a society which barely understands any of those concepts...

How do *you* want to be used? How do you want to use others? In what ways do you *like* being being used? What is the *feeling* you experience when you know that your skills, your knowledge, your sense of self, are being used by you and by others appropriately and with respect? Where, within you, do you feel this?

How do you *not* want to be used? How do you not want to use others? What is the feeling when you, or someone else, crosses that boundary from use into abuse?

In what ways *are* you used by yourself, and by others? In what ways do *you* use others - 'borrow' their skills and knowledge, use their time and other resources, or whatever?

Looking wider, in what ways do others - people you know, people you just hear or read about - use or abuse others? In what weird ways does society condone, or even incite, some kinds of abuse? Find your own examples, but there's a simple clue: look closely at the common usage of the word 'power'...

As we've seen earlier, power is best understood as the ability to do work, as an expression of choice. Since it's closely linked with personal choice, the only real source of power is from within ourselves - our own 'power-from-within' - though it can also arise as 'power-with', from our interweavings with others - in effect, from the choices made by 'We', rather than only by 'I'. Anything else is likely to be abuse... it's as simple as that. Any attempt to shuffle responsibility onto others without their explicit consent is abuse; any attempt to prop ourselves up by putting others down is also abuse - and that includes getting together as a group to put others down, which is not power-with, but a collective form of power-over, or more often power-under. These are all extremely common...

So the fact of abuse shouldn't be a surprise: in the terms I'm using here, many aspects of our society - such as those countless advertising campaigns which depend on fear - are inherently abusive; and with paedarchy running rampant, and true self-honesty being the exception rather than the norm, it could hardly be otherwise. Most relationships have a few threads of abuse running through them somewhere; some relationships - personal, professional, familial or whatever - may have more than just a few of those threads... But there's a simple reason for this: *we're all human*. And human abuse, and human violence, arise from a perfectly human mistake: evading 'response-ability'. *No-one* is immune from this mistake; so no-one is immune from abuse, or is free from responsibility for abuse.

And despite the well-meant wishes of so many would-be social engineers, we'll never eliminate abuse. For it not to exist would require every aspect of the world - every adult, every child, even every animate and inanimate entity - to be fully responsible and fully 'in control' of themselves at all times: this is not an achievable goal... Like 'use', abuse is a thread of the *wyrd* - a major thread - which passes through everyone, everything, everywhere, everywhen: we can never *control* it as such - but we *do* have the choice to direct how it impacts on our own lives, and the lives of those around us. For example, we can play 'victim' if we so choose: but as we've seen, it doesn't actually help *anyone*, especially ourselves. A wiser choice, perhaps, would be to accept, and aim to work *with*, that weird comment that "The world breaks us all - but afterwards some of us are strong in the broken places". Yet it's up to us: there's always a choice, there's always a twist - though sometimes the twists of abuse can be very tangled indeed...

## Context and consent

One of the weirder twists is that there's no such thing as 'abusive behaviour': what makes a given action - or inaction - abusive is

the *context*, not the behaviour itself. For example, hitting someone obviously sounds like abuse: but if you're in a full-blown panic in a burning building, it's quite possible that the *safest* action for a rescuer, both for you and for themselves, would be to hit you hard enough to knock you out - because then they can get you to safety without your panic getting in the way... And sometimes the *absence* of behaviour is abusive: if you're in desperate need of help, and I sit back and do nothing, smiling smugly at your predicament, that would be abuse - it certainly couldn't be called 'power-with', at any rate! What matters is the context, and the *consent* to be used in that way. As long as there's clear consent (preferably conscious consent, though at times, such as with children, or in some kinds of emergency, it isn't always practicable or possible), *anything goes*: it's entirely up to us what behaviour we choose to *share* with others.

Most sports involve a kind of 'play-fighting', a weird cross between competition and co-operation. And some people seem to *need* to play-fight, and to wrestle: as long as it remains a game, by mutual consent, anything goes - and it's *use*, not abuse, because it helps all those involved to find, and extend, the limits of their power and their 'response-ability'. "Yeah, I really like fightin' with me old man", said Lisa to me the other day, "'s'great fun! And we both really get into it, too! The other day", she said, grinning, "he trod on me foot by mistake and I couldn't duck out the way, an' he caught me a great big wallop on the face. Gave me a great big bruise, too... We're always yellin' and screamin' at each other - we have a great time, but Gawd knows what the neighbours think!" Which is a valid point, because in another context exactly the same kind of 'fighting' could have a very different edge, and be all too real...

In what ways do *you* 'play-fight' with others? What do you feel when you play that edge between co-operation and competition, between sharing and selfishness?

The game collapses as soon as anyone takes it too seriously - stops seeing it as a *game* - and tries to 'take control', to gain power-over others, or manipulate their defeat through power-under. What do you feel when the game collapses in that way? What do you feel towards the 'giggle-wrecker' - the one who took the game too seriously, and spoiled it for everyone? When you've been the one who made that 'mis-take', what do you feel towards yourself? And how much do you try to cover up those feelings by blaming others instead...?

Another key part of the context is the distinction between fear and respect. The image comes to mind of a stereotyped 'little old lady' character driving a huge bulldozer down a suburban street: she has enormous power at this moment, and enormous 'responsibility' - and the choices are hers, not ours. Watching her smooth but inexorable progress down the street, what do *we* feel? Respect for her skills? - that's power-with, and acknowledging her power-from-within. Or a hint of unacknowledged fear? - which might lead us to want to take control (power-over), or to mock or belittle her (power-under) until she gives up. The key here is *trust*: when we don't trust, it's fear; when we do trust, it's respect - or possibly foolishness...!

"The key here is *trust*": what's *your* response to someone not trusting you, or respecting your skills and abilities? When others don't trust you, and try to take control, or to mock or belittle what you've done, what do you feel? Are you likely to respond in kind, with your own attempts at power-over or power-under?

Now turn this round: what are others' responses to you when you don't trust them, and try to put them down? Notice how quickly the abuse can echo back and forth... Yet in what

conditions do you *not* get a similar response in kind? What happens then to that apparently endless cycle of mutual put-downs?

Twist this a little further: what's your response when someone does acknowledge your skills and abilities? When others do trust you, and *don't* try to take control, or to mock or belittle what you've done, what do you feel? Are you likely to respond in kind, with renewed respect of those others' skills and abilities? How difficult do you find it to trust their apparent respect of you? If you don't trust, what do you do - and what happens then?

So notice the choices you have here: we *always* have the choice to change a situation for better or worse - the twist is in what it asks from us!

And a further twist in the context of use and abuse is gender - social stereotypes about sex-differences. There are *some* differences - as a friend put it, about both use and abuse, "he was stronger, but I was more persistent!" - yet in reality the differences between the sexes are much less than the differences between individual women, and between individual men. One of the most serious mistakes is to stereotype abuse as something that only men do: abuse is a *human* fault, not a gendered one. An earlier generation of feminists - writers like Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan - acknowledged this: they promoted women's power and women's responsibility, yet were equally aware of women's potential for abuse. But it's a point which, in their rush to blame men for everything, has been conveniently forgotten by more recent 'cuckoo feminists'... a mistake which, by the usual weird twists, is more likely in the long term to drag women back down into powerlessness again than anything men could do - because responsibility and power are inextricably interwoven, and cannot exist without each other. ('Cuckoo-feminism'? It looks like the real thing but hatches out into



a childish monster that destroys everything for which feminism once stood.) The subject-centred stupidity we call 'sexism' goes both ways, not one: and it always hurts *everyone*, not just the ones who are blamed...

Stereotypes can be useful, but help no-one if they're taken too literally: so in many of my examples I've deliberately shown women using power-with in positions of authority - their *use* of others - and also resorting to power-over and power-under in their abuse of others. In facing their own role in abuse, men do have the advantage of knowing that they're at least responsible for *something*; but for some decades now, women have been taught to believe that they're never responsible for anything they do, and particularly not for anything done 'to' them. So you may find this next section particularly hard to face - especially as you may not see much relief until well into the following section... But abuse - and our own involvement in it - is something that we *must* face if we want to find our own power, and especially our power to share with others: because whenever we're abused by ourselves or others, or abuse others or ourselves, *that's* where most of our power is lost. That's the twist: that's the choice... it's up to us.

Facing abuse *does* take courage, so stick with it as best you can: but do be gentle with yourself. Stop for a while, if the going seems to get too rough; and then come back to it again when the courage returns - as it always does. Just keep going, keep going, one step at a time...

## Threads of abuse

We use others, and ourselves, to get what we want and need - that's how we survive. Sometimes it is just 'survival'... But an awareness of how the *wyrd* works, in order to work with it, can help to change that into being *alive* - and a central part of that awareness is in knowing how to change abuse into mutual, respectful, use.

Use takes many different forms, but always has the same intention: to create something which is *shared*, and in which everyone 'wins'. In much the same way, abuse takes many different forms, yet always has the same intention: to offload responsibility or fear onto others - the aim is to 'win' by making others lose, but, courtesy of the usual weird twists, in reality *everyone* loses.

And abuse is much the same for both men and women: women tend to be a bit more personal and a bit more subtle than men, but it comes to much the same in the end... This makes sense in terms of those gender-stereotypes: 'masculine' abuse would be object-centred, and follow the 'hunter' stereotype of small numbers of large, visible actions - which are easily identifiable, and easily labelled as 'criminal'; whereas 'feminine' abuse would be subject-centred, and follow the 'gatherer' stereotype of large numbers of small actions, each one individually deniable, apparently trivial, and easily dismissed as 'ordinary relationship problems', but often adding up to greater overall damage than the 'masculine' forms.

Stereotypes about 'masculine' and 'feminine' abuse can be useful, but as usual we need to be wary about taking them too literally. For example, think back to your own experiences of childhood bullying: open carefully that closet of memories about the students you feared the most... Which of the girls typified 'masculine' abuse, hitting others, using direct threats and intimidation to get their own way? Which of the boys typified 'feminine' abuse, mocking and deriding others, or - that most feared of all forms of bullying - spreading malicious rumours about you?

This time we won't look at how you did the same: that will probably begin to be all too obvious anyway... if memories about that do re-emerge, just notice them, accept them, and quietly move on...

Physical abuse can be a serious problem, but at least its effects are visible. Non-physical abuse is often much more difficult to tackle, precisely because its effects are *not* so visible - which also makes it much more difficult to get help, or even to heal, because there's so little that's visible on the surface. We *can* make some comparisons, and there are some well-known metaphors for this: a 'cutting remark'; an insult is 'a slap in the face'; a man was 'broken' by his supervisor's constant put-downs. But because non-physical abuse *is* so difficult to describe, I tend to look more at how long it takes someone to return to constructive creativity ('constructive' because some people's creativity is turned towards creating further abuse...) - in other words reclaiming power-from-within and power-with, rather than turning that power against oneself or against others as power-over or power-under.

And in those terms, I've suffered my share of both kinds of abuse - physical and non-physical - from others. For example, I've been beaten up by a man who wanted to hurt his ex-girlfriend, and found me an easier target: but that took only days to begin to heal, whereas it took me many months to begin to recover after a woman deliberately brought me to the edge of a nervous breakdown in order to give herself an illusion of superiority - and avoiding facing her own violence... And one of the worst forms of non-physical abuse is 'third-party abuse', giving a false or incomplete story to set up a third party, such as a teacher, a supervisor, a welfare official, or another family member - "I'll tell my big brother on you!" - to carry out abuse on our behalf: most stories must be taken on trust, so the real abuser - *us*, if we're the ones who provided the false story - can easily evade all responsibility, and blame others for the entire incident...

None of this is simple. It's rare that there's a single easily identifiable 'abuser' and 'victim': what there is instead is a weird web of interactions and 'mis-takes', weaving its way through many different people, and often spanning many generations. "I sometimes wish my father *had* hit me in those adolescent arguments of ours",

said a sad friend, going back over childhood issues, “at least it would have released that awful *tension*, constantly holding back his anger... it killed him in the end...” Codependent relationships are often mutually abusive, with each party oscillating between abuser and abused; Transactional Analysis theory also recognises the role played by an ‘enabler’ who appears to take no active part in the battles, but condones the abuse - or self-abuse - by at least one of the other parties, and helps to maintain the blame-game.

So the usual approach to the problem of abuse - find out who’s to blame, and then punish them - is often worse than useless: *everyone* is to blame, and punishment is just another form of third-party abuse... What *does* work is to shift from blame to responsibility: be honest about our *own* part in each incident - courtesy of the interweavings of the wyrd, there’s *always* some - and find our own power to respond, to change the weaving of that thread for everyone. That’s what ‘response-ability’ means.

Any practical approach to the problem of abuse has to begin by accepting its inevitability as part of the human condition: we’re all human, and everyone makes ‘mis-takes’... To learn how to minimise abuse, and to help others and ourselves recover from it, is *everyone’s* responsibility. But it *is* true that most abusive behaviour comes from habits passed down through the generations: and it’s unreasonable to blame others, or ourselves, for what they, and we, have been taught. Yet if the sins of the fathers (and mothers) are fetched even unto the seventh generation, then it’s also true that if we manage to face more than a seventh of our familial ‘bad habits’, we’re doing better than the average - and that at least is an achievable target!

So let’s make a start at this. We already know a number of key points: for example, we know that true power - power-from-within, power-with - cannot co-exist with abuse - power-over and power-under - and it’s up to us to choose which we want. (There are some weird twists that can get in the way, of course, but the choice *is* still ours, and is always there.) And we know that abuse generally

arises from a felt sense of *powerlessness*, combined with a socially-condoned delusion that to be abusive 'is' powerful, and a further delusion that it is possible to 'export' this sense of powerlessness to others.

What we *feel* is not an issue: feelings such as anger, sadness, love and joy arise from the fact of being human - and pretending that we don't feel what we feel usually causes damage, to self and often also to others. What *is* at issue is how we *respond* to those feelings - literally, our 'response-ability'. Whatever we do 'to' others eventually weaves back through the wyrd into our own lives: so it's a good idea to learn to take that responsibility seriously - yet also not *too* seriously!

Our feelings are ours, not anyone else's; nor are they anyone else's responsibility. Uncomfortable as it may well feel, no-one has a 'right' to not be afraid, or to not experience feelings such as embarrassment or shame: and any attempt to offload responsibility for fear or other feelings onto others is not only counter-productive, but is actually a form of abuse. We can be responsible *about* others' fears, but we cannot be responsible *for* them - a subtle but crucial distinction; and since one of the most common sources of abuse is a 'pre-emptive strike' against an imagined threat, we also have 'response-ability' to learn to distinguish clearly between real and imagined threats, and to respond appropriately to each.

The aim here is simply to explore *our* own involvement in abuse, whether to us or by us; and what we *don't* do matters as much as what we do. In a sense, as we'll see, what others do or don't do is almost irrelevant: like all the threads of the wyrd, the threads of abuse pass through everywhere, everywhen, everyone, but the only place we can change them directly is within us, and the only behaviour we can change directly is our own. That's *our* 'response-ability': nothing more, but also nothing less.

Although abuse can occur in any context, and in *any* form, one useful summary is the 'Duluth Wheel', developed by the Duluth

Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, in Duluth, Minnesota, which divides abuse into eight categories: coercion and threats, intimidation, economic abuse, emotional abuse, abusing privilege, isolation, third-party abuse ('using children' in the original), and minimising, denying and blaming. Unfortunately, the original version can only be described as sexist in the extreme, because it was written with the arbitrary assumption that men are the only abusers, and women as the only 'victims': but with one small change, to make it gender-neutral, we can use it for our weirder and wider purpose here - we'll need a little imagination and a little courage, but that's all.

Use the examples that follow to explore your own involvement in abuse: go through your memories to remind yourself of your and others' behaviour which would fit that category of abuse, and your own responses to and interactions with that behaviour. The temptation here may be to rush it, or to blame others (or even to skip the whole thing entirely!); but *don't*, because the more carefully you do this, the more you'll be able to see how you lose *your* power in abuse - and hence also the more you'll be able to reclaim that power.

In each of the examples, I've used the generic term 'Other' to indicate the supposed 'victim' of the abuse. But if we keep it generic, we'll probably learn nothing: so the key point here is to *make it personal*. Read each example several times, each time substituting a different person - a former partner, perhaps, or a work-colleague. Don't just use 'her', or 'him': use their name as you read it. And always use your own name at least once, to explore abuse done *to* you...

When looking at abuse done *by* you, notice how easy it is to hide by blaming others: "Look, she started it, she hit me first". When this happens, bring the focus back to you, and your 'response-ability': imagine someone saying to you, "Yes, we accept that that's your experience, and we neither agree

nor disagree: we're asking you what you could do to change the situation to something better for *both* of you if it happens again".

When looking at abuse done *to* you, you'll probably find instead that there's a tendency to blame yourself: "He always tells me it's my fault, so I suppose I must be to blame". When this happens, bring the focus back to you, and your power, to find alternatives which are responsible rather than blaming: "Yes, we accept that that's what you were told, and we neither agree nor disagree: we're asking you what you could do - what power you have - to change the situation to something better for *both* of you if it happens again".

None of this is likely to be easy or comfortable, but you won't be able to understand your 'response-ability' - and hence your own weird power *with* others - unless you do this. Be gentle with yourself, be careful with yourself, yet "feel the fear, and do it anyway"!

In each of these categories of abuse, there's an attempt to 'control' the Other directly - through power-over - or to manipulate the Other - through power-under - to 'control' themselves on our behalf. Some categories are more object-centred, others more subject-centred; some are more 'masculine', others are more 'feminine'; but ultimately it's all the same. In each case I've also summarised the opposite of that type of abuse - a constructive approach to the same issues - though we'll look at them in more detail in the next section.

The first, and most physical, category is *coercion and threats*; its opposite is 'negotiation and fairness'.

Coercion and threats include: physical assault of any kind - including any hit or slap - to the Other; making and/or carrying out threats to do something to hurt the Other; threatening to leave the Other, to commit suicide, to report the Other to welfare, police, employers, teachers or other external 'authorities'; making the Other withdraw complaints; and making the Other do illegal or other 'forbidden' acts. What is your involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* 'responsibility' here?

The opposite is negotiation and fairness, which includes: seeking mutually satisfying resolutions to conflict with the Other; accepting change; being willing to compromise with the Other. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'responsibility' here?

The next category is *intimidation*; its opposite is 'non-threatening behaviour'. Like coercion, it's often mis-stereotyped as 'male': for example, one woman described her mother's 'normal' behaviour in exactly these terms...

Intimidation includes: making the Other afraid by using looks, actions, gestures; smashing things; destroying the Other's property; abusing pets and other animals as a threat to the Other; and displaying weapons (for example, brandishing a kitchen-knife). What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently?



What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The opposite is non-threatening behaviour, which includes: talking and acting so that both self and the Other feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves and doing things, both in their own ways and with each other. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

Next we come to *economic abuse*, whose counterpart is 'economic co-operation'. Because of the still-prevalent gender-stereotypes about economic roles, this is another category of abuse that has strong gender-overtones: but as before, it works both ways...

Economic abuse includes: preventing the Other from getting or keeping a job; making the Other ask for money; giving the Other a restricted or conditional 'allowance'; taking the Other's money (including trapping the Other into a 'provider' role); and concealing nominally shared resources from the Other (such as not letting family Others know about or have access to family income). What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The opposite is economic partnership, which includes: making money decisions together; and making sure both self and the Other benefit from mutual financial arrangements. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive

behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

And the next category - whose opposite is 'respect' - is *emotional abuse*. This is often type-cast as 'female' rather than 'male', but it is, interestingly, reported as the type of abuse most feared by school-boys from other boys. This is often the most difficult type of abuse to face, because it can take such subtle forms: it's characterised by subject-centred 'magic' words like 'should' and 'ought' and 'must', which are all too easily abused to export blame and responsibility - and as John Bradshaw warned, 'resentment' is, in effect, "a demand that the Other should feel guilty"...

Emotional abuse includes: putting the Other down; making the Other feel bad about themselves; calling the Other names; making the Other think they're crazy; playing mind-games (such as setting up a double-bind for the Other); humiliating the Other; and making the Other feel guilty. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The opposite is respect, which includes: listening to the Other non-judgmentally; being emotionally affirming and understanding, both of self and the Other; valuing opinions of both self and the Other; What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The next category is even more subject-centred: it assumes a right or *privilege* - literally, 'owning the law' - to control the Other's behaviour. Its opposite is 'shared responsibility' - power-with, in other words.

Abusing privilege includes: treating the Other like a servant; excluding the Other from major decisions that concern them; acting like the 'owner' of the Other - assuming 'authority' from social stereotypes; and attempting to be the one to define male and female roles, or other social or familial roles. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The opposite is shared responsibility, which includes: mutually agreeing with the Other on a fair distribution of work and responsibilities; and making family and other 'group' decisions together. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

And the next category is so subject-centred that it refuses to allow 'We' to be anything other than its own 'I' - and hence tries to force the Other into *isolation* from anything 'not-I'. What's missing, of course, is the opposite, which is 'trust and support'.

Isolation-abuse includes: controlling what the Other does, who the Other sees and talks to, what the Other reads, where the Other goes; limiting the Other's involvements and inter-

ests outside of the relationship; and using jealousy or envy to justify actions against the Other. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The opposite is trust and support, which includes: supporting both self and the Other's goals in life; and respecting self and the Other's right to their own feelings, friends, activities and opinions. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The next category is what the Duluth group called *using children*, but is more generically *third-party abuse*: the use or misuse of nominally-uninvolved third-parties such as children on the one hand, or 'authorities' on the other, as a tactic in intimidation or emotional abuse of the Other - and particularly the use of those third-parties as a shield whilst abusing the Other. With children, the opposite is 'responsible parenting'; with others, the opposite is simply being responsible - and honest.

Using children and others for third-party abuse includes: making the Other feel guilty about the children; using the children to relay messages; using visitation (after divorce) to harass the Other; and threatening to take the children away - to isolate the Other from the children. (As you explore this category, expand it to include similar types of third-party abuse, such as using others to relay messages, at school or at work, or giving false information so as to set others up to carry out supposed 'legally-justified' abuse.) What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here?

Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* ‘response-ability’ here?

The opposite is responsible parenting and responsible citizenship, which includes: sharing parental responsibilities; and being a positive non-violent role model for the children. (Again, expand this category outward into other contexts if you can.) What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is ‘the Other’ here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* ‘response-ability’ here?

And the final category is *minimising, denying and blaming*, whose opposite is ‘honesty and accountability’. Perhaps the most extreme example of this that I know was described to me by my friend Rob, an engineering technician: he and another man had been working late one night, so he gave the friend a ride home. Standing in the kitchen, the man’s wife started to berate him about something - Rob didn’t remember what - and at some point the man said “I’m not going to argue with you about this, you don’t know what you’re talking about”. As he turned to walk away, the woman grabbed a heavy cast-iron skillet from off the worktop and, as Rob put it, gave the man “a great big whack round the back of the head with it, which laid him straight out on the floor”. As the man lay there, groaning, the woman dropped the skillet, ran over to him, and screamed “You stupid idiot! It’s all your fault! You shouldn’t have said that! - now look at what you’ve made me do!”

Minimising, denying and blaming includes: making light of the abuse and not taking the Other’s concerns about it seri-

ously; saying the abuse didn't happen; shifting responsibility for abusive behaviour; and saying that the Other caused it. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of abuse, how could you respond differently? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

The opposite is honesty and accountability, which includes: accepting responsibility for self, and about the Other; acknowledging past use of abuse; both self and Other feeling safe in admitting being wrong; and communicating openly and truthfully with the Other. What is *your* involvement in such behaviour? Who is 'the Other' here? Seeing your own involvement in these types of constructive behaviour, how could you create the same in the abusive situations above? What is *your* 'response-ability' here?

That's abuse. But the opposite of abuse is not just 'use', it's how we get to be *able* to change abuse into mutual, respectful use. That's what we call *assertiveness* - asserting 'I' - and after the rough ride we've been through, in looking at abuse, it's what we urgently need to turn to next!

## 17: Girls and boys

Fairly early in pregnancy, a single chromosome in the growing embryo triggers a minute change in the amount of a hormone in the mother's bloodstream: and that's what determines those major shifts in body-structure that we see as the two different sexes. It's weird that a tiny difference in an otherwise unremarkable body-chemical can lead to a huge divergence in life-experience: but just how much of these differences between the sexes are due to nature, or to nurture? How much of the problems, and the advantages, that we have in our lives *really* derive from our sex - and how much from plain old sexist stereotypes, about what we 'ought' to be? Whichever they may be, a wyrd perspective will probably help...

### Nature...

The two sexes *are* different: our experiences of sexuality - to continue our previous theme - are distinctly different, for a start.

Another 'exercise in empathy': how well do you understand how sexual experiences *feel* for the other sex? If you don't know - which most of us don't - then ask... which may bring up some weird responses! Notice the difficulties which arise for you in doing this - or even in response to the *suggestion* to do this... why should this simple question seem so difficult?

Some of the differences are not so obvious, and could certainly be described as 'weird'. In their work on the trance-effects of

postures, based on religious sculptures from around the world, Felicitas Goodman and her colleagues found that exactly the same posture can create entirely different experiences for men and for women, and that different postures are sometimes needed if both sexes are to experience the same effect - and that these sex-differences have been recorded in different traditions throughout history. Goodman's 'Chiltan Spirits' posture from Uzbekistan, for example, requires the women to sit cross-legged, and the men to stand, in order to experience the same trance-image - usually of a circle of women seated round a fire, in this case. Another matched pair of postures, from Cernavoda in Romania, appears to be used for a healing trance: the woman sits in a rather awkward position with one leg straight and the other bent, while the man sits in a kind of pensive or sorrowful position: the men in this posture hardly experience anything at all - other than exhaustion - but their presence means that "the women report having access to powerful reservoirs of energy to do their healing work". Weird... the threads of wyrd do pass through us all, yet it does seem as though our sex can make it harder for us to access some threads, but much easier to access others...

Another subtle difference is simply the different experience of *change*: adult women are changing all the time, weaving their way through many different cycles of the body, whereas men - although they do have their own cycles - tend to experience change as something less internal, and more 'out there'.

There's a beautiful African tale that illustrates this point. Imagine an old woman sitting in front of her hut in the heat and the dust of an eastern evening, with a gaggle of girls squatting in a semicircle in front of her. "A long time ago", she says, "I was a girl, just like you. And then my body changed, and I became a maiden. And through each month, and through each month, my body changed, and I knew



myself as woman. And I met my husband: and through each month, and through each month, my body changed - but he was always much the same. Then by him I became pregnant: and through each month, and through each month, as my baby grew within me, my body changed - yet my husband was always much the same. Then I bore my child, and I fed my child: and through each month, and through each month, my body changed - but my husband stayed much the same. Then I bore my second child, and my third: and with each child, and with each child, my body changed - but my husband, he was always much the same. Now I am an old woman", she says, "my body has changed: I can bear children no more. But my husband, he's still much the same as he ever was. How boring!"

Whether you're a woman or a man, in what ways are you aware of the rhythms and cycles of your own body? In what ways are you aware - if at all - of those of others? Without awareness, there can be no empathy; and without empathy, relationship can become more than a little problematic...

We're never responsible *for* others, but it's useful - to *everyone* - to be responsible *about* others and their constantly changing needs. Reaching out in empathy with others along the threads of *wyrd*, sensing within you the ways that *they* change, and change in response to you, what can you learn about your *own* cycles, your own changes?

It's if we're *not* aware of our cycles that the problems can arise - because we're then likely to project the changes in behaviour onto others instead, blaming *them*, in a subject-centred way, for changing, when the changes are actually in *us*. Unhappy memories, for example, of trying to co-exist with Kara in that office, because, to her, everything was *always* our fault: "you should have *known* it's 'raging hormones' season", she'd yell, "I'm not responsible for my bloody hormones, am I?" For the hormones themselves, no: but

even under their influence - especially if aware of it, which she obviously was - she surely had *some* 'response-ability' to manage how she related to others? But then I can hardly talk, I suppose: "Why are *you* angry?" I snarl, when it's clear that it's just one of my mood-swings that's going on...

Pregnancy is perhaps the extreme example of this - so much so that some women describe it as like being taken over by a kind of parasite: symbiotic, perhaps, but not always benign - especially in terms of what *we* may choose. "I'll tell you what was wrong", says Ursula Le Guin's character Takver, in her novel *The Dispossessed*: "I was pregnant. Pregnant women have no ethics - only the most primitive kind of sacrifice impulse. To hell with the book, and the partnership, and the truth, if they threaten the precious foetus! It's a racial preservation drive, but it can work right against community; it's biological, not social. A man can be grateful he never gets into the grip of it. But he'd better realise that a woman can, and watch out for it." She may be right on the last point: but looking around in our society, particularly at many fathers' *felt* response to the complex issues of abortion, I'm not so sure about that...

Mark, one of our grumpier technicians, is obviously having trouble at home: "Don't ever let your ol' woman get pregnant", he says, while we're sitting in the tearoom; "her brain'll go to pudding, and then you've *really* had it..." A few of us start muttering: "hey, that sounds a bit sexist, Mark..." But then a quiet voice cuts in, unusually excited: it's Mai, one of the senior programmers. "It's *true*!" she says; "all the time I was pregnant with Anna, I had to struggle to keep my mind working, and I still don't think I've got it all back yet". Mai's done both her master's degree and doctorate *and* had her first child since moving here from overseas seven years ago: she's no sluggard, and no fool. For all his surly sexism, perhaps Mark might have a point...

Pregnancy affects everyone differently - including the fathers who so often get forgotten, and who *can* help a great deal when they're allowed to be involved! It can be a time of wild changes for everyone: so once again, it calls for mutual respect - and for empathy, not sympathy. In what ways can *you* help in creating this? Whether you're a woman or man, what 'response-ability' do you have?

The one obvious difference between women and men is that women can bear children, and men cannot: and that in itself has some some weird results. Women have a kind of literal immortality built into them - an immortality which men can only access through women. If she so desires, a woman needs no *direct* contact with a man in order to become a mother; but to be an active father, a man is entirely dependent on a woman's presence - a dependency which can easily lead to all kinds of abuses, in both directions. Some societies resolve the problem by building a philosophy of *personal* immortality - either by 'redemption', as in Christian theology, or through reincarnation, as in eastern religions or early Celtic concepts. But where the only available 'immortality' is through children and grandchildren - such as in Judaism - it tends to lead to 'ownership' of children (and arguably of women too): hence, for example, all those endless 'the son of... the son of... the son of...' lists of patrilinearity in the Bible...

It's useful to explore this dependency through empathy, by the age-old trick of inverting the options - and exploring the reality of that inversion.

If you're a woman, imagine that you have no way of bearing children on your own: if you want to be a parent, you have no choice but to involve a man, to bear the child for you. Explore

how you'd *feel* in that scenario: would you succumb to a sense of emptiness and purposelessness if no man would have you, perhaps - or even try to trap a man into depending on *you*, to hide your dependency on him?

If you're a man, imagine that you have 'immortality built into you', in the ability to bear children: but the responsibility - and the risks - are yours alone, and women have no way to reach that sense of immortality except through you. How does it *feel* to be depended on in that way - and to have that responsibility for others as well as for yourself?

Both these scenarios are inverted from physiological fact: but how much are they true in other senses? Explore those twists in reality for a while...

Many of the old stereotyped gender-roles arose from real physical differences: many of them quite small, but crucial in terms of survival for a society always on the edge - as most were until well into this century. A surprising number of sex-differences can be categorised under the old 'gatherer/hunter' split: male anatomy focusses the strength in the upper body, and is geared for high-power but lower-endurance tasks typical of a hunter, while female anatomy focusses the strength more in the lower body and is geared for lower-power but higher endurance tasks typical of a gatherer - hence the comment, from the Vietnam War days on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, that "women can carry only four-fifths of a man's load, but can carry it half as far again". Even in city-based societies, the same stereotypes still have their validity: women tend to be better than men at 'multi-tasking', and at picking out patterns in an overall structure, but tend to have more difficulty than men at spatial tasks such as reading a map 'upside-down' or judging the exact distance between their car and the next. It's these weird differences that emphasise that it's useful for *everyone* if we *can* be allies for each other!

Given the omnipresent ‘incentives’ to complain - such as that “special attention which is the prerogative of the miserable” - it’s all too easy to see the disadvantages of our life, or the advantages that others seem to have: but what are the *advantages* of being the sex that *you* are? What do you *not* have to face because of the type of body that your ‘I’ wears?

And how true for you are those stereotypes about the ‘typical’ man or woman? How much is the *opposite* of that stereotype true for you?

Quite minor physiological differences can have significant effects on our emotional behaviour, too. Most men will remember all too well the childhood admonition that ‘big boys don’t cry’: but it would be more accurate to say that big boys *can’t* cry - whereas small ones certainly can... - because a specific ‘female’ hormone, tightly linked with the ability to cry, shuts down in males during puberty. It’s much the same reason why many women - often to their intense frustration - find themselves crying when, in reality, they’re angry; and conversely, for men, the inability to express emotion in tears, as they were able to do in childhood, often leads them to express sadness as anger - especially in times of grief. Weird... but that’s the way our bodies work - and it’s important to learn to work *with* it.

There *are* differences between the sexes - and important ones at that. But in many ways the differences between the sexes, in practice, are far less than the differences between individuals - each one of us - regardless of their sex: the *intra*-gender differences, technically speaking, are far greater than the *inter*-gender differences. But often it won’t seem that way: not because of our nature, but because of our nurture - the expectations that were thrust upon us by others in the society and family into which we were born.

Often we don't have much choice about what we've been handed by nature (though a little persistence can often pay dividends!); but we *do* have choices about our nurture - especially once we start to unravel some of the weird twists that can *seem* so 'natural', 'just the way things are'...

## ...or nurture?

Feminist theory draws a useful distinction between sex - the facts of physiology - and *gender*, which is more of a stereotyped role imposed on us by society's subject-centred expectations of what boys and girls 'ought to be' - constructing, from infancy onwards, a picture of 'proper' behaviour for women and men. For example, there's that pervasively nasty little nursery-rhyme:

"What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all things nice - that's what little girls are made of. What are little boys made of? Snips and snails and puppy-dogs' tails - that's what little boys are made of."

"Oh no, not *that* nursery-rhyme!" said Fred, who's now in his sixties. "My mother thought it was wonderful: she put a framed copy of it above my bed, and she used to recite it to my sister and I every night - she had no idea how much I *hated* it. It made me feel like I was being blamed for everything, and that my sister was always perfect, whatever she did - and that's certainly how it seemed, because I was always getting into trouble on her behalf. I hated it so much that in the end I *did* start to act like I was made of 'snips and snails and puppy-dogs' tails': and Mother didn't like that *at all* - even though that's what she'd told me, night after night, that I was supposed to be..." "Fair enough", says his partner Sylvia, "but

how would you like to be told, endlessly, that you have to be *nice* to everyone? ‘Sugar and spice’ indeed! - we always had to look so damn ‘nice’ that we were never allowed to play out in the street, like you could, in case we got our clothes dirty!” They both laugh: a healing laughter...

Innocent nursery-tales - or a serious source of sexist stereotypes? What do you *feel* in response to what that rhyme says about *you*, about what you’re ‘made of’? Explore some other songs and stories of your early childhood: looking back through the feelings of that time with a more adult empathy, how much have the gendered ‘morals’ of those tales pervaded your life - and your choices now?

Nature and nurture are so closely interwoven that it’s often hard to tell the difference: though they’re both part of our *wyrd*, that much is for certain! One solution to the problem is to take the stereotypes *as if* they’re true, and then twist them around a bit... This is what Jungian psychology does: it starts with basic stereotypes of ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’, and weaves outward through the complex threads that are described as ‘archetypes’, until it arrives at a richer, deeper, wider fabric that approximates to a description of the *wyrd* itself.

It’s a useful tool: but like all such tools, there’s a real danger in taking it too literally. I’ve seen quite a few ‘women’s spirituality’ texts, for example, that insist, almost in a kind of Jungian parody, that the moon - or whatever - is *always* ‘feminine’, and likewise that intuition, nurturing, sharing, peace-loving and so on are human attributes that only women have, whilst only men are violent, competitive, controlling... Not only are such ‘essentialist’ ideas little more than an embellished version of those childish sugar-and-spice/snips-and-snails stereotypes, but they’re also exactly what earlier feminists fought *against* - because they knew how much those stereotypes stultified women’s choices. As Jung’s concept of

the 'animus' and 'anima' - 'the man within the woman' and 'the woman within the man' - make clear, *every* thread passes through *every* one of us: everyone, everywhere, everywhen. As we saw earlier with those issues of use and abuse, perhaps the only real 'gender-difference' here is in which threads tend to show more easily on the surface...

It's worthwhile looking at some of the standard gender-stereotypes - 'masculine' strength and courage, 'feminine' beauty and nurturing - and exploring their opposites *within yourself*. So, for example, what is *feminine* strength, *feminine* courage? What is *masculine* beauty, *masculine* nurturing? What form do they each take within *you*? What form do they take in others - particularly those of the 'wrong' sex, according to those stereotypes?

Take a look around you - at how you interact with others, at how others interact with you, at images in the media and elsewhere. How much do those standard gender-stereotypes dictate how you, and others, relate with each other? Make a point of looking for those 'opposite' threads - such as feminine courage, or masculine nurturing - in everyone you meet: what difference does it make to how you perceive them, and relate with them?

Another important 'nurture' issue arises from the dominant role of the mother in most children's upbringing: even where the father is permitted to be present at all - which he's not for a surprisingly high proportion of families - he's far more likely than the mother to be away from the home, at work or elsewhere. The result is that girls and boys tend to have quite different problems in what Jung described as 'individuation' - the *spiritual* process of identifying 'I', and defining boundaries between 'I' and 'not-I', which comes to a head in adolescence.



The problem for girls is to *separate* from the mother, to identify herself as an individual in her own right. From birth onwards, she's known herself as 'same as' her most prominent - perhaps only - parent: so it's easy for her to regard herself as an *extension* of the mother - and courtesy of the usual subject-centred confusions, many mothers do treat their daughters in that way, even to extent of sharing each others' clothes. So the late teen years, when the *need* for individuation usually becomes too strong to suppress or ignore, can be a suddenly explosive time - and particularly hard for the mother, who may well feel she's been betrayed, or at least unfairly attacked. But it's actually a kind of wrestling, in which the daughter is trying to find *her* own strength and power - and *needs* someone to push against, someone who will push back hard, but will still let her 'win'. As one wise friend - a grandmother - commented to me the other day, "of course it's 'unfair' - but the main task of the mother of a teenage daughter is to be in the wrong!"

The boys' problem is somewhat different: they've known from birth that they're *not* 'same as' their mother, but that's about it. Right to the end of primary school, they've lived in a world populated either mostly, or entirely, by women: hence many, perhaps most, boys have no idea of who they are, or what they're 'for' at all - and almost the only images they have about what it is to be male come from the media's mangled stereotypes, or from women's often disparaging remarks. Sometimes the only 'self-definition' that boys have is a fear-driven *negation* - that they're not-female, not-homosexual, not-weak, not-cowardly and so on; and since, by its nature, the wyrd keeps reminding them that they *are* all of these things, in one sense or another, they may well try to 'export' those fears, through 'gay-bashing' or similar kinds of scapegoat-abuse.

The systematic, if not obsessive, 'pro-feminist' denigration of masculinity and maleness in the past few decades has certainly made the problems worse - there can be no doubt about that. But throughout history, boys have always been easy 'marks' for any group or cult that seems to offer them *any* sense of meaning and purpose: and

the spiritual *need* for ‘a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of self and of that which is greater than self’ is so strong that it almost doesn’t matter what the group is or does, as long as it *does* seem to offer that spiritual ‘security’. The fanaticism of many sports-fans may seem pointless to most of us, but it’s actually one solution to this problem: and least it’s a relatively benign one, because many cults and cliques are not. Where most girls seem simply to need someone to wrestle with - in one sense or another - most boys do seem to *need* this sense of group-membership to provide them with a stepping-stone to personal identity: and if our society doesn’t seem to care what form this takes, it can hardly complain at the results! Inaction and indifference are *choices*, even at a societal level: “there’s always a choice”, says the wyrd, “but there’s always a twist...”

Look back - or within - your teenage years, at that crucial period of individuation: that time of becoming *yourself*, as an independent - and sexual - being. Was it a time of turmoil for you, as it was - and is - for so many others? Understanding a bit more about the nature of abuse - and being aware that blame for the past - whether of others, or yourself - helps no-one, look a little closer: what did you do to others, and to yourself? In what ways did you try to export those confusions to others - or try to ‘buy being liked’ by ‘importing’ others’ inner chaos? How much do those choices then still affect your life now - especially in the ways in which you relate with others?

What was happening to your peers then - how did *they* cope? In what ways did you allow *their* choices to influence how *you* relate with others - both then and now?

By the time we get to adulthood, the basic gender-stereotypes can be summarised in two simple matched pairs of statements. The first of

these 'summaries of sexism' is the ubiquitous assumption that 'men *do*; women *are*'. Men are defined in terms of what they *do* - "what are you? oh, a used-car salesman... how nice... see you!" - or in terms of some arbitrary, external definition of success - "February's 'Salesman of the Month': that's *good*"; but they often struggle to be acknowledged for who they *are*, as human *beings* rather than 'human doings'. By contrast, women are acknowledged for who they are (or rather, who they *appear* to be - hence a huge and highly profitable cosmetics trade...), but often have to struggle to receive any acknowledgement of the vast amount of work that they *do* - "well, isn't that what women are *supposed* to do? what's special about that?" These stereotypes permeate through every aspect of our society: every Mother's Day the cards are about 'mother's love', and the advertisements are for flowers, for fashions, for perfumes, or (the nearest to acknowledgement that mothers *do* indeed work!) for household utensils; every Father's Day they're for tools, for car parts, for paints and glues - and ghastly socks and ties! - and the cards talk more about 'fatherly *duties*'. But these are stereotypes which are surprisingly hard to challenge - even within ourselves. It all seems so much a 'fact of life': and yet the weird twist is that it is, in reality, nothing more than a *choice* - though one that greatly affects how we relate with each other.

The other matched-pair makes stereotyped assumptions about our inner worlds: "women don't think, *can't* think", it says; "men don't feel - *can't* feel". Although some male politicians, and some feminist theorists, seem determined to prove the stereotypes true in their own case, they *are* no more than assumptions. Perhaps because they'd gone against those stereotypes, most of the women engineers at the research establishment were above the average of their male counterparts; the same seemed to be true of the male nurses at the hospital. But breaking free from those stereotypes can be surprisingly hard work...

To illustrate this point, let's do another of those inversions, and assume a stereotype of 'men *are*, women *do*'. It's just another choice: but it may seem a weird one...

Imagine, as a woman, that you will only get acknowledgement for what you *do* - or appear to do. People aren't interested in *you* at all, and especially not in what you feel: they're only interested in the size of your purse. Everything hinges on status: without that, you're *nothing*, especially to the other sex - so status, and a sizeable purse, are your only hope for a family, or even for friendship, of a kind. If that's the stereotype, how would you relate with others of your own sex? If the other sex seems interested only in your status and your ability to act as their 'provider', how would you relate with them? If status is everything, how safe would you be in expressing what you *feel*? And how much would you rely on outward 'symbols of success' to shield yourself from inner uncertainty? Since no-one takes any notice of how you feel, how easy - or not - would it be for you to care about your *own* appearance and health - or would you expect to have to sacrifice it in the desperate search for that elusive 'status'?

And imagine, as a man, that you will only get acknowledgement for what you are - or *appear* to be, rather - and even that 'acceptable appearance' is set within tightly defined limits which change wildly according to the whims of fashion. Although people will pay lip-service to what you say you feel, no-one seems to have the slightest interest in what you think, or even in what you do - everything you do is either unnoticed, or taken for granted. Everything hinges on how you look: without that, you're *nothing*, to anyone - especially as you get older, and are less 'desirable'. If that's the stereotype, how would you relate with others of your own sex? If the other sex seems interested only in your appearance, and in your ability to prop up *their* all-important status, how would you relate with them? If appearances are everything, how safe would be in expressing what you *really* feel? And how much would you rely on artificial aids to prop up your appearance, in order to

shield yourself from inner uncertainty? Since no-one seems to notice what you do, how easy - or not - would it be for you to care about your work?

Again, these do have their counterparts in the so-called 'real' world: but how much do those 'natural' stereotypes - "men do, women are; women don't think, men don't feel" - still dominate in our society? Those are the choices that our society 'chooses' for us: yet what are the twists that arise from them?

Sometimes breaking free of the stereotypes can seem more trouble than it's worth. The weird fuss over 'the first woman to...' - doing something that seems quite ordinary and natural to the woman concerned - leaves many a woman feeling more like a performing monkey than the professional that she is. And 'nice guys' often pay a painful penalty for being open and empathic, because many women want to "practise having a male friend without causing emotional damage" - as one friend put it - yet fail to notice the damage they *do* cause whilst they're 'practising'... So it's often essential to be well aware of what we're doing before we breach the stereotypes - and to be clear about the boundaries of 'I'.

Yet the *wyrd* passes through everyone - every one of its threads. And each of us - and the choices we make - are expressions of the *wyrd* and its weavings. These gender-stereotypes place artificial boundaries on those interweavings, and greatly limit the range of possibilities available to us - for no real benefit to anyone. In the name of equality, if nothing else, it's wise to challenge them - especially within ourselves.

But George Orwell's famous warning applies here as much as it does in politics: if we don't take care in creating our 'equality', "All are equal" can easily mutate into "Some are more equal than others" - and that's exactly what's happened with those gender-stereotypes. Over the past few decades 'Western' societies have done a great deal

to tackle the women's side of those matched-pairs: much has been done to acknowledge what women *do* - and have always done - and no-one can reasonably doubt that women *do* think, and have as much right as men to say what they think. But the other side of the equation - acknowledging who men are, and what they feel - hasn't yet happened: if anything, the stereotype has become even more entrenched, and few people - feminists especially - seem willing to face it. That's been our society's choice, if only by default: but there's always a twist, says the *wyrd*, and the twist seems to be that unless we tackle the *whole* of the problem of sexism, we'll end up right back where we started, or worse - which would not be a good idea... If we want genuine equality of the sexes, nurturing the full expression of the *wyrd* within each and every one of us would seem to be the only way to go.

## Nurturing the *wyrd*

Equality is a difficult concept, and gender-equality especially so: as we saw a while ago, in all sorts of issues such as the public provision of toilet space, identical treatment is often far from 'equal'! But the *wyrd* passes through us all: with very few exceptions - most of which *can* be attributed to nature rather than nurture - almost all so-called 'gender-issues' are essentially *human* ones. And it is disturbing to see just how one-sided most ideas of 'gender equality' have become: most governments now have an 'Office for the Status of Women', or some such department, for example, but few - if any - have anything resembling an 'Office for the *Safety* of Men', which - given the social stereotypes of gender - would be the effective equivalent for men's concerns.

The front page of the newspaper consists of a story about a TV anchorwoman who'd 'collapsed' at the newsdesk, and

all the worries about her health; the back page, of course, is full of sport. Women's safety; men's status... priority news, it seems. Yet side by side, tucked away in a forgotten corner near the middle of the paper, are two items apparently almost too trivial to mention: about a leading woman novelist winning a major international award; and a man crushed to death in another building-site accident. Women's status, men's safety - or lack of it - as invisible as ever...

We can't do much individually about major social stereotypes like these, but it's certainly worthwhile exploring how they affect the way we think - and the way we interweave with others in the wyrd. If true equality would mean that "the needs, concerns, feelings and fears of women and of men are of exactly equal value and importance", how much do the images in the media and in our society in general support this? How much do those images influence your *own* attitudes to men and to women? And once you start to see those influences, what can you do to counter them - both in yourself, and in your relationships with others?

Equality goes far deeper than merely that between men and women, girls and boys: it's about understanding that *everyone* is "equally deserving of respect" - simply for being who they are, as an expression of the wyrd. There's always a choice, there's always a twist: given the nature of the wyrd, choosing to nurture a genuine equality for everyone will bring us face to face with some very twisted attitudes - especially within ourselves...

There's always a choice: so what do *we* choose? If power is 'the ability to do work, as an expression of choice', what is our power? That's up to you, says the wyrd...

Germaine Greer once commented that feminism was about “exploring all the possibilities of what it is to be fully human, in a woman’s body, and from a woman’s perspective”: a committed exploration of the *wyrd*, yet understanding, and accepting, that there *is* such a thing as sex, there *is* such a thing as gender - and there is such a thing as our own, peculiar, particular body. The same could be said for men, too, of course - otherwise it wouldn’t be equality!

In what ways do you commit yourself to “exploring all the possibilities of what it is to be fully human”, in your *own* body, and from your *own* perspective? In what ways can you support others in doing so? In what ways can you support everyone in doing so?

Each of us is an expression of the *wyrd*, a clustering of its threads; a series and sequence of *choices* - each with its own inevitable twist, and its own ending. Our power arises from awareness - awareness of ourselves, of others, and of the *wyrd* itself - and from choice, for ourselves, and *with* others. So what *do* we choose? Answer: it *is* always up to us. But nurturing choice in the infinite ‘We’ that we share with others - treating everyone, including ourselves, as “equally deserving of respect” - eventually weaves its weird way back to us: it’s a wiser way to go.

The catch is that what it asks for from us is *trust*: trust in the *wyrd*, trust in ourselves, trust in others - boys, girls, everyone. And it also asks us for commitment: to be ourselves, to be *here*, to be *now*, and accept the *wyrd* for what it is - the interweaving of everyone, everywhere, everywhen. Yet there are times when trust and commitment can be very hard to find... and that’s when trusting just a little - enough to trust our *knowing* in the *wyrd* - can make all the difference in our relationships with others, and with ourselves.