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Why Enchantment, and Why Now?



1. Enchantment matters

The wind at dawn has secrets to whisper
Don't go back to sleep!

Mewlana Jalaluddin Rumi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

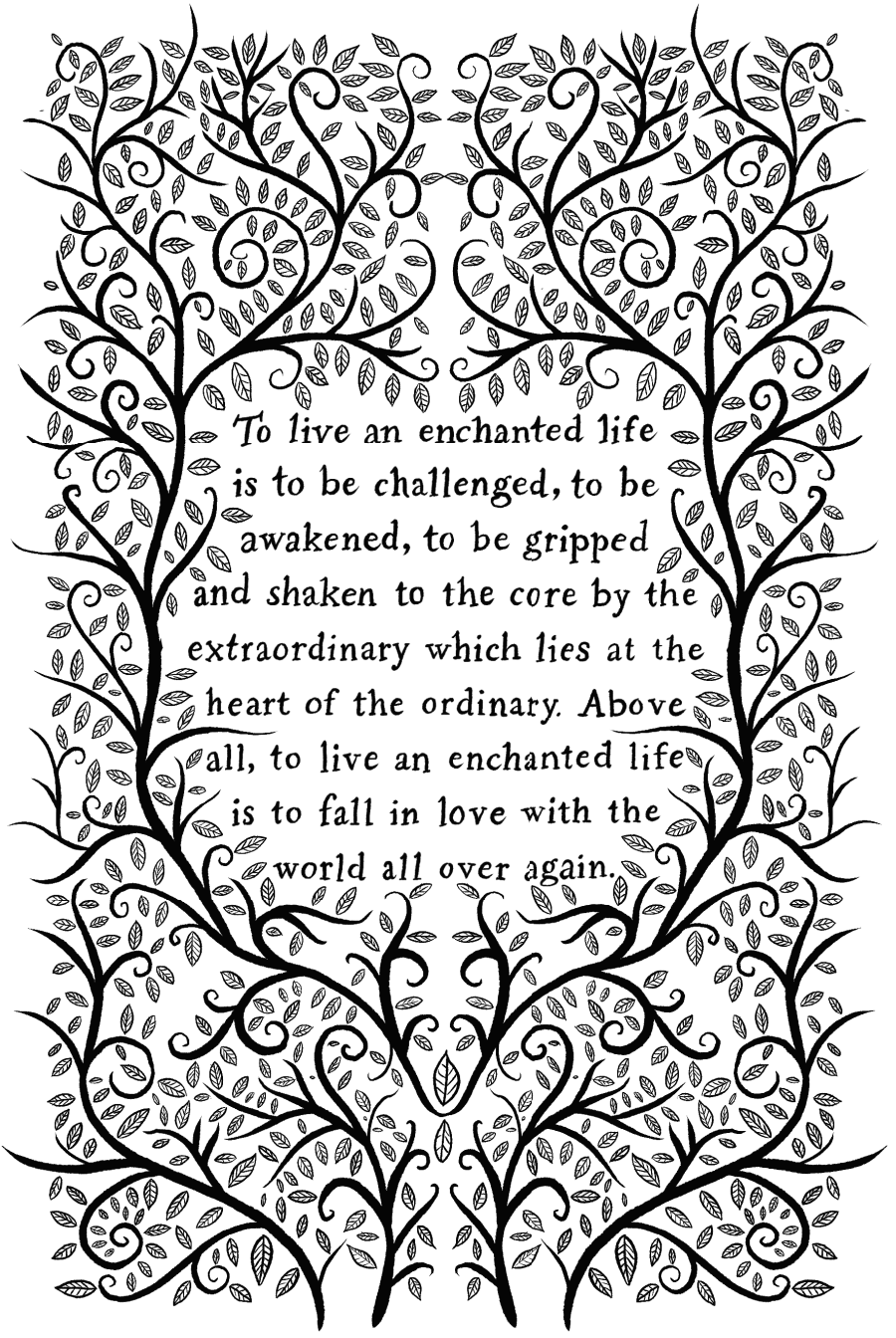
And in one sense, it's true: on average, human beings in Western countries today are safer, healthier and wealthier than in any other civilisation in the history of the world, and life expectancy continues to rise along with these objective markers of 'quality of life'. But there's a catch. The statistics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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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