

The Abyss, Death, and Butterflies

Gerald del Campo · 12 July 2026

There's nothing in philosophy which could not be said in everyday language.

—Henri Bergson

The Supernals. Kether, Chokmah, Binah. We can't get there fast enough, but no one understands the big hurry. It seems like a race to the top, but what are we chasing? What about Knowledge & Conversation? Yes, the Supernals are the ultimate triad, but anyone who feels they can skip the rest of it does so at their peril.

From below the Abyss, we can perceive little bits of the Supernal's nature, but only through lessons learned on the other triads. It's an illusion. Above the Abyss, there is no triad. *"The three in one, the one in three."* The number three is an important one. Suffice it to say that *"Kether is in Malkuth and Malkuth is in Kether, but after another manner, and that Malkuth reflects Kether, for that which is above is like that which is below, and that which is below is like that which is above."*

The triads on the Tree of Life are organized in a hierarchy, with those above the Supernals receiving the highest priority. We begin our journey from the bottom, but if we remain aware, we can also see that we are simultaneously descending from the top. Each triplicity provides insights and mysteries about the triads both above and below it. They reflect the different aspects of a person's existence.

There are others, of course. Aleph, Mem, Shin; The Father, Son, The Holy Ghost; Sulfur, Mercury, Salt; The Lovers, Devil, or Chariot; The higher self, the conscious and unconscious self, etc, are all aspects of the magician's mind on different planes of existence.

The eight branches of yoga conceal their own triplicity. The Yamas, Niyamas, Asana, and Pranayama are collectively referred to as the “External Yogas” and are associated with the sympathetic nervous system in terms of function and effect. The “inner yogas” are Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi, which lead to the parasympathetic state. Each of these contributes to their own triplicity: Ida, a lunar quality; Pingala, a solar quality; and Sushumna, the child of their conjunction. Furthermore, Ida, Pingala, and Sushumna can be further explored with the use of the tarot and the triplicities above.

If you prefer a more modern attribution, one can certainly be made using psychoanalytic concepts of the conscious, unconscious, and superconscious. These three aspects comprise universal consciousness.

If you want to explore this on a personal level, consider the different aspects of “you.” First, there is the “public you,” which is how you and others perceive you. Then, there is the “shadow you,” the part of yourself that only you can see and which may still be largely hidden from your own awareness. Finally, there’s the “integrated you,” which emerges when these two seemingly opposite aspects are united to create something new. This concept relates to our goal of achieving the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel.

We may be tempted to skip some of the Work because we instinctively understand that the knowledge of the angel does not occur in the biblical sense until one has crossed the Abyss. We may be overenthusiastic. Praise, medals, jewels, shiny stars, certificates, and other forms of social currency drive us, pushing us into a race with our peers and even with ourselves, creating a sense of anxiety about the Work that could, in some instances, strip it of the joy of doing it.

It is a not-so-hidden secret that the yogas can be used while moving up the tree to prepare us for our journey across the Abyss.

The Abyss

So, what happens when we get to the Abyss? That light-capturing black hole that nothing escapes. That mysterious lava tube that consumes all that dare swim too

close and spits one back out into a completely different reality?

This doctrine is extremely difficult to explain; but it corresponds more or less to the gap in thought between the Real, which is ideal, and the Unreal, which is actual. In the Abyss all things exist, indeed, at least in posse, but are without any possible meaning; for they lack the substratum of spiritual Reality. They are appearances without Law. They are thus Insane Delusions. Now the Abyss being thus the great storehouse of Phenomena, it is the source of all impressions.

—Crowley, *Little Essays Toward Truth*

We are often told that we go there to die or, worse, to face the demons of our own creation, leading to our complete destruction until nothing of ourselves remains. Everything that isn't aligned with our true selves is burned away, leaving us feeling naked and exposed. If the process of alchemy is successful, we are reborn, refined, renewed, and refreshed, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

Below the Abyss, everything appears as a multitude of divisions. We are not one person but a collection of complexes generated by our circumstances and interactions with our environment. Although we may not always realize it on a conscious level (some may never realize it at all), every single one of those aspects behaves as though complete and includes its own desires and aspirations. We are, therefore, conflicted by our plurality. I'll repeat it: *We are Legion*.

Crossing the Abyss is a process of refining matter. It is inner alchemy in which all those aspects or complexes are first exposed and isolated and then finally, purged to reveal the true nature of the perfected being. Alchemical Gold. It is a death, and those who accomplish it are given the title of Magister Templi, whose throne is ruled by Saturn, as illustrated on the Tree of Life.

You may be wondering why the hell anyone would bother to go through all that. The answer is quite simple. The only way to the truth, the light, and ultimately to the salvation that only knowledge can provide us is attainable by crossing that vast desert. On the other side is true wisdom. It is Knowledge that saves us: Gnosis, not

faith. One of the most important ways to approach this journey safely is revealed by the oath:

"I will interpret every phenomenon as a particular dealing of God with my soul."

This line hints at what survives the Abyss if the aspirant is successful in acceptance, and the absence of lust of result. Everything else is destroyed. Your true essence will survive the journey. Kiss everything else goodbye.

Just like one would interpret a Tarot reading, so must we now interpret every aspect of our interaction with the universe. It is only with this focus and attention that we can maintain a healthy mental attitude.

So why do we fear death? Wouldn't it be a lot easier without fearing our total annihilation? Yes, it would be, but that is the point. To Know, To Dare, To Will, and To Keep Silent. The point is to move forward despite one's fear.

"You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave."

But the very ego that protects us and makes it possible for us to exist in this world of duality is the very thing that both fears its ultimate destruction and leads us to the Abyss at the same time. And yet, that aspect of our consciousness can enter the Abyss, but it cannot exit because it is annihilated while it is there. Stew on that for a while. Talk about dualities. Again, that idea of purification to expose that which remains is reflected in the concept of the "one and three, and the three in one."

Death

Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye.
—François de La Rochefoucauld

Since crossing the Abyss has been so closely compared with death, perhaps understanding death is a way to lighten our load as we journey into the Abyss. After all, not only is the experience strikingly similar, but the ego is obsessed with

it, which is why for humans, the afterlife has been a significant preoccupation since the time of Gilgamesh, the Egyptians, and in more recent history, Dante. Recently, Neanderthals have been discovered buried with seeds and other items intended to provide utility after death, prompting us to consider death for a very long time. Death and the afterlife are parts of universal consciousness and have been since the beginning of time.

I believe the reason we tend to obsess about death is that our brains are programmed to predict the future. Recent neurological research has shown us that our brains are constantly trying to calculate what comes next, often without our awareness. It's just how we are made. This is why humans can't conceive a future without themselves in it, and this is probably why humanity created and designed religion to contain an afterlife. This recent neurological discovery is worth remembering.

Make no mistake, I'm not trying to reduce magick to psychology or the concept of Self or Will to the realm of electrical and hormonal impulses. I'll write about that at a later time. Magick is much greater than that, even considering the scientific verification of some of its elements. Scientific verification makes metaphysics that much more exciting. Let's agree that much of it is beyond the working of the conscious mind, that it bears mentioning before going any further.

Crossing the Abyss is like death; therefore, we must attempt to come to terms with it.

Some birds aren't meant to be caged; their feathers are just too bright.
And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock
them up, does rejoice. I guess I just miss my friend.
—Morgan Freeman as "Red" in *Shawshank Redemption*

Every day, we face the option to fight, surrender, or adapt. Change is all around us. It is constant, and it is inescapable. It is not always something we can control. It is impossible to adapt to change in earnest without first making a genuine surrender. If we have any fight left, we will duke it out with the universe to try to achieve some control over situations. And we only surrender once we have

realized that we could have had it from the beginning, if we were rational creatures, and realized that we have no control. It's exhausting, but that's the nature of the ego.

"There is the dove, and there is the serpent. Choose ye well!" (AL 1:57)

There is a magical application of surrender. It involves the True Will and Love, as you might have guessed. How these two ideas, fight and surrender, manifest in those of us who practice magick is in the choice to control or adapt. But there is no choice. More on this some other time.

This phenomenon, this struggle, is seen in all the world's mythologies. In America, the pervasive myth of rugged individualism, which emphasizes self-reliance and the idea of picking oneself up by the bootstraps, along with other stories of American exceptionalism, prevents us from understanding the concept of adaptation because our myths don't contain the idea of surrender. That doesn't make us victorious. It means we get our asses kicked, and we are unable to cope because we don't have a mechanism to understand that surrender is how we move from things we can't or shouldn't change to things that we can. Americans must fight or die trying because our culture dictates that giving up on things that don't work is akin to failure. Surrender, defined as the ability to readily abandon one's ideas and desires when they are not feasible, is not something that we are very good at. Other cultures have no problem asking themselves if "the juice is worth the squeeze," and their mythologies accommodate that.

This explains why we have such a difficult time with Death in America and why this instinct may give us a disadvantage when approaching something as personally devastating as the Abyss. There are exceptions, such as the jazz funerals of New Orleans, but anyway you look at it, death demands surrender, and few Westerners have learned to deal with it.

Shouldn't we grieve? Of course, but we should understand that grieving usually involves a hefty dose of self-pity mixed in. That doesn't mean grieving is a bad thing; it simply means it should be understood as a necessary component of living.

Everything we experience through our senses is an amalgamation of experiences projected and interpreted by our psyche. This includes every person we have ever met, but it's especially those who have stuck around long enough to make an impression. That person whom you are mourning so profoundly is a placeholder in your psyche, which you identify as a part of yourself: a part you will never experience again. When that person ceases to exist in a way that we can experience with our senses, we grieve because some part of our psyche has died with them. In other words, when someone we love dies, a part of our consciousness dies with them. This phenomenon occurs even when someone we dislike passes away because whatever it is that makes us dislike that person is something that lives within us, or we wouldn't recognize it in the first place. When a person dies, we lose a part of ourselves, and it sucks. For the person dying, they are losing everyone and everything. This is precisely what occurs during the crossing of the Abyss. The entire person is dying.

Cue the ego. For the ego, the prospect of non-existence is terrifying.

Our attitudes towards death are visible in our funerary rites. They are usually almost all business. People are dressed in suits, ties, and evening gowns, and they appear very somber. Sometimes this mourning can last for months or even years. Then they are buried and largely forgotten over the years, but the void in our psyche remains largely unaccepted and unresolved.

In contrast, many Latin American cultures have a different response to death. It is a time for mourning, but ultimately, it ends in the celebration of a person's life through libations, music, and storytelling. In Mexico, people build altars to memorialize and interact with deceased relatives on the Day of the Dead. Ancestors play a key role in Latin American life. It is a continuity of sorts rather than an end.

In the French Quarter of Louisiana, the funeral procession begins somberly but picks up as it heads towards the cemetery, accompanied by live music, dancing, and libations. It is a celebration of death, but most importantly and most triumphantly, it is a celebration of that person's life. The music is loud, and there is

much dancing and joy as the procession of musicians, friends, and family members helps to lead the soul of the deceased to their place in heaven.

All religions, with very few exceptions, attempt to deal with the death of the ego by creating myths that support its survival into the next life. Those myths are usually hooked around a particular ethos that may or may not be life-enhancing. There are many examples we could explore here, but I'll delve into a couple to illustrate how these superstitions can shape culture and ultimately lead it to its demise.

The case of Christianity is straightforward. You live your life in accordance with an impossible and unnatural ethos that causes various existential crises, psychosis, and other forms of suffering (which is a virtue in Christianity), and in the end your reward is to live on the clouds spending the rest of eternity singing the praises of a god that looks a lot like Santa Claus, or Lon Duquette. Your choice. Be sure to bring a book. Preferably one of Lon's.

The trade-off is the idea that there's a better place than "this" elsewhere. That this place is only temporary and that it belongs to God's duality, or Shadow Self: The Devil. (Cue scary music). In the West, we have lived with this fairy tale for the last 2,000 years, and its effects are evident in our culture, manifesting in consumerism, pollution, disease, isolationism, and global warming. Christianity is a Gnostic heresy, and the idea that God gave us this Earth to be its caretakers and that the Garden that is spoken so highly of in the Scriptures is right under our feet has all but been erased from its history.

Hinduism, on the other hand, teaches the concept of many lives, past and present, and a complex caste system dictated by the idea of karma. The issue with any religion is that, no matter how well-meaning it may begin, adherents will eventually start looking for loopholes and exclusions from the responsibilities that come with their adherence. In the case of Hinduism, those who lack the incentive to do The Work as defined by their paradigm can justify holding off until they incarnate again.

So, as an adherent of Thelema, the solution seems clear, at least for me.

"None... and two. For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union. This is the creation of the world, that the pain of division is as nothing, and the joy of dissolution all." (AL 1:30)

"...Think not, o king, upon that lie: That Thou Must Die: verily thou shalt not die, but live..." (AL 2:21)

The collects in *Liber XV* (also known as the Gnostic Catholic Mass) have a remarkably comforting and compassionate approach to dealing with the subjects of death and the afterlife.

Death

The DEACON: Term of all that liveth, whose name is inscrutable, be favourable unto us in thine hour.

For all of the things that live, who must die, make our passing easy.

The End

The DEACON: Unto them from whose eyes the veil of life hath fallen may there be granted the accomplishment of their true Wills; whether they will absorption in the Infinite, or to be united with their chosen and preferred, or to be in contemplation, or to be at peace, or to achieve the labour and heroism of incarnation on this planet or another, or in any Star, or aught else, unto them may there be granted the accomplishment of their wills; yea, the accomplishment of their wills. AUMGN. AUMGN. AUMGN.

Even after our physical lives end, we are encouraged to continue fulfilling our true wills.

Then, we are given an infinite number of possibilities. To stop existing is the first; to remain with our loved ones is the second; to enter into a state of divine meditation, to rest, or to decide to incarnate anywhere we wish, or anything else which may be in line with our true wills.

I can't think of a more beautiful message of hope.

Let's move on.

Okay. So, what is happening to the person as they are making their way across the Abyss? Here, we face the same problem as trying to discuss what happens with death. There are no words, only allegory.

Metaphors and Metamorphosis

Death escapes the use of our language. Parables have been employed throughout the ages to explain it. Likewise, we are faced with the same problem describing the crossing of the Abyss. The rising of the Phoenix and the transformation of the butterfly are two such metaphors. I prefer the butterfly metaphor because it must have been such a magical experience for our ancestors. It's magical now, even with everything we know about biology and science. The death of the old and the birth of the new. It represented the transmutation of the gross into something far more beautiful, more spiritually elevated.

Imagine the first person who opened a pupa, expecting to see a caterpillar transform itself into a butterfly but only finding a mass of indistinguishable goo. No trace of the insect it had been or the insect it was becoming. Only a collection of dead, broken-down snot-like cells, which somehow results in a butterfly in the end. It is as though they are, in actuality, two different insects.

Let's think of the butterfly as a perfected form of the caterpillar. You can begin to appreciate how this serves as a perfect metaphor to describe what happens when one approaches both death and the Abyss and makes their way across. That change from caterpillar to a bag of dead cells to a beautiful butterfly is so radical, you might be tempted to ask yourself whether there's anything left of that caterpillar in the butterfly at all. And if you apply this metaphor to human phenomena, then we can ponder whether the "I" makes it to the other side.

If I make it, who will "I" be? How will it affect my psyche? Will I still love all the things and the people that I loved before? In other words, does the butterfly remember having been a caterpillar?

It wasn't until the 1600s that a scientist spotted legs, wings, and other features of the butterfly between the goo and the skin of the pupa. This means that the skin, which turns into the chrysalis, contains all the parts necessary for the caterpillar to become a butterfly, which also means that the caterpillar carries the potential of that butterfly from birth. It is the same for us: if we were to anthropomorphize this experience, it would be akin to our older, more idealized selves being inside our present bodies.

But that can't be the end of the story.

But it's not rainbows and butterflies. That period in which that caterpillar is dissolving, before the growth of the butterfly can take place, is painful, chaotic, and destructive in a way that can only be understood by Geburah. Taking that journey across the Abyss is the same. There is a point of no return, where the traveler has no choice but to persist or perish. The only way out is through. Once you've taken the red pill, you can't take the blue one. While you are in the Abyss, you are Schrödinger's cat.

When people speak of crossing the Abyss, they speak of it as a task that can be accomplished with some moderate discomfort. But whether it takes a minute or several years to achieve that crossing, it can take an entire life to make sense of the experience. Whether or not a person can survive the journey depends on their ability to integrate the experience.

One does not necessarily need to set out on a magical path to end up at the portal to the Abyss. Trauma can lead us to that place, but the magician approaches willingly and with intent. I am sure that we are all familiar with at least one story of someone taking the oath of the Abyss before they were ready.

Imagine the goo in the pupa wanting to go back to being a caterpillar. It isn't possible any more than it is possible to unlearn something. Upon one's return to the world of duality, it is not unusual to experience fear, panic, dissociation, and other forms of psychological distress while trying to integrate the experience. Failure to do so can escalate into more advanced depression, anxiety, social isolation, and even hallucinations, a subject nobody wants to speak about in

magical communities. I am choosing to do so because oftentimes, just understanding what is occurring can help minimize those symptoms, making it easier to integrate the experience. Don't let it catch you by surprise. Understand what is happening, realize it isn't any more permanent than that pupa stage is in the development of a butterfly, and use the tools you learned to help yourself normalize.

In the Jewish text, *Pirkei Avot* (5:21), we find that the study of the Kabbalah was forbidden until one had reached a certain age. From this text, translated "Chapters of the Fathers," we learn that at age 40, one should pursue Binah. The number 40 is important, but I won't bore you with the details, as I'm sure you now have a good understanding of the Hebrew letters and their correspondences. The preferred age for in-depth study typically occurs when one is at a mature and more stable stage in life. This is good advice.

The Journey I am describing is a difficult one, and we can't simply retreat into the woods or mountains to heal our psychological wounds, as our ancestors may have done. We must integrate as we continue facing the daily struggles of existence in the modern world. We don't have the luxury of being psychologically incapacitated, even if it's for a short period.

"But Mom, do I have to?"

Not everyone who begins a magical path needs to cross the Abyss. Whether or not you have that need (or obligation) depends on the individual's karma. It certainly shouldn't be done out of mere curiosity, peer pressure, or because someone else did it. It should be done with much purpose and forethought. It should be a need and not a desire, and most importantly, it must be in accordance with your True Will. And remember: refusing to cross once you are at the gate is the mark of a Black Brother. It is all or nothing. All of that said, I'll leave you with this:

You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.

—*Pirkei Avot* (2:21)

One last word, concerning the dangers of magick and mysticism, always brings me back to Israel Regardie's advice to seek psychoanalysis with a sympathetic therapist. Once upon a time, I scoffed at the idea, thinking it was completely unnecessary, and the more I have indulged in this Work, the more relevant his advice becomes. I highly recommend *Psychoanalysis, Mysticism and the Problem of Epistemology: Defining the Indefinable* by Dr. Alice Bar Nes.

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