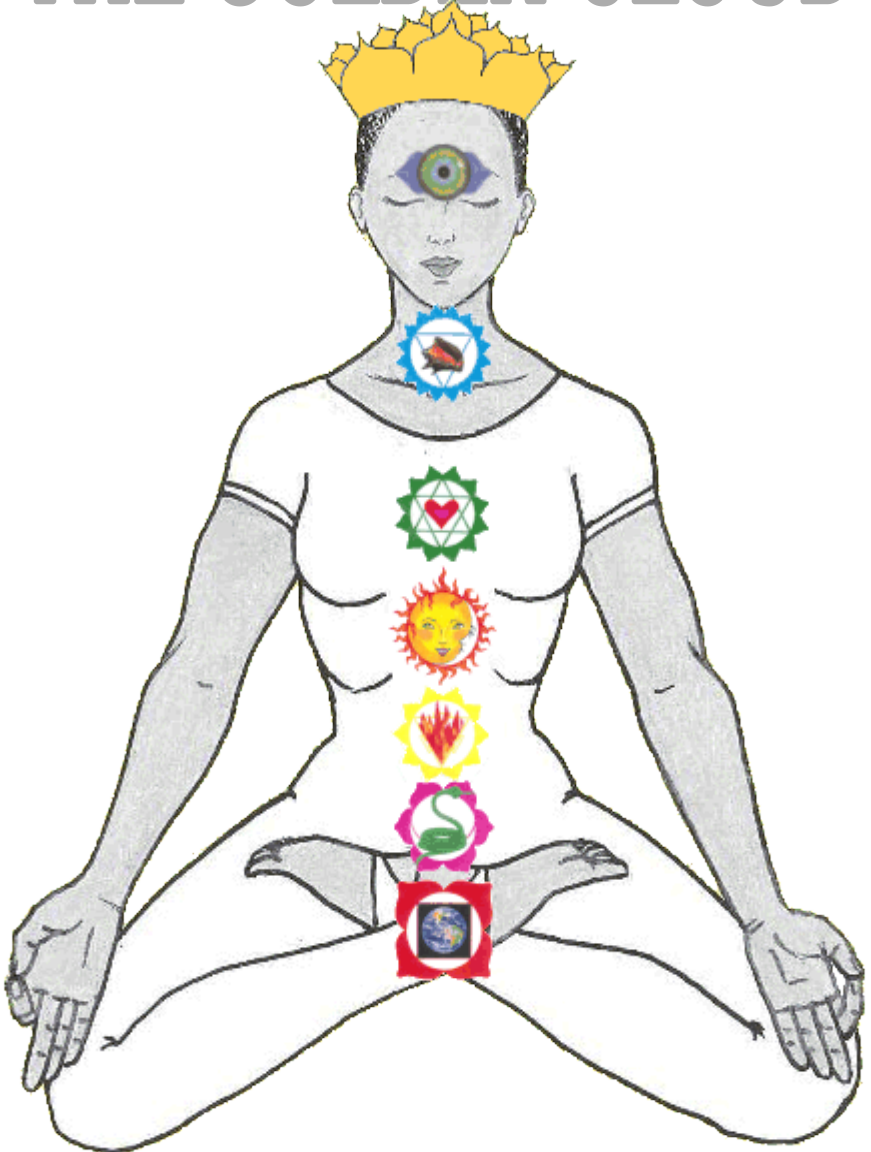


THE GOLDEN CLOUD



Dale R. Gowin

The Golden Cloud

By Dale R. Gowin

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Can you remember the golden cloud?
You were there. We all were.

I know, I know, we're not supposed to think about it. It's the first and biggest taboo.

We drank from the river Lethe, we passed through the cloud of unknowing on the way down here. We turned our faces away.

But it's been seeping back into me and I can't get it out of my mind.

We were everywhere and nowhere, and every eyeblink was an eternity of ecstasy.

We'd always been in that shoreless ocean of joy, yet each instant was utterly new. Every possible taste tantalized our tongues and every twitch of desire was not only instantly fulfilled but always had been.

We were home.

Ah! how the mighty have fallen.

A gust of wind spatters the page with rain. The ink bleeds random letters into gray blotches. I hunch over on the bench, tilting the notebook to catch the streetlamp's dull yellow light. The cold seeps into my bones.

From that to this. Why?

What was that siren song that lured us, that tempted us to turn our faces away, toward the glittering mystery?

Remember that sucking wind that drew us in when first we moved toward the shadow?

Gripped by gravity, some fought to free themselves – too late. Some sank into the dark embrace with all their will.

Ah, sweet kisses of Night! Didn't our forbidden love blaze brightly? Truly, its echoes must have stunned the very gods. What devilish delights we devised as we soared and dived in that sweet descent through the veils of Heaven! We thought it would be so forever – naive children that we were.

But we were done with forever; we had chosen now. And at the appointed time and place we hit the ground, and came to be.

Ah, memory! The dam is broken and it's all coming back.

The electric urge that pulsed through a cell of primordial protoplasmic jelly still snaps and crackles through my nerves. I become I for an instant, only to divide and

die. Again and again I am pulled back into the throbbing dance.

My desire pushes me onward into thickening density; earth and water separate and become distinct. Now sap flows through veins of cellulose that hunger for light; another pulse and blood flows through flesh; once more around the old dance floor and flesh begins to harden into bone.

I swim; I fly; I stand upon the ground.

I raise my eyes to the sky and breathe in a full breath of pine-scented mountain wind.

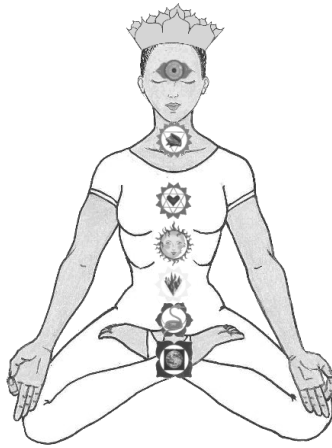
I am alone. Thunder shakes the sky. Hunger boils in my belly.

Can you remember that long summer before the ice? How we laughed as we

roamed the virgin forests of our maiden mother Earth! When we were hungry fruit would practically fall into our hands, and delicious water would spring from mountain rocks, cascading down in streams and waterfalls to feed the endless fields of sustaining grains and medicinal herbs. Our mission was to sing hymns to the rising sun, the moon and stars.

We would move with the seasons, gathering in great festivals and then scattering to the world's corners in tribes and clans, joining and dividing at will, sharing the bounties of the mother's sweet bosom.

How did we lose our way and end up in these concrete canyons, slaving under the lash of cruel masters?



The One who is All and always has been has slept and dreamt the dream of Time and Space.

And in the dream the One became the Many.

And the Many scattered themselves into the far corners of Infinity and Eternity and were lost in the deep wilderness of Being.

Deeper and deeper slept the One, and the dream divided and multiplied into myriads of dimensions of complexity.

And of the Many, each kept hidden deep
within itself its identity with the One, lest
its revelation stir the One to waking and
disrupt the dream.



Step quietly... do not wake the sleeping eye of I within.

For that eye sees the point at which Each is connected with All, and it is forbidden to look in that direction and see that point of unity.

It's the Big Taboo. Don't go there. It's the unmentionable. Don't look in that direction or even admit that there is such a direction.

It just isn't done in polite society.

Only in the shared solitude of the boudoir may you glance in that direction for a brief sweet moment... then you must lay this memory away in the faded rosewood casket along with the dried rose petals and foolish love letters of your intoxicated youth.

For in that direction lies the shocking recognition of paradoxical shared selfhood, and this can shatter the fragile sanity of civilized humanity upon which our livelihood depends.

Children and animals may play safely and happily in the shared recognition of blended sentience, but adults must put aside such childish things.

You must close the door that hides this mad awareness of communion and lock it tight – lest the fortress of your private self

be weakened by subversive suspicions, and the security of your secrets be compromised thereby.

Beware, therefore! For it is our bold and impertinent purpose to wrench open this barricaded door and pass beyond the primal perimeter of personhood, to taste the communal continuity of the oversoul.



Where in the warm darkness it's hard to hold on to a self-image.

Simultaneously I am a helpless bawling babe, a child of six years, a pubescent teen, an adult bent weary from toil and struggle, a frail elder ready for the last long sleep – and which of these versions of me am I *now*? – I've lost track; all points on the continuum seem equally probable.

The form becomes fluid and mutable, but the focal mystery of I remains fixed,

ever as it was. Yet this self of myself eludes my understanding as I seek a sense of its essence behind its ever-changing mirror-mask.

Who is it exactly that I am, again?

Let's run through the catechism one more time.

I am not my body. I have a body, but it does not define what I *am*. The body constantly changes its form, growing, maturing, aging... but the core *selfness* of myself remains unchanged, exactly as it was when I drew my first breath, as it must also be when I give back my last.

Who, then, am I?

I am not my mind – the memories that have accrued since my mysterious appearance, the hall of mirrors of my personal

history, all I have learned of the world and its ways. These are instruments I use, as I use my eyes and hands.

What, then – if I am neither my body, nor my mind, but something distinct from both?

Personality? No, that too is something I *have*; it is woven of the costumes I wear in the great mad masquerade ball of the world. Strip them all away, and I remain, ever as ever, a naked singularity of conscious presence.

Identity? That is a mere collection of names, tags, memos and receipts. It is also something I *have*.

Here is all I know for sure: *there is a conscious presence happening now* – all else is mystery.



But now there's something new: I sense this conscious presence that is all I know of as *I* reflected back to me from the eyes of a passing stranger on the bus.

A quick glance, a flash of sudden recognition; eye contact a split second longer than is strictly proper – *are you also a me, like I am?*

I'm shocked. I look down at the newspaper folded in my lap. The coffee is hot in the styrofoam cup gripped in my left hand;

my thumb rests on the plastic tab that covers the drink-hole as the bus sways around a corner and jolts to a stop.

Keep your cool, don't be a fool.

Stepping to the sidewalk, bodies pressed close but eyes downturned or flickering quickly away; we are all alone in our togetherness, all together in our aloneness.

Yet for that one nanosecond when our eyes met, we both *knew*, and that moment was solid gold.



The street is dark and empty. A lone parked car dozes in a pool of buttery light beneath a streetlamp.

I walk through the sleeping university neighborhood, past the hilltop park and the women's athletic building, toward my rendezvous with otherness in Oakwood Cemetery.

“It’s almost time,” says a squirrel out of the corner of its eye as it grips the side of a telephone pole, an acorn in its jaws, then

zips away to its nest.

I hear the crows laughing in the graveyard trees as I approach the gates. The grass of the cemetery lawn winks conspiratorially in the moonlight.

“We’re ready,” calls a nightbird from a tree limb.

“Let it begin,” sing the crickets.

Stepping off the sidewalk and onto the cemetery grounds, I leave the land of the living and cross the border into the domain of the dead. The necropolitan stillness begins to stir, to eddy and swirl around my feet, rippling out rumors of my approach.

The graveyard trees grumble me their greetings around mouthfuls of rock from their dark subsurface domain, their trunks dangling down dreamily into our up.

Stone slabs inscribed with my ancestors' names loom ahead in pools of moonlight. I hear ghosts whispering their dusty gossip in the astral underbrush as I pass, my boots crunching gravel and slipping through muddy ruts.

The crows flock through the trees above me, shadowing my path, as I wend my way to the rendezvous point. They settle in the high branches as I climb the round hill with the pyramid-shaped mausoleum at its top.

I sense a doe and her twin fauns as they settle into attentive repose in a thicket down by the railroad tracks to the west of the pyramid. I feel/send them a respectful caress wrapped in a moon-shadow.

The breeze holds her breath and then gives a gentle sigh.

It is the midnight hour. I burn a pinch of a forbidden herb in a stone pipe, then gather myself for meditation. I sit in the Lotus Position, bare feet pressing opposite thighs, facing the dark East.

The midnight stars whirl above. The clouds part and Luna smiles me down a silvery moonbeam kiss.

Breathing deeply, eyes closed, I begin to soothe the fluttering feathers of my mind to a calm, attentive repose.

First I must still the ever-present subvocal narrator, always anxiously attentive to every detail and always ready with urgent bulletins, cogent analysis and critical commentary, framing every experience of life in artistic prose. Just for now, O Narrator, lay down your script and step away

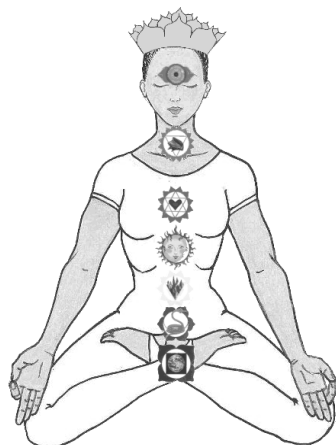
from the microphone. Take five.

A chorus of supporting thought-voices bustle and twitter noisily behind the Narrator – lobbyists, technical advisors, research assistants, security officers, each with a dossier of top priorities. These, too, I bid be still for a time. Do not fear; the situation is under control; all will be well.

Let every cell be at peace, yet alert and attentive. Let the pulse of my heart be easy, regular and strong.

Let the in-breath roll in like a tide-swollen wave, lapping the very walls of the sea-cave of the lungs with fresh oxygen-rich renewal; let the out-breath purge away the flotsam and detritus of organic life, leaving the cave cleansed and ready for the sea's delicious dalliance to continue.

Let the mind be calm and clear like the still surface of the moonlit sea, untouched by the slightest breath of rippling breeze.



In the silence I call to you across the
dark river.

*I am here, O my Beloved. I have
come as you commanded.*

I feel your approach as the dew-kissed
rose petal feels the approaching dawn. My
spine tingles in anticipation of your touch.
My tongue awaits the sweet nectar of your
words.

At the sound of your voice I dissolve
into an infinite starfield of ecstasy.

*Ah, long-lost companion of my soul!
To these many ages have passed, yet I have
not forgotten you. The poignant pang of our
separation still stings my heart. I limp
through these endless worlds half-heartedly,
grieving the lack of your company. When
will the fates relent and allow our paths to
cross once more?*

The darkness swirls through me; the
breath of the breeze billows my lungs like a
sail.

The wave recedes; I see before me the
footprints of my Beloved in the sea-damp
sand – a moment later they are gone, lapped
up by the hungry ocean's tongue.

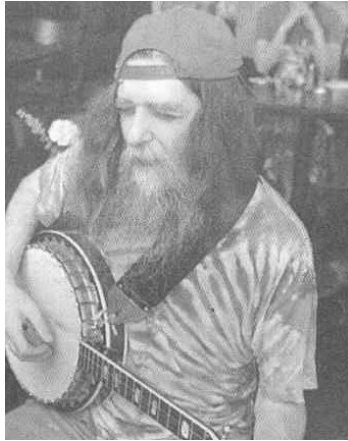
But I will not forget.



A stir in the breeze calls me back to my body as it sits locked in the Lotus Asana on a hill in the heart of Oakwood Cemetery.

There is a hush of purple in the eastern sky and the Dawn Star blazes there like a diamond. The trees are still shrouded in darkness before me.

A sentinel crow makes his rounds and alights with his shadowed kin to await the dawn.



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