



Sacred art & sacred action:

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW HARVEY

Andrew Harvey was born in South India in 1952. He entered Oxford University in 1970 and at the age of 21 became the youngest person ever to be awarded the Fellow of All Souls College, England's highest academic honor. Andrew has written and edited over 30 books, among them *A Journey to Ladakh*, *The Way of Passion: A Celebration of Rumi, Son of Man*, and most recently *The Direct Path: Creating a Journey to the Divine Through the World's Mystical Traditions*. For more information on Andrew Harvey's work and teaching schedule, see www.andrewharvey.net.

WHJ: In your wonderful book on Rumi, *The Way of Passion*, you state that "Sacred art is sacred because it springs from the silence of adoration." Could you elaborate on that a bit?

ANDREW: I think sacred artists are those who, in the depth of themselves, attune themselves to the Silence that is beyond all form and beyond all words and beyond all dogma, and through the adoration of that Silence, that Silence comes to live in them, and to infuse them with its power and its passion and its purity and its light. And through being infused with that power and passion and purity and light, they become instruments of that Silence, and that Silence is able to use them, to create through them what it needs the world to receive.

WHJ: So in that sense, would sacred art be limited only to the great saints and mystics?

ANDREW: No, I think that many people—perhaps every-

body—has this ability to tune in at the deepest levels to that Great Silence, but the more holy the person, the more transparent the instrument, the more luminous the work will be. Although there are people we can think of, like Wagner for example, who wrote the greatest of all spiritual operas, *Parsifal*, who in his personal life was very destructive. So there are people who can bring this ability to tune into the Silence out of the depths of a very difficult life. There are others, and I think Rumi would be the ultimate example, who achieve the heights they do because they are holy and because they are transparent to the Silence.

WHJ: You speak of Rumi using language itself as a means to communicate the absence of words, the space behind the words. I'm wondering if you as a writer think it's possible to use the actual practice of poetry and writing, or any of the arts, as a spiritual practice to move one closer to realization of the Great Presence and the Great Silence.

ANDREW: I believe it's absolutely possible and that art is one of the highest yogas and one of the most difficult. Because really to dedicate your gifts to becoming an instrument of the Divine is to turn your whole life over to Divine Inspiration, and to make of your whole life a laboratory for Divine Illumination. The work of actually transmitting those sacred truths, too, is a very arduous and rigorous one, and demands honesty and passion at every single level of the personality, and in that way, too, it becomes transformational.

WHJ: Can you say a little more about what you mean by art as a yoga?

ANDREW: Art is a yoga because anything that you use to enter into deeper union with the One can be a form of yoga, a form of that discipline that helps you unite with Sacred Reality. Art is a particularly demanding yoga because you are using words to try and describe something that is beyond words, you're using language or representation to try and describe something that is beyond either language or representation. And you yourself have to be the most sensitive imaginable receiver of sacred information in order to be able to transmit it.

So it's not simply that you have to develop a technique that is able to transmit sacred truth, you also have to be yourself someone who is able to receive the subtlest messages from the Silence. And that means that your whole being and how you exercise your gifts have both got to be dedicated to the Divine for the truth of sacred art to be manifest in you. And that means, of course, that you really have to give up your whole life to the Divine Experience if you're ever going to be graced with the power to transmit it in its true richness. So in that sense, art becomes a form of dancing for God.

I have a favorite story which is about the juggler of Notre Dame: he's an old man who spent his life juggling in front of Notre Dame, and when he was old, he was taken into a monastery. He felt very intimidated by all the Latin around him and all the sacred chanting, and thought, "My God, what do I have to offer?" So in the evenings when most people were asleep and nobody noticed, he would go into the sacred shrine and juggle for the Virgin. One day the monks and the Abbot followed him into the sacred shrine, saw him juggling and were horrified. But the moment they tried to arrest him, the Virgin statue came to life and said, "He is giving me everything that he is, and for that he is sacred." And she embraced him and took him up to Heaven. It's a very beautiful story because it shows what the yoga of art really demands—the giving up of the whole of the Self to the Divine and the offering of all of the gifts that you have to the Divine, so that the Divine can transfigure them and transform them and use them.

WHJ: Not everyone has an inclination for music or dance or art—can you speak of the creative process in a more

inclusive and universal way, that might apply to all people?

ANDREW: Well I think the aim of life is to integrate the Divine with the ordinary, and if you believe that, then all of life is a potential field for human creativity. You can arrange flowers in a way that expresses Divine beauty. You can cook a meal in a way that is infused with love, adoration and tenderness. You can garden with a passion and adoration for nature. You can clean your house with a sense that what you are doing is preparing a temple for the Presence to inhabit.

So all of life is potentially a field for creativity, and I would invite everybody to find that area in their life in which they feel most deeply invested, and dedicate themselves to making that area as beautiful and as powerful and full of Sacred Presence as possible. Human sexuality can be another area in which this Divine Creativity can flame out, if you follow the rigorous laws of tantra as laid down in the great tantric traditions. If you really plunge into an adoration of your partner as the living Divine, and worship and respect and honor them as the living Divine, you will then experience with them, in the depths of sexual passion, the forces of creative ecstasy that create the universe. So all activities that we in ignorance call humdrum or boring or ordinary, can be, if we bring to them the power of insight and the power of adoration, places where the Divine secrets flash out.

WHJ: Do you think this is possible even in the corporate business world? There's a lot of talk these days about bringing creativity and innovation to the workplace, and "thinking outside the box"—they seem to be dabbling on the edge of something.

ANDREW: Well, the decision that the corporate world will have to make to be able to invite Divine creativity into its core, will be the decision to protect nature and not destroy it, the decision to honor human beings and not exploit them, and the decision to adapt all the conditions of commerce to the true laws of nature. If the corporate world was able to make these fundamental changes—to be preservers of nature, not destroyers of it—then of course Divine creativity would come into it.

WHJ: But it's not that hopeful.

ANDREW: The chances of the corporate world going through that particular transfiguration are incredibly slim unless there's a major disaster. What's really happening in

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so much of the New Age is that people are trying to appropriate these Divine techniques for very secular and very self-absorbed uses, and not to dedicate themselves to Divine Transformation. Because that's the last thing the corporate world really wants, for people to be infused by Divine Truth and Creativity, because if they were, they would criticize everything that the corporate world stands for.

WHJ: In *The Way of Passion*, you speak of the Sufi passion for music and dance in contrast to the “modern faddishness for using music and dance in flashy emotional ways to arouse vaguely spiritual emotions.”

ANDREW: I'm referring to the difference between authentic mysticism and what I call virtual mysticism. We live in a time in which true reality is being mimicked at every level, isn't it? And there is such a thing as virtual mysticism, which is rampant out there, and it can be unmasked by its superficiality, it's frivolity, it's inability to see the truth of evil, its inability to embrace the suffering, its total disregard for the different stages of authentic mystical development, and its use of mystical language and jargon to justify quite self-absorbed ends. And that, I think, is 80% of the New Age. And the true teachers out there trying to bring in a sense of authentic adoration and authentic service, have to fight with all their inner being against this virtual mysticism, because, of course, virtual mysticism is extremely consumable, it's very, very easy to sell, and it flatters human egotism instead of deconstructing and destroying it in the fire of authentic Divine passion.

WHJ: That is reminiscent of what you wrote about reading Rumi: “If you read this poetry without any longing for God, what you will hear are a few wonderful images which might be interesting, but if you listen to this poetry torn by a longing to be propelled into the presence of the Divine, then your whole being will be moved.”

ANDREW: That's it. It's the same with spiritual practices. If you go to spiritual practice just with the ego hungry to be made more effective, then all you'll get is just a scrap of the beauty that you could get if you went to spiritual practice hungry for Divine Illumination. If you read Rumi, or the Bhagavad Gita, or the Upanishads, or St. John of the Cross, *prepared*, by meditation and by adoration and by true inner silence, to penetrate the deepest meanings of what you are reading, then the Divine will use the work of these great masters of language to open you up to the highest secrets and infuse your deepest being with the highest truth.

WHJ: Is that kind of hunger something that one has any control over, or can develop, or is it just the raw, naked experience of particular souls?

ANDREW: I think everyone has that radical hunger at the core of their being, but it's extremely scary to uncover it,

because once you uncover that hunger for the Absolute, you realize that all other appetites are pale reflections of its tremendous intensity, and once you've uncovered that hunger, you have to follow it, and you have to unite with it, you have to become it, and you have to allow it's full outrageous passion to be present. And that's part of the deepest meaning of mystical practice—to uncover this longing and to keep it aflame.

If you do keep that longing aflame, it will burn you through to the Divine Reality and to the Divine Presence, but it requires tremendous courage: first, to confront that hunger, and then to sustain it, and then to follow it, and then to allow it to burn away all false imitations of itself in your life. But if you do, the tremendous reward is that you finally face the depths of your need to understand your own eternity and to understand your own immortality, and in the depths of your being to transform your life into one that constantly calls out to the Divine to transfigure it, and that call for transfiguration is never left unanswered.

WHJ: I've noticed in my own life, and in people I know, that there were periods of deep hunger and seeking, and then, over time, there was an overlay of cynicism and resignation, as if the fulfillment of that hunger was just unavailable. And it's easy to become kind of complacent again and go about one's business, thinking, “Well, it's only for the genuine mystics out there who are going to go for it, not the rest of us.” Can you speak to that cynicism at all?

ANDREW: Well the important thing is to stay as inspired as possible. And that's why it's so important to turn to the great sources of inspiration, like great sacred music and great sacred art. And to those practices that help you divinize life itself, as we were discussing before. If you don't constantly attune your Being to this inspiration, then the forces of darkness that really want this world to be destroyed—and I cannot put that too strongly—will take you over slowly and make you their resigned slave. So you really have to see how essential it is to remain inspired.

And you have to constantly rededicate yourself to the passion and the pain and the ordeal and the ecstasy of the authentic mystical life, and that means that you really have to believe that it is the one serious enterprise, and that every other enterprise is nothing compared to it. Nobody can make those radical decisions for you, but unless you make them and keep making them, and keep plunging back and back into the fire, you're going to become, in the end, a part of the great problem and not a solution to it.

WHJ: What are the sources of inspiration that you find yourself turning to when needed?

ANDREW: Let me say that I think this is the most devastating time. And I think that it's a time of enormous menace, and enormous danger, in which nearly all good human hope is being battled on all sides. It seems to me absolutely incredible, for example, that none of the political parties are talking about serious solutions to the environmental holocaust that's surrounding us. It seems absolutely incredible that the New Age is not really mobilizing people on all levels to make serious protest against poverty, against the environmental holocaust, against terrible injustice, against the proliferation of war everywhere, so I can see all kinds of reasons to despair at this moment.

However, if you have given your life to the Divine, and if you have really decided to become above all else an instrument of the Divine, you have only one choice, which is to *really*, in a time like this, dedicate yourself intensely to the most intense and sustained imaginable spiritual practice, because *only* intense, sustained, mystical practice in the core of life will give you the stamina, will give you the strength, will give you the inspiration, will give you the passion, to be able to continue against such overwhelming odds.

So when you ask me, what am I sourced by? I'm sourced by passionate prayer, I'm sourced by mantra practice, I'm sourced by trying to keep in my heart a perpetual stream of adoration, I'm sourced by the service that I attempt to do as a teacher to other Beings, to help them awaken to the enormous challenge and enormous potential of our time, and I'm sourced by the continual commitment to use what gifts I have as service to this Divine Illumination. So I think that the only way to remain inspired is to try and turn to the Divine in the core of your heart at every moment.

WHJ: And there are also, I'm sure, certain works of art and music that you turn to...

ANDREW: Yes, oh God yes. The music that inspires me most is the polyphonic music of the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries—especially great composers like Josquin Desprez. I'm enormously inspired by classical Indian music, and I'm inspired by great singers of tremendous courage like Maria Callas. As for art, I've just been on a pilgrimage in France visiting the sites of the Virgin and the Black Madonna and Mary Magdalene, and I spent an amazed morning in Chartres, gazing at the rose windows hanging in all their polyphonic flaming beauty in the morning, and that was more than an inspiration, it really was an initiation. And I'm equally inspired by the great painters like della Francesca and Cezanne, and the great

poets like St. John of the Cross and Rumi, and I try to surround myself by an atmosphere of sacred inspiration because I find I really need it.

WHJ: Frederick Franck had a statement, that "Art is that which, despite everything, gives hope."

ANDREW: How beautiful—and Dostoevsky said, "If we're going to be saved by anything, we're going to be saved by Beauty." And for me, the beauty that you see in a della Francesca or in the anonymous sculptor's work that created the Black Madonna of Rocamadour, or in the flame rose windows of Chartres—that beauty is an exact and perfect mirroring of the Divine Beauty and a direct infusion of it into the depths of our hearts. And that beauty reassures at the deepest level, because at a moment of such unparalleled and disgusting ugliness and horrible violence as the time that we are living in, to be reminded of the beauty that the human spirit is capable of, and to be reminded of the beauty that is the Divine Presence at the core of the human spirit, is crucial, I think, to going on fighting for love and justice in the core of a burning world. [...CONTINUED ON PAGE 15]



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WHJ: I was watching a video of a spiritual teacher recently who was also saying that “the whole world is groaning in pain right now,” but then he paused and added, “But of course it has always been that way in this realm.” He said that while it seems as if the whole world can end now, that was also true thousands of years ago—if all you knew was your village, and your village was threatened, then that was the possible end of your whole world.

ANDREW: True, but now we know that the capacity for the ending of the world is so much greater. I don’t believe at all that it has always been like this—I think this is a very, very much more dangerous time than any other in human history. That kind of thinking comes from an addiction to cyclical time and transcendence—“it’s all suffering, it’s always been suffering, this is nothing unusual”—well that’s a good excuse not to mobilize everyone to do something dramatic about it. To my mind, that’s just the repetition of the same old stuff. If we don’t realize that the environment is going to be destroyed if we don’t protect it, and that destruction will mean the end of the human race and the majority of the animals, we’re still in a dream!

So let’s get real. We’ve never had the power to destroy the world before breakfast with nuclear weapons, we’ve never had the power to destroy the whole environment by greed, and we’ve never had the power to create a world as we’ve now created with three billion people living on less than a dollar a day! You can talk about suffering—there’s always been suffering of age and dying, and suffering of violence and all the rest of it, but the suffering that we’re now staring in the face is absolutely unparalleled in human history. And the consequences of it, unless we dramatically change and dramatically fight against it, are going to be unspeakable and immense beyond any imagining that we could possibly have. Until that gets through the mind and heart of the world, we are just stammering nonsense on the edge of absolute destruction. And that’s it.

I’m sick to death of all of this “It’s always been like this.” It hasn’t always been like this. Turn on CNN today—the Middle East is now in flames; read this week’s TIME Magazine—they’re building a road through the Amazon which means that the last remaining thousands of acres in the Amazon will be in flames very soon, which means that the whole environmental balance of the Earth will be changed. This is not an illusion, this is reality. We’re living in terrifying times, and nobody’s doing a fucking thing about it, including the spiritual movement which listens to these people who say there has always been suffering, instead of realizing the absolutely new world of potential total destruction that we’ve

now entered. Do you see what I’m saying?

WHJ: I do, and I’m wondering how you manage to get through the day with such an acute awareness of that sort of heaviness?

ANDREW: Well because I love God! I love the Divine in myself and all other beings, and I think that despair is a luxury I can’t afford. I get through by listening to St. Paul, “Love believes, hope endures all things.” So by centering my entire life in Divine Love, I try and fight with everything I am to open people to the reality of where they are and to the potential of what they could be and do if they woke up to where they are. And the only way to overcome despair is to serve with every breath, and to give with every gesture, and to pray with every breath.

WHJ: So to come full circle to the primary focus of our magazine, which is art and spirituality....

ANDREW: Yes, it’s part of the same focus you see, because the role of art now is to testify to the Divine Presence, the Divine Beauty and the Divine Splendor within every one of us, and also, and this is very important, to become an instrument for this radical waking up of the whole human race to the disaster that threatens its life and the life of nature, and to the potential that could unfold within the human race if it chose to be transfigured by the Divine.

So an authentic art of this moment would be extremely mystical and extremely political and radical also. It would be an art that would be infused by Divine Passion and very radical in its exposure of cruelty and injustice and madness and horror, so that people could be shocked awake to where they are and empowered by Divine Love to act from where they are to transform the conditions of the planet. And that’s what I am trying to do in the work that I do, and that’s what many other sacred artists of our time are trying to do, and this is the only art that deserves to be called Divinely Inspired art.

An art that simply repeats some kind of vague Divine sweetnesses is just entertaining the bourgeoisie while the whole planet burns. An art that is authentically, Divinely inspired at this moment will be a spear through the heart of anybody who listens to it or reads it; it will be a flame inciting that person to burn away in Divine Passion and to dedicate their lives to Divine Service, and that’s the only kind of authentic Divine art at the moment.

Once you’ve seen where we are, once you’ve seen what we face and what’s ahead of us if we don’t change, then how could you not want to devote everything that you do as a sacred artist, not only to waking people up to the full range of their Divine powers, but also to the full disaster of what’s happening, and to what they must then do? The only authentic sacred art of our time isn’t something simply that inspires people, it actually calls out for sacred action on every level.