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# From change to progress: critical spirituality and the futures of futures studies

Marcus Bussey \*

*P.O. Box 879, Maleny, Queensland 4552, Australia*

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## Abstract

This paper argues that for futures studies (FS) to have a future that is relevant to current shifts in meaning and consciousness, then it must incorporate into its methods and practices a sense of mystery founded on a critically spiritual sensibility. Critical spirituality redefines rationality and empiricism by including within their framework both the somatic and the meditative as valid and necessary components of any research activity. In the short term this means a shift away from the current Western obsession with change and a stepping back to allow for critical distance in order to understand that it is in the appreciation of progress — a fundamental shift in consciousness to include the spiritual dimensions of human experience — that discourse will emerge to take FS to the heart of civilisational renewal. In allowing for mystery, silence and the meditative empiricism required to access these categories, critical spirituality lessens the gap between thought and action and thus enables truly transformative academic practice to emerge. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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The idea of progress has been central to the unfolding of the modernist project over the previous century. Yet as the century drew to a close it became increasingly hard to keep faith with the idea in the face of growing disillusionment and the obvious failure of modernism to deliver what people most wanted: happiness born of personal fulfillment. A growing range of voices in the critical futures field have been questioning the assumption that change in material terms equates with progress.

These voices fall into four main areas.

- Post modernist and post structuralist thinkers;

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\* Tel./fax: +61-7-5429-6292.

*E-mail address:* fitzbus@ozemail.com.au (M. Bussey).

- Feminists empowering postmodern discourse with value laden analyses of power;
- Post colonial thinkers with a debt to neo-Marxist and critical theorists;
- Neo-humanist thinkers with an investment in all three of the above, who work from a critically spiritual perspective.

In this paper I am going to argue that a Neo-humanist vision of the futures of Futures Studies is one which will fully engage the human potential by activating a critically spiritual methodology. This is important as many of the tools of futures work are actually intended for use in anticipating and managing change (uncritically) but have little relevance when considering the nature of progress. Those methods and techniques which engage with the less analytic more visionary process of futures are much more relevant to progress because they actively involve the individuals in the act of ‘futures building’ as opposed to ‘futures scanning’.

‘Progress’ here is used to mean fundamental change in the consciousness of both the individual and collective mind. It is essentially spiritual and has no clear temporal or spacial restrictions being timeless, or as Joanna Macy would have it, anchored in “deep time” [1]. Change, on the other hand, is very much associated with technical and material movement, having no connection with the inner fabric of the human psyche. There is no appreciation of spirit here, though great attention is paid to gross national product and the latest technical innovation to hit the market.

Futures Studies has the potential to be responsive to future human dilemmas. But to be so it will need to make the effort to embrace tools and concepts that lie beyond the narrow pall of academic rationality as it is currently constituted. A greater space is already emerging within the field that not only tolerates but promotes imaginative and creative processes that break down the intellectual prudery of those who are attached to their own discipline and have little capacity to envision beyond narrow and self imposed confines. Thus we find music and song, poetry and story, art and theatre effective vehicles for work on deeper forms of consciousness. Visioning and imaging workshops such as those run by Joanna Macy, Elise Boulding, John Seed and Warren Ziegler (to name but a few) are growing in power and sophistication. Meditation and other reflective practices — the spiritual quest — seeking to plumb the depth of the human soul become relevant when seen within a broadened definition of rationality and research.

Clearly futurists need to be able to assess and describe likely changes in the short, medium and long term but their central goal should be to facilitate areas of human endeavor which can benefit from a closer linkage between action, the consciousness that informs and directs the action and the spirit that underwrites the consciousness. Equally clear is the fact that not all futures trends are as relevant to this deeper layer of operation within Futures Studies.

## **1. Main trends**

Futures Studies is going to develop in a number of well defined areas.

- Empirical analysis — predictive, forecasting, system analysis

- Cultural critique — surveys, social analysis, communication, futures in education
- Civilisational renewal — reconceptualising, imaging, alternative technology, spiritual and transpersonal.<sup>1</sup>

The overall thrust of these developments is that we are part of a dynamically expansive discipline which is transdisciplinary and alive to the environment in a way that many more traditional disciplines are not. The down side of this is of course that in many areas of academia we are still not taken seriously. What is interesting however is that much of the language of futures, being borrowed from more centralist disciplines, is flowing back into them enriched by futures ideas and associations. Language is not static and attracts, through usage and development, ever newer possibilities. Critical Futures Studies is interested in language, how we use it, how we can extend it and transform ourselves and our society through its action upon our consciousnesses.

So a major part of the futures agenda is simply the development of a language of possibility. Such a language contests the reductionist, intellectual pessimism of empirical researchers, revealing it to be rooted in value laden assumptions about the world. These assumptions remain invisible and uncontested within their own domains. Thus the Club of Rome spreads statistical terror over an imminent Malthusian crisis threatening to sweep away all we in the West have worked so hard to achieve. Population is an issue for futurists but is not necessarily the problem it so often is made out to be [3]. If we see human beings as creative generators of their own individual and collective futures as opposed to voracious consumers of resources, then we can begin to generate different responses to the question: What does ‘over population’ mean?

## 2. The language of conception

How we conceive of humanity, both the collective force of it and the individual unit consciousnesses that constitute it, is central to how we understand and enact critical Futures Studies. Similarly our sense of what it is to be human will shape how we constitute any possible future developments for this discipline. Thus we have to pay close attention to the language of conception, with all its emotional and cultural resonances, when we look at our selves and our practices and, in typical futures style, apply the lens of Futures Studies methodology to our own discipline.

A growing number of futurists are turning their attention to the development of meaningful constructs to deepen futures methodology through an active engagement with the interface between conception and consciousness. Sohail Inayatullah’s Causal Layered Analysis [4–6] are all examples of this development and all offer useful tools in understanding this process.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of these areas see: Inayatullah and Wildman [2].

### **3. Critical Spirituality**

Critical Spirituality is particularly concerned with the language of conception in the application of neo-humanist method to the analysis of ‘consciousness’. Neo-humanism, drawing as it does on yogic and tantric conceptions of consciousness, describes human consciousness as a continuum that extends from the physical body through action (engagement of body and mind with the outer world) to mind and spirit [7]. It offers an analysis of reality which accounts for the human civilisational project as a collective struggle to achieve ever higher order spaces in which subtlety and spirit can emerge, through conscious human engagement, into the collective domain.

As method, critical spirituality applies analysis and synthesis in equal measure, incorporating into its research a meditative empiricism which acknowledges mystery and the importance of deep reflective practice in the unfolding of meaning into our daily lives and actions. Rationality in this approach is a layered, value laden application of intellect which offers rigor and discriminative judgment, a critical stance which problematises reality and consciousness (the conceptual language of researchers), grounded in a spiritual episteme [8] that takes the cap off human potentiality by imposing no limits to the possible.

### **4. Mystery**

Thus Einstein’s assertion that “Imagination is more important than knowledge” can become the proposition that “Knowledge is limited only by one’s imagination.” Imagination, the creative impulse, being an expression of an individual’s inner dwelling or spiritual intuition. Matthew Fox, when he argues that we should educate in awe [9] is pointing to the fact that most intellectual activity today is premised on the stripping back of mystery at the expense of the human spirit. Rationality is limited here to the faculty that penetrates mystery with the scientific method laying bare the true and disallowing obscurantist language that seeks to bring mystery within the realm of human action.

Critical spirituality brings mystery within the boundaries of method, embracing it as part of human experience. Here mystery is recognised as a fertile ground from which humanity constantly benefits. Thus a discourse is offered that encapsulates the human experience of the unknowable. How we respond to mystery is as important to how we research and how we envisage the future as is our ability to clarify problems and articulate responses. Mystery is simply another area of human experience. It is now made possible through neo-humanist method to make some sense of the experience of mystery and just as chaos and complexity have become essential parts of academic discourse, seeking to grapple with the awesome array of forces at work in our lives, so too mystery becomes another conceptual tool in the ever expanding language of the possible generated by Futures Studies.

Further on this, if we examine silence we find that it is an important facilitator of the human experience of mystery. Mystery cannot itself be communicated directly,

yet it can be experienced. Communications theorist Ramana Williams in his analysis of the role of silence in communication points out that some things cannot be put into words but remain central issues for humanity to deal with. Thus silence becomes “a powerful communicative media for the transmission of ‘higher knowledge’...[because] symbolic expression is ultimately limited expression, since human beings possess only a very limited capacity to express or articulate that which is being experienced inwardly” [10].

The Quaker tradition has raised silence to a powerful communicative force that bonds their communities more powerfully than the greatest of sermons. Thus Ralph Waldo Emerson thoughtfully observes, “Good as is discourse, silence is better and shames it....If at one in all, no words would be suffered” [11]. To dwell for a period in silence is a meditative act as it is opening up a reflective space that approaches mystery. So, the central research tool when dealing with mystery is meditation. Meditation is an empirical exercise as it empowers the practitioner with the ability to ‘see for themselves’. This ‘seeing’, the development of a spiritual rationality, supplies the epistemological anchor for all other intellectual (both abstract and applied) activity.

## **5. The futures spectrum**

When surveying the array of tools available to Futures Studies we are presented with a wide spectrum of possibilities ranging from the predictive through to the humanistic and transpersonal.<sup>2</sup> Each tool is specifically crafted for its own purpose, and all can function within a critically spiritual context. Yet, from the critically spiritual context the tool box is incomplete without meditation since no other tool available can perform the function of exploring mystery.

Mystery is as much an empirical as a spiritual reality. Scientists still grapple with the big questions about the origin of life, the mechanisms of evolution and the function of consciousness. Futures Studies is also centrally concerned with mystery because the future is so closely enmeshed with one of the most mysterious of entities: the human consciousness and its powerful capacity to create the world in its own image.

The inclusion of mystery and its corollary meditative empiricism within futures discourse greatly opens up the discipline to possibilities denied us by a reliance on more narrowly defined empirical tools. It augments the already brimming tool box so that Futures Studies can become even more open and flexible in its responses to the central dilemmas facing us today.

## **6. Ecumenical voice**

Critically spiritual futures are pluralist and ecumenical. Meditative empiricism is not dependent on any one system of practice, rather it acknowledges that we all have

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<sup>2</sup> See Table 5.1 in Slaughter, [5, p. 204].

individual paths to tread and that there are as many reflective paths as people to tread them. What does hold however is a recognition that human beings are constructed as layered minds and are not simply political or social beings, not rational animals or pleasure driven consumers, nor are they simply suicidal nihilists or would be gods awaiting the lifting of the burden of original sin.

Critical spirituality, by offering a layered description of consciousness further enriches layered methods and offers increased depth and subtlety to futures discourse. This is important as Futures Studies itself, by virtue of being open and eclectic, always stands at risk of being hijacked by a dominant ideology and forced into blinkered horizontal analyses common to standard academic practice. By imbuing enquiry with this ecumenical spirit critical spirituality allows for a wide range of voices to convene in a dialogue of diverse narrative strands all of which have value but must be harmonised within an over arching ethic of benevolence and tolerance. This is very important as it makes room for what feminist futurist Ivana Milojevic calls the perspective of the powerless [12].

## **7. Some implications**

There is no substitute for sound research and strong theory. Critical spirituality offers a research methodology that places individual consciousness at the centre and works directly upon it through a process of deep reflective action. By placing consciousness under the lens of meditative empiricism, critically spiritual processes offer a range of previously inaccessible tools and perspectives to Futures Studies.

### *7.1. Concepts*

- Progress is spiritual, most Futures Studies is focused on change
- To study change is to settle for futures that will be deficient
- Meditative empiricism as valid research
- Futures will be increasingly nonlinear — complex and layered
- Critical spirituality realigns scientific method with an ethic of benevolence, offering a spiritual and ethical rationality
- Mystery — an empirical and spiritual reality

### *7.2. Tools*

As the shift from change to progress occurs so tools will have to become focused on the spiritual development of consciousness. Such tools will include:

- Deep action research — consciousness explored through meditative empiricism as part of action research cycle
- Deep layered maps of the future: Gnosis (individual knowing, the personal face of critical theory) will become increasingly relevant when mapping the future and problematising the present

- Deep dialogue promoted by an ecumenical voice
- Deep reflective practice

### 7.3. *Implications*

- Shift in research from the study of trends and change management strategies to deeply qualitative explorations
- The interplay of consciousness and language explored through sensitivity to the language of conception
- Re-mystification of experience allows for new categories, such as microvita and prama, to become legitimate features of scientific discourse
- Change has relative importance, it is not an absolute construct
- As consciousness is problematised issues of authenticity also problematised — solutions lie in ethical analysis
- Research redefined as a spiral activity that begins and ends with researchers engaged with their own consciousnesses

### 7.4. *Civilisational vision*

- Progress is spiritual and can only be achieved through individual and collective endeavor
- Ecumenical voice is multicultural, being deeply appreciative of the other as a source of inner knowledge
- ‘Desired future’ seen as containing higher order space — the attainment of which is the culmination of the human civilisational project
- Meditative empiricism takes the cap off human potential
- Cultural renewal flows from individual renewal
- Emergent partnership society as spiritual rationality rebalances gender relations

The implications of these shifts in method, both its theory and practice, allow for increased creativity and affective, as opposed to effective, change. It takes the central plank of critical Futures Studies — the desire not simply to predict the future but to shape ethical and emotionally desirable futures — and gives it ‘teeth’. This is imperative if we are to actively engage in generating sustainable and attractive conditions for future generations.

## 8. **Getting personal**

It is essential for the futures of Futures Studies to get personal. Critical futurists cannot avoid the fact that they need to bring their discipline ‘home’ in order to merge personal experience with global vision. The process begins in the heart as we plumb the mystery at the core of our being and grows as we make personally informed judgments based on our direct experience of responsibility for our world gained through an ever growing awareness that we are connected, intimately, at the levels

of body, mind and spirit with one another and the universe. Such an awareness can only come out of a deep experience of reflective space.

Futurist Hazel Henderson points to this personal imperative when she notes, “The challenge to western science is not only to place the observer back into the equation, but to recognise the human actor as the key shaper of economies, technologies, and the evolution of cultures and societies as well” [13]. The recognition Henderson is pointing to is central to all futures methodology.

Western culture struggles to understand the sense of ‘personal’ required here. Its central philosophical corner stone is the individual. Yet, individualism with its rights and responsibilities is only a small part of what is being described here. The personal is a fully empowered individual who has a spiritual working relationship with self and other and environment.

The Buddhist scholar and activist Joanna Macy points to this fact and offers participants in her workshops an invitation into meditative space and deep time. This is done in order to break out of the bonds imposed upon us by culture and personal history. She is inviting us “to wake up for the sake of all beings” [1, p. 82] through the reconceptualisation of self in order to empower us for future action. The healing of our times and our selves is to start with our intention to begin the work in our daily lives. It is a personal work, as big or small as we are.

Richard Slaughter makes this point explicit when he argues that we need to begin futures work with “individual human capacities” [5, p. 307]. We need to engage with the personal visceral face of the future, the active participants in future building, in order to generate what he calls “humanly-compelling futures” [5, p. 317]. He insists that “individuals do matter, that what they do — or fail to do — has real consequences.” He then goes on to state:

The path of social innovation is clear. It runs from the clear understanding of particular individuals and groups, their commitment to what ever form of practice will elevate their consciousness from the mental egocentric to that of vision-logic and beyond. From here the outputs of higher order engagement are expressed in a variety of practices: in social innovations of many kinds, inner and outer. This has long seemed a most productive output of successful futures work — inventing the future, as it were, ‘from the ground up’ [5, p. 355].

Critical spirituality activates the personal within futures research at its deepest level by insisting that meditative rationality, Slaughter’s ‘vision-logic’, can only emerge from a real commitment to a reflective practice. It is actively engaged in generating a language of the personal to sustain and expand the discourse into a layered and reflexive conception of the consciousness that underpins the personal.

## **9. From image to action**

Another implication for Futures Studies is in the area of workshops. Educational futurists such as Hazel Henderson, David Hicks, Alan Tough and Frank Hutchinson



have all pointed to the central importance of image in our conception of the future. Hicks sums up the dilemma facing us today when he observes that,

Popular images of the future in the West tend to be negative if not dystopian in nature while, on the other hand, what is most needed are creative and positive images that provide a basis for hope [14].

Workshops that focus on re-imagining the future have been successful and can generate what Hutchinson calls ‘literacies of hope’<sup>3</sup> yet as he goes on to state, this does not imply “that the very act of imaging a better world is sufficient.”<sup>4</sup> Each individual’s image needs to come together in dialogue and take form as action plans.<sup>5</sup> Yet the process, though empowering has great limitations as an image has a relatively short ‘shelf life’. Thus Hutchinson observes that young people felt discouraged that schools spent so little time on positive image building as part of their activities.<sup>6</sup> One important aspect of critical spiritual practice is that meditative empiricism engages the consciousness at such a fundamental level that the gap between thought and action decreases, thus greatly expanding the possibilities of image becoming activated reality.

In this way we come to see the insight captured in Boulding’s phrase, “We do not have to abandon the methods to image that better world, only broaden and deepen them...”<sup>7</sup>

## 10. The spirit of enquiry

By embracing a layered methodology critical Futures Studies is opening up the future and freeing us from the determinism that arises from a commitment to a single method of enquiry. In this way the spirit of enquiry is deepened and research processes remain responsive to the possible.

Futurists Thomas Gaspar and Erzsebet Novaky explore the nature of the emergent world order in a series of dilemmas that arise from the tensions between methodology and method. These tensions arise because of what they describe as the ‘transition paradox’.

The Transition Paradox draws the attention to the fact that the methodological debates and the future of futures studies are embedded in the debate on the coming world system which gives the possibility and the need for the mass to actively

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<sup>3</sup> Hutchinson, *op cit*, (p. 195).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* (p. 204).

<sup>5</sup> The work of Tony Stevenson is good here. See [15]

<sup>6</sup> Hutchinson FP. *Educating beyond violent futures*. London: Routledge, 1996. p. 87–8.

<sup>7</sup> Boulding, E., quoted in Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, (p. 204).

participate in its creation. One who seeks for the future of futures studies has to integrate the aspect of methodology, like the one who thinks of the future methods has to take sides in the research on the new world order. From a scientific point of view this means that the time is ripe for integrating epistemology and ontology again, which were separated in the European Enlightenment [16].

Critical spirituality is positing such an integration of the epistemological and ontological forces that generate the future. It is proposing a spirit of enquiry that begins with the one making the enquiry. This is done because, as Warren Ziegler, the author of *Ways of Enspiriting*, states, “our spirit will no longer let us discern the future with forecasts, plans, predictions, trend extrapolations and high-technology inventions that do not speak directly to our spiritual dimension” [17].

## 11. Transdisciplinary futures

Such an integration of spirit and method cannot occur without generating considerable stresses as world views, paradigms, epistemes are all jealous of their ‘turf’ and tend towards the dogma of narcissism. However, Boulding’s point needs to be stressed. By deepening and extending the sense of the possible we do not have to abandon our methods. Layered interpretations of reality validate each method within its own epistemic context. They do this without relativising our research because layered approaches recognise the logical integrity of each method and its appropriateness within its respective focus of enquiry. What is also acknowledged is that no one layer ‘tells the whole story’ and that to be an effective futurist one needs to have a dexterity and facility within the whole spectrum of methods represented by the futures field. Working from such a transdisciplinary position, Futurists can then specialise in an array of those methods that best reflect their own value base and epistemic lineage.

Critical spirituality is also empowered with a spirit of deep tolerance that is rooted in a spiritual understanding that is holistic in nature. This tolerance is rooted in an ethical vision of human action premised on the engagement of benevolent rationality with the world’s problems. Critical spirituality promotes this rationality through the removal of barriers between peoples, species, genders and the manifest universe as a direct product of the refinement of consciousness through the action of meditative empiricism on each individual’s mind.

## 12. The nature of ‘real progress’

In this context the spirit of enquiry thus expands beyond sectarian limitations to include all forms of research that help us better generate futures processes conducive to real human progress. In this sense what I am proposing is that a critically spiritual futurist take on the role (or posture) of the shaman as described by Ashis Nandy. Within Nandy’s post-colonial critique of the west is the awareness that method is

not impartial or culturally neutral and that much dissent is in fact simply rhetoric. Dissent always stands in danger of becoming ‘standardised’ and to truly have impact and vision, it needs to come from beyond the pall of western, Enlightenment drenched, analysis.

Thus Nandy explains, “the shaman is actually the repressed self of the society in which he lives. He articulates some possibilities latent in that culture, possibilities which the ‘sane’, the ‘mature’ and the ‘rational’ person cannot self-consciously express or seriously pursue...Perhaps, in the present global culture, the shaman, taken metaphysically as a figure of opposition to the king and the priest, remains the ultimate symbol of authentic dissent, representing the utopian and transcendental aspects of the child, the lunatic, the androgyne, and the artist. In this sense, he remains the least socialised articulation of the values of freedom, creativity, multiple realities and an open future. At a time when mass culture and the media dominate the world, the shaman tries to transcend manifest reality and the strait jacket of ‘common sense’. This expression of defiance uses a language of transcendence or utopianism. But this is partly because the shaman has to force us to move beyond the accessible world of knowledge to the mysterious world of those who remain the ‘under-socialised’ critics of the present global civilisation” [18].

The shaman has knowledge of ‘the mysterious world’ gained from direct experience. He or she knows that, as Shakespeare put it, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” [19]. The shaman knows that the Western idea of progress is a myth — a falsehood — because, having applied spiritual rationality to the analysis of western culture it has been revealed that, as the Indian mystic and philosopher Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar has observed, progress is simply equated with change. But change is *not* progress. Change is temporally bound and has nothing to do with human spirit.

Nandy is arguing that meaning be given back to non-western cultures. But he cannot reach the point of committing to the Indic response to meaninglessness — namely active spirituality practiced through meditation. Yet Sarkar does indicate that this is where the reclamation of meaning begins, stating that “Progress is when one moves in the spiritual sphere...Without spiritual progress, one’s existence will not be meaningful.” He goes on to stress however that “For progress in the spiritual realm, one must not ignore the psychic realm or the mundane external sphere... Your life will become more and more meaningful if you do more and more work and more and more meditation” [20].

### 13. Beyond the surface

To be a vital force in generating creative, morally cogent and ethically viable futures a discipline like Futures Studies needs to take risks. Futurists here are in agreement. What is still unclear though is how to take risks and still be taken seriously.

I believe that it is the duty of the critical futurist to play the role of Ashis Nandy’s shaman — the voice of the other, of the deep and mysterious forces, the actor of decidedly different and surprising tomorrows, the mirror of dissent — as opposed

to the king — the authoritative one, the punitive disciplinarian, learned, professional and boring- who represents the safe but sorry future which is decidedly white and male. Dissenting futurist Zia Sardar points out how already Futures Studies is being “domesticated and institutionalised” and goaded in the direction of narrow Western interests [21].

Such colonization is founded on the assumption that change equals progress and that such change, through the mechanisms of capitalism and the free market, will eventually penetrate to even the ‘darkest’ (what a sinister metaphor!) corner of the globe. In response to this colonization of the future, suspicious futurists have set about deconstructing it. This has led critical futures to a layered understanding of the future and its relationship with the present. This layering has taken critical Futures Study below the surface and created the space for a legitimate reassertion of spirituality as a source of knowledge and a tool of analysis and synthesis.

Critical spirituality with its focus on the connection between individual consciousness and personal and collective action really begins to muddy the waters of knowledge and meaning. Young poet Star Hungerford knows what many of the so called wise, who prefer clear waters and stagnant futures, have failed to recognise:

*“Smiles and tears would remind me to discover places others fear.”*<sup>8</sup>

It is from such places that our tomorrows will arise. The ‘centre’ is shifting, but where will it go? Critical spirituality points to the fact that it will go no where if not within, to that place — the spiritual core of humanity — that many in academia fear.

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<sup>8</sup> Star Hungerford is 14 years old. These lines are taken from “Come Into My Land” [22].

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