THE HEALING POWER
OF
ANCIENT LITERATURE
THE HEALING POWER OF ANCIENT LITERATURE

Edited by

STEPHEN BERTMAN
AND LOIS PARKER

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
# Table of Contents

Prologue.................................................................................................................. vii  
Medicine for the Soul

Introduction ............................................................................................................ ix  
Lois Parker  
Journey Back to Where We Began

Chapter One.......................................................................................................... 1  
John L. Foster  
The Wisdom Tradition of Egypt

Chapter Two ............................................................................................................ 23  
John Maier  
A Mesopotamian Hero for a Melancholy Age

Chapter Three ......................................................................................................... 45  
Rami Shapiro  
The Wisdom of Torah: Healing the Alienated Soul

Chapter Four........................................................................................................... 67  
Lois Parker  
Epic Woman in the *Iliad* and the Absence of Healing

Chapter Five ........................................................................................................... 83  
Stephen Bertman  
Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Healing of Society

Chapter Six............................................................................................................. 93  
David V. Hicks  
Stoic Healing

Chapter Seven...................................................................................................... 109  
Stephen Bertman  
The Healing Power of the *Tao*
Conclusion.................................................................................................................. 119
Stephen Bertman
“A Timeless Journey”

Contributors.............................................................................................................. 123

Index............................................................................................................................. 125
PROLOGUE

MEDICINE FOR THE SOUL

“Time heals all,” said Sophocles some 25 centuries ago. Taking the Greek dramatist at his word, two investigators—one a Classicist and the other a Licensed Psychologist—organized a symposium to explore the capacity of the past to cure the ills of the present.

Entitled “The Healing Power of Ancient Literature,” the symposium took place in Reno, Nevada, on June 19 and 20, 2008, under the leadership of Dr. Stephen Bertman, Professor Emeritus of Classics at Canada’s University of Windsor, and Dr. Lois Parker, Director Emerita of Counseling Services at the University of Nevada, Reno. The program was jointly sponsored by The Parker Institute, the University of Windsor, the University of Nevada, Reno, and the Nevada State Psychological Association.

The symposium’s premise was that literature, especially ancient literature, possesses a profound power to heal our souls, a power that is especially needed today when the rapidity of change and the force of world events combine to make peace of mind an ever more distant and seemingly unreachable goal. Featuring nationally-renowned scholars, the meeting explored the wisdom literature of Egypt, the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, the Biblical books of Ecclesiastes and Job, the poetry of Homer, the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, and the teachings of Lao-tzu as sources of enlightenment and inspiration for the modern world.

The present anthology incorporates all six of the symposium’s formal presentations as well as an additional essay by Dr. Parker on the symposium’s humanistic theme.
INTRODUCTION

JOURNEY BACK TO WHERE WE BEGAN

LOIS PARKER

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
— from T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”

In “Burnt Norton,” the first of his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot wrote: “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past.” If Eliot was right, time itself is more fluid than is suggested by references to ‘past,’ ‘present,’ and ‘future,’ as though these were three distinct time periods. If time really is fluid, if what happened in the past really is contained in our present, and if what is happening now implies our future, we would ignore this fluidity at our own peril.

In full recognition of time’s fluidity, a two-day symposium titled “The Healing Power of Ancient Literature” was convened at the Airport Plaza Hotel and Convention Center in Reno, Nevada, June 19, 2008. As the inaugural lectures of The Parker Institute, the symposium was planned and co-chaired by Stephen Bertman and Lois Parker, and was endorsed by Canada’s University of Windsor, the University of Nevada, Reno, and the Nevada State Psychological Association.

The purpose of the symposium was to explore various ancient literatures for their relevance in today’s world for healing our souls. The symposium was planned as an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural event, with no simultaneous presentations. All invited speakers were nationally-renowned scholars who had direct experience with the ancient literature

---

about which they spoke; and all were present throughout both days of the symposium. In short, this was an old-fashioned symposium wherein an ongoing dialogue focused on what ancient literature might say to us today, not just in terms of answers, but in terms of questions to ponder.

The template we chose for what we would be doing these two days was the four-line quotation reproduced above from Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” the last of his *Four Quartets*. Thus, we envisioned ourselves traveling together on a journey of exploration back to where we began, that is, back to the beginnings of civilizations where, in the spirit of exploration, we could experience those beginnings as if for the first time.

This place of our beginnings is envisioned here as society’s long fluid transition from orality to literacy or from myth to history, a place where and a time in which humankind, living intimately with the environment, derived its knowledge, experience, and inspiration directly from nature. In those days, the earth’s rivers and waterways, like time itself flowing endlessly toward the sea, provided nurturance along the way for all kinds of life, including small settlements of humans, some of which, in time, became our first civilizations. Living so intimately with nature, our ancestors came to know what was and what was not predictable in life, a *knowing* that richly informed their stories and sayings, some of which, over time, evolved from an oral tradition into an enduring literary one.

Believing that a tradition so readily endowed by the universe itself could yield knowledge and wisdom, sensations and imaginings, questions to ponder, and new rhythms to live by, we began our two-day envisioned journey with high expectations on the banks of the Nile—that slowly moving river that, in ancient times, was so rhythmical in its yearly flooding that it dependably brought nutrients to the soil along its banks, thus giving rise to the early settlements that, in time, evolved into one of the greatest of ancient civilizations. Leading us on this part of our journey was John L. Foster who, using his own voice, provided echoes of those early voices of ancient Egypt—voices, so we learned, that were not unlike our own, writing love poems, sayings to live by, and instructions for the young. These Dr. Foster called the Maxim tradition, the forerunner of the discipline of philosophy. As Chapter 1 of this anthology, Dr. Foster’s presentation marks the place where our journey began.

Continuing our explorations, we soon came to the estuary of two other rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates of ancient Mesopotamia. Unlike the Nile, these rivers provided no predictability of seasonal flooding. Yet, despite their capriciousness, they invited the seeds of another civilization to be sown, one that has widely influenced Western culture in numerous ways. Leading us on this part of our journey was John Maier who, within the
context of ancient Mesopotamian ways of healing melancholy, told one of the earliest stories known to the Western world, the story of Gilgamesh—that early King of Uruk, whose thirst for immortality took him on a long journey that eventually brought him, not to immortality, but to a homecoming of proud discoveries. Dr. Maier’s presentation of the Gilgamesh story is Chapter 2 of this anthology.

Following in the footsteps of Abraham, we now traveled upstream along the Tigris and Euphrates to another land, one that had many names in ancient times, but is principally known today as Israel. Pausing atop Mount Nebo, we could envision the shining Mediterranean in the distance, but looking down into the valley, we found another river: the giant mud-colored Jordan moving serpent-like through green thickets and white marl hills. From this breath-taking view, one could not help but hear the echo of voices from long ago, especially those of the early Hebrew prophets. Leading us on this part of our journey was Rami Shapiro, who suggested that the malady of today’s world is meaninglessness. He then prefaced his remarks on the books of Job and Ecclesiastes with an exposition on what constitutes a sacred text; thus, he provided us with a context for understanding just how meaningful these two books are for the world today. Rabbi Shapiro’s presentation is Chapter 3 of this anthology.

Now traveling north to the ancient city of Troy, but looking out to sea toward the Greek mainland, we find epic woman as seen through Homer’s Iliad addressed in Chapter 4 by Lois Parker. Although not presented at the symposium, this chapter is intended to fill one of the many gaps in our attempt to cover multiple ancient literatures within a two-day period of time.

Leaving Troy, we moved out into the Mediterranean on a long voyage under the leadership of Stephen Bertman. Guiding us through the trials of an ancient hero’s ten-year struggle among the Mediterranean’s sunlit isles to make his way back to Ithaca, Dr. Bertman showed how Homer’s Odysseus, a “thinking-man’s hero,” was not just going home to regain a kingdom; rather he was going home to reestablish a society where traditional values could once again be respected. Following Odysseus’ journey, Dr. Bertman took us back to our beginnings in Chapter 5.

The path of another hero who left Troy, this time a Trojan named Aeneas, marked the next phase of our journey. Following his path, we journeyed westward across the Mediterranean, stopped off in both North Africa and Sicily, but eventually made our way up the coast of that giant, boot-like peninsula of Italy to finally arrive at the seven-hills of Rome in the days of its Empire. Leading us on this part of our journey was David Hicks, who prefaced his remarks on Marcus Aurelius’ work with an
Introduction to the Greek origins of Stoicism. Within this context, he then showed how, given that Marcus’ sole intent was to improve his own mental health, his writings, sometimes called “meditations,” may constitute one of the first, if not the first, self-help book of the Western world. Aurelius’ Stoic template for self-exploration, as presented by Mr. Hicks, is Chapter 6 of this anthology.

Finally, we found ourselves in the hills of northern China not far from the Yellow River where the seeds of another ancient civilization had taken root. Here, too, one voice, that of Lao-tzu, rose above the crashing sound of water washing down the mountainsides. Leading us on this phase of our journey was Stephen Bertman, who introduced us to the Tao, that is, the Way, about which Lao-tzu wrote. We learned that this wise man had thought deeply about human life and its relationship to the universe and had concluded that there was a Way, one that he metaphorically described with the image of water, but also one that can teach us much about the many problems we face today. Dr. Bertman’s presentation of the Tao Te Ching, along with an addendum of how Lao-tzu’s teachings compare with those of Jesus, is found in Chapter 7, the final chapter of our anthology.

Our journey completed—inafar as any such journey can be ever completed—we concluded our symposium with a round-table discussion chaired by Dr. Bertman. After that, each of us departed for home—perhaps thinking about the fluidity of time and what ancient literature offers to us today, or maybe having a renewed notion of what going home really means.

Now we offer to you, our readers, this anthology, so that you, too, may join us on this journey back to where we began, back to where the fluidity of time was felt to be more real, back to where literature (oral or written) was itself recognized as a power for healing. For only by traveling together may we someday rediscover those life-giving rivers that endlessly flow through time past, time present, and time future.
Some forty years ago I was in Cairo sitting drinking coffee with a friend in his apartment. We were watching TV—think it was an episode of “The Munsters.” Out the window I could see—dimly because of the haze and pollution—the Giza pyramids in the distance, the only surviving “Wonder of the Ancient World.” They are tombs, once housing the mummified bodies of ancient kings. Today they symbolize for us a very ancient civilization known through not only these pyramids but ancient kings like Ramesses II and Tutankhamun, through statues in stone of hundreds of ancient people, of officials and the upper class, or murals of kings and queens, banquets with dancing girls, and scenes of life in Egypt in the old days. These are all visual images, of course; and one soon begins to wonder what these ancient people thought about—what went on in their heads, what they did with their time, and, most specifically, what they might teach us.

The Egypt we are interested in flourished from before 3000 B.C.E. down to about 350 B.C.E. It is truly very old; and the thrust of my essay will essentially be about how such an ancient people are like ourselves, how the human venture extends for some 5000 years. To be sure, the ancient Egyptians had their own thought processes—resulting in not philosophy, which had not been invented yet, but in wisdom; and their professional writers in this area were not “philosophers” but “sages.”

I.

I would like to begin—as an example of what we can learn from the
ancient literature—with a love song—of all things! There are only a few dozen of them, all—as far as we know—written by males but with both sexes speaking in the poems. The names of the authors are all anonymous now. Here is a piece, spoken by a woman (or in this case, a girl):

“Love, how I’d love to slip down to the pond,
bathe with you close by on the bank.
Just for you I’d wear my new Memphis swimsuit,
made of sheer linen, fit for a queen—
Come see how it looks in the water!

Couldn’t I coax you to wade in with me?
Let the cool creep slowly around us?
Then I’d dive deep down
and come up for you dripping,
Let you fill your eyes
with the little red fish that I’d catch.

And I’d say, standing there tall in the shallows:
Look at my fish, love.
how it lies in my hand,
How my fingers caress it,
slip down its sides . . .

But then I’d say softer,
eyes bright with your seeing:
A gift, love. No words.
Come closer and
look, it’s all me.”

I usually call this “The Memphis Swimsuit,” though none of these poems have titles in the original. The reason I offer this piece is to show how it connects with us immediately—even though it was written some thirty-five hundred years ago.

I would like to offer a second of these poems. The male is speaking:

“I think I’ll go home and lie very still
feigning terminal illness.
Then the neighbors will all troop over to stare,
my love, perhaps, among them.
How she’ll smile while the specialists
snarl in their teeth—
she perfectly well knows what ails me.”

The next piece is grouped with the love songs but is a little different.
The gods Ptah, Sakhmet, and Nefertem are the holy family of Memphis, capital city of Egypt. The male speaker is perhaps leaning over the rail of the ship:

“Oh, I’m bound downstream on the Memphis ferry,  
like a runaway snapping all ties,  
With my bundle of old clothes over my shoulder.

I’m going down there where the living is,  
going down there to that big city,  
And there I’ll tell Ptah (Lord who loves justice):  
‘Give me a girl tonight!’

Look at the River! eddying,  
in love with the young vegetation.  
Ptah himself is the life of those reedshoots,  
Lady Sakhmet of the lilies—  
Yes, Our Lady of Dew dwells among lilypads—  
and their son, Nefertem, sweet boy,  
Blossoms newborn in the blue lotus.  
Twilight is heavy with gods . . .  
And the quiet joy of tomorrow,  
dawn whitening over her loveliness:  
O Memphis my city, beauty forever!—  
you are a bowl of love’s own berries,  
Dish set for Ptah your god,  
god of the handsome face.”

As I said, this poem is a bit different. What begins with a desire to get away from it all, to travel to the big city of Memphis, and to have “a girl tonight”—soon develops into an awareness of deity hovering in the air and permeating the River’s landscape (the Nile). The thought of a girl is supplanted by the awareness of the presence of deity in the landscape and upon the journey; and Memphis becomes, not the place for lovemaking, but the holy city of the god Ptah. Here I am not so much interested in the gods mentioned in the poem as the idea of the wonders of nature, particularly in their role as healing powers, as it appeared to the speaker, and to the poet who composed the poem nearly four thousand years ago.

II.

Now I would like to turn back in time another thousand years—to the Old Kingdom (the Pyramid Age) and Dynasty Five, about 2400 B.C.E.—to the figure of Ptahhotep, one of the wise men of Egypt. Ptahhotep is
standing before his King Isesi—as an old man now, complaining of old age:

“My sovereign Lord,
Old age has come, the years weigh heavily,
misery my lot, and infant helplessness returns.
Repose for such a one is sleeplessness each day;
the eyes are dim, the ears benumbed,
Strength ebbs from the faltering heart,
the mouth is still and cannot speak,
The mind is gone and cannot picture yesterday,
the nose is clogged and cannot breathe the air,
it makes no difference if you stand or sit.
Good turns to ill,
experience has passed you by:
What old age does to all mankind
is heartbreak every way.”

Remember, the speaker of that passage has been dead for forty-four hundred years. Ptahhotep goes on to ask his sovereign for a surrogate son to pass his wisdom to; and the king replies:

“Yes, teach him according to the speech of old;
then he shall be a pattern for offspring of the great,
So that understanding shall sink in because of him,
each heart a witness to what he has said,
No one is born wise.”

Ptahhotep is known for one of the earliest “wisdom texts” from Egypt, The Maxims of Ptahhotep. Here is an example of his wisdom—his first maxim:

“Do not be arrogant because of your knowledge;
approach the unlettered as well as the wise.
The summit of artistry cannot be reached,
nor does craftsman ever attain pure mastery.
More hidden than gems is chiseled expression
yet found among slave girls grinding the grain.”

Ancient Egyptian teaching is like this: it is not in the form of the argumentation which constitutes philosophy, but rather in “nuggets” of wisdom, so often like a father passing on his knowledge to a son.

Much of Egyptian literature reflects the high esteem in which it was held—and, indeed, the high place held by the authors of that literature. Ancient Egyptians honored the Word (capitalizing it). They did not deify
it, but it was certainly given an important place in the civilization. Here is a passage written by a New Kingdom scribe (a “scribe,” incidentally, was someone who could read and write):

“Those writers known from the old days,
the times just after the gods—
Those who foretold what would happen (and did),
whose names endure for eternity—
They disappeared when they finished their lives,
and all their kindred were forgotten.
They did not build pyramids in bronze
with gravestones of iron from heaven;
They did not think to leave a patrimony made of children
who would give their names distinction.
Rather, they formed a progeny by means of writings
and in the books of wisdom which they left.
The papyrus roll became their lector-priest,
the writing board their loving son;
Books of wisdom were their pyramids,
the reed-pen was their child, smoothed stone their spouse.
In this way great and small became inheritors;
and the writer was the father of them all!”

And the writer goes on to name some of the great names of the Egyptian tradition:

“Are there any here today like Hordjedef?
Is there another like Imhotep?
There has not come in our time one like Neferty
or Khety, the best of them all.
I give you the names of Ptahemdjehuty
or Khakheperreseneb.
Is there another like Ptahhotep
or the equal of Kaires?”

You will notice the name of Ptahhotep there; and we have works surviving of at least three others of those named.

Let us turn to the work of Khety, called “the best of them all.” What we have of his is his Instruction for Little Pepi on His Way to School. An instruction is a slight variation on the maxim form. Khety is taking his son upstream (south) to school in the capital. Pepi is young, perhaps only about ten years old. He is not too sure about this schooling business; and he does not want to leave his mother. So Khety has to cajole and persuade Pepi that education is a good thing—to be cherished:
“I have seen defeated, abject men!—
You must give yourself whole-heartedly to learning,
discover what will save you from the drudgery of underlings.
Nothing is so valuable as education;
It is a bridge over troubled waters.”

Khety goes on to show the “drudgery of underlings” by giving portraits of those who must labor, lacking education. Like the stoker:

The stoker has foul fingers,
and the stink of him smells like the dead;
His eyes burn from too much smoke,
and he can never ward off sickness.
He spends the day cutting up old rags,
yet his own clothes are an abomination.”

There is a whole gallery of portraits of the uneducated and downtrodden which, incidentally, has given the piece a wrong title, *The Satire on the Trades*. These vivid portraits are hardly satirical, but are presented by Khety in a harsh light in order to let little Pepi know what will await him if he does not study. After giving many of these portraits, Khety concludes his “instruction” thus—in one of the great passages in Egyptian literature:

“Now, it is good to study many things
that you may learn the wisdom of great men.
Thus you can help to educate the children of the people
while you walk according to the wise man’s footsteps.
The scribe is seen as listening and obeying,
and the listening develops into satisfaction.
Hold fast the words which hearken to these things
as your own footsteps hurry,
And while you are on your journey
you need never hide your heart.
Step out on the path of learning—
the friends of Man are your company.”

III.

What lies behind Khety’s advice to little Pepi is the concept of *ma’at*, an Egyptian word signifying a fusion of our concepts of truth, justice, and order. *Ma’at* signifies the principle of cosmic balance; and, as such, was the fundamental principle of ancient Egyptian ethics. In *The Eloquent Peasant*, *ma’at*, here translated as “justice,” is given its proper place:
“Do Justice for the Lord of Justice,  
who is the wise perfection of his Justice.  
Reed pen, papyrus, and palette of Thoth all dread to write injustice;  
when good is truly good, that good is priceless—  
But justice is forever,  
and down to the very grave it goes with one who does it.  
His burial conceals that man within the ground,  
yet his good name shall never perish from the earth.”

IV.

What survives of the ancient literature is full of wisdom, not only for scribes but by extension for any who read (or hear). The primary genre is of course the Instruction, aimed at the neophyte scribe like little Pepi; and these pieces are often introduced by a Prologue telling the reader the kind of wisdom he will be receiving. Here is the beginning of one such Instruction, this by Amenemopet, a high official in agriculture. It is one of the later instructions and one of the fullest and best:

“Beginning of the meditations on good living,  
the guide to health and happiness,  
The various regulations for gaining entrée to officials,  
and the customs of the courtiers;  
To know how to reply to one who speaks to you,  
to bring back a report to one who sends you;  
To help you enter upon the Way of Life,  
to keep you safely while on earth,  
To help your mind withdraw into its chapel . . .”

Notice that a primary aim of these Instructions is practical—to learn how to conduct oneself as an official—but also how to pursue the Way of Life. Here is the fourth maxim in Amenemopet’s Instruction:

“A man of the temple who is intemperate  
is like a tree which grows indoors.  
In a short moment its leaves and blossoming are finished  
so that its journey ends on the rubbish heap;  
It floats to its final destination  
and its burial is fire.  
But the truly thoughtful man, though he keeps himself aside,  
is like a tree growing in sunlight;  
It greens and flourishes, it doubles its harvest,  
standing before the face of its Lord;  
Its fruit is sweet, its shade is pleasant,
and it ends its days in the garden.”

Or, elsewhere Amenemopet says,

“Do not lie abed fearing tomorrow;  
day breaks, what will it be?  
Man cannot know what the morrow will bring.  
God dwells amid his perfections,  
man must live with his failure;  
And the words which men speak are fleeting,  
and the creatures of God pass away.”

In fact, the Instruction of Amenemopet has many of its passages begin with “do not”—“Do not be friends with the intemperate man;” “Do not antagonize the angry man”; “Do not covet the little that the poor man has.” Or:

“Do not misuse a widow if you find her in the fields  
nor fail to set aside your work to speak with her;  
Do not let a stranger pass your beer jug thirsty,  
refill it time and time again before your friends—  
Give love to the god of the ruined and poor  
far exceeding your debt to the eminent.”

Instructional passages, as I mentioned earlier, are directed at those aiming at official positions and are full of material on how to obtain a job, how to act, and of course how to write. Thus, Ptahhotep back in the Old Kingdom:

“If you would be a leader,   
spread wide good governance by means of your edicts.  
Do deeds of distinction  
so that the days which come after remember them.”

Most of Ptahhotep’s Maxims have this practical feel to them.

V.

Now, let’s return to more examples of the immediacy of these ancient Egyptian words, particularly those referring to students in the scribal schools. We can look at a fledgling scribe’s wanting to throw up his hands at having to study (and to remember all those “do’s” and “don’t’s”):
“I would spend my workday wakeful and dutiful, but the will drowses, heart
Vears away, will not stay in my body; all other parts of me sickened to ennui—
The eye heavy with staring and studying, ear, it will not be filled with good counsel,
Voice cracks, and words of the recitation tumble and slur.

O Lord of the City friendly to young scribes, be at peace with me!
Grant me to rise above this day’s infirmities!”

And the earlier part of the poem tells us, like the Memphis ferry poem that I offered at the outset, that he would rather be in Memphis.

In another of these schoolboy pieces, we have a teacher addressing a student who has gone bad (that’s the teacher’s point of view), a student who has not risen “above this day’s infirmities,” running about the streets, getting too close to the street girls, paying no attention to his studies or his teacher. The teacher speaks:

“Now, as for what I have been told—
that you throw aside your studies
and live in a whirl of singing and dancing:

You go about from street to street,
and beer fumes hang wherever you have been.
Don’t you know beer kills the man in you?
It stiffens your very soul!”

Etcetera.

We can turn to another piece, a letter from a father, Menna, to his absent son, Payiri. Both were actual persons at Deir el-Medineh, the village for the artisans who built and decorated the royal and noble tombs across the River from ancient Egyptian Thebes, one of the great cities of the New Kingdom. Payiri has run off to sea, leaving his father, whose apprentice he had been. Menna is devastated by this, from the one he had counted on to work alongside him. So he writes Payiri a letter. Here is part of it:

“I had set good advice of every sort
before you—but you never listened.
I would point out each path
which hid the danger in the underbrush,
Saying, ‘Should you go without your sandals, 
one little thorn will end your caravan.’
I satisfied your needs in everything 
which normal men desire . . .

. . . . . . .

I am so troubled I would range the sea 
might I report that I had rescued you;
Yet would you come to enter your own village 
bringing but water for your monument.

. . . . . . .

I see you sinking in the chambers of the sea, 
and my arm does not know how to save you!
All I can bring you is a slender straw 
thrown in the wide path of the drowning man . . .
There is not any way at all.”

Recently I was reading a book by a young woman, Rosemary Mahoney, titled *Down the Nile*. She is a rower; and she would row all over the lakes near her house in New England. She got the crazy idea into her head that she wanted to row down the Nile, by herself. You may already realize that this is simply not done in Egypt. But she did it. When she stopped at Luxor (ancient Thebes), she went walking about in the sands of the West Bank, the same area where Menna and Payiri lived 3000 years ago. Let me quote a passage for you:

“The ground here was not protected, enclosed, or part of any government museum, and the sight of all these ancient scraps scattered freely about underfoot was thrilling. I once spent an entire afternoon wandering in the dust of the west bank discovering human jawbones and femurs and ancient rubbish. Holding these fragments in the palm of your hand is a way of connecting to the distant past. Some potter had made this now broken cup three thousand years ago; the fine lines that his fingertips had left on the clay were still visible. He had held it in the palm of his hand, exactly as I was holding it. When he looked up at the night sky, he had seen virtually the same stars I saw now. The thought of it made me realize that the potter and I were not so different; I could almost hear him breathing.”

VI.

That is what we are attempting to do today—with words—to demonstrate a connectedness—a fellow feeling with the ancient peoples. In a sense, we are working on two levels here. One of my aims here is to
introduce the ancient Egyptians to you through their words to show that they are so much like us. The other theme is to introduce you to the ancient Egyptian wisdom tradition and to put it in some sort of basic context. To reiterate, maxims and instructions existed to perpetuate the world governed by the principle of ma‘at by outlining correct modes of behavior. We not only find these ideas in testaments from father to son and teaching texts aimed at young scribal students, but even find these ideas in tombs in the biographies of the tomb owners. These are testimonials of a life righteously led, often stating that the deceased had followed the precepts of ma‘at and stating his accomplishments much like a maxim text itself. Some parts became so formulaic after a time that we in Egyptology call them the “Catalogue of Virtues,” which includes such phrases as “I fed the hungry” and “I clothed the naked.” Further, a few biographies have details more specific to the life of the deceased. In the tomb of Paheri at El Kab we hear the following from him. Note the parallels to the maxims:

“I was a nobleman, effective for his lord, wise, not negligent.
I proceeded on the path which I sought out
and came to understand the goal of living.

I came and went
with my heart my sole companion.
I did not speak falsely to another person,
knowing the god who dwells in humankind—

I did not speak the language of the streets
nor consort with those of little character.”

Not so much different from eulogies of today. Paheri has behaved well. In fact if all this was so, for Paheri the transition to the Afterlife—where a perfect, ma‘at-ruled existence occurs—should not have been fraught with fear at the time of judgement. To learn what the realm of the dead was like, we again go to the walls of the tomb of Paheri where an extensive description of the afterlife is written. We must, of course, take Paheri’s word for it:

May you come and go, while living,
with joyful heart by favor of the Lord of gods,
With a fine burial in old age,
after your length of years has come.
May you take your place in your sarcophagus,  
unite with earth in the Western Land,  
Become transformed to a living Spirit  
—powerful over bread, and water, and air—  
Which may take shape as phoenix or as swallow,  
as falcon or as heron, just as you wish.

May you ferry across without hindrance  
and sail upon the waters of the flood.  
May your life return once more—  
your spirit never deserting your body again!  
May your spirit be holy among the transfigured,  
and may the blessed hold converse with you; . . .  
May you have power over water, breathe air,  
drink whatever your heart desires;  
May you be given your eyes to see with,  
your ears for hearing whatever is said,  
Your mouth for speaking,  
and your feet to walk.  
May your arms move for you, and your shoulders,  
your flesh be firm, your muscles thriving;  
May you have joy of all your members  
and count your body whole and well.

---------------

May you explore the Afterworld  
in whatsoever shape you shall desire.  
May they call you every day  
to the Table of Osiris, who was truly good;  
And may you enjoy the offerings in his presence  
and the gifts for the Lord of the Sacred Land.”

A bit later we have:

“May you be at ease in the underworld,  
travel freely about in the city of Hapy;  
May your heart have joy in your ploughing  
in your plot in the Field of Reeds;  
May your portion attain what has been set for you  
and the harvest arrive full of grain;  
May the draw-rope be taut in the ferryboat—  
Sail to your heart’s desire!”

There is much more written in Paheri’s tomb; but this is enough for us  
to realize the afterlife was a time of joy and comfort, with Osiris.
Other views of this perfect world lived according to the precepts of ma`at can be seen not only in tomb inscriptions, but in tomb scenes as well. These provided the deceased with all the amenities of the good life known in his or her mortal existence. Grain production and animal husbandry, food-stuff manufacture and crafts, banquets with singers and dancers, these scenes—like the written words—show a formalized version of life in Egypt while small attentions to detail make us identify with them immediately: small girls fighting and pulling each others’ hair, an overseer falling asleep on his stool in the field.

A final, broader perspective of the world governed by ma`at can be seen in hymns and songs of praise to the gods. They delight in and record the timelessness of this world. Here, for example, is a passage from Akhenaten’s “Hymn to the Sun,” written about 1350 B.C.E. The words of the poem are put in the mouth of Akhenaten, who is praising his father, the Sun:

“Let your holy light shine from the height of heaven,  
O living Aten,  
source of all life!  
From eastern horizon risen and streaming, 
you have flooded the world with your beauty.  
You are majestic, awesome, bedazzling, exalted,  
overlord over all earth,  
yet your rays, they touch lightly, compass the lands  
to the limits of all your creation.  
There in the Sun, you reach to the farthest of those  
you would gather in for your Son,  
whom you love;  
Though you are far, your light is wide upon earth;  
and you shine in the faces of all  
who turn to follow your journeying.

When you sink to rest below western horizon  
earth lies in darkness like death,  
Sleepers are still in bedchambers, heads veiled,  
eye cannot spy a companion;  
All their goods could be stolen away  
heads heavy there, and they never knowing!  
Lions come out from the deeps of their caves,  
snakes bite and sting;  
Darkness muffles, and earth is silent:  
he who created all things lies low in his tomb.
Earth-dawning mounts the horizon,  
glows in the sun-disk as day:  
You drive away darkness, offer your arrows of shining,  
and the Two Lands are lively with morning-song.  
Sun’s children awaken and stand,  
for you, golden light, have upraised the sleepers;  
Bathed are their bodies, who dress in clean linen,  
their arms held high to praise your Return.  
Across the face of the earth  
they go to their crafts and professions.

The herds are at peace in their pastures,  
trees and the vegetation grow green;  
Birds start from their nests,  
wings wide spread to worship your Person;  
Small beasts frisk and gambol, and all  
who mount into flight or settle to rest  
live, once you have shone upon them;  
Ships float downstream or sail for the south,  
each path lies open because of your rising;  
Fish in the River leap in your sight,  
and your rays strike deep in the Great Green Sea.  

How various is the world you have created,  
each thing mysterious, sacred to sight,  
O sole God,  
beside whom is no other!  
You fashioned earth to your heart’s desire,  
while you were still alone,  
Filled it with man and the family of creatures,  
each kind on the ground, those who go upon feet,  
he on high soaring on wings,  
The far lands of Khor and Kush,  
and the rich Black Land of Egypt.  

You make Hapy, the Nile, stream through the underworld,  
and bring him, with whatever fullness you will,  
To preserve and nourish the People  
in the same skilled way you fashion them.  
You are Lord of each one,  
who wearies himself in their service,  
Yet Lord of all earth, who shines for them all,  
Sun-disk of day, holy Light!  
All of the far foreign countries–
you are the cause they live,
For you have put a Nile in the sky
that he might descend upon them in rain–
He makes waves on the very mountains
like waves on the Great Green Sea
to water their fields and their villages.

You are the One God,
shining as Aten, the Living Sun,
Revealed like a king in glory, risen in light,
now distant, now bending nearby.
You create the numberless things of this world
from yourself, who are One alone—
cities, towns, fields, the roadway, the River,
And each eye looks back and beholds you
to learn from the day’s light perfection.
O God, you are in the Sun-disk of Day,
Over-Seer of all creation
–your legacy
passed on to all who shall ever be;
For you fashioned their sight, who perceive your universe,
that they praise with one voice
all your labors.

And you are in my heart,
there is no other who truly knows you
but for your son, Akhenaten.
May you make him wise with your inmost counsels,
wise with your power,
that earth may aspire to your godhead,
its creatures fine as the day you made them.
Once you rose into shining, they lived;
when you sink to rest, they shall die.
For it is you who are Time itself,
the span of the world,
life is by means of you.

Eyes are filled with beauty
until you go to your rest;
All work is laid aside
as you sink down the western horizon.

Then, Shine reborn! Rise splendidly!
my Lord, let life thrive for the King
Who has kept pace with your every footstep
Chapter One

since you first measured ground for the world.
Lift up the creatures of earth for your Son
who came forth from your Body of Fire!”

We don’t know if the king himself composed it, but this hymn certainly has all the earmarks of Akhenaten’s religion. He was the world’s first known monotheist. Not only did I want to share this with you to show the world in its perfection when ordered by ma’at, but I am also interested in it because of its power to widen our own horizons. We don’t need to be believers in order to be impressed by the wonder the composer shows at the world before him. The poem teaches us that someone like ourselves could be moved by the shining sun; and we can share his rejoicing and feel at one with him.

VII.

Interestingly, the ancient Egyptians also portrayed the world without ma’at or at least with ma’at disrupted. There is the extraordinary piece known as *The Debate between a Man Tired of Life and his Soul*. The man is so despondent he wants to commit suicide; his *ba*, or soul, argues against self-destruction, trying to convince the man to enjoy life until the time when going into the West (death) comes naturally. The man’s mental struggle elicits some fine poetry. Here is an excerpt:

“Who is there to talk to today?
There is no thought for tradition;
no one nurturing decency these days.
Who is there to talk to today?
Brothers betray;
they talk to strangers, not men of integrity.
Who is there to talk to today?
Faces are wiped out;
each, high or low, fighting all others.
Who is there to talk to today?
Hearts are selfish and slick;
no heart to lean on.
Who is there to talk to today?
There are no righteous men;
earth is abandoned to evil.
Who is there to talk to today?
Emptiness in trusted friends;
blind ignorance to life that brings wisdom.
Who is there to talk to today?
No man of satisfied mind;
one to walk quietly with does not exist.
Who is there to talk to today?
I am bowed too low with my misery
lacking someone to share the thoughts in my heart.
Who is there to talk to today?
Wrongdoing beats on the earth,
and of it there is no end.”

Not only were scribes, their teachers, and all people in general to guide their lives by ma‘at; but kings and gods as well were to govern and be governed by it. If the king failed to rule by ma‘at, Egypt would face upheaval and disaster, as in this portrait of the land at war in a passage from Neferty:

“They shall take weapons of war
so that the land is alive with tumult.
They shall make arrows of copper,
bread shall be paid for in blood.
Let them laugh with the laughter of pain,
no tears shall be spared for the dead;
One cannot assuage the wants of the dying–
the heart of a man first looks to himself.

There are none who show sorrow these days,
and the heart is wholly bewildered because of it.
A man sits down, turning his back,
while another murders a third–
Let me give you the son as an enemy, brother as foe,
a man killing his father.

–Each mouth is full of love, of love,
but all the loveliness is gone.”

Hear a passage from The Admonitions of Ipuwer. Ipuwer, in a similar situation, complains of the conditions in the country:

“The villages are vexed by roving robber bands
so that a man goes plowing with his shield;
The face is ashen, bedouin settle in;
deceit is everywhere, there is no man of yesterday.
Plundering is all about us . . .
the servant is detained for what is found on him.
Hapy overflows, they cannot plough;
each says, “I don’t know what is happening to the land.”
Women are barren, they cannot conceive;
Khnum will not make children due to the land’s condition.
The poor are lords of riches,
he who had no shoes is wealthy.
The servants here, their lives are full of greed;
leaders will not mingle with the people.
The heart is violent, plague rages through the land,
and blood is everywhere.”

Elsewhere Ipuwer cries,

“Why did God take thought to fashion men? . . .
If only he had seen their nature in the early generations,
he would have dealt with their rebelliousness;
He would have stretched his arm against them
to obliterate their seed and their inheritance.
Fearing this, they craved procreation—then came sadness;
misery was everywhere; wrongdoing.
And it did not go away though gods were watching.
Descendants flowed from the women of mankind;
Injustice made havoc of all that they had built;
no leader led them in their day.
Indeed where is there such a guide today? Perhaps he sleeps?
—we cannot find a trace of him at work.”

VIII.

How does one heal such a world gone astray? What is the remedy? Primarily it is adherence to the dictates of the wisdom tradition and appeal to a higher authority for intercession. Ipuwer himself addressing God directly, says:

“If only You would nourish us!—
I cannot find You!
And yet I cannot pray to You as Nothingness—
that were calamity enough to break my heart!”

In The Eloquent Peasant, a story from ancient Egypt with didactic overtones, Khnum-Anup, the farmer robbed by a rapacious bureaucrat does both: he continues to behave correctly and he appeals to the Royal High Steward. Eventually balance is restored, even bringing some renown and reward to the peasant.

On a larger scale, the scale of the passages in Neferty and Ipuwer, it is the king who must act. Periods of Egyptian history when a strong king was not ruling—such as the times portrayed in Neferty and Ipuwer—are