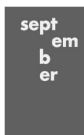


# The Enchanted Life

unlocking the magic  
of the everyday

Sharon  
Blackie



An extract from  
September Publishing

# Contents

## Why Enchantment, and Why Now?

1. Enchantment matters	3
2. The unendurable everyday	13

## What Is Enchantment?

3. To inhabit the living world	41
4. The wonderment	71
5. At home in our skin	93
6. The mythic imagination	125

## The Magic of the Everyday

7. Coming home to ourselves	167
8. An ear to the ground	195
9. Kinship and otherness	229
10. Hands on the clay of life	255
11. Life as if it mattered	273

## The Enchanted Life

12. A manifesto for an enchanted life	299
Acknowledgements	305
References	306

## 2. The unendurable everyday

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The element of fire is quite put out,  
The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it.

John Donne, from 'An Anatomy of the World'

I REMEMBER MY first experience with what I'd now call disenchantment: the first time I ever actually understood what it was, and all that it implied. It wasn't when, at the age of five, my great-uncle calmly informed me that Santa Claus didn't actually exist (I wasn't entirely sure I'd ever bought into the idea, to be truthful), or when, not so very long afterwards, a schoolteacher told me that there were no such things as fairies (that was just silly. Of course there were. I'd read *Peter Pan*, and I also knew perfectly well that, when she said those words, a fairy died). In fact, I retained a sense of that particular kind of enchantment all through a challenging childhood and well into my teenage years. I knew full well that the world was full of mystery. I discovered it under every leaf and stone in our tiny urban garden, and I fell headlong into it when I read the mythology, fiction and poetry which I loved. If we could imagine worlds filled with such wonders, I reasoned, then at some level they had to be real.

No, my first ever full-on experience of disenchantment came at the age of eighteen. It happened during one of the first lectures I attended after enrolling for a degree in psychology at a university in the north of England. I'd chosen to study psychology rather than literature, as I'd always imagined I would, in good part because I was afraid that that the obsessive textual deconstruction that seemed to characterise the advanced study of literature would take all the enchantment and mystery out of the great books that I loved. And by studying psychology, I believed, I would instead be delving into all the enchantment and mystery of the human mind. I was thrilled by the idea; as the only child from my impoverished working-class family line who had ever made it to university, I so badly wanted to learn, to be inducted into the magical world of academia.

And so it was with a strange sick feeling in my throat that I watched as a sardonic disbeliever-in-everything thoroughly

deconstructed the idea of hypnosis. It was a demolition job which involved a fair amount of showmanship, as the lecturer in question gathered a couple of giggling helpers from the admiring audience and demonstrated how to perform the Human-Plank Feat – once declared to be one of the ‘proofs’ that hypnosis was a unique state of consciousness in which people could be instructed to do things they normally wouldn’t dream of – and then proceeded to pick apart all of the ways in which humans indulged in ‘magical thinking’. This degree course, he informed us, would knock all of that kind of nonsense out of us, once and for all. It would show us how to think; it would show us how to recognise what was ‘real’ and what was just a figment of our imaginations.

It’s not that I didn’t want to learn how to think: I did. It’s not that I didn’t want to know that what once was held up as a ‘proof’ of the existence of an irresistibly suggestive hypnotic state wasn’t actually a proof of anything at all – anyone with halfway decent abdominal muscle tone could achieve it. I did want to know such things. But what struck me to the core were two fundamental aspects of his approach to the subject: first, his profound and gleeful contempt for people and the way they participated in and thought about the world; and, second, an absolute refusal to entertain any idea that couldn’t be empirically verified, and to dismiss it as ‘mere imagination’, as unreal. What was wrong with imagination? I was bewildered. With the obligatory exceptions of O levels in biology and mathematics, all of my education at school had focused on the arts. Imagination was life – it was everything. It was the best of us. So I wholeheartedly believed (and still do).

With that, the brain-washing began. A year into that degree, and I could hardly say the word ‘mind’ without shuddering. ‘Brain’ was fine, because it was a physical entity which we could break into and look at; and ‘behaviour’ was fine, because we could see it and objectively measure it (even if we couldn’t always *trust* it). Internal events, though, were another matter entirely. Thought and emotion? Well, if you couldn’t explain them in measurable behavioural or biological terms, you simply shouldn’t study them at all. You probably shouldn’t even use the words. Best, on the whole, to pretend they didn’t exist. People who talked about things like ‘mind’ and ‘consciousness’ – well, they were all a bit . . . flaky, to proper scientists like us.

The truth is, it was a fine enough education in its way. It was gloriously broad, as we delved into the relationship between psychology and disciplines as diverse as genetics, neuroscience, social sciences, ethology and linguistics. It was rigorously scientific, and the subjective nature of psychology meant that it was necessary to question everything, always to be aware of and challenge your assumptions. That was good, and I've been grateful, over the years, for that fine education in how to think. We humans need a hefty dose of rationality in our lives; it keeps us honest. I liked the rigour – but I didn't like the fundamentalism which presented science as the only true dogma, and I didn't at all like the ways in which we were actively and determinedly disenchanted, as lecturers wielded copies of B.F. Skinner's profoundly disturbing *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* as if it were their institutional, and very holy, bible.

It took a lot of years for me to recover from that reprogramming; a three-year PhD followed by a stint of postdoctoral research in behavioural neuroscience certainly didn't help. And yet I held on. Throughout it all, I lived a curiously double life: in my spare time I read and studied, just as I had always done, everything I could find about myths and fairy tales, and immersed myself in books and novels imbued with that sense of enchantment which was now sorely lacking in my own working life. I wouldn't, of course, have admitted to it under torture; the persona I presented to the world was always wonderfully . . . rigorous. I was a very successful neuroscientist. It wasn't until I was in my late thirties – all at sea, burned out from several years of corporate disenchantment after I finally left academia, and working my way through what seemed like the last in a whole line of early and mid-life crises – that I found a way to combine psychology with the mythology that I loved, and clawed my way determinedly towards a vision which could bring those two aspects of my own personality back together. Because an enchanted life recognises the need both for rigour and for the free-wheeling imagination. The one doesn't have to exclude the other. The world isn't black and white. A scientific approach is a valuable part of the way we come to understand the world; the problem arises when it presents itself as the only valid way.

But here's the question which consumed me during my university days, and which still nags at me today: how did we ever get to the stage where we thought this might be a good way to educate

a human being? Where did we acquire our determined worship of the rational and intellectual, our downgrading of the value of the creative imagination? And how did it so profoundly infiltrate our institutions?

## The disenchantment of the world

If to be enchanted is to fully participate in the world, to be open both to its transparency and its mystery, then to be disenchanted is its opposite. To be disenchanted is to be shut down. As we'll see in a later chapter, our way of being in the world is naturally open to wonder and awe when we are children, but then we lose our facility for enchantment as we grow older, and learn to conform to the social and cultural codes which tell us we must actively *disenchant* ourselves if we want to be thought of as fully adult. My own experience, as a scientist-in-training, might have been extreme in its focus, and in its clearly stated intent to disenchant – but we're all subjected to the process of disenchantment in one way or another. Disenchantment is ingrained in our culture and, as we'll discover, it goes back a long, long way. This way of thinking won't be so easy to uproot.

So what is it, this disenchantment which ultimately replaces the instinctive, enchanted worldview that we possess as children? What does it actually look like, and how does it manifest itself in our lives and in the world around us? How does it happen to us?

### *It's just a bird, for heaven's sake*

At the risk of seeming to over-simplify, to those of us in the English-speaking world, disenchantment arguably begins with 'he', 'she' and 'it'. Because what replaces enchantment is the intensely dualistic – 'us and them' – Western worldview which is instilled into us from the moment, as children, we begin to learn language, and are taught to label things and categorise them. The English language in particular forces us to adopt a position of separation and distance from the rest of the world as soon as we begin to use it. Only humans may properly be given the pronoun 'he' or 'she'. Everything else is an 'it'. An 'it' is usually an inanimate object – something which (even if it is capable of growing, like a plant) isn't alive in the same way that we are

– which lacks characteristics like perception, consciousness and volition. Even though we tend to agree that animals are not inanimate objects (though not all philosophers have been entirely convinced, as we'll see in a moment) nevertheless, in proper use of English, we don't talk about them in the same way we talk about ourselves. Sometimes it's acceptable to refer to a pet – an animal with which we have a personal relationship – as 'he' or 'she', but a quick online search of 'how to do grammar properly' resources for writers will confirm their advice that we should always refer to a wild animal as 'it'.

Already, we are separate. There's us, the humans, and there's the rest of the world. The one we are told is outside of us – which we are taught to think of as beginning where our skin ends. A completely different category: one giant, inanimate *it*.

This perspective – in which we are not participants in the world but mere observers of it, acting upon inert objects which are *other* than us – clearly distances us from our surroundings and the (non-human) beings who we share them with. It not only teaches us that this strange *it*-ness outside of us is less valuable than we are (not requiring of us the same linguistic courtesies, for example), but it profoundly reduces our sense of belonging to the world, for how can you ever belong to something from which you are so profoundly different, and to which you imagine yourself morally and intellectually superior?

Our first fictional walker in the woods, Woman A, displays just this kind of attitude. Everything she encounters is an object, something other than her, something to observe, sometimes admire, and perhaps classify (if she can). She walks apart on the man-made path, and engages with nothing that she encounters – a curious crow is dismissed as 'just a bird'. She is entirely wrapped up in her own head, in the experience of her own subjectivity. Woman B, on the other hand, treats everything she comes across as another being with whom she can have a meaningful exchange – whether it's a crow, a bluebell or a stone.

In most indigenous societies – and we'll explore this more deeply in the next chapter – the prevailing view of the world is animistic. The word 'animism' derives from the Greek *anima*, 'soul', and in such a worldview everything is alive – not just humans, not just animals, but rivers and seas, rocks and stones, trees and plants. Humans are a part of this world, just like all those other living



things. We aren't in charge, and neither are we alienated observers of an inert cosmos: we are all bound up in its unfolding, all of us in it together. A vast meshwork of humans and animals, rivers and seas, rocks and stones, trees and plants.

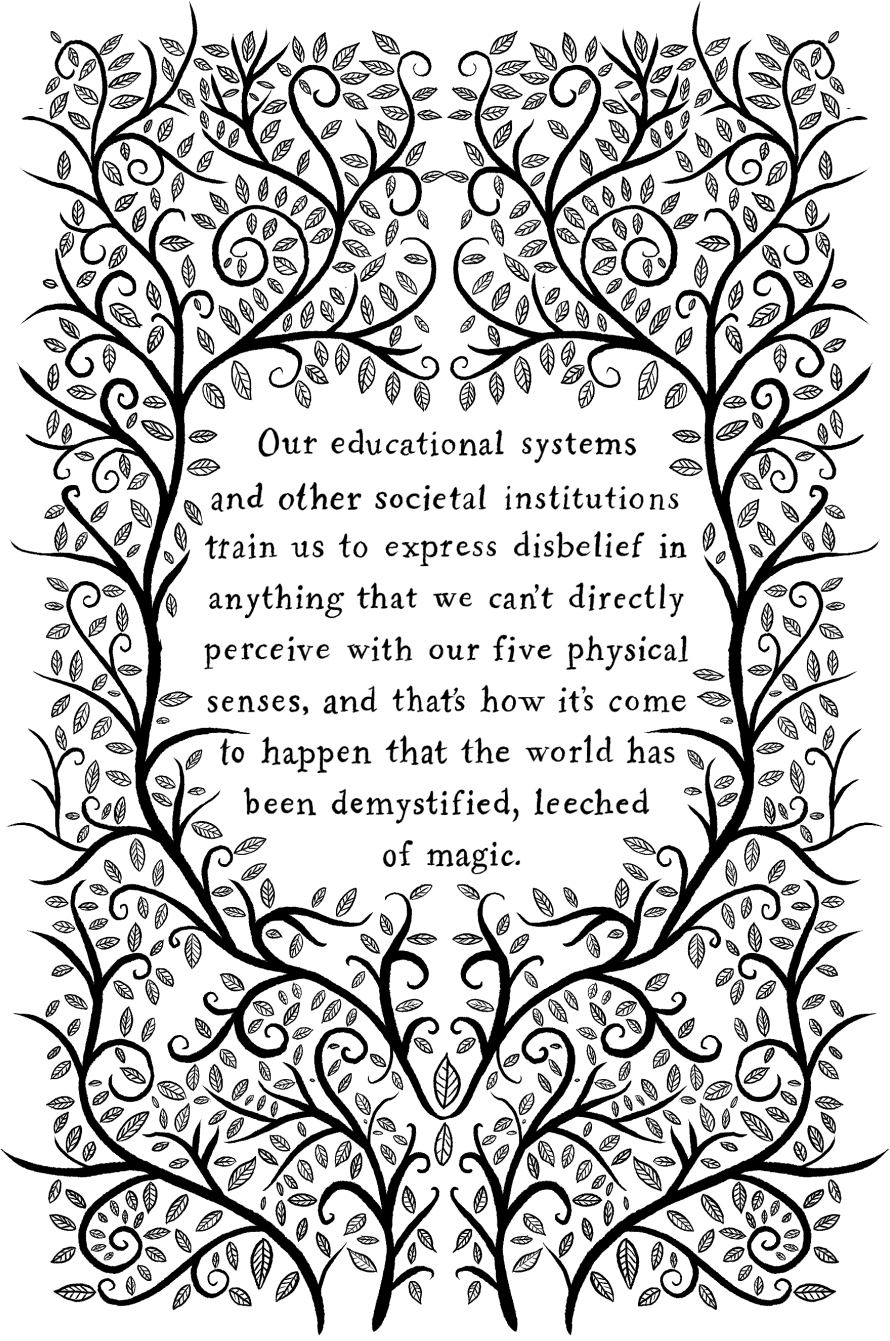
### *The corruptions of the flesh*

It sounds like a much richer, friendlier way to live, to inhabit a world in which you are enfolded into a vast community of life, constantly surrounded by others with whom you can enter into relationship – but unfortunately this way of being in the world began to erode in the West a long time ago, as philosophers and other intellectuals increasingly began to promote the rational and intellectual above all other types of knowledge, and taught us that we should mistrust the evidence of our physical senses. Our detachment from the rest of the world around us is clearly expressed in the writings of Plato, a wealthy Athenian about whom little is now known, but who, along with his teacher Socrates and his most famous student Aristotle, laid many of the foundations for Western philosophy and intellectual practice as we know it today. Plato argued 2,500 years ago that humans alone possess reason and intellect, and because of this we're not only different from, but superior to, every other living creature that exists.

There we have it: in one fell swoop we are severed from the rest of life on this planet, completely alone in the world.

In contrast to the 'naturalist' philosophers who preceded him, Plato denied the reality of the physical world, arguing that the material world that we perceive with our senses is not the 'real' world at all, but only an image or copy of a real world which can only ever be properly known through the intellect. The physical is profoundly to be mistrusted; only reason can lead us to the truth.

And of course, it's not as silly an idea as it might seem; one of Plato's points was that the way the world is perceived is very subjective. You can argue as much as you like that grass is green, but if the person looking at it has a particular form of colour-blindness, then chances are they'll see it as grey. Which is 'real'? Unfortunately, though, Plato's rejection of the physical and veneration of the transcendental and intellectual passed directly down into later Western thought, and, for example, strongly influenced the doctrines of



Our educational systems  
and other societal institutions  
train us to express disbelief in  
anything that we can't directly  
perceive with our five physical  
senses, and that's how it's come  
to happen that the world has  
been demystified, leeched  
of magic.

major religions such as Christianity. The body was scorned as a remnant of our 'animal nature', which we were striving to supersede in our pursuit of reason and intellect, so that we might grow closer to a transcendental, immaterial God. And so phrases such as the 'corruptions of the flesh' abound in medieval religious writings; only by negating the body could you hope to grow closer to God. That's why certain religious communities, especially those of women, were taught to practise 'mortification of the flesh' – in its more extreme forms, a particularly unpleasant form of active self-harm which included flagellation – so that they might free themselves from 'sin'.

Given that we experience the world and live in it as embodied creatures, none of this was ever going to help us feel a sense of belonging to the physical Earth which we inhabit right now. Unfortunately, it was never going to do much for the overall mental health of our species, either: denying what you are is the first step forward on a sure path to madness.

Many of us today are still embarrassed by our physical bodies and their perfectly natural functions. We concoct all kinds of strange words and phrases to gloss over or camouflage the process of eliminating waste from our bodies: in North America, for example, even the word 'toilet' has been exchanged for the bizarrely bashful and utterly inapposite 'restroom'. As a teenager, I could hardly say the word 'menstruation' without blushing, and going into a shop to buy tampons or sanitary pads was positively excruciating. The sexualisation of the female body in particular means that nudity is seen as titillating rather than natural. We cover ourselves up so as not to be a source of 'temptation', and if we don't and we are assaulted or raped, then we are just 'asking for it', because everyone knows that the female body is unbearably arousing and induces men to sin.

Most of us experience a sense of shame because we can't live up to the cultural idea – and men, of course, suffer from body image issues just like women. The presentation of the 'ideal man' – tall, muscular, bronzed – is no more realistic than the presentation of the ideal woman. A 2017 article in *Time* magazine spoke of a 'body image epidemic' in American men – Dr Harrison Pope, director of the Biological Psychiatry Laboratory at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, said that the increasing equation of masculinity with muscularity has led men not only to feel more and more

dissatisfied with their bodies, but for around 4 million of them to use potentially harmful anabolic steroids to increase their muscle mass.<sup>3</sup> The body image issue for lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual and questioning others is even more complex, with societal stereotyping adding to the problem, as individuals experience intense feelings of dissonance between who they perceive themselves to be and who they ideally would like to be.

### *The Chain of Being*

Later, Aristotle – a man whose students were nicknamed ‘the Peripatetics’ because he was known for walking briskly around the school grounds while lecturing them, forcing them to trot along behind – formalised Plato’s ideas into a hierarchy of values. Plants were placed at the bottom of his value system, because they possessed only what he called ‘nutritive souls’, which were related to growth and metabolism. Slightly above plants in his hierarchy were animals, who in addition, he said, possessed ‘perceptive souls’ of pain, pleasure and desire. And firmly at the top of the ladder were humans – because, he believed, we additionally, and uniquely, possessed the faculty of reason. Later, this notion was expanded by other philosophers into what is now referred to as the ‘Great Chain of Being’, which proposes the following hierarchy: God at the top, followed by angelic beings – neither of whom occupied the realm of the material and so were infinitely superior to those who did – then humans, then animals, then plants, then minerals. Beings on higher levels of this hierarchy were believed to possess more authority over those in lower positions.

Although it might seem like a rather archaic idea to us now when presented in this fashion, the Chain of Being still informs the way we think about ourselves and our relationship to the rest of the world today. In a recent article in *Psychology Today*, a respected Harvard psychiatrist refers to all things which are not human as ‘lower life forms’.<sup>4</sup> The Chain of Being certainly informs our exploitation of the environment, and we still often apply Aristotle’s value hierarchy in making judgments and choices – for example, when we make choices about what it’s okay to eat: humans never, animals sometimes (depending on whether or not you’re a vegetarian) and plants always (even if you’re the most radical of vegans) because, as

a vegan friend declared to me once, ‘Even if plants are alive, they don’t feel pain in the same way we do.’

### *Masters and possessors of nature*

This sort of thinking pretty much held sway down through the centuries, through the Middle Ages and on into the Renaissance. In the early seventeenth century, it was further advanced by French philosopher René Descartes, who was perhaps best known for his most famous written line, ‘*Cogito, ergo sum*’ – ‘I think, therefore I am’. Descartes is believed to have been sickly as a boy, and to have suffered a nervous breakdown while studying law at the University of Poitiers. Then, having become disillusioned with the world of books, and in a move that might not seem entirely obvious for someone of such an apparently tender disposition, he decided he would be better served by seeing something of the world – and took himself off to join the Duke of Bavaria’s army. So it was, at the age of twenty-three, that he found himself ‘shut up in a stove-heated room’ while wintering with the army in the German city of Ulm. It was 10 November 1619, the vigil of the Feast of St Martin of Tours – a time of great celebration in the France of the day – and, during the course of the night, Descartes had three ‘big dreams’ which he later credited with determining the future course of his work. He immediately interpreted them as coming directly from God, and from that moment on, Descartes believed that he had a divine mandate for his ideas. Indeed, he was so convinced of this divine endorsement of his ‘mission’ that he shortly afterwards made a pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loreto to express his appreciation.

Descartes – clearly by then not a man particularly given to self-doubt – took from those dreams the message that he should set out to reform all human knowledge; he decided to begin with philosophy. Unfortunately for the future trajectory of Western civilisation, Descartes’ dream-God seems to have left him with the impression that our job is to make ourselves the ‘masters and possessors of nature’. This would be a desirable thing, Descartes wrote, because it would allow us to ‘enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth and all the goods found there’.<sup>5</sup> But, it hasn’t quite turned out that way. As a consequence of our quest for mastery and possession of nature

we are, like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, much more likely to have sown the seeds of our own destruction.

Descartes also extended the Aristotelian view that, as well as being the only creatures who possess reason, humans are unique because they alone possess souls and 'mind'. Animals, he declared, have neither soul nor mind; they have no self-awareness or volition; they're insentient and feel no emotion. Although they might act as if they're conscious, they're really not: they are nothing more than biological machines, programmed to behave in wholly predetermined and highly restrictive ways. The entire non-human world is bereft of animating force, insentient, purposeless and completely lacking in intrinsic value. We can do what we like with it.

Again, chances are that many of us, when presented with such a bald statement as 'We can do what we like with it', would flinch or demur. We don't think like that any more, we might say: we've moved on since then. And yet, many of us don't think twice about killing and concreting over fertile fields and healthy forests to create our cities, or injecting liquid at high pressure into subterranean rocks to force open fissures so we can extract oil or gas, or keeping vast numbers of living animals confined in cages throughout the entire course of their drastically abbreviated lives so we can slaughter them en masse and buy their flesh neatly wrapped up in plastic in our supermarkets and not have to think about where it came from. Aren't we humans, and don't we need more houses and more power and more food for the hungry (human) masses? Don't we have more right than any other being to the space, and the resources of the planet? (And for sure, hardly anyone ever thinks of asking a stone on a beach whether it would be okay to remove it from its natural environment, take it home with us and 'display' it on an indoor windowsill.) Whether we know it or not, the choices we make as individuals, as well as the practices of our civilisation, are still driven by ideas concocted hundreds of years ago by wealthy, educated men such as Plato, Aristotle and Descartes.

### *Too enlightened for our own good*

While Descartes was working towards his vision of mastering and possessing nature, Europe was in the throes of the Scientific Revolution: a term used by historians to describe the emergence of modern science,

when developments in fields of study like mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology and chemistry were profoundly transforming our views about the nature of ourselves, and the world. Francis Bacon, one of the early founders of the scientific method, was an influential contributor to the Scientific Revolution in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He strongly believed that the only valid approach to science was empirical: in other words, you can only properly test an idea by observing, experimenting and measuring, and if you can't do that, it's not a proper subject for study. Thinking about something and reasoning about it just isn't good enough, and older forms of knowledge such as intuition are completely beyond the pale.

Bacon was originally a statesman who, after becoming Lord Chancellor, was subsequently accused of accepting bribes, and was impeached by Parliament for corruption. With his political career in shreds, he decided to have a go at philosophy. In the *Novum Organum*, published in 1620, he suggested that humans could achieve power over the world by seeking knowledge of it – and so give birth to the 'Empire of Man over creation'.<sup>6</sup> The same fundamental idea: humans better; humans first. Unfortunately for Bacon, in the expression of his own individual Empire it was 'creation' which had the last laugh. In 1626, while performing a series of experiments to test the effects of cold on the preservation and decay of meat, he stuffed a hen with snow and promptly caught a chill. He soon developed bronchitis and, a week later, died.

The theories of Descartes and Bacon, along with others which were developed during the Scientific Revolution, influenced the intellectuals whose ideas, taken together, ushered in the period of history that we now call the Enlightenment – and which is sometimes called the Age of Reason. During this period (the Enlightenment is usually considered to have lasted through the eighteenth century) there were also major challenges to religious beliefs and practices; at the same time, there was a growth in the doctrine of Humanism, which emphasised the primacy and centrality of human beings in the world, instead of God. The old religions were held to be mere superstition; the new, true religion was founded on the application of reason and the acquisition of knowledge – but only if that knowledge could be verified empirically.

This cultural worship of reason and empiricism means that our educational systems and other societal institutions train us to

express disbelief in anything that we can't directly perceive with our five physical senses, and that's how it's come to happen that the world has been demystified, leached of magic. We might, deep down in our hearts, believe that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in the empiricists' philosophy, but most of us probably feel we'd be wise not to talk about them in public. I've been a recovering scientist now for thirty years, and I still find myself flinching if ever I should happen to use words like 'holy', 'sacred', 'reverence' or 'spiritual'. I'm not entirely sure I won't someday be burned at the stake if I confess that there's something in me which believes the old gods are alive, still, and walk the land, if only you know where to find them . . .

And yet, 'official' cultural norms aside, many people in the West have their own antidotes to disenchantment. Belief in protective icons and rituals is still strong. Nearly 30 per cent of Americans say they have felt in touch with someone who has already died, almost 20 per cent say they have seen or been in the presence of ghosts, and 15 per cent have consulted a fortune teller or a psychic, according to a 2009 Pew Research Center survey.<sup>7</sup> As many as 72 per cent believe in Heaven, 58 per cent believe in Hell, and 83 per cent are absolutely or fairly certain that God exists.<sup>8</sup>

### *Dogma and demiurges*

And on that note – it's not just scientists and philosophers who laid down the script for our disenchantment: religion was influential too. This might at first seem like an unlikely idea, because ever since the Enlightenment, critics have usually associated religion with exactly the kind of 'irrational' thinking that's sometimes linked with the use of words like 'enchantment'. But many religions, in their dogmatic adherence to one particular way of seeing the world, relieve us of possibility and so fetter our imaginations. Wonder and awe, they tell us, can be turned only in one direction: never onto what is 'worldly', but always in the direction of God.

In many monotheistic religions, to love God automatically requires a rejection of the physical world. Some strains of Christian thought, for example, involve a profound hostility to the physical, the here and now, and value only the transcendental – the unearthly – and the notion of an afterlife far away from the 'corruption' of



material things. We find some of the most striking examples of such beliefs in Gnosticism, a religious perspective adopted by some Christians in the first and second centuries AD. The Gnostics believed that the physical world was evil because it was created by the Demiurge: a malevolent 'emanation' of the One God.

The Cathars, recently popularised (and mostly romanticised) in a series of movies and novels such as Kate Mosse's 'Languedoc' trilogy,<sup>9</sup> were members of a Gnostic revivalist sect which flourished in northern Italy and southern France between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. They're now remembered primarily because of a prolonged period of persecution by the Catholic Church, which didn't recognise their beliefs as properly Christian (especially their belief in two Gods – one good and one evil) and so condemned them as heretics. The Cathars believed that the world was in fact created by Satan, and so this world, this Earth, was inherently tainted with evil. All physical matter was created by this evil God, and because of that, the Cathars also believed that all reproduction – including human reproduction – was a sin.

So there we have it: a millennia-old tradition of Western thought which perceives the physical as bad; the intellectual, rational and transcendental as good; and humans as superior to and masters of the rest of the world – which, by the way, is filled with mindless creatures and objects which have no awareness or agency of their own. And so which have no meaning or purpose at all other than as objects for us to act on, use or consume. Humans, so uniquely clever but so uniquely alone, plonked down by virtue of some evolutionary accident on the hard surface of a largely inanimate planet, completely at odds with the physical bodies which are our only means of perceiving, experiencing and living in the world. Nothing else to have a proper relationship with, nothing to look up to and, as atheism continues to gain ground over religious faith, nothing to consider sacred beyond ourselves.

No wonder we're alienated and depressed.

In the early twentieth century, German intellectual Max Weber, who is now recognised as the founding father of modern sociology, coined a term which he used to describe these multiple historical processes through which a sense of wonder at the world, a sense of all life as not only redolent with meaning, but as sacred, began to

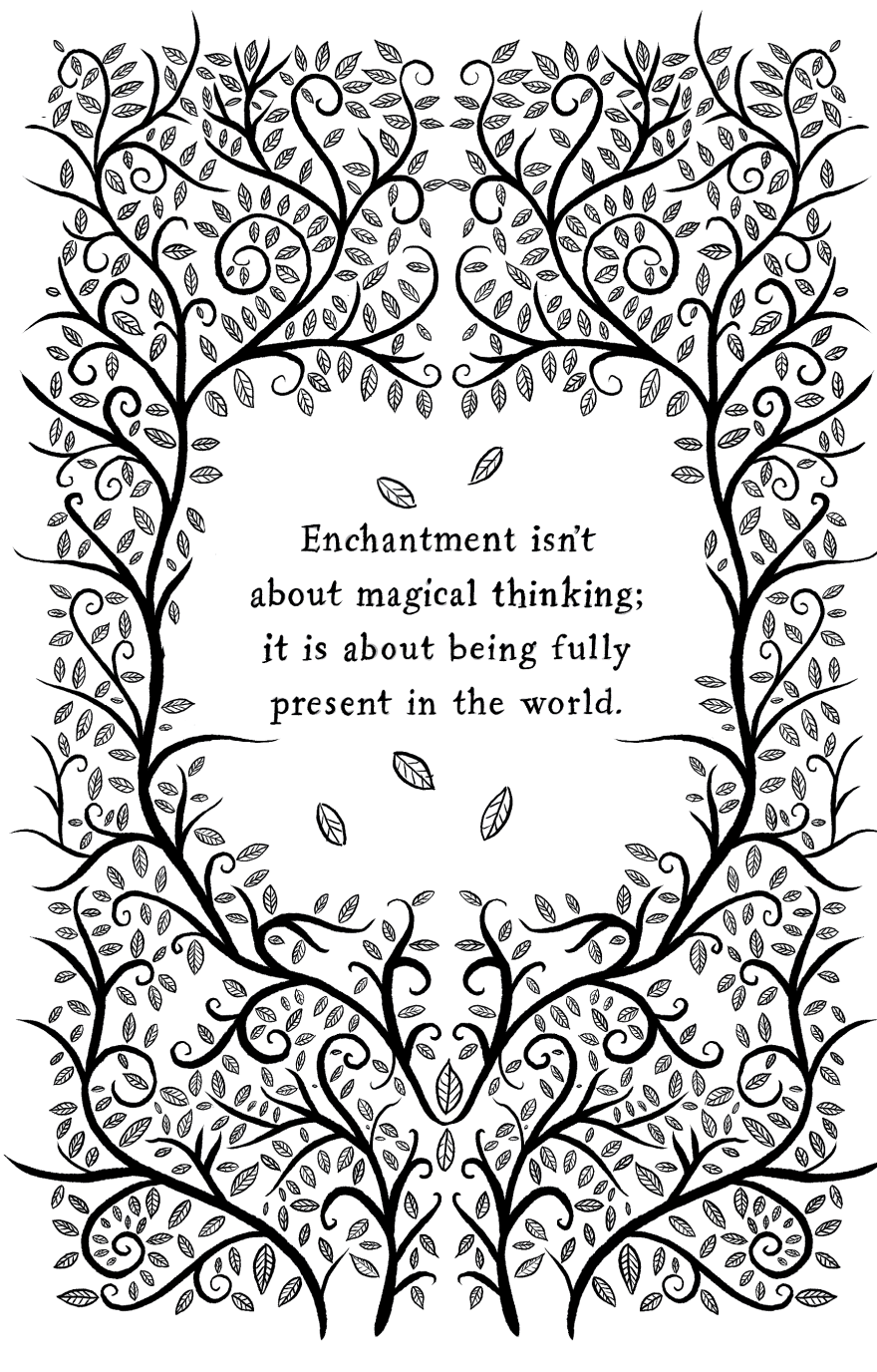
lose ground. ‘The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”,’ Weber wrote.<sup>10</sup> But of course it is not the world which is disenchanted: it is ourselves.

Each of us, at some level, in some way, has an instinctive understanding of the many different forms which that disenchantment can take; there are so many ways in which we have disenchanted ourselves. But in this book we will explore acts of *re-enchantment*: antidotes and alternatives to the centuries-old deadening, new ways to bring ourselves back to life. New ways to come home to ourselves, and to rediscover our place in the world.

## The hymn of the pearl

There is a story contained within a hymn in the Gnostic Acts of Thomas, one of the apocryphal New Testament gospels (those which were left out of the modern canon and didn’t make their way into the ‘official’ Bible). I heard it many years ago, but never could remember where it came from, and what little of it I recalled was never enough to identify it to other storytellers I asked. Recently, I happened across it again, by chance – if you believe, which I do not, that stories ever come to you by chance. But we’ll come to the hidden lives of stories in another chapter. For now, I’d like to share this particular story with you; it is called ‘The hymn of the pearl’.

Once there was a boy, the son of a king of kings, who lived happily in a house of great wealth and luxury. But his parents decided to send him on a journey. Equipping him with gold, silver and precious stones, they removed his clothing – the glittering robe and purple toga which he loved, and which suited him so well. And then they made a pact with him, and wrote the pact in his heart, so that he should never forget it. ‘Go west,’ they told him, ‘and bring back to us a uniquely beautiful pearl which lies on an island in the middle of the sea, guarded by a fierce, roaring serpent. This pearl is yours. If you do this, then when you return to us you may have your glittering robe again and your favourite purple toga. And you will inherit our kingdom together with your older brother.’



Enchantment isn't  
about magical thinking;  
it is about being fully  
present in the world.

So the young boy travelled west, accompanied by two guardians – for the way was long and hard, and he was very young to travel it. After passing through many lands and seeing many wonders, he eventually came to the island he had been told about: an island in the middle of the sea where the serpent lived. Once they had arrived safely on that island, his companions left him. And so the boy asked some questions, and discovered where the serpent made his home; and he remained on the island for a while, planning to wait until the serpent fell asleep (which he did rarely) so that he could take the beautiful pearl from him. But while he waited he became lonely and missed his family; and so when a local boy made friends with him, he shared with him the gold and silver and jewels that his parents had given him, and began to dress like him in order to better fit into his surroundings, and not to be treated like a stranger.

Although he had been warned by his parents not to eat the food of these people, most of whom were slaves, he was hungry as well as lonely, and he gratefully took their food when it was offered to him. And so it happened that, clothed in the garments of this strange country, and partaking of its food, he forgot that he was a son of kings, and began to serve the new country's king: the king of these people, who were slaves. And he forgot his pearl, for which his parents had sent him, and it was as if a veil covered his eyes and he fell into a deep sleep. So he remained for many years.

When years passed and still their son did not return home, his parents understood what must have become of him, and they brought together all of the nobles in their kingdom so that together they could make a plan to rescue him. His family wrote a letter, signed by all the nobles of the kingdom, reminding their son that he was a son of kings, and asking him to free himself from the slavery of the country where he now was – and to remember his pearl, for which he had been sent. Remember also your glittering robe, the letter exhorted him, and your purple toga, and come back to your family and your home!

The letter was given to an eagle, and the king of all birds flew west and soon found this boy who was now a man, and landed beside him as he slept. When, startled, he awoke, the eagle spoke to him and dropped the letter at his feet.

And the man read the letter and remembered that he was of noble birth; and he remembered his pearl, for which he had been

sent to this strange country. The veil fell away from his eyes. And so he left his room and went at once to the place where the terrible roaring serpent lived, and he sat down at its feet and set about the process of charming it. He sang and he crooned, and eventually he lulled the serpent to sleep. Once it was safely and soundly slumbering, he snatched away the pearl which lay in the centre of the spiral created by its coiling body. He cleaned his filthy clothes and set off across the sea, embarking on the long journey east.

Just as he was approaching the gates of his family home, servants came out to him, bearing the bright robe and the purple toga which once he had worn. He hardly remembered them now, for he had left his home many years ago, when he was a child – but as soon as the clothes were placed back into his hands, all of a sudden they seemed like mirrors of his true self. And so the man put on his old robes – the beautiful, richly coloured, glittering robes he had worn as a child, but which had grown along with him – and returned home, bearing the wondrous gift of the pearl which he had wrested from the terrible, roaring serpent who lived on an island in the middle of the great western sea.

If you're not used to working with stories of this kind, it's easy to become distracted by their literal content rather than seeing them as metaphors whose function is to shed light, as simply and as briefly as possible, on the complexities of the human condition. You could, for example, focus on the wealth and privilege of the prince's upbringing and lose sight of the fact that, in story terms, this is simply a way of indicating that he was a loved and cherished little boy, and that worldly wealth is often a metaphor for spiritual wealth. This story, then, coming out of a Gnostic text, is usually interpreted as metaphorically reflecting a Gnostic perspective on the human condition: that we are (good) spirits lost in a world of (bad) matter, and that we are forgetful of our true origin as inheritors of the kingdom of God.

But here's the thing about stories: they won't be confined and they won't be constrained. The best thing about stories is that they have lives of their own, and sometimes they conspire with you to subvert the 'official' meaning. So this story presents itself to me in another way. We have indeed forgotten who we are. We've travelled a long way from the natural world that is our home, and