

Reaching Across Space and Time

by Therese Schroeder-Sheker

“Alexander is not dead, but lives above the stars, and his body rests in this tomb.”

Inscription in the catacomb of St. Domitilla¹



I was engulfed with or recollected inside a vast impression. It seemed to reach across distances. The sphere was one of gravitas and yet suffused in enormous gratitude. With all the tenderness and mystery possible, the timeless three were palpable: hope, faith, and love. If it is possible to distill a spiritual experience into a few words, this late hour with the starry sky resounding the message of the heavens anchored itself in heart and mind as something like: *Dear Ones, even when you are open, you vastly underestimate the degree, intensity, kinds and frequency of assistance you receive from spiritual beings working on your behalf.*

You look up into the starry sky, and then look inward into your own human heart. Risk going back and forth. Up, followed by in. Up, in. In the press of daily routines, many of which are patterned with distractions, we might not see or comprehend how many things, events, conditions, people and

At dawn and at dusk, I step outside into the priory garden just “to *be*” and to “be *with*” Earth and Sky, Creation, Creator, and Cosmos. Dawn and dusk are the times when the fleeting light is so expressive and instructive, and for me, the changing light is observed in something like receptive awe rather than by preconceptions. I love the psalms and many prayers, but this openness, this tranquil waiting and receiving: ² *this* occurs wordlessly. What is received helps one live more fully.

During a recent period of twenty-four months, twenty-six dearly beloved friends made their *transitus*³; they crossed the threshold and changed form. And so recently, while looking up to the stars in the silent way just described, and after having cherished the epigraph quoted about the early Christian community meeting in the catacombs, I found myself in a condition of earnest tranquility. Yes, the bodies and ashes of my loved ones do rest in the grounds of several countries spanning thousands of miles, but like the earliest Christian community witnessed on behalf of their beloved Alexander, my loved ones too are very much alive, however metamorphosed, however changed they are in their new conditions and new garments. If we love, as we love, love transposes and transmits. It is possible for communion to continue despite all odds.

beings collaborate across space and time in order for a single, lifesaving, helpful, blessed or potentiating set of circumstances to become manifest. Each of these is a crossroads charged with significance. It can take three or ten generations or hundreds of years for unseen hands working behind the scenes to sculpt the terrain, the conditions and very separate strands in which a once-in-a-lifetime moment constellates and is potentized. Likewise, it takes repeated effort in human recollection and living thinking to trace, recognize, see and honour the major threads activated at biographical turning point moments. These insights don’t arrive like information retrieved in the pages of an encyclopedia because those bits and shards of knowledge were separated from wholes and codified yesterday, yesteryear. They are repeated today unquestioningly. The perception of the kinds and types of assistance put into place on your behalf or on my behalf, assistance from the spiritual world, comes in different degrees and stages. Perception arrives in the individual interior life gradually, profoundly, over time, and when it does, one is left in unspeakable humility. So very much had to happen in order for us to meet or for this event to unfold.

All these conditions and beings converge to create an intersection on our behalf, on behalf of the individual and on behalf of humanity in general. These turning

points rise up when least expected. You might be sitting on a wooden cart moving through a remote olive grove, or the opposite, find yourself as a passenger on a bullet train speeding toward a metropolis of millions. The turning point occurs in classrooms, coffee shops, hospitals, crowded streets. It manifests while walking with friends or strangers, amidst war, and in peace. Sometimes we sleep right through the crossroads and sometimes we are wide awake as we choose the direction or take the next step.

The aid of the spiritual world works in such a manner that whenever we humans approach one of those intersections, major or minor, large or small, regardless of the size of the consequences, freedom is operational. Philosophers and theologians, farmers and weavers all have been known to observe: The outcome is not pre-determined. But here is where we bow in humility before the sacred mystery: Our understanding of the meaning and significance of a specific next step may require the remainder of our lives (or longer) to comprehend, metabolize, integrate and appreciate.

What is it that the Frenchman Henri de Lubac⁴ says? *Those who obtain something without trouble keep it without love.* In retrospect, of course you know: had the Plato not fallen on your head in the library when you were fourteen, had you not missed the first train and taken the second, had the stranger not placed that book in your hands, had you not heard the bells pealing, had Fr. Bernard not said *Thebes*, had you not seen the painting of Francis, such-and-such would never have come forth into the light of day.

Without a thousand previous events creating the scaffolding, you would never have discovered Bartok, met your best friend or your spouse, been the one on-call when George was dying, experienced Der Blaue Reiter in fullness, stumbled upon the cabin at the end of a rainbow, found that forest path in the Pyrenees, traced hymns back to the Hebrides, or received that call from Dr. Lehrs. But awareness of connections is only like coming up to the front door of a mansion. Many can and do arrive there. Choosing to enter is another matter.

Some individuals are called to enter the resonance structure and move through the rooms and storeys of the mansion for the remainder of their lives and more. In so doing, one finds the living streaming gifts of those who carried each stone, cut each tree to fashion the table, and



crafted the wood of loom and shuttle. The inner rooms teach us to cherish the mystery of those who have gone before, those who have given so much, and yes, even those who laugh when we are in a condition of maximal transparency. In entering these rooms, we are allowed to pray, meditate and reflect upon the how and why of the (otherwise easily forgotten or otherwise too easily dismissed) choices comprising each human biography. When the soil is prepared, when these seeds germinate and awaken within us, the fruits can come directly into our field of vision. The events and conditions of human biography ultimately become one's destiny. But none of it occurs without the help of the angels.



Many years ago, I attended a lecture where a professorial priest-philosopher was describing what it means to think about thinking, and in particular to cultivate *living thinking* or the philosophy of freedom. Toward the end of his lecture, one student asked: Is it possible for a person to *miss* his or her destiny? Another bit his lip furtively and whispered: Can we actually *miss* our own boat? Those words seemed to burn in the air, but not before changing all who listened deeply.

It is amidst such sustained thought and tenderness, amidst the memory exercises which nurture true recollection, and with the awareness of the recently departed loved ones streaming across the sky that I began to gain a different footing. The soil of my own heart and soul had been prepared to receive assistance, the kind tradition calls *consolations*. I was visiting an art gallery⁵ on a coastal town and there encountered a body of work by an artist who is unashamed to enter or speak from the world of spirit.

What I saw struck me like the fluidity of the ocean and the luminous starlight combined. One particular image “spoke” of the cloud of witnesses⁶. Like the living books that appear with uncanny power and timing by virtue of the nudge of an angel – Like the living word that is a well that cannot be exhausted – when twenty-six of my loved ones had just departed, I stood before a painting that spoke truth about them in particular and about millions of others in general and about the way spiritual beings inhabit the heavens.

The entire cosmos painted on the canvas is populated with non-material beings, human and angelic, each in vestures of radiance. Countless souls and beings are moving intentionally and streaming to and from a vast and starry world. Movement in, around, and through and movements with love and light in exquisite proportion. Not a single straight edge or linear route to be seen in these migrations, only heavenly movement, like that of the wandering stars. Each human being is companioned by an angel. There is no distinction made about male and female, so much as there are individuals in the vesture of the human archetype. Each is changing form, leaving one condition and moving into another, each undergoing metamorphosis. Each soul is protecting a living flame, and each companion angel is protecting a brighter flame.

The painter’s name is Elena Markova, an artist of prodigious delicacy and insight. The gallery website says that she is descended from a long line of artists and craftsmen, and lives and works from her studio in Oregon, though she is originally from Kargopol in Northern Russia. Her life and work are steeped in the churches, chapels, cathedrals and folk arts, the history, legends and myths of her native homeland. She exhibits exclusively at the Dragon Fire Gallery in Cannon Beach, Oregon and Elena kindly gave her permission to allow her paintings to be featured in this issue of *New View*.

I acquired the *Great Migration* painting just described and depicted on the cover, and this is from

her 2008 *oeuvre*. During the last seven months, several more came to me by way of gift, and each, for me, is deeply meditative and spiritual. Each is intimate with the two great themes of incarnation and excarnation. The imagination of the human soul in any stage of transition is sacred. Elena's paintings reflect human spirits before birth and after death as they move across mysterious waters and through star filled skies, often in small boats, some of which have a ferryman angel, some of which do not. Whether one is steeped in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or Egyptian texts or Biblical scriptures or classics by priest-theologians, Elena's depiction of spiritual beings in spiritual worlds, (or the conditions of spiritual navigation through events, conditions, spheres and worlds), appears to me to offer as much food for thought, reflection, prayer and meditation as do the artworks over the altars in houses of worship across the world. Her artistic voice is distinctly Sophianic and agapeic, conveying Wisdom and Love, insight rather than dogma.

In December of 2022, I met Elena, and visiting a world class artist in the privacy of her home – or is it a sanctuary? – is unlike even the most wonderful gallery experience. She has several sons, and she, speaking very little English, and I, with zero Russian, needed the assistance of a very skilled translator. Her son delivered! We had several hours together, with patient translation provided during the entire exchange. I want to close this article by saying that anything and everything I have presented here about this artist's work is my own attempt to describe the blessing of living with her creativity. If

my meditative interpretation is far off the mark, and by that I mean *far off her mark*, I sincerely apologize.

Last, it is true that I encountered the humanitarian in Elena as well as the artist, the mother, and the woman of spirit. She watches the news of any war anywhere in the world and does so at great cost, in real pain. There was a certain moment when she asked me to wait in the kitchen and disappeared, only to return with a dozen or more paintings, each indescribably expressive and soulful. I was speechless. The subject matter? WAR. This gentle soul depicted WAR.

Readers who know and love the history of art might be familiar with Francesco Goya's eighty-two prints titled *The Disasters of War*, one of the most famous anti-war series ever depicted. Every horror imaginable is depicted in his etchings, rightfully so. He wasn't glorifying the violence of war; he attempted to make sure that the agonial sufferings endured by the men, women, children, soldiers and priests did not disappear from human consciousness.

Elena on the other hand approaches war very differently, with extraordinary feminine insight into the soul and spirit of individual human beings and groups of human beings caught in the snares of human deception or violence and the angels who assist us at all costs. Her paintings depict human souls, in hope, in love, in anguish, not the blood and guts aftereffect of the demonic machinery, and not the repeated earthly travesty of war. She explained to me that nothing in her WAR series is for sale or will be sold (and we do not show any of those images in this article). These

works continue daily and remain together.

Elena Markova strikes me as a one-woman witnessing consciousness, and her artistry works from within a different consciousness in order to serve a *new* consciousness. I imagine this notion of service is in resonance with the intention of a *New View*. Not unlike the return of a Cistercian who once spoke at Chartres⁷, Elena Markova's paintings depict intimacy with the Lamb of God. She seems to me to be a servant of the highest spirit in the human being as well as a painter of the spirit serving the Creator from whom we come and, I believe, to whom we shall all return.

*Therese Schroeder-Sheker,
The Chalice Well,
Whitsuntide 2023*



Harpist and singer Therese Schroeder-Sheker made her Carnegie Hall debut in 1980, concertized internationally for over 3 decades, has numerous recordings with American and European record labels, founded the palliative medical modality of music-thanatology, chaired programs at universities and seminaries, and publishes widely in theology, musicology and medicine. She now lives in Mount Angel, Oregon, USA.

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Endnotes

1. Heidenreich, Alfred. *The Catacombs: Pictures from the Life of Early Christianity*. Christian Community Press, 1962.

2. An opposite to the endless activities while working in the hospital or the garden.
3. This term to depict death as a crossing rather than an end originates in manuscripts of monastic medicine; it always emphasizes movement. See Schroeder-Sheker, Therese. *Transitus*. St. Dunstan's Press. 2001.
4. de Lubac, Henri. *Paradoxes of Faith*, Ignatius Press, 1987.
5. I am indebted to Martin Burke without whom I would never had been able to travel to Dragon Fire Gallery in Canon Beach, Oregon, USA.
6. The phrase *cloud of witnesses* is from the *Epistle to the Hebrews*
7. McGinn, Bernard. *The Golden Chain: Study om the Theological Anthropology of Isaac of Stella*. Cistercian Studies Series. 1972. Dronke, Peter. *Bernardis Silvestris Cosmographia*. E. J. Brill 1978. Wetherbee, Winthrop. *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres*. Princeton. 1972.

