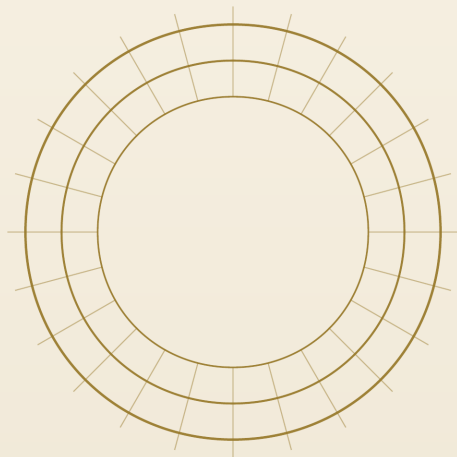




THE IMMORTAL LIGHT

THE TEACHER'S EDITION

*The Essence of the Divine Teaching Through All
the World's Religions, Told in Parables*

FIFTY-FIVE PARABLES FROM THE WORLD'S TRADITIONS

ALIN DRAGOȘ

REVERB PUBLISHING



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The parables are retold in the author's own prose from texts in the public domain, each attributed to its source. A full list of sources appears at the end of the book. This book is a work of philosophical and spiritual synthesis; quotations from sacred texts are reproduced for the purpose of comparative study.



*For you, who are searching —
whatever name you give the divine,
whatever language you pray in.*

The Light is the same.

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FOREWORD

*To the Reader Who Opened This Book Without Yet Knowing
Why*



This book has been written once before.

The first time, I wanted it to be clear. I took the great traditions of the world one by one and said honestly what each of them holds about the things there is no going around: God, love, suffering, death. I was careful to set no one above anyone. I checked, I weighed, I cut out the exaggerations. What came out was a fair book.

I read it again later and came upon something I did not like.

I remembered the arguments. I did not carry them with me. I could say what Vedanta holds about the Self and what Buddhism holds about its absence. But none of it ever stopped me in the street. What stopped me were the stories. Three or four of them, thousands of years old, let into the text almost by accident. I was not the one holding on to them. They were holding on to me.

A sentence that convinces you stays a week. A story that hits its mark moves in, bags and all, and never leaves.

I have sat with this long enough to believe I know why.

An argument speaks to the part of you that judges, and that part has only one job: to say yes or no. Once it has said it, it rests. That is why it is so comfortable — it asks you for a verdict, and a verdict is cheap. You can agree completely with a sentence about love without loving anyone that day.

A story asks nothing of you. It has no thesis; it can be neither approved nor refused. It takes you inside and leaves you there. And if you truly went in, you come out with a decision you never made — because you did not make it; it was made in you.

There is a point, in any talk about last things, where argument finishes its work — not because it is false, but because it has given everything it had. No one has ever been argued into love. From there on you go by other means. People knew this before us, and that is why they left us stories.

Three things this book does not do. I say them at the outset, so you do not waste time.

It does not compare religions in order to choose one. This is not a contest. I have no jury, and if I had one I would not name myself to it. No one can judge all the houses from outside all of them, because whoever judges is standing somewhere — and that place where he stands is a house too, even if it has no name and no steeple.

The rule binds me as well, so I will say where I speak from. I stand in the house I was born in: Eastern Christianity, with its bells, with the fasts I keep badly, with incense that says something to me before I have time to think. I did not choose it: it was given to me, the way a man is given the language he dreams in. I have walked in the others long enough to know I have nothing to teach them. But I wrote this book standing

somewhere, not nowhere, and it is only right that you know where. Had I grown up in another language of prayer, it would have come out a little different. Not in what it claims. In what sounds warm.

It does not blend them into one. The temptation is strong and it looks good: you take a little from each, take out whatever has edges, and what you get is a lukewarm broth that anyone can drink and that feeds no one. The differences are real, and some of them are not reconciled by a footnote: for one house, God became man in a particular year, in a particular city; for its neighbor across the hill, that is precisely the one thing that cannot be said. I will not smooth that over.

It does not convince anyone of anything. I did not write it to move you from one faith into another, or from unbelief into belief. If you close the book believing exactly what you believed when you opened it, but with one more window in the wall, then it has done its work.

What does it do, then? It gives each of them the floor in turn, and listens.

That is not a small thing, though it sounds like one. You hear a tradition in its own language, not in yours. Something offends you? Sit with it. Do not reach straight for the explanation that settles you — there is always one to be had, and it is always yours, never theirs.

If you opened this book to find out who is right, you will be bored.

A word about the parables, since they are the greater part of the book.

They are all old, and not one of them is mine. I took them from where they were first told — from the Upanishads and the Buddhist canon, from the Gospels and the Desert Fathers, from Rumi, from the Talmud, from the Zhuangzi. But I have retold them in my own words. A copied story is a dead story: to live, it has to pass through someone, and whoever it passes through leaves marks on it.

Which means they have passed through me as well: where the tradition has three versions, I chose one; where a story carried a detail that means nothing today, I left it out. One thing only I did not allow myself: to sweeten them. Some are harsh, some do not end well, in some the just man loses. That is how they were told, and that is how they stay.

And now the one thing I ask of you, because without it the book does not work.

A parable is read once, straight through, without hunting for the meaning along the way. The meaning is not hidden at the end like a key under the doormat; it is in the whole story at once, and if you go after it from the first sentence you will walk right past it. When you have finished, put the book down. A minute is enough.

And then the prohibition, which matters more than the rule.

Not one parable in this book is about someone else.

It is not about your brother who will not listen, it is not about the neighbor who thinks herself devout, it is not about the poor people of other centuries who did not know what we know. The moment you say to yourself *this would do someone I know a world of good*, the parable has gone out in your hand, and you will not light it again.

They are about you. All of them. Above all the ones in which the man who goes wrong is nothing like you.

The short pages after each story, the ones called “What the parable knows,” are mine, and they carry the weight of one man’s opinion. If the story tells you something other than what I tell you there, believe the story.

From here on, the loud voice in this book is no longer mine. The ones speaking are men dead thousands of years before me, in languages I do not know, under skies I have never seen. I only seat them in the same room and see to it that there is quiet enough for them to hear one another.

— Alin Dragoş

Focşani, Romania

INTRODUCTION

One from Many — Many from One



Some sixty thousand years ago, perhaps longer, someone did something with a dead body that no animal does.

He did not leave it where it lay. He dug. He laid the body curled on its side, like a man asleep, knees drawn up to the chest. He scattered red ocher over it, the color of blood, the only color he had. He set things down beside it: a stone tool, a deer antler, something to eat.

Stay a moment with that last detail. Someone believed his dead man would get hungry.

Everything begins here. Not in temples, not in holy books, not in councils. In a pit, with a hand laying a piece of meat beside a mouth that no longer eats. The first theology in history was never written down and converted no one. It was a gesture made against the evidence, by someone who could see perfectly well that the other had stopped moving and who refused to draw the conclusion.

At Shanidar, in the mountains of Iraq, a grave tens of thousands of years old was found with pollen lying around it in little heaps, as though flowers had been laid there. Some researchers say there were flowers. Others say rodents carried the pollen in. The argument will never be settled.

But nobody argues about the ocher, and nobody about the way the body was laid down. And if that man did not bring flowers, he did something just as improbable: he stayed beside a dead body long enough to arrange it with care.

Out of that gesture came, in the end, the pyramids, the Vedas, the Gothic cathedrals, the muezzin's call at sunrise, and a monk sweeping a courtyard of sand at five in the morning. Everything we call the spiritual life is that same gesture, grown larger.

Two questions remain. Where it comes from. And why, when the people who made it began to say what they believed, the things they said rhymed — though they had never met, though oceans and thousands of years lay between them.



THE QUESTION — IT DOES NOT COME AT JUST ANY HOUR

No one has ever wondered what lies beyond while laughing at a table full of friends.

The question has its hour. It comes at three in the morning, when you wake for no reason and the ceiling seems lower than usual. It comes in a hospital corridor, between two doors. It comes a week after the funeral, not at the funeral — on the day itself there is far too much to do. And now and then it comes in the middle of a perfectly good afternoon, with nothing at all to summon it: you stop with the key in the door and, for a moment, everything you have built looks like it belongs to someone else.

Which is why anyone who treats it as a problem of thought has it wrong. Curiosity asks *how*, and an answer quiets it. This question asks *why*, and nothing quiets it, because it was not born in the head. It was born in a place without words, and it pushes from there.

Explanations have been offered for the whole business, and some of them are good. That we have a brain built to see intention everywhere, because mistaking the wind for a tiger is cheaper than mistaking a tiger for the wind. That we know about our own death because we can picture another person's mind, and from there to picturing the absence of our own is a single step.

These explanations account for the machinery. They do not account for the hour.

And there is something they do not account for at all. Wherever the question has been asked, the answer has gone in the same direction. Not upward, as you would expect. Inward.

"When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known" — *the Gospel of Thomas*.

"*Ayam atma brahma*. This Self is the Absolute" — *the Mandukya Upanishad*.

"He who knows himself knows his Lord" — a saying that entered the Sufi tradition under the Prophet's name.

Three languages, three worlds, nearly three thousand years between the first and the last. And all three point to the same place, which is not a place: to the one who is asking.

One of the oldest stories humanity has begins at that hour.



The Parable of Gilgamesh and the Plant on the Sea Floor

Retold from the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablets IX–XI

Gilgamesh was king in Uruk and lacked nothing: the city wall, power, beauty, and a friend — Enkidu the wild man, the only person who had ever beaten him and the only one he loved.

Enkidu fell ill and was dead in twelve days.

Gilgamesh would not let him be buried. For six days and seven nights he circled him the way a lioness circles the place her cubs were taken from. He tore the hair out of his head. He dressed him as a man is dressed for his wedding and not for his grave. He gave him to the earth only when he saw something white moving under his friend's nostril.

Then he rose and fled into the wilderness.

He went about in lion skins, unwashed, unfed, shouting across the steppe:

“When my turn comes, will I lie there like that? The fear has settled in my chest and it will not leave.”

He had heard that at the edge of the world there lived a man who had been given life without end: Utnapishtim, who came through the flood. He set out for him.

He reached Mount Mashu, where the sun goes in at evening. The scorpion folk who kept the gate told him no one had ever passed that way. He passed: a day and a night of walking through the darkness inside the mountain, with nothing to see ahead of him or behind. He came out into a garden where the trees carried polished red stone instead of fruit and not one leaf stirred.

On the shore of the sea beyond that garden, a tavern woman bolted her door in his face and called down to him that he was after a thing that is nowhere to be had.

He did not listen. It was still too early for him.

He crossed the waters of death with Urshanabi the ferryman, cutting three hundred long poles out of the woods so as to push the boat without touching the water. And he found Utnapishtim. The old man looked at him a long while.

“You came all this way to haggle. With whom? The thing that took Enkidu from you keeps no shop and has no door for you to knock at. And a man deep in sleep is no different from a dead one — until he wakes.”

Then he set him a test.

“Stay awake six days and seven nights. That is all.”

It was as long as he had sat beside Enkidu without closing his eyes.

Gilgamesh had barely sat down before he was asleep.

The old man’s wife kneaded one loaf a day and put it beside the sleeper’s head. When they woke him, he sprang to his feet.

“I shut my eyes for a moment, no more.”

The old man showed him the row: the first dry as a stone, the fifth taken by mold, the seventh straight out of the oven.

The man who could not defeat sleep for six nights wanted to defeat death.

As he was leaving, Utnapishtim told him a secret all the same. On the floor of the sea there grows a plant that guards itself with thorns, like a briar. Whoever eats it takes his years back.

Gilgamesh weighted his ankles with stones, let himself down to the bottom, and tore it up. It pricked him, the way a briar pricks a hurrying hand. He gave it a name: *Turn-Back-the-Years*. He did not eat it. He decided to carry it home to Uruk and try it first on an old man.

Halfway back he found a pool of cool water and stopped to bathe.

A snake caught the scent, came silently, and took the plant. And as it went off with it, it shed its skin.

Gilgamesh sat down on the bank and wept. For a snake, he said. All that trouble, all that water, the whole road — for a snake that happened to be passing.

Then he got up and went home. And when they stood in front of the city, he turned to the ferryman.

“Urshanabi, do you see the wall? Put your hand on it. That is brick taken through fire, not mud dried in the sun; that is why it is still standing. And the foundation underneath is not mine. Seven old men with sense measured it out, long before my grandfather’s grandfather. Go round the top of it and count how many paces it holds.”

WHAT THE PARABLE KNOWS

Gilgamesh sets out after one thing and comes back with another, and never once realizes he has made the exchange.

Notice where he loses the plant. Not on the sea floor, not in a fight. He loses it after he has held it in his hand, while he is washing, on a quiet afternoon. Immortality is not refused him. It is handed to him, he keeps it for a day and cannot hold on to it — because it is not the kind of thing that can be held on to.

And notice what he does in the last sentence. He does not curse the journey, he does not say it was all for nothing. He takes the ferryman's hand and lays it on a wall. The oldest answer humanity ever wrote down about death is not a doctrine, it is a motion of the hand: look what gets made, look what lasts, look — the foundation underneath was measured out by others long before me. The man who thought himself alone against death finds out at the end that he is standing on something built by those who came first.

The story is four thousand years old and is still read today. Not because he found the plant. Because he lost it honestly, and somebody wrote that down in clay.

Fear makes you run; it does not make you walk a day and a night through the darkness inside a mountain. What carried Gilgamesh to the edge of the world was something else, and it has no good name in any language. Every voice that follows belongs to someone who came back from that road with something in his hands.

WHAT THEY ALL SHARE — NOT THE ANSWERS, BUT THEIR SHAPE

Read the traditions of the world one after another and the first things you see are the differences: a pantheon of thirty million gods and a God who permits no image at all, monks who will not kill a mosquito and prophets who led armies.

What can be heard underneath them, if you stay long enough, is the business of the chapters that follow. I do not intend to say here what comes out at the end; it would be like reading you the last page before the first.

One thing can be said from the outset, though, because it is not a conclusion but an observation about construction. Not *what* the paths claim. What they are *made of*.

Every living path in this world has the same five bones.

Someone saw it with his own eyes. At the beginning of every tradition stands a person who did not receive information but had something happen to him: a bush that burns and is not consumed, a light on the road to Damascus, a fig tree from under which a man stood up with his face changed, a cave outside Mecca. Direct experience is the cornerstone. All the rest is commentary on it.

A road was left behind. That person said which way he had gone, and out of his telling a path was made that can be walked by people who have had no visions: prayer, meditation, fasting, chant, silence. Without a road, the experience belongs to one man alone and dies with him.

It is walked by twos and by hundreds. No tradition has ever survived as a private practice. The sangha, the church, the *umma*, the order, the village that gathers at the same hour — not for the sake of administration, but because a man alone on this road goes astray without noticing, and other people are the only mirror in which he can see himself.

Something is asked of your conduct. They all have an ethic, and they all state it in much the same way: do not do to another what you would not want done to you. It is not an appendix glued onto the metaphysics, it is the test of it. If a man says he has seen Reality and then cheats his neighbor on the scales, his tradition knows what to make of that vision.

A person comes out changed. What is promised at the end is not more information but a different man. Nobody has ever said that the goal is to know more about God.

Take away any one of the five and you see at once what breaks. Experience without a road: a private intoxication that cannot be handed on. A road without experience: a routine kept up by people guarding somebody else's memory. Practice without ethics: a technique, and techniques are for sale.

Five bones, the same five, among people who had never heard of one another. This proves nothing about heaven. But it is strange in the way it is strange to find the same tool in two graves on two continents.

About old roads, something was said once that is not forgotten afterward. The Buddha said it unasked, to monks who had put no question to him.



The Parable of the Old Road in the Forest

Retold from the Nagara Sutta ("The City"), Samyutta Nikaya 12.65, Pali Canon

They sat down as on any other morning, and he began of his own accord.

"Monks, before the awakening, when I was still one who searches, I looked at this world fallen into misery, which is born and grows old and dies and is born again, and does not know its way out. And I looked for where it comes from, link by link, as far back as anyone can go. Then I looked for where it comes undone. And I found out."

Then he told the story.

Picture a man walking through a forest with no end to it. No trail, no village, no smoke. He has been walking for days and does not know whether he is going forward or in circles.

And all at once he sees a road.

An old road, worn in long ago, walked by people before him. You can tell it is a road and not an accident: it goes somewhere, it climbs where climbing is called for, it goes around the marsh.

The man takes it. And the road brings him out at a city — an old city, where people once lived. It has walls, it has gardens, it has groves, it has ponds full of lotus. The forest has overrun it, but you can see at first glance that life here was good.

The man does not stay.

He goes back along the same road, comes before the king, and says:

“Know, Your Majesty, that walking in the forest I came upon an old road, and at the end of it an old city, with walls and with water. Raise it up again.”

The king raises it up again. Time passes, and the city is full and prosperous once more, crowded with people, growing and spreading.

“That is what I did as well,” said the Buddha. “I saw an old road, a way worn in by the fully awakened ones who came before me. I walked it, and in walking it I found out where suffering comes from and where it goes out.”

And that old road has eight arms: the way you see and the way you resolve, the way you speak, the way you behave and the way you earn your bread, the way you exert yourself, the way you take heed and the way you gather yourself.

“I walked it to the end. And I told what I had found to the monks and the nuns, to the men and the women of the world — until this life had spread wide, known to many, scattered abroad among people.”

Notice what this man does not say.

The most original man in the history of religion, the one who broke with caste, with sacrifice, and with the gods of his day, opens his testimony by saying that he invented nothing. Revelation, the way he describes it, is not the discovery of a new land. It is somebody coming upon a road and taking it.

And notice what makes a road a road. Not the stone, not the craftsmanship. The fact that people have walked on it. A road is the trace of passages, and if it is still there after all this time, it means that not a few went by, and they did not go by once.

Then there is something else, easily missed: the finder does not stay in the city. He could have — it has walls, it has water, nobody there to trouble him. He walks the road back and fetches a king, masons and all. Not out of duty: he simply cannot not tell. Every community in the world comes from there — not from an ambition to organize people, but from somebody's inability to keep a thing like that to himself.

And notice how both stories end at the same moment, on the same word. The city fills with people. The news spreads among people. A road that has been found and that nobody walks on closes over again within a generation — the forest has nothing against it, it just grows.

And if you listen to the traditions of the world and hear the same thing said in languages that are not related, the simplest explanation is not that they copied one another.

It is that the forest is large and the road is old.

The two stories stand at either end of the same line.