

Not long ago, I found online a person I met in my teenage years. Although I did not know her well, she struck me at the time as a calm and quiet soul. A video she made public was sent to me in a sarcastic tone. In it, she spoke of a group of women she had joined. The people in this group, as she put it, “gifted each other money”, thus realizing an “alternative economy”, which was feminist “because the group consisted of women only” and defied the mainstream capitalist dynamics.

She went on to describe how, upon entering the group, a woman was of the fire element, and thus proceeded to “burn her fears away”—while also being obliged to give her money away to a member who had reached the element of water. At some point, through some mechanism she made not clear, the one that was fire was to become water and receive “that great abundance” too. In short, in what seemed to me a desperate need for belonging, she had fallen for a pyramid scheme. I later came to find she had sold most of her things in order to meet the initial payment required for entering the group, and that two years later she still awaits her time to become water—And although no fire lasts that long, she trusts her time will come, and that abundance awaits.

She was also very caught up in what I can only term *pensamiento mágico*. Every being is—she tells—the vibration of a spiritual substance—A ritual was to be held involving the burning of pieces of paper with our fears written on them—Everything she believed was a bizarre mixture of a conspiracy theory, self-help books for bored women over fifty, and *duendology* (duendología). In short, she seemed to have lost track of what was real, and to be very lonely and credulous indeed.

Although this content was sent to me with the purpose of making me laugh, I could not help but to feel a tremendous compassion for her. I was reminded of a very dark period of my life, which transpired about three years ago. The trigger is too private to note here—suffices to say a tragedy in the most inner circle of my family provoked a profound depression in me. Perhaps for the worst, at the time I was studying the work of C.G. Jung, which was so suggestive in a mind as vulnerable as mine was at the time, that I secluded myself to the examination of my dreams. I came to learn that self-absorption is the finest ally of anguish. In what I now deem a desperate attempt at staying in touch with at least an abstract form of reality, and escape that universe grim and bleak which my interior life became, I gave myself to the study of chess with almost obsessive devotion. My only happiness at the time came from this solitary diversion, and from the study of mathematics, which I struggled to sustain with the same vehemence and exertion with which even the lowest forms of life strive to preserve their petty selves.

One must be very lost indeed when chess and mathematics, which are everywhere held to be the precursors of madness, are one’s anchors. Whatever the case, I hardly remember anything of that period in my life. When I think of it, two things only stand out: a profound solitude, which nothing could ever break, and a sadness as deep as I have ever felt. Everything else is fuzzy and irrecoverable in my memory.

I was reminded, too, that at this time I came quite close to Christianity. A stranger may think it stupid, perhaps even insulting, to take Christianity as similar to the magic ideas that seized the mind of this old acquaintance. But whoever knows me personally will understand the comparison is not far from true. I have never received any religious education. I have not been baptized. I

read the bible in my twenties and merely out of literary pleasure. And not only was I not religious: I was a committed atheist.

I spoke then with two friends of mine. One is a devoted Christian, who had studied Spanish literature in New York, specializing in the Catholic writers of the *Siglo de oro*. The other is a former Christian that converted to Islam and leads a highly religious life—at the time he was still a Christian and was quite close to becoming a friar in the Dominican order. I came to both of them with a single, unique question: how was faith brought about. I distinctly remember *wanting* to believe—so desperate was I—but I couldn’t find a way to do so. I will avoid any detailed discussion on this: suffices to say their answers did not convince me. I eventually regained my strength and became my normal self, and these religious concerns became once more a matter of cultural diversion only. And here, pondering on this biographical considerations, I found the source of my compassion.

I came to think: No one is so blessed, so exempted from misfortune, that he may not fall for desperate answers when faced with desperate questions. It is a repeated stoic idea that fortune is the master of us all—but it is also a true one. A few weeks ago, I found the word *weird* in an English ballad from the 12th century—but it was used in a strange way. Upon consulting the etymology of the word, I found that *weird*, from the Anglo-saxon *Wyrd*, meant *faith, fatum, destino*. The *Weird sisters* were the Norns of Scandinavian mythology, as accounted I think by Snorri Sturluson. These three goddesses spin the threads of fate in a manner inexorable to men. Who is to say what is being woven for himself? I may find that old acquaintance strange, her ideas ridiculous, her credulity even silly—but how many misfortunes split the distance from her fantastic confusion and my sober tranquility? Am I so soundly fixed in my equanimity that a simple stroke of faith could not drive me too into that peculiar solitude—that very modern solitude—that frequently forebears the fantasies and anguishes of contemporary forms of magic—that is so fundamental to madness and despair?

Whoever can’t imagine a thousand faiths by which to be devolved, degenerated, or lost—whose blow would drive us stupid, confused, suggestible, or crazy—whoever can’t see himself in the credulous, the silly, and the weak—that person ignores how fragile is the fabric of which our souls are made, and takes for iron what is clay, and mistakes character with fortune.

Furthermore, when I compare myself to her, and examine what it is that makes us different—more yet, what it is that makes her laughable and not me before to the common eye—I find that it is a set of, I concede, positive and desirable traits, but none of which is truly a merit of mine. It is hardly possible for someone with a minimal scientific and rational education to fall for magical ideas, such as that our thoughts are the producers of our reality—but I had that education by luck and not by merit. Is it my accomplishment to have had a father that procured to instruct me in philosophy and science, or her fault to have lacked or forgotten that very same instruction? I am a lot of things, but not confused—and yet, are my tranquility and determination a merit of my own? I doubt it, insofar as I have been very lost as well, when so was the will of fortune, and thus the matter seems at least in great part to lay out of my hands. Even the differences in personality, which I do consider relevant—she is more naive than I, for example, as accounted for her unwillingness to admit that “feminist economy” is a pyramid scheme—are, I suspect, much less in our

control than we want to think. Heraclitus taught: *character is fait*. This seems to me a pure truism—in a non-pejorative way—.

What, then, is there to laugh about? If anything, I see a poor girl being robbed off by scammers. Is she doing any harm to anybody? I see no reason to think so. Is there an ethical dimension to her naivety, her magical ideas, her silliness? If there is, then whatever harm is being done is done against her. A lost soul, perhaps. But that is anybody's faith. And this is all I came to think when thinking of her.