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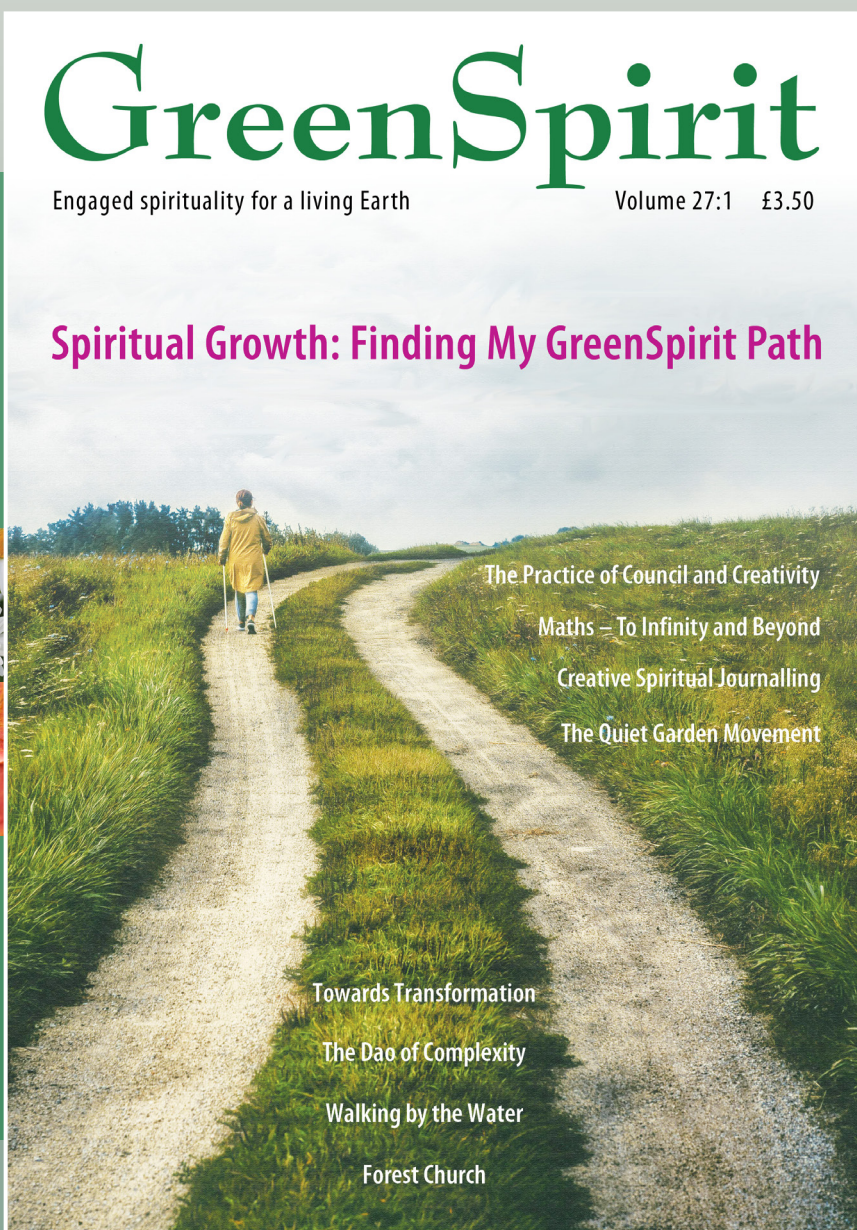
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The Dao of Complexity

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In September 2024, *The Dao of Complexity*ⁱ was published – following more than five years of concentrated work. But the journey that led to the writing of this book started decades ago through my adolescent engagement with philosophy, science and ‘the meaning of life’. I went on to study physics, and my PhD in quantum physics usefully confounded my logical brain and introduced paradox, uncertainty and ‘fields’ as intrinsic features of an ever-becoming universe.

When I reflect back, joining GreenSpirit in the late 1990s also had a significant impact on my developing thinking, in particular through interacting, when I was on the editorial team of the journal, with three mighty éminences grises: Jean Hardy, Michael Colebrook and Chris Clarke.

Jean Hardy was a feisty indomitable spirit. She had taught political theory at Uxbridge and, in 2011, long into her retirement, she published *A Wiser Politics*ⁱⁱ. One of the ‘political philosophers’ she introduced was, to most people’s surprise, Charles Darwin. This caught my attention. Ilya Prigogine, one of the founding fathers of complexity thinking, says that it was reading *Creative Evolution* by Henri Bersonⁱⁱⁱ that started his scientific inquiry. Prigogine’s question was “why did things in the natural world evolve into ever more sophisticated forms, and yet physics seems to stand in contrast to this?” He was awarded the Nobel prize for recognising that, in physical systems *open* to their wider environment, order and form could emerge – order out of chaos^{iv}.

Then there was Michael Colebrook. Michael was a biologist and deeply interested in complexity theory and quantum mechanics. Indeed Michael, together with myself and Chris Clarke, led a GreenSpirit conference on science and spirituality in Bath in 2007. I’ve just found his slides. His sources ranged from complexity biologist Stuart Kauffman’s book *Reinventing the Sacred*^v to *The Water Babies*^{vi} by Charles Kingsley.

This emerging view finds a natural scientific place for value and ethics, and places us as co-creators of the enormous web of emerging complexity... In this scientific world view... the natural processes of the creative universe have yielded galaxies, chemistry, life, agency, meaning, value, consciousness and culture... Kauffman



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Image from *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley

Mother Carey sat quite still with her chin upon her hand, looking down into the sea... Her hair was as white as the snow – for she was very very old... And, when she saw Tom, she looked at him very kindly... “I heard, ma’am, that you were always making new beasts out of old.” “So people fancy. But I am not going to trouble myself to make things, my little dear. I sit here and make them make themselves.” Kingsley

Finally, mathematical physicist Chris Clarke: Chris’s great contribution, in my eyes, was to point out that quantum physics does *not* paint a picture of an objective, ‘real’ universe. Chris describes it like a cracked vase, where the crack is its most beautiful feature, or like a flatpack from Ikea which never seems to come together no matter how hard you try^{vii}. His point was that it is in the cracks, in the paradoxical irreducible conundrums of quantum physics, where the mystery, the mystical lies. For him, science and spirituality are a unity. I am reminded of Leonard Cohen: “There is a crack in everything, that is where the light comes in”.

These are big ideas sketched lightly here; I am keen to celebrate and recognise how GreenSpirit played a part in shaping my journey of thought – an important step on the path that led to the *Dao of Complexity*.

Can I sum up this new book in a few sentences? The cosmology or worldview encapsulated in complexity theory in the tradition of Prigogine is almost *identical* to that at the heart of Daoism, as articulated in particular by Roger Ames and David Hall in their 2003 translation^{viii}. The idea that a modern science, with all its complexities, surfaces a view akin to that emerging in the 5th century B.C.E., continues to entrance me. The book describes what I have called ‘process complexity’ – a world comprised of patterns of relationships, a paradoxical world always in process, shaped by history and context, where there is always the potential for newness and novelty. The *Dao de Jing* conveys a very similar image and in addition has much to offer by way of advice on how to cultivate ourselves for the good of others, for the good of nature and the future.

One of the phrases that sums up more than any other the heart of Daoism and process complexity is:

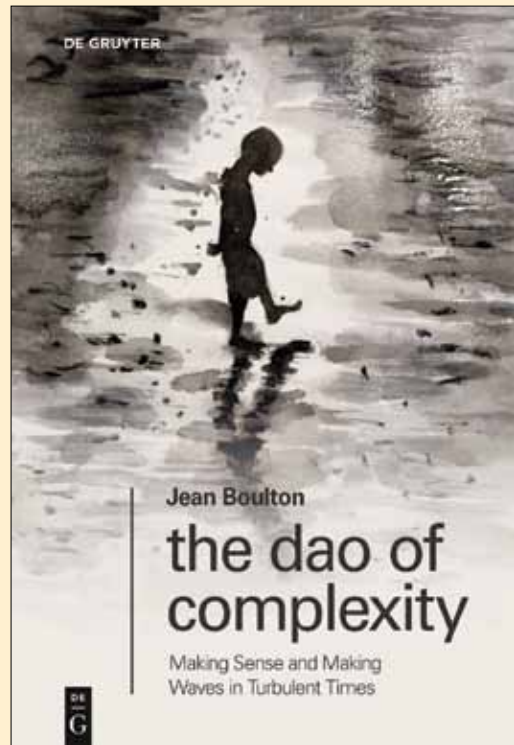
The path is made through walking^{ix}

This simple sentence incorporates the sense that there is no pre-set path – we co-create the future by our actions. It is why Stuart Kauffman insists values are central – in order that we can ‘seed the future with good ingredients’. It is why Mother Carey feels, like the Daoists, that the most important role of leaders and elders is to use their wisdom to ‘hold the space’ in such a way that they don’t try to direct what happens, but ‘let things make themselves’.

The Dao of Complexity does not set out to be a spiritual book. It sets out to ask what it means to say the world is complex and then reflect on how this may shape actions and intentions for those of us concerned with the need for change – personal, organisational, global. And yet the book is *imbued* with ‘the spiritual’ – the centrality of values, the importance of authenticity, the need for courage and ‘showing up’, the working towards a future that is fair and sustainable – because “no one is safe until we are all safe”. And I explore the idea, articulated so well by Chris Clarke, that the universe is *not* a pre-determined machine – but contains mysteries and paradox, and indeed is mysterious to itself.

This is an excerpt from the very end of the book:

I am reminded of *The Plague* in which Albert Camus tells an allegorical story of a town cut off from the outside world due to an outbreak of the plague. He describes how some citizens behave selfishly, hoarding food and barricading themselves in; others



carouse in the conviction that there is no hope. But the doctor, who understands more than anyone what might be in store, continues to work tirelessly to help the sick. Clive Hamilton^x describes this as Active Fatalism – despair, accept and then act. He continues: “only by acting and acting ethically can we redeem our humanity”.

We must embrace our agency, however tiny that may feel. We are all complicit in co-creating the future. And in a world where nothing is fixed forever, there is always hope.

Jean Boulton www.embracingcomplexity.com is an expert on complexity theory and its implications for practice. She is deeply concerned about the state of the world – global heating, rising inequality and increasing conflict. Her writing is her form of activism.

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