

A Union of Opposites

As we live in an incredibly complex and sometimes chaotic world, it is necessary to impart some semblance of order upon it. We weigh, we judge, we must decide how to feel, what to do. We may hold idealistic notions of ourselves and others, of the world—often unrealized, abandoned, upended—and yet we must strive forward through whatever life presents us.

One of the basic aspects of life is duality—hot and cold, light and dark, mind and body, love and hate, simple and complex, male and female, risky and safe. The list is endless. They can be polar opposites, and yet intimately linked, as one cannot exist without the other. The space or scale between them can be infinite, yet they may rest side by side, or vibrate back and forth—transforming, merging, disappearing only to reappear. It's natural for us to draw borders upon this scale, to separate things, place them in boxes, to judge things as either this or that. We need this discernment to navigate and understand the world, but according to certain religions and philosophies, this is all illusion, for everything exists together as one reality at each moment. We can note the border between ocean and shore, but where exactly does it exist? And at what point in time? We soon find ourselves sifting wet sand grains

from dry sand grains, only to find we must start over again. On a more personal level, at what point do we judge someone to have done something wrong, something for which we might condemn them?

In my fiction, I explore these fundamental issues through the journeys of my characters. Reflecting the murky, relativistic nature of life just described, my aim is to confront the reader over preconceived ideas, snap judgements or black and white thinking. As writer/creator, I manipulate characters and their situations, yet I try to reflect or model what I've explored and seen in everyday, real life. Otherwise, I don't see any point in the effort.

In my novel-in-progress, *The Angel of Pleiku*, all three main characters hold opposing forces within themselves. In my previous posts, I have related some salient points about my protagonist, Arlene Stephens. The first and last scenes of the novel reveal how much she changed, and yet she remains the same flawed person who will continue to struggle onward, just like all of us. An inner wound likely caused her to behave in ways we would judge inappropriate. For these transgressions she was punished, but were her jurors ever curious about her past?

Many of today's major religions are concerned with the duality of body and spirit, the carnal with the divine. I grossly simplify here,

but within Christian religion, the carnal aspects of man (as in the pleasures and pain found in the physical, earthly realm) can be transcended into the divine world only through salvation from sin through the acceptance of a savior and the precepts of his church. In many Eastern religions, transcendence from apparent opposites is achieved by unifying them—realizing the interconnected wholeness of life—and it is possible to achieve this within oneself, without church or savior. It is reasoned by some that the Gospels of Thomas, Philip and especially Mary Magdalene were excluded from The Bible because they stress the more individualistic path toward salvation (or enlightenment?) Mary was Jesus's favorite disciple, a close companion who at times received wisdom from him that was denied the other apostles. Given the patriarchal nature of society at the time, along with the church fathers' conflicted attitudes about women and sexuality, Mary's gospel and her central role in the founding of Christianity were eventually minimized.

Though my novel is grounded in action and the specifics of time and place—the carnal, physical realm—themes of tolerance and judgement, redemption and healing reoccur throughout, with an emphasis on the most mysterious and powerful of all—love. This is the main thrust, after all, of Jesus's and Mary Magdalene's teaching, of the compassion spoken of by Buddha, and what drives Arlene forward on her journey. At once a nature-child addicted to alcohol and sex, she also has visions, hears voices, and is perhaps

telepathic. Like each of us, she holds all opposites, all dualities within herself, but it will be up to the reader to judge if she has touched the divine.

The rain settles into a hypnotic lullaby, and she steadies her breath like Gordy taught her. Gazing at the windshield, the image of a lake appears. It's familiar, yet she cannot place it. Raindrops strike its surface, forming multiple rings that expand into other rings, and then a gust of wind erases it all. It sweeps by her like a ghost, and she returns—water running down the glass, drumming in her ears, the engine's heat starting to warm her battered body.

—Arlene Stephens, home and yet homeless, parked on a street in Binghamton, NY. From *The Angel of Pleiku*.