

WHAT EGYPT STILL HAS TO TEACH US

By Normandi Ellis

Within the dark recesses of Ancient Egyptian tombs one often finds images of the dead seated before a burgeoning tray of cakes, fowl, onions, melons, breads and beer as if prepared to feast at a grand meal. The impression most tourists have of this image is that the ancient Egyptians looked forward to entering a heaven filled with good things to eat and drink. The second impression one has is of priests and relatives gathering to make food and beverage offerings at the tomb of the dead, in the naive belief that the soul of the corpse would actually eat this food.

We make the mistake of judging Egypt by what we assume they knew. Perhaps, I think, there is more to this feasting image than a childish faith in a departed spirit that needs to be eternally fed. Perhaps, indeed, their understanding of the spiritual realm exceeds our own gross material interests.

I recall the tomb portrait of an ancient woman named Nefertabet, high priestess and daughter of a pharaoh. She sits before an offering table wearing the leopard skin that signified her initiation into the mysteries of Osiris. None but the highest office priest or priestess wore the panther skin robe, which was the emblem of having "passed through the skin," meaning of one having died and been reborn in her lifetime. Her closed hand seems to gently tap her heart, as if reminding us that the message of this feast resides there, within the breast of each soul. The feast lies spread before her, but rather than reaching for it, she meditates upon it. What could such a feast represent?

When I was attending an Episcopal church service the other evening with my family, there came a moment when the congregation performed the ritual of "Passing the Peace." In essence, one reached toward another member of the congregation and said, "Peace be with you." Someone grasped my hand and said softly, "Peace," and I replied without a moment's hesitation, "Em hotep." That was the Egyptian word for "peace." It was also the Egyptian word of offering. It was written on the doorway of every tomb with the hieroglyph of the unrolled mat on which sat a cup of beer and upon it a loaf of bread. A moment later, I watched the priest unroll the altar cloth and uplift the chalice and hold above it the "host," or a circle of bread. I suddenly realized I was witnessing a ritual that was not only a recreation of the Last Supper, but was a ritual that predated Christ, extending back 5,000 years.

I remember Alberto Villoldo telling me that the secret of the Peruvian shaman was his ability to see all the world as sacred. His mentor told him, "The problem with Westerners is that they believe they have been kicked out of the garden. They live their lives as if they had been thrown out of the realm of the Divine. But the shaman knows that we always have existed and still exist in the Garden. Life is a feast. You are invited to dine."

That statement conveys all the truth about what the ancient Egyptians believed about the *neters* (gods and goddesses). The ancient Egyptian word *Neter* swims through a sea of

etymological soup, moving through the Coptic Christian *netjer* into the Greek *netcher* and coming to us in English as *nature*. These ancient people inhabited a world that was spiritually alive and vibrant from horizon to horizon. Wherever one stood, one existed in a land imbued with magic. The gods and goddesses revealed their secret selves in the natural beauty and mystery of the world: the movement of sun, moon and stars, the mountains, desert and river, the birds, fish, cattle, sheep, leopards and jackals. There was no event in heaven or on earth that they did not observe keenly to understand its spiritual implications. The disappearance of the Dog Star Sirius for 70 days during midsummer, then its reappearance on the horizon at dawn was seen to coincide with the rising of the Nile, and thus with the myth of Isis regenerating Osiris her husband who became the Nile itself. There was no event in human life that was not also a manifestation of the life of the neters. The ritual mourning that accompanied the death of a spouse mimicked the mythic mourning of Isis for the death of her husband. Each day, Ra, the sun, was reborn, and each night the sky mother, Nut, revealed the thousand twinkling stars that were all the souls of the living and the dead held and nurtured by her body.

Imagine how different our lives would be if for every tree that was cut to build a house, we retold the myth of Osiris, the Green Man of Egypt—how he was trapped within the sacred tree and how that god-filled tree was cut and carried away to become the central pillar of a great house. What if we recognized that tree as the axis mundi connecting heaven and earth? Would our forests be more valuable if we viewed each tree as a divine body and each house we built as a temple or dwelling place for the divine?

The fact that Egyptian people celebrated over 300 feast days a year attests to the fact that they viewed every day as a miracle, a holy event. The neters were invoked and bore witness to every tilling of the field, every sowing of seed, every cutting of the grain, every building project, every birth and death, every rise of the constellations. All life to the ancient Egyptian was a manifestation of Light, of the god Ra. God of many aspects and names—Nefertum or Kheperi when he rose as the sun in the east, and Osiris or Atum when he set in the west—Ra possessed innumerable bodies and souls. All forms passed away in order to transform into other living forms of the god. Ra lived and died and transmuted and was reborn in order "to gain knowledge of himself."

The ancient Egyptians saw themselves and all humanity as forms of the Divine. Humankind was created by Ra as "his likeness that came forth from his flesh." It is this same deep recognition of our own spiritual heritage that Christ professes when he says, "The Father and I are One."

Every part of the body in life was a part of the divine body and had a spiritual function. One of the mummification rituals dedicated each part of the body to a particular god or goddess, saying: "My hair is the hair of Nu. My eyes are the eyes of Hathor. My face is the face of Ra. My ears and lips are the ears and lips of Anubis. My backbone is the backbone of Seth. My womb is the womb of Isis. My belly is the belly of Nut. My feet are the feet of Ptah..." and so on.

The body itself was an adytum, a temple filled with neters, and the ancient Egyptian architect-priests built the holy temples of the gods and goddesses upon the proportions of the divinely infused man and woman. French symbolist R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz called the Temple of Luxor "The Temple of Man," meaning a temple that honored the divine power of the enlightened individual symbolized by the pharaoh. Schwaller de Lubicz tells us that in the quiet mind the Temple of Man speaks, saying, "There! Thou art myself. I have conducted thee through the universe that thou might become my Temple, my "Self-Same" in the flesh. All the kingdoms of nature are within thee."

More than this, even the words we speak were considered holy. Called *heka*, these "words of power" were the hieroglyphs or holy language of the gods bequeathed to humanity from the beginning of time when the god Ptah spoke the world into being. Being forms of the divine, bodies of the divine body, we too had the power to speak our lives into being, to create form from the desire of our hearts aligned with the will of the gods. Simply saying the name of a divine being, or the names of the dead had the power to bring to consciousness all the power that being held in life. By chanting a god or goddess's name, the human soul was made divine. One Middle Kingdom burial text summarizes the power of *heka* by its simple declaration: "God is my name. I do not forget this name of mine."

The famed Books of the Dead make no assumption that these sacred divine powers were the exclusive right of the dead. True, the words often appeared on the tomb walls and within papyrus scrolls, but their intent was to remind the living of the cyclical nature of all life. For example, I would not assume that a man buried with his Bible was taking it with him so that he could read it later when he has more time!

The divine is and always was, even to the ancient Egyptians, meant to be apprehended here and now. It is better to learn the lessons of spiritual life by reading The Bible, or the Tibetan Book of the Dead, or the Egyptian Book of Coming Forth By Day in this lifetime, for then one is able to see the divine powers manifest all around us. Then one, infused with holiness, would treat the world everyday as sacred and holy. The Osirian Mysteries were called The Secret of Osiris Becoming Ra, which contained the "spells" for living and dying well. The secret of turning death into life, of regenerating in this lifetime was the impetus behind the mystery tradition. Light becoming light consciously understood during one's lifetime is better than learning it unconsciously after death.

Every man is an Osiris. The chapters of these papyri are inscribed for "Osiris (Name)." Insert one's own name in the blank. This is your book. It once belonged to Ra, and then to Osiris, and now it belongs to you. The story of the god Osiris tells us that he held a party for the people on the night he was murdered by his brother Seth. In the midst of music and dancing, drinking wine and feasting, he was snatched from this earth and killed. The parts of his body scattered along the Nile remind us that Osiris, the divine spiritual impulse for regeneration, still appears everywhere in the world. We are told that wherever Isis, his wife found a piece of the god, she built a temple in that place to honor him. It was in this way that she re-membered him.

Osiris is to be found in the rising river, in the greening fields, in the majestic trunk of a tree, in the rich black soil, in the constellation Orion appearing in the winter sky. Osiris is an omnipresent reminder that life on earth is a gift of the divine. The body of Osiris is a sensual body, oriented toward earthly experience. For many, this world is to be disdained because it focuses on experience that is far removed from the spiritual realm. Yet this feasting, boating, dancing, hiking, working fields, making love and smelling flowers aspect of the world is engaging in the pleasure of all life forms. Through it we come to know the spirit in a tactile way, a method far more excellent than the rude guesses of spiritual wisdom the mind alone makes. It takes the peculiarly transcendent, brilliant mind of the ancient Egyptian to see that in the midst of death, there is life. Egypt is a place that to others might seem a desert wasteland, yet to the ancient Egyptian the focus is always on beauty, on truth, on what abides.

We are entering an age of the Great Turn Around. A millennium ends. A millennium begins. I see our entrance into the Aquarian Age as an opportunity for us all to recall the divine legacy of humankind, to remember that life is a feast. And each time I see the Aquarian emblem of the Water-Bearer pouring out his two jars of spiritual fluid, I see the god Osiris manifest as the Nile stemming from its twin sources. May that water flow through our veins. May we see the god everywhere, within our land, within our neighbors, within ourselves. May we embrace transformation and come to understand the Secret of Osiris Becoming Light.

Life is a feast. You are invited to dine.

Normandi Ellis's passion for the nuance of truth embedded in the hieroglyphs led to her acclaimed book *Awakening Osiris*, a profound translation of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. She further carried her work into *Dreams of Isis*, a tapestry of interwoven history and myth, travels through Egypt, and personal experience. Her commitment to exploring language as incantation and enchantment led to the earthy lyricism of her award-winning collection of short stories, *Sorrowful Mysteries*. *Voice Forms*, a collection of prose poetry, was published in 1998. She has published essays, stories, and translations in a variety of national magazines. Currently living in Kentucky, she teaches as an Artist in the Schools and holds workshops based upon ancient Egyptian mysteries.

Write to Normandi Ellis at P.O. Box 51, Frankfort, KY 40602