

A Brief Introduction to

The Unified Heart and The Blessing to End Disunity

And Other Spiritual Themes in Leonard Cohen's Songs

By David Peloquin

"There are halls in the heavens above that open but to the voice of song" from the Zohar

As I write this (February 2012), Leonard Cohen's new masterpiece, ***Old Ideas***, is taking the popular music world by storm. The enormous success of the recent world tour and the release of the *Live in London* (CD, DVD) and *Songs From the Road* (CD/DVD) have contributed greatly to this much deserved resurgence and appreciation of Leonard's work.

Songs from the new album *Old Ideas* will figure strongly in this study. This will be a brief introduction to some of the key spiritual themes in Cohen's songs, especially *The Unified Heart*, and guide to a meditative approach to Cohen's work in general. I believe that it is specifically the *spiritual depth* of Cohen's work that has touched the hearts of so many in this troubled world for so many years. This kind of spirituality has little to do with theology or organized religion. It is a spirituality of *personal experience*, which is the essential element of the traditional mystic path.

Leonard Cohen has been engaged in a life-long exploration of the great wisdom traditions, East and West. These include, at least: Indian philosophy, (Vedanta), Yoga, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Judaism, (including Kabbalah) Christianity, Gnosticism, Sufism and Alchemy. He moves with great freedom and creativity within these traditions. Cohen's focus has always been on esoteric mystical inner *experience* rather than exoteric doctrines and beliefs. The highest mystical insights of all the fully developed wisdom traditions share a remarkable resonance and they appear to agree with each other on the most essential points.¹

There is an old idea among spiritual poets (Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Rumi, Mirabai, Lorca, Machado, Rilke, and others) that if a work of art is created in the interior space of Spirit, and if someone with the appropriate sensibilities encounters that space with a receptive consciousness, then there is the possibility of a resonant transfer of "fragrance" from the art to the one who experiences it. I think this is what Leonard Cohen has intended from the start of his career as an artist: to create work that the listener/reader can enter into as a meditation, a Sanctuary of Spirit, albeit sometimes a postmodern one with many perspectives and a multitude of paradoxical referents.²

Most writers and critics of Cohen's work mention his spiritual themes, but the themes themselves are seldom explored in any depth. Even less considered is Cohen's admission that his music is a sanctuary. This essay will be the first in a series that will attempt to address these important concerns in the art of Leonard Cohen.

Four Premises

I will begin with four premises that we will touch upon throughout this discussion:

1. **That Cohen has explored various states and levels of spiritual consciousness *personally* and therefore is informed about them *from experience*.**

Cohen's depth and understanding in spiritual matters, and the graceful and evocative beauty of his art, have all the fragrance of one who has explored the territory firsthand and with a certain steadfast devotion to the task. This is coupled with a genuine humility in the presence of these profound insights.

2. **Cohen's *intention* is to provide the opportunity to enter into a "sanctuary" offered by the song and to gently evoke an experience in the listener. The following quote is key:**

"There's a place for my kind of music although it can never be mainstream. It is a sanctuary for me and for the people who can use it that way. That's what I use it for. A sanctuary." Leonard Cohen (1972)

The author intends the possibility of a multi-dimensional, multi-leveled interpretation. He is ultimately pointing toward something quite beyond the relatively surface aspect of "meaning." He suggests that the environment best suited to encounter his art is the inner world of Spirit, the sanctuary of the heart. Cohen also says that he intends a "*kind of conversation*" and that the song/poem is "*my turn to talk.*"³

3. **If a song strikes you, draws you in, assume that it has something to do with *you personally* and proceed from that insight.**

Without the personal element, you might get it *intellectually*, but you will be just another tourist. You might even stumble on some meaning, but you will have missed the true beauty: the *fragrance* of the song.

4. **There are many important spiritual themes that Cohen has explored throughout his career. I will focus on the following:**

The existential condition, the interior world of Spirit, the Divine Feminine,⁴ the soul's longing to return home, the transcendence of the small self (the ego), the awakening of the Higher Self, and perhaps most importantly, the reconciliation of opposites symbolized by the image of The Unified Heart and The Blessing to End Disunity.

Spiritual Themes in Leonard Cohen's Songs and Poetry

The Existential Condition

We are "strung between heaven and earth," to paraphrase Plato. We have an *intuition* of eternity, of infinity, but are painfully aware of our mortality. Cohen has often used the sense of a "twist" to give the feeling of this "*tangle of matter and ghost*" (from *The Window*). We are a tangle of body and spirit. At first experienced as suffering, we may eventually come to realize the deep beauty and mystery of this twist, as in this line from "*Bird on the Wire*":

"It was the shape of our love that twisted me"

Although Cohen appears to be addressing a real woman in many songs, (and often is), a deeper reading will point to the inner *Muse*, *Our Lady of Solitude*, *The Shechinah*; *The Divine Feminine* in Her many guises:

"Like a worm on a hook

Like a knight in some old-fashioned book

I have saved all my ribbons for thee"

The song *Sisters of Mercy* has this classic line:

"I've been where you're hanging

I think I can see where you're pinned

When you're not feeling holy,

Your loneliness tells you you've sinned"

Cohen's personal experience of this existential condition is often expressed in his repeated mention of loneliness and longing, and in the metaphor of "*slave*," and the expression "*born in chains*."

From *Old Ideas*, *Show Me The Place*:

"But there were chains

So I hastened to behave

There were chains

So I loved you like a slave."

And this line from *Come Healing*:

"O solitude of longing

Where love has been confined"

The Interior World of Spirit

From the first note of *Suzanne* on Cohen's first album, we are in visionary space, inside a meditation, a sanctuary. This is sacred space; a place of stillness, a place to listen attentively. A useful metaphor for this sanctuary is a cathedral with stained glass windows. Instead of images from Christian symbolism, each window could represent the images in a Cohen song or poem. Each listener must find his or her own personal metaphor.

Images and metaphors are useful at first, but eventually, even images get in the way. Alert, relaxed presence is the hallmark of the sanctuary. With practice, images, thoughts, sensations, and emotions subside significantly. You can imagine that you have gone *through* the stained glass, beyond the images, to the light that shines from behind. We are left with an alert, lucid state of spacious consciousness. This spaciousness is experienced as stillness, as light, as the ever present Now. It feels like home. There is nowhere to go.

The following lines are from the poem *Owning Everything* from *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961):

"Only strangers travel.

Owning everything,

I have nowhere to go."

Only "*strangers travel*". This is why Cohen calls his music *Stranger Music*. It is for those who travel, for the ones whose restless souls cannot be still. Most of us are "*just some Joseph looking for a manger*" (from *The Stranger Song*.) We are searching for a "*Place*" to allow the divine feminine to bring forth the divine child, which, as Joseph Campbell would say, is our own sleeping potential to awaken. That Place is not outside of us; it is in the inner space of the soul. This place cannot be found by traveling, by seeking. It was never lost; just forgotten. This is not the language of *literal* forms. We are in symbolic, metaphoric space. When the traveler stops seeking and discovers the still point, the ever present Now within, then there is nowhere to go. One owns everything one needs, and the traveler feels at home. No need to travel. No longer a stranger wandering through the world. The end of seeking.

From *Old Ideas, Show Me The Place*:

"Show me the place

Where you want your slave to go

Show me the place

I've forgotten, I don't know"

These are powerful, heartbreaking lines. The traveler is lost in the existential twist, wandering ceaselessly. Cohen's voice in this song is a cry from the depths, from the caverns of the heart. And yet the Place is so close, just beneath the troubled dust, forgotten, like a lost treasure.

And from *Come Healing*:

"Behold the gates of mercy

In arbitrary space

And none of us deserving

The cruelty or the grace"

"Arbitrary space" could be any moment, any place experienced as Now. Every moment is a possible portal of insight, a possible gate of mercy. The Zen injunction is even more direct: to simply *notice it*.

The Divine Feminine

Cohen has many names for Her, including *Suzanne, Our Lady of Solitude, the Muse, The Shechinah*, and many others (She has many Sisters). She is Mistress of all matter, time, and space. She comes to you *Light as the Breeze* (from the album *The Future*). She is associated with darkness, silver, mirrors, rags and feathers, vessels of all kinds, including you. She is as mysterious as the phases of the moon, and she is elusive as water, as the river. She is merciful, evergreen, transcendently erotic, transformational, and compassionate. The Nightingale sings Her song beneath a branch of holly. She is the loving Goddess who sends the children, Adam and Eve out of the fragrant, *timeless Garden*⁵, not to punish them, but to allow them to grow and discover who they really are. She is the one who, in every moment, calls gently to each heart, each refugee, each of her divine children, to come home.

"Right here...Once again, Love calls you by your name" from *Love Calls You by Your Name*.

Leonard Cohen *"caught the darkness"* from her early on:

"She said: Don't try to use me, or slyly refuse me, just win me, or lose me- it is this that the darkness is for!" (from *Lady Midnight*)

An example from *Old Ideas, Come Healing* (the song begins with the voice of the Muse):

*"O gather up the brokenness
And bring it to me now
The fragrance of those promises*

*You never dared to vow
The splinters that you carry
The cross you left behind
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind"*

The Soul's Longing to Return Home

Indian spirituality, among other traditions, has a very old story about what Spirit has been up to. The story goes...

...that radically transcendent, non-dual formless Love throws itself out as form and manifests as duality, as time and space, male and female, subject, object. Spirit spins out a universe of forms and, in the process, "forgets" itself, and then begins a slow process of "remembering" itself, spiraling back. (The spiraling dance of the Sufi Dervish is a sacred meditation on this insight.) Part of the deep mystery of the soul is the longing that is often a push or a pull that demands a response. This longing can only be satisfied by what the soul truly wants. Substitute satisfactions will all, eventually, disappoint. What the soul truly longs for is the return home and to know itself as formless Spirit.⁶

Awakening, in the mystical spiritual traditions, is about remembering who you really are.

This Dance is sometimes called evolution/involution. The highest reading of this story is that Spirit itself is the entire display as form and formlessness. Spirit, at the ultimate insight is "not-two"; it is non-dual. Spirit throws itself out and "calls" itself back. It is a kind of divine play, this forgetting and remembering, in which Spirit plays all the roles. The Hindus called this divine play *Leela*. I have taken some pains to introduce this old "story" because specific aspects of it are present throughout the entire work of Leonard Cohen.

Recall that Cohen's song, *Avalanche*, (from *Songs of Love and Hate*) begins with:

*"I stepped into an avalanche
It covered up my soul
When I am not this hunchback that you see
I sleep beneath a golden hill
You who wish to conquer pain
You must learn to serve me well"*

"Stepped into," suggests that this was a choice. You might ask yourself "Who stepped into an avalanche?"

You can *think* about it and you will form *ideas*, which may lead to *meaning*. That's all fine. Or ...you can enter your inner sanctuary and "step into an avalanche that covers up your soul" as a personal meditation. Feel the difference? This is the open secret of great poetry, and especially spiritual poetry: It's always about *You*, and it's not what you *think*.

Cohen's song *Dance Me to the End of Love* has a poignant, conscious sense of the Dance and of longing for the return:

*"Dance me to the children
Who are asking to be born
Dance me through the curtain
That our kisses have outworn"*

Another example from *Old Ideas, Going Home*:

*"Going home
Without my burden
Going home
Behind the curtain
Going home
Without the costume
That I wore"*

And one more from *Boogie Street (10 New Songs)*. One of the loveliest and most profound verses in all of Cohen's work:

*So come, my friends, be not afraid.
We are so lightly here.
It is in love that we are made;
In love we disappear.*

The Transcendence of the small self/ Awakening to the Higher Self

The mystic traditions share the insight that we tend to identify with a small, contracted self (also called the ego). We are "*bound in chains*," as in William Blake's "*mind- forged manacles*" (from the poem *London*). We are full of fear and desire, looking out at a small world from a point behind our eyes and wearing a temporary "costume" of physical form. Our true nature is radiant, infinitely spacious, and formless.⁷ We have forgotten where we came from, who we really are, and therein lies the source, the secret of our pain. This is the beginning of suffering, and it unfolds in an interior space, as in *Show Me The Place*:

*"Show me the place
Where the Word became a man
Show me the place
Where the suffering began"*

Theology or organized religion is of little use here. This is a *mystical space of direct experience*. As Robert Faggen wrote in his excellent forward to *Leonard Cohen: Poems and Songs*:

"For Cohen poetry and song can go places and explore contradictions lost to theology."

The entire album, *10 New Songs* (2001), explores the themes of transcendence and awakening in depth. Leonard Cohen was ordained a Zen monk in 1996. Zen is all about awakening to your Original Face. *10 New Songs* unfolds like a series of Zen dharma talks; insights and guidance into the deep truths of your true self. As Leonard says in *Show Me The Place*: “*I’ve forgotten, I don’t know.*”

We wear a costume in this world of forms. Suffering could be defined as identifying with this limited, *relative*, physical form, this brief elaboration of a neural tube. In the *Absolute*, in the ever-present Now, we are formless. From this “*higher eye*” (*Different Sides*) perspective, suffering is seen through. The Higher Self has transcended the small, fearful world of the little ego trapped in time and space, past and future. The higher eye can observe, can therefore speak to, “*a lazy bastard living in a suit*”. Even Leonard’s sense of humor is transcendent!

An example from *Old Ideas, Going Home* (Here the Awakened Transcendent Self is speaking to the small self called Leonard):

*“I want to make him certain
That he doesn’t have a burden
That he doesn’t need a vision...”*

The little Leonard, the “*lazy bastard living in the suit,*” does not need a “*vision*” because the Higher Awakened Eye is holding a higher vision *for* him. Lazy Leonard only needs “*to SAY what I have told him to repeat*”.

The Unified Heart and The Blessing to End Disunity

And so we come home to one of the most important themes in Leonard Cohen’s work: that there is a great need in our troubled world for Healing to Come, for the conscious affirmation in the world of the Compassionate Divine Feminine, of the Muse. What is called for is a penitential hymn, a confession, (at least about the Garden) a metanoia, a change of heart, a change of attitude.

For Cohen, this is not a confession of *sin*, but a confession of *ignorance*, of sleep, of having forgotten. The sleeping, dreaming heart has *already and always* been secretly Unified, but the “*troubled dust*” of thought, and the existential condition, has obscured this truth. The Sisters of Mercy know this. That is why they wait for you as you travel. When you feel that you just can’t go on, when exhaustion finally forces you to rest, to collapse into the Now, then they may appear in your sanctuary.

From *Sisters of Mercy*

*“They lay down beside me
I made my confession to them
They touched both my eyes
And I touched the dew on their hem”*

The Sisters rest in the Eternal Present; so close that you will miss them by taking that very next step in your travels. If you have the sense to be still, they will open your eyes. You will awaken. And...

If your life is a leaf [temporal, ephemeral]
that the seasons tear off and condemn [the existential condition]
they will bind you with love [they will mend the split]
that is graceful and green as a stem [the evergreen becoming that is the Now and is full-of grace]

The Unified Heart is central in the work of Leonard Cohen. The novels, poems, and songs lead here to this still, vibrant center: The Sacred Marriage of the inner male and inner female in ecstatic union; *all opposites, all dualities reconciled*. Revisit the cover and liner notes for the album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (1974). Notice the coupling of the masculine and the feminine, the sacred and the profane, matter and ghost. Both figures are crowned and winged. They are the “Coniunctio Spirituum,” or The Spiritual Union of the Male and Female Principle.



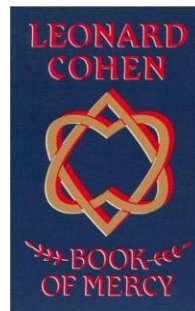
This next section is a kind of “meditation.” You might want to revisit the poem *You Are Right Sahara*⁸ from *Book of Longing* (2006) and the song *The Letters* from the underrated album, *Dear Heather* (2004)

There is an old idea that waking up from this dream of life involves a sacrifice, surrender, a death, a “crucifixion” of the heart. This part of the story is very hard, because it gets very personal, and ultimately, *beyond* personal. Your story was so long. The plot was so intense. Letters and invitations are sent to the suffering Wretch. Clues and crumbs are left along the path of remembrance. For some, it would take a Miracle to find the way back, but it would be a tragedy to simply “wait” for one to come.

Still, the Divine Feminine calls out softly with “*the pull of the moon the thrust of the sun.*” And when she comes, Light As the Breeze, She wants to hold you, hug you, “*like Bernadette would do.*”⁹

If The One Who Must be Sacrificed surrenders and “dies before he dies,” he/she transcends the temporary costume and becomes The Resurrected One. In such a one, the Christ, the Buddha, the Goddess, has risen from the “*caverns of the heart*” (*Land of Plenty, 10 New Songs*). Such a Resurrected One, knows The Place, has learned how to roll away the stone, and has gone beyond living only a Thousand Kisses Deep. Such a one may become a Transparent Eyeball, like Emerson, and see beyond The Great Distances, Mists, and Veils. Such a One may, for an afternoon or a thousand years, finally see the whole story of the Dance to the End of Love; from the children asking to be born, to the mystery Behind the Curtain. Love Itself. Going Home without your burden, your sorrow, your loneliness. Amen.

The symbol of The Unified Heart that Cohen devised first appears with *Book of Mercy*, 1984: The Star of David transformed into two entwined, interlocking hearts. The Unified Heart refers directly to Cohen's personal and universal *resolution* of the existential twist. Carl Jung speaks to this eloquently as "*the reconciliation of the tension of opposites.*" Joseph Campbell also posits, metaphorically, that the tension between heaven and earth, in Christianity symbolized by the cross, is reconciled "*in the heart of the crucified Savior.*"



Finally, here are just a few implied "reconciliations" between apparent opposites in the songs on *Old Ideas*. You might consider these as meditations on The Unified Heart. As mentioned earlier, they are far more powerful when taken *personally*.

- **Going Home:** reconciliation between the small self and the Awakened Self
- **Amen:** reconciliation between moments of near despair and the hope of *Come Healing*
- **Show Me the Place:** reconciliation between the suffering of the small self and liberation of Spirit, the Christ, the Buddha, that has "*risen from the caverns of the heart*" (from *Land of Plenty, 10 New Songs*)
- **Darkness:** reconciliation between the Now of formless "Darkness" and the world of time and space, past and future.
- **Anyhow:** reconciliation between the dance of flesh and the dance of spirit. (A companion song to *Waiting for the Miracle*. This could be that same lost man continuing his skewed "conversation" with the Muse.
- **Crazy to Love You:** reconciliation between the real woman and the sacred feminine. "*Crazy has places to hide in*" the Now, and "*that's why you want to be there*" from *Suzanne*.
- **Come Healing:** reconciliation between body and mind, spirit and limb, reason and heart...all things broken and broken open.
- **Banjo:** reconciliation between the fearful, contracted self and the Awakened Self. Cohen here in the darkly comic role as a man almost in a trance, perhaps a bit mad, tortured by dark visions (of what Cohen calls the Flood), of the Ocean of Suffering: what the Hindus call *Samsara*).
- **Lullaby:** reconciliation between all forms, from the lowliest to the most sublime. Many "*tongues*", One Song. Even the cat and the mouse are in love in this Peaceable Kingdom, this Uni-verse. A transcendent truth delivered in a sweet, simple lullaby. Magic!
- **Different Sides:** reconciliation between the Relative and Absolute; between the visible world of forms and the invisible world of the formless. Between time and space and the Now, between the Higher Eye¹⁰ of Spirit and the lower eye of mind.

The image of The Unified Heart has evolved and now depicts two hands from the Heart beneath that support the Heart above. The Hebrew letter *Shin* appears in the center; a Blessing to End Disunity.

“In Judaism Shin also stands for the word Shaddai, a name for God. Because of this, a kohen (priest) forms the letter Shin with his hands as he recites the Priestly Blessing.” (from Wikipedia)

O troubled dust concealing

An undivided love

The Heart beneath is teaching

To the broken Heart above



Seal of The Blessing to End Disunity

Notes

1. Known generally as The Perennial Philosophy, this view has been supported by many philosophers and sages including Plato, Carl Jung, Arthur Lovejoy, Aldous Huxley, Albert Einstein, Joseph Campbell, Houston Smith, Ken Wilber, and others.
2. Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, 1966, is widely considered to be the first postmodern novel in Canadian literature. Here is one quote from a 2001 Live World Chat that gives the flavor of the postmodern side of Cohen: *“In the stream of writing, all that is written changes its meanings by what is written subsequently”*
3. From the *Sony World Live Chat with Leonard Cohen*. 2001

4. The theme of Spirit as masculine in tone, as *Father*, and the dynamic energy of *will* in Leonard Cohen's work is the subject of a future essay. *Book of Mercy*, 1984, written in a style similar to the psalms, deeply explores this theme.

5. In *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Viking 1964 (13, 14), Joseph Campbell presents a strong argument for the Near Eastern Goddess and her Garden of Immortality as being usurped by a male God in the Bible. Ken Wilber writes "[the God of the Bible garden] was a geocentric, egocentric, anthropocentric local volcano god...He touched human history...to either "reward" or "punish". *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality, Shambhala*, 2000 Revised edition (360-61) Cohen's work contains numerous references to a generative spiritual feminine presence whose "story" has been obscured and overshadowed by the masculine throughout Western history.

6. The theme of evolution/involution is a complex consideration. My intent here is to simply point out, in a rather compressed paragraph, some of the aspects of this theme that appear throughout Leonard Cohen's work.

7. Organized religion and theology, especially in the West have traditionally been wary of individual mystical experience and have generally perceived it as a threat to the status quo. Specifically, the West has rather harshly denied the possibility of "identity" with spirit or godhead, which is considered blasphemy. Yet this was *exactly* the claim of the Christ who "*sank beneath your wisdom like a stone*" from *Suzanne*. Mystics, who claimed identity, as did Meister Eckhart, were usually harshly criticized, censured, or, as we know in the case of the Christ, forced to pay the ultimate price for their realization.

8. "*Sahara*" correlates to the Yoga "*Sahasara-cakra*" at the crown of the head and is associated with kundalini energy, which is capable of guiding one to the marriage of Shiva and Shakti, God and Goddess: to Enlightenment.

9. From the song "*Song Of Bernadette*." Co-written by Jennifer Warnes and Leonard Cohen. Originally released on the Jennifer Warnes album: *Famous Blue Raincoat*, 1987

10. In Yoga, the Higher Eye is the third eye (the eye of Shiva), the *Ajna-cakra*.

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This essay is Part 1 of a two part series.

Part 2 will offer specific insight meditations to delve deeper into the multiple levels of Leonard Cohen's work. The focus will be on personal *inner experience* rather than on traditional "analysis" that leans toward an intellectual, "left-brain" approach. Meditation, as we know from brain wave research, accesses the right brain's capacity to rest in spacious, open consciousness. It is in this state that deep spiritual insight may bloom like a Lotus or a Rose. It is here, in this inner space, in the sanctuary of the soul, that we might hear the voice, the song of the "Heart beneath" the troubled dust.

David Peloquin has been an Insight Meditation teacher for over 20 years. He is an internationally recognized folk music performer and recording artist. In 2000, he performed at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. He lectures on Leonard Cohen, Ken Wilber, Integral Theory, Spiritual Poetry, and other subjects. He lives in the quiet of the Maine woods where he teaches, writes, and records music and poetry.

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peloquin.david@gmail.com