

1. Beginning: Apocalypse

- Start again.

Suppose you've been selected for a secret mission. For all you know, it could be a *sacred* mission. But you don't know who selected you, or why, and you don't know what the mission is – not *consciously*, at least. Nobody has told you what it is, nor could you tell anybody, at least not in any language like the one you are now reading. Yet your life is *consecrated* to it, and your consciousness itself can only serve its purpose.

So you don't know how to complete the mission, or even how to begin. But you continue to guess, because you *have* begun. If you don't know how to continue, your only choice here and now is to

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Your mission is *secret* because only you *inhabit* this mission, live through it, see your world from within it. In that sense you are unique – just like everybody else. And yet by living through you, the secret expresses itself to whoever reads your life as a sign.

The sense in which you are unique must be a *common* sense: how else could we speak a common language? Our private paths can *cross* because they differ. Where they cross arises the common sense of *a path*. In this way we can collaborate in asking what anybody's mission is, what it can have in common with others, and how it can differ from yours. Meanwhile, you can only learn where your path is taking you by *reading the signs* you meet along the way. Some signs, like this book, are made to be read; for you, its purpose is to cross your path at this end of time, at this beginning. Others ("natural signs" and some cultural signs) act as such simply because they *mean* something to somebody. This action of signs, regardless of whether they were *meant* to

mean something or not, is called *semiosis*, which is in a sense the subject of this book. In another sense, you (the reader) are the subject; but you and semiosis are quite naturally connected. Before we can clarify this connection, though, you may want to know more about where this book is coming from and why it could be worth reading. That means we need to

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Why would a book begin like that? Perhaps as a way of saying that it's a *beginner's* book. It's not written by an expert or intended for experts in any specialized field of inquiry. Instead it begins with what must be *present* to any and every sign-reader, and begins by asking: What's the point of this *presence* (if indeed it has any point, other than being here now)?

Or rather, since this is a 'philosophical' question, it begins by asking you (as the *generic* reader) to consider your own presence – or the presence of the world to you at this moment, which is the other side of that coin. This means dropping the habit of taking the presence for granted, which is not easy, because all your projects and preoccupations are grounded in that habit. To drop it, even momentarily, is to embody 'beginner's mind,' as the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki called it. His predecessor Dogen called it 'dropping off body-mind' or 'dropping off birth and death.' But it doesn't matter what you call it; the point is to renew one's intimacy with the presence, and in that light to look again at what you know, or think you know, wondering what sense it might make. At least, that's where the philosophical path begins.

Certainly, in philosophy what a man does not think out for himself he never understands at all.

Nothing can be learned out of books or lectures.

They have to be treated not as oracles but simply as facts to be studied like any other facts.

— C.S. Peirce, HL 139 (1903;
citations in *Turning Signs* refer to dates given in the reference
list.)

The fact is that the book presently crossing your path is an *attempt* at weaving one writer's thread of thought into the fabric of the Whole Truth. Its author is not a professional philosopher or a Professor of Philosophy, but has been asking "philosophical" questions from as far back as he can remember. He's also a collector of aphorisms, one-liners (mostly by other writers) that struck him as concise clues to the mysteries of life. Gradually he realized that such a saying strikes a person as profound because it comes into a context of thinking and feeling and questing for meaning prepared to discover its implicit connections with the Whole Truth. So, having retired from teaching to start again as a learner, he tried to organize a text that would serve as such a context by making sense of sense-making systems. As it turned out, it took 15 years – much longer than expected, because he didn't expect to learn as much from the process as he did, which led to much rewriting and revising; and here he is starting again with Chapter 1 of *Turning Signs*.

By the way, even if you are not philosophically inclined, you may still find this book amusing if you enjoy reading essays about science, religion, art and such. Essay writers tend to be collectors of ideas from many different sources who weave them into their essays, in which they *try* (that's the meaning of 'essay') to say something worth saying, but are never sure that they've succeeded. By publishing these things, we essayists claim only that we've given our wide-ranging curiosity a chance to express itself by applying it to a more or less specific subject. So this book is a 'fact' in that sense, a sign of one person's attempt at articulating a "quest for meaning."

A 'fact' is a *sign*, which means that it can mean something to those willing and able to read it. Your mission in reading this book – should you choose to accept it – is to make some common sense of your mission, by exploring some of the qualities common to all sign-readers, sense-makers, sign-makers, 'sentient beings'. We call a book like this a 'text' because it consists of constituent sign-threads woven into the *texture* of a much greater sign, its *context*, which also includes your life. What does it all mean? You are here to

mean it now: **How do you mean?**

You can't take a question like this to an expert.

You are the problem. No scholar to be found far and wide.

— Franz Kafka (1936, 166)

If you have a specific medical problem, you can take it to a specialist. But what if your problem is *having a body*? Likewise, if you wonder about some particular part of the world, you can ask an expert. But what if the wonder is *having a world*?

To ask *How do you mean?* is to open up the question of how you read the world. You read it one sign at a time, whether it's a book like this one, or a sacred scripture, a song, a film, a face, the tracks of an unseen animal, the fossil record in the rocks, or just an idea. At the same time, you may well be a sign yourself, meaning something to somebody else. When signs *connect*, they *participate* in a greater sign. 'If any signs are connected, no matter how, the resulting system constitutes one sign' (Peirce, R1476: 38). Or, looking at it from the other end, words are signs because they can play parts in more complete signs.

The title of this essay, *Turning Signs*, has its origin in a Zen story ('*koan*') used by Eihei Dogen in several of his 'dharma talks.' One version, given in 1244, begins like this:

Baizhang, Zen master Dazhi of Mount Baizhang, Hao Region, was the dharma heir of Mazu. His priest name is Huaihai. When Baizhang gave teachings to the assembly, an old man would often appear and listen to his dharma talks. The old man usually left after the talks, but one day he remained behind.

Baizhang asked, "Who are you?"

The old man said, "I am not actually a human being. In ancient times, at the time of Kashyapa Buddha, I lived and taught on this mountain. One day a student asked, 'Does a person who has

cultivated great practice still fall into cause and effect?’ I said to him, ‘No, such a person does not fall into cause and effect.’ Because of this I was reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lifetimes. Venerable Master, please say a turning word and free me from this body of a wild fox.” Then he asked Baizhang, “Does a person who has cultivated great practice still fall into cause and effect?”

Baizhang said, “Do not ignore cause and effect.”

Immediately the old man had great realization. Bowing, he said to Baizhang, “I am now liberated from the body of a wild fox. Master, will you perform for me a funeral service for a deceased monk? You will find the body of a dead fox in the mountain behind the monastery.”

— Dogen, SBGZ ‘Dai shugyo’ (Tanahashi 2010, 705)

A ‘turning word’ (轉語, *tengo*) leads to liberation because it is connected with other signs, and even more intimately connected with the *experience* common to those who speak and hear it. Words can have this effect because they participate in a continuous stream of semiosis as deep and broad as life itself. Dogen’s own explication goes like this:

The story states that because of the turning word of the current Baizhang, the former Baizhang—an old fox for five hundred lifetimes—immediately became liberated from the body of a fox. Understand the meaning of this story. If you assert that a turning word by an outsider can liberate a wild fox, then there must be innumerable turning words by mountains, rivers, and the great earth from the incalculable past. However, to say that there had never been the liberation from a wild fox body in the past, but the current Baizhang’s turning words alone liberated the wild fox, is to deny the way of the ancestors. To say that

mountains, rivers, and the great earth have never uttered a single turning word is to say that there is no place for the current Baizhang to even open his mouth.

— Dogen, SBGZ 'Dai shugyo' (Tanahashi 2010, 708)

For ten years the working title for this essay was *Turning Words*. The change to *Turning Signs* reflects what the author was learning about *semiosis*, mainly from Charles S. Peirce (pronounced *purse*; 1839-1914) and later workers in *semiotics* (the study of semiosis as named and pioneered by Peirce). However, the present author is not a Professor of Semiotics either and has not been “trained” in that discipline. Indeed no special training or equipment is required for this kind of inquiry, because everyone is engaged in semiosis all the time. It’s the process of signs doing what they do, which is to affect the actions (and passions) of one being (or *subject*, or *system*) by mediating its relations with others, or with other *possibilities*.

We might crudely define a *sign* as anything that means something to somebody – except that the ‘somebody’ is not necessarily a ‘person’ in the usual sense of that word, and the sign is not really a *thing*. The mediating role of the sign (or *representamen*, as Peirce called it) *may* be vested in a sign-vehicle, but really consists in its triadic relation with the other two roles involved. One is called the *object* of the sign, while the other – the effect of the instance of semiosis upon the subject/system affected by it – is called the *interpretant* of the sign. These and a few other semiotic terms will be introduced and clarified as needed for our purpose, which is not to be a treatise on semiotics, but to elucidate what a “mission” in life might be for you and other sentient beings.

Although for humans, all ways of inquiry are human ways, they are not *only* that – they are natural ways as well. The testimony of every expert in this or that special part of the universal mission arises from such inquiry, and some are woven into this text. The author has documented these ‘sources’, providing a reference list and links that you can follow or ignore as your own inquiry allows or requires. (If

you are reading the hypertext version of this book, you can click on the links embedded in it for more information.)

I've spread the net of testimony broadly in order that some of the deeper patterns can appear through various idioms and expressions without getting caught in any one of them. But the depth of this demonstration really depends on you. Specialist, generalist or beginner, whatever we learn of a common truth turns upon 'personal knowledge,' as Michael Polanyi called it. As the one in charge of *meaning* all this, you can rest assured that all the specialists are working for you. And as the beginner of this reading, it's your mission at the moment to

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From moment to moment, day to day, year to year, generation to generation, we humans make choices – some consciously and carefully, some not – according to which we live this time. As we navigate the world, a myriad courses fan out before us, even when only one (or none) looks viable. We are blessed, and burdened, with an ability to alter and adjust our courses spontaneously, systematically and recursively. We form and reform habits of doing, being, seeing and saying because we are complex adaptive systems implicated with larger systems (cultures, ecosystems) and composed of smaller systems (organs, cells, routines). We are formed, constrained, informed and guided by systems within us and without us, our lifeways involved with myriad others.

Or to put it more simply and vaguely, we are spiritual beings.

Because of all this, the one thing we can never do is to know precisely what we are doing. We have no way to determine in the present exactly what events our current choices will determine in the future – even though our whole *purpose*, if we have one, is to determine a future. The ultimate effects of our actions are radically unpredictable. All we know for sure is that they will *change the situation* so that future decisions will be made in different circumstances. Without knowing the ultimate result, though, we can still be guided by our expectations; and our expectations in turn are

guided by observed results of what we've done before. Though the world remains a mystery, the difference you make by acting into it can sometimes surprise you, and thus can exceed and recreate your expectations.

Everything you do is part of a dialogue with mystery, a conversation between your island of familiar habits and the vastly shifting seas of an unknown reality. This dialogue inhabits a collective conversation between humanity and the mystery out there, in which we are sustained by our faith that we can learn a little of how the sea changes by reading the signs it leaves lying about. The human side of this dialogue includes an internal dialogue of cultural semiosis, called by some humans 'the Great Conversation.' Although it contains the highest achievements in art, science and scripture, it's only one part in the bigger play which Thomas Berry (1999, 82) called the 'communion of subjects' – the internal dialogue of universe. The significance of your mission is a microcosm of this vast conversation.

The common root of 'universe' and 'conversation' is *turning*. A change of direction is a *turning*; seen from within the changed path (or mission), it appears as a new direction, a *beginning*. A sign that can trigger such a turn – a *transmission* – may be called a *revelation* by 'people of the Book,' or a *turning word* between one buddha and another. This book is about the deep grounding of such 'turning words' in natural signs and semiotic cycles. Along the way we discover that the spirit and the method of scientific inquiry spring from the same deep source. Just as reader and author collaborate in learning from their common experience, a scientific community collaborates in learning from their experience of nature.

Since life goes on within and without us, we have no choice but to simplify our lives with metaphors and models, reducing a fluid process to an interplay of recognizable forms. The 'island' of habit and the 'sea' surrounding it are metaphors; so is 'navigating the world,' a variation on the 'path' metaphor which we all use to represent our decision-making. A *path* by this metaphor is not just a line along which one moves from point A to point B, as in plane geometry, or a

trajectory in the 3-dimensional space of classical and folk physics. The *path* we actually inhabit is a reiterative *practice* in a space of innumerable dimensions. The navigator in this real space needs a metaphorical map, and needs to read not only the map but the *difference* between map and world. Otherwise there could be neither expectation nor surprise – nor life as we know it.

You must have done all this reading and mapping fairly well up to now, or you wouldn't be here to read the text before you. So you might well wonder whether it serves any practical purpose to think about thinking, or know about knowing, or read about reading. And while you're at it, you might wonder what makes any purpose *practical*. As author of the present interlude in the 'Great Conversation,' i can identify with that. After several decades of living a human life, i'm still wondering how it's done. Now i've left the tracks of my wondering where you can find them. You never know what can happen when you cross paths with another beginner – you might even

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(1) Jesus said, "The person old in days will not hesitate to ask a little child seven days old about the place of life, and that person will live. (2) For many of the first will be last (3) and will become a single one."

— *Gospel of Thomas* 4 (NHS)

The *Gospel of Thomas*, a treasury of turning words from the earliest days of Christianity, is one of the sources deeply embedded in this book. Others, such as the writings of 13th-century Zen master Dogen, exemplify Buddhist views of the Way or 'buddha-dharma'. Still others are drawn from various sciences, with a special focus on the ground of *semiosis* common to all sense-making, including science and scripture.

In one of his lectures, Peirce identified three 'mental operations concerned in reasoning' which will also play key roles in this book: Observation, Experimentation, and

Habituation, ‘the power of readily taking habits and of readily throwing them off’ (RLT, 189). Of the latter he said that

Perfect readiness to assimilate new associations implies perfect readiness to drop old ones.... To be a philosopher, or a scientific man, you must be as a little child, with all the sincerity and simple-mindedness of the child’s vision, with all the plasticity of the child’s mental habits.

— Peirce (RLT, 192)

This is essentially the same point made by Jesus in the *logion* (saying) above from the *Gospel of Thomas*. The ‘scientific,’ ‘philosophical’ and ‘spiritual’ views here converge in affirming the value of plasticity in a habit-system. Without it there’s no way to

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— or change course, or even to *continue* on the same course, in a constantly changing universe. *Of course* you can only start (or continue) if you have some definite sense, *based on current habits*, of where you are now. Again, you can’t get that from a specialist. But you might get it from the practice of *philosophy* – or more specifically, *cenoscopy* – which according to Peirce is the least specialized of all sciences, ‘a science which rests on no special observations, made by special observational means, but on phenomena which lie open to the observation of every man, every day and hour’ (CP 7.526). If we can call this a book of philosophy, then, your task as its reader is to test what it says against your own observations – which you alone can do, by recreating this public inquiry in your own image.

This doesn’t mean we can ignore the more specialized sciences; rather it means placing their discoveries in a more comprehensive context than any of them can provide by itself. What makes a special science relevant to your mission (or to any mission guided by experience) is that it can reveal specific relations, patterns and connections among the forms, feelings and things making up your world. And the same goes

for the signs presented by arts and religions. Tracing threads from these various sources, and checking them against experience, might help us to awaken our senses of where we are and where we are going.

Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to proceed only from tangible premisses which can be subjected to careful scrutiny, and to trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one. Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected.

— Peirce (EP1:29; CP 5.265)

Though the cable/message/text called *Turning Signs* is woven of many threads, i have tried in this first (**obverse**) part of the book to present them one at a time, as a series of steps along the path we make by walking on it. This train of thought eventually arrives at a terminal called **The Point**, which should make perfect sense if you and i have played our parts well as reader and writer, but would make little or no sense if we started there. In the second (**reverse**) part, the train of thought – having passed through the Point and dispensing with serial order – explodes into a network, where each new point takes its place as a node linked to many others, and the whole network is the context of each point. The roots of the inquiry are *philosophical*, meaning that the connections between points and the integrity of the whole matter more than any part does by itself. As Peirce put it,

in every age, it can only be the philosophy of that age, such as it may be, which can animate the special sciences to any work that shall really carry forward the human mind to some new and valuable truth. Because the valuable truth is not

the detached one, but the one that goes toward
enlarging the system of what is already known.

— EP2:48

Topologically-minded readers may also find that the shape of the book resembles a Klein bottle, or a tesseract, and thus embodies its central theme ... but let's not give away the ending.

— As if i could *say* what the book says, get straight to the point without going through it! **The train that can be expressed is not the express train.**

This opening chapter is supposed to give a few intimations of the train's itinerary. You might also wonder where that's coming from, and whether its order is related to the personal/historical circumstances of the author's life. Indeed this does make a difference, every mission being unique –

A man cannot receive a heritage of ideas without transforming it by the very fact that he comes to know it, without injecting his own and always different way of being into it.

— Merleau-Ponty (1960, 224)

That's as true of me as it is of you. Although very little space is given here to the author's biography, placing it in historical context might begin to explain why *beginning* is here entangled with *apocalypse*. I was born exactly one month after *The Day the World Ended*. That was Kurt Vonnegut's name (in his novel *Cat's Cradle*) for August 6, 1945 – the day when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. So you might say that mine has been a post-apocalyptic life.

40 years later Paul Ehrlich (author of *The Population Bomb*), speaking at the local university, told us that we humans had a choice: we could render the Earth unfit for human habitation in 50 minutes, by using nuclear weapons; or we could achieve the same result in 50 years by simply carrying on with 'business as usual,' that is, with trashing the planet. – *Or* we could change the way we live.

Skip another score of years, into the 21st century CE, and

things have changed, as usual. For one thing, the world has been taken over by alien beings from another dimension – we call them *corporations*. Meanwhile it's projected that the human population of the planet will peak (at around 10 billion) within this century, and then start to decline. (If it doesn't collapse more suddenly, that is.) I suppose the rest of the biosphere, or whatever is left of it, will breathe a sigh of relief at that point, though i can hardly imagine what the place will be like by then. Indeed it's getting hard to imagine with any confidence what the place will be like next week. People have always felt (more or less) that they were living in times of crisis, but until recently they could assume at least that human life would go on somehow, for better or worse. But in 2005, we heard from the Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (representing 6 years of study by 1366 scientists in 95 countries) that 'human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.' Many species of our fellow earthlings have already been driven to extinction since *homo sapiens* arrived, and the pace has accelerated since 1945. The lives of our own cultural systems are no less precarious. The financial 'meltdown' of 2008, along with its many fore- and aftershocks, revealed our vaunted economic systems to be little more than bubbles: held together by surface tension and inflated by sheer greed, liable to collapse at any moment, with unpredictable consequences for human and other communities.

Still, one thing hasn't changed: every choice you make while you live *could* make *some* difference in the world our descendants will live in. There's guidance on offer all around you – much more than you can possibly use – about the specific choices before you, in whatever situation you find yourself. In 2006, for instance, there was *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, in which David Korten outlined the 5000-year reign of 'imperial consciousness' and pointed the way to a more promising orientation. The present book, however, does not offer that kind of time-and-place-specific guidance. Rather it aims to investigate how

guidance systems work in every domain (physical, biological, psychological, cultural and so forth), and how those domains are related. Whether that aim is too ambitious, or not ambitious enough, is for you to decide.

Something else happened toward the end of 1945, something that almost completely escaped the notice of a world distracted by the War and the Bomb. You could say it was an information bomb, secret and slow in its detonation, yet symbolic of a larger life still dawning every day – a wake-up call from two thousand years ago. That was the discovery, near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, of a collection of books written in Coptic and hidden in a large jar in the fourth century C.E. The villager who broke open the jar and found them had no idea what they were, and scholars are still working out their implications; but already they have shifted our sense of what early Christianity was like. Perhaps the most significant discovery in this Nag Hammadi library was the *Gospel of Thomas*, previously found only as a few fragments of a Greek manuscript. We will read it here as a sign of what some call ‘the spirit,’ and others ‘religious experience’; let it stand beside the Bomb as a kind of counterpoint. Unlikely as it may seem, reading these twin signs of our trying times might serve after all as means to the end of a new beginning.

- (1) The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us how our end will be.”
- (2) Jesus said, “Have you discovered the beginning, then, so that you are seeking the end? For where the beginning is the end will be. (3) Blessed is one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death.”

— *Gospel of Thomas* 18 (NHS)

The world as we know it is coming to an end: apocalypse. *Apocalypse* (ἀποκάλυψις) is Greek for *uncovering*, or *discovery*. Blowing the lid off: revealing the secrets inside the tomb (resurrection), inside the womb of the world (new life, new heaven, new earth). The resurrection of the body, bringing forth a world turned inside out. Waking from a

living death to reveal the secrets of mission and transmission. Who are *you* becoming, O Reader? That's the real question.

I can tell you this much up front: Your *primary* guidance system is made up of your *habits*, which you can think of as the river on which your thinking and feeling rides. Consciousness (or 'thinking too precisely on th' event,' in Hamlet's words) can sometimes get in the way, but sometimes that's the only way to *change* a habit. A change is a turn in the path, anything from a slight shift of practice all the way to *revolution*, or even beyond that, to apocalypse. We commonly think that *apocalypse* means the end of the world; actually it's an opening for a whole universe to

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Sometimes, fellow startlings, lightning strikes and we know that what's now revealed was hidden only by our very immersion in it, by vision buried in the habit of seeing.

His disciples said to him: 'When will the <resurrection> of the dead take place, and when will the new world come?'

He said to them: 'That (resurrection) which you are awaiting has (already) come, but you do not recognize it.'

— *Gospel of Thomas* 51 (5G;
for a key to abbreviations used in this book, see the reference
list.)

(1) His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?"

(2) "It will not come by watching for it. (3) It will not be said, 'Look, here it is,' or 'Look, there it is.'

(4) Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

— *Gospel of Thomas* 113 (NHS)

After two thousand years, there's still time to stop waiting. **Eternity now!**

You can only *start* from where you are and step into the

future. If this book means anything to you – and who else could it mean to? – that’s because it will make a difference, however subtle, in what you imagine your mission to be.

- In the beginning is the •