

Acornology:

Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called "Getting All You Can out of Your Shell." There were wounded-ness ness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped "but of the blue" by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, lie stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, lie said, "We ... are ... that!"

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: "So tell us, how would we become that tree?" "Well," said he, pointing ing downward, "it has something to do with going into the ground ... and cracking open the shell." "Insane," they responded. "Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn't be acorns anymore." Humor aside, the point is obvious-at least when it comes to acorns. An acorn is only a seed; its nature and destiny is to become an oak tree. Everyone knows this. What's much more difficult is to apply this same parable to ourselves.

But that's exactly what Wisdom does-and in fact, all the great spiritual traditions of the world do, so far as I know, without out exception. This "I" whom I take to be myself, this individual who moves about on the planet making choices and doing her thing, is not who I am at all. It's only the acorn. Coiled within this acorn is a vastly more majestic destiny and a true self who lives it. But this oak tree of myself can come into being only if it lets go of its acorn.

(Originally devised by Maurice Nicoll in the 1950s, Jacob Needleman popularized this metaphor in Lost Christianity and named it "acornology." I am reprinting the story from Cynthia Bourgeault's The Wisdom Way of Knowing)