

## The Numinous

The ancient Romans perceived the natural world as alive. The rocks and trees, oceans and rivers were all imbued with an animating spirit the Romans called numen. The word numen literally means “a nod” or “divine approval expressed by nodding the head.” The Romans communicated with the natural world, seeking a nod of assent before altering it. Attribution of immaterial spirit to plants, objects, and other material phenomena can be traced back as far as hunter gatherers, a religious doctrine known as Animism.

The word numinous was invented by the German philosopher Rudolf Otto in 1917. He wrote, I adopt a word coined from the Latin numen. Omen has given us ominous, and there is no reason why from numen we should not similarly form a word numinous.

Omens are typically warnings of something dangerous to come. These warnings are arriving more frequently and with greater consequence. Rains that ravish coastlines, the drying up of rivers and lakes, fires that burn throughout the year. As more bad news comes in, our planet-destroying economic system carries on with business as usual, a collective deafening against the harbingers of collapse.

Whereas an omen is an outer phenomenon, the numinous is an inner one, it is a state of consciousness. A numinous experience can be caused by an outer occurrence or object, but the numinous is the emotional experience. The numinous is unique to every human who experiences it, it is not one thing.

Otto explains it cannot be taught, but it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes 'of the spirit' must be awakened.

To awaken the numinous, be open and receptive, like a channel, like a daisy opening its petals to the sun, invite in the presence of mystery into your consciousness. What potential for communication exists, as a way forward through uncertain times? Like the vast underground Mycorrhizal network that connects fungi and trees, or animals that run to find higher ground before the storm, the numinous is a connection to a higher consciousness.

The pink glow of pollution cast across a darkening sky, precious metals piling high in landfills, the pillaging of distant forests. Is there hope for the animism of our excesses? How to measure the value of what has already been lost? A painting as a starting point for a relationship to the non human. The dust of many stones, the essence of plants, the first person who drew a line along a rock to mirror his sacred enemy. Life forces in opposition, an eternal reckoning and rebirth.

- Elise Adibi and Sarah Schneider, January 2025