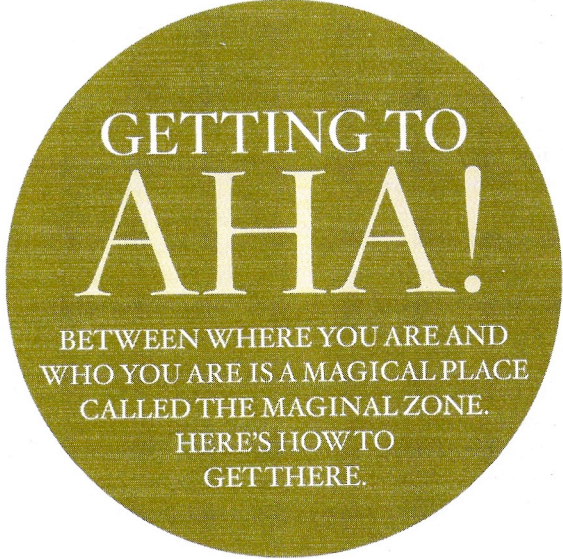


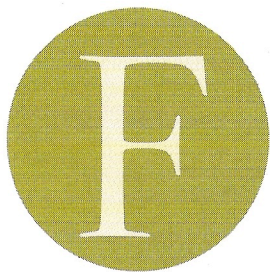
Spirituality & Health
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GETTING TO AHA!

BETWEEN WHERE YOU ARE AND
WHO YOU ARE IS A MAGICAL PLACE
CALLED THE MAGINAL ZONE.
HERE'S HOW TO
GET THERE.

By TREBBE JOHNSON • Photography by CHIP SIMONS



For months Eva had looked forward to her three-day wilderness solo on the sacred mountain, Mullaghmore, in western Ireland. An ordained minister and psycho-therapist, she planned to make altars to the earth, sky, and four directions and seek insight on how she could be of more service in the world. Circumstances, however,

had other plans for her. On the first afternoon, fierce storm winds split one of her tent poles in half. Painstakingly, she tried to repair it by wrapping it with adhesive tape from her first-aid kit, but the pole, now fat and bulky, still bent.

The preparation practices for her solo vision quest had emphasized that all events, inner and outer, were like provisions for the journey, so Eva began to look at her own response to her predicament. She saw that the way she had bound the tent pole was exactly the way she often treated her clients, smothering them in compassion instead of offering them support to make their own decisions. She undid the swaddling and stabilized the pole with a piece of hazel wood that she cut from a small tree, and the tent stood much better.

Two nights later, as another storm raged and she sat inside her tent, bracing it with her body to keep it from collapsing further, she had another revelation: growing up, she had weathered the bad times in a dysfunctional family simply by her determination to protect her inner life, her own private shelter.

Attending simultaneously to what was happening around her and what was happening within, Eva was exploring the "Maginal Zone," a term I coined for a fertile state of meaning and transformation that stretches between the events that unfold around us and our own unique response to them. The Maginal Zone is a

and stuck his tongue out at the sign like a defiant child. He practiced slipping between the forbidden zone and the permitted zone. He climbed up on the pylons and, balancing like an acrobat, made his way from one side to the other. And along the way he began to see how his interest in this borderland mirrored his own challenges as a gay, black, classical musician in the inner city, where hip-hop reigned. Playing with the boundary sign reminded him that his gift was, in fact, unifying two apparently alien worlds.

Sam has since founded an organization, Mssng Lnks, in Boston, dedicated to teaching inner-city youth to perform a variety of musical genres and helping them negotiate the ropes to a professional career in music.



Most of us go about our day as if we were on a track — we know what we need to accomplish and we set out for it, whether it's to finish a report, follow a diet, catch a train, or meditate.

If we're not focused on something specific, our awareness tends to shrink. In either state, we ignore ideas and sights that beckon alluringly from other directions, urging us to pause and explore them. We tell ourselves that we're too busy or that these invitations are mere distractions. And yet, as the French poet and chronicler of the profound meanings of *Things*, Francis Ponge, wrote, we cannot truly see something until we approach it, not as a superior but as an equal that has the power to startle us with the marvel of its selfhood. "It is necessary for things to disarrange you," wrote Ponge. When we enter the interactive Maginal Zone, we deliberately let the world disarrange us, surprise and enlighten us. And, as Sam and Eve discovered, old inner conflicts are not only mirrored in what happens to us but resolved with fresh new insights.

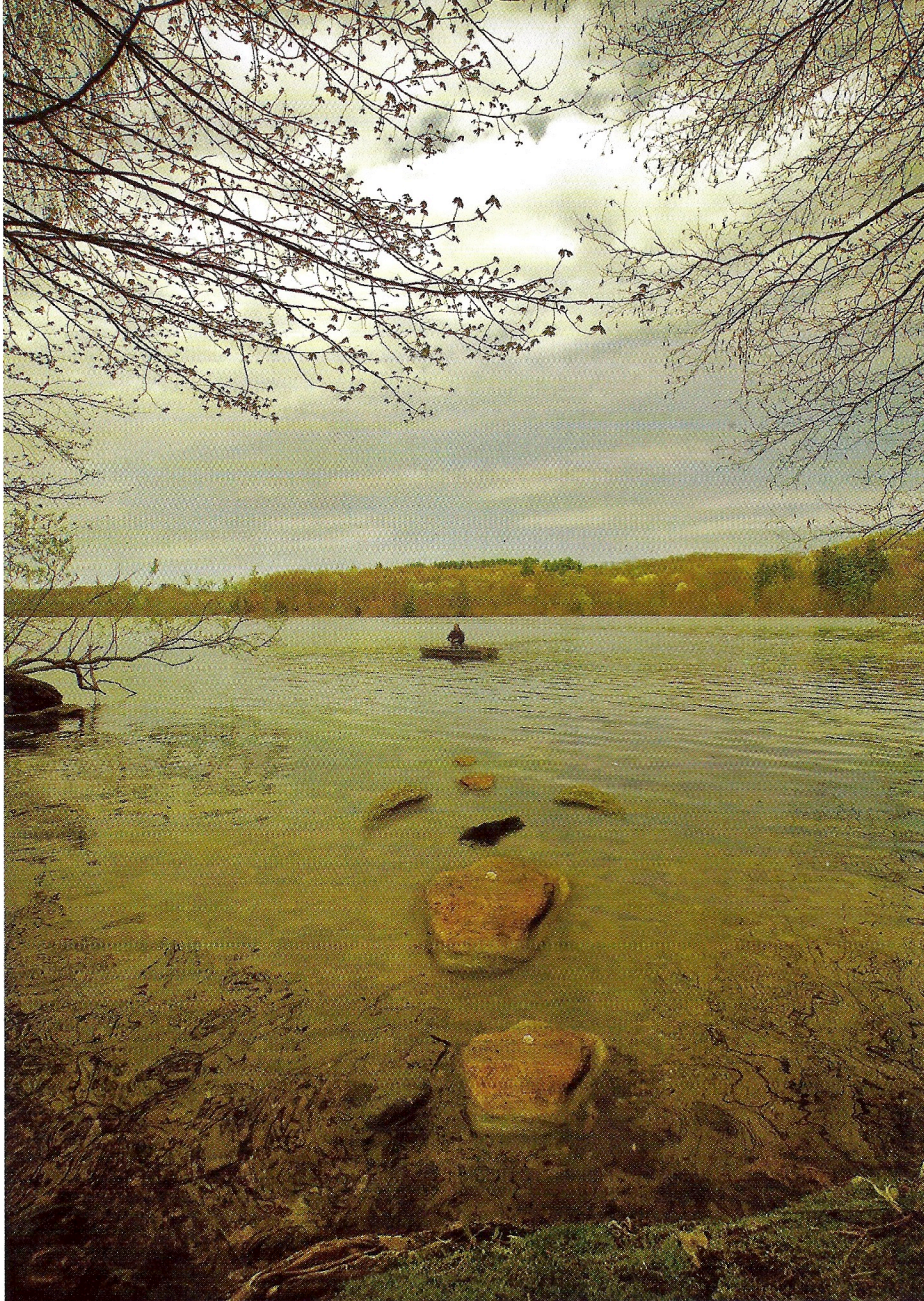
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place of *imagination* — a borderland, a world in the margins. And it is magical. We enter it when we expand our awareness of our surroundings and let the surprises, coincidences, and insights we discover there touch our particular habits, longings, fears, and questions. Interacting with what happens on both inner and outer levels, we find that aspects of our past, present, and future come into a new focus. We see other people, places, and ideas with more insight and compassion, and we feel more connected to a higher sense of purpose.

A three-day wilderness solo is a ticket to the Maginal Zone, but such commitment isn't necessary. While hiking one afternoon in a nature preserve, Sam became fascinated with a formidable NO TRESPASSING sign that a neighbor had made by slathering each letter in red paint on a row of thick pylons. At first dismayed by the sign, he then walked through the pylons



The attempt to define the intriguing yet elusive territory between the physical and meta-physical worlds is ancient and universal. In the fifth century B.C.E., the Greek philosopher Empedocles urged his student Pausanias not just to perceive but to perceive his own perceiving and so enter a state of alertness he called *metis*. Medieval alchemists sought to demonstrate the fertile interdependence between humanity and the wider universe. "There is nothing in man that is not marked in his exterior, so that by the exterior one may discover what is in the individual," wrote sixteenth-century Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus. Henri Corbin, the twentieth-century scholar of Sufism, used the Latin term *mundus imaginalis* to describe a visionary state somewhere between the senses and the spirit, in which mystics experienced a non-ordinary reality



that was imbued with images but that was far from being merely imaginary or fantastical.

A contemporary visionary, former magistrate, and teacher of the traditional ways of his Shoshone tribe in southeastern Idaho, Clyde Hall likens the Maginal Zone to the “shaman’s night,” a state of consciousness that’s “between the reality of this world and the reality of the other world.” In this state, which Hall says is best accessed after one has had the proper training, people may communicate with the spirits of the ancestors and nature beings, all of which are constantly present and ready to impart their wisdom to the human, who is, in fact, a reflection of them. “This is a place of great power,” Hall says. “There’s a sacred unity between the supernatural powers, the human being, and the environment.”

Carl Jung was fascinated with synchronicity, an “acausal connecting principle,” or timely occurrence of two things, inner and outer, coming together in a nonlinear yet meaningful way. In an example Jung himself gave, one of his patients was describing a dream she’d had of a golden scarab beetle when Jung heard a clicking noise behind him on the window. He turned to discover

that the closest Swiss relative of that mythical insect was trying to fly into his office. Did the inner world invite the outer circumstance? Were the two events on a kind of parallel track through the universe, destined to meet in just this way? Jung did not have the answers, but he perceived synchronicity as neither entirely psychological nor entirely physical, yet occupying a real “psychoid” space in between. However, says Nancy Qualls-Corbett, Jungian analyst and author of *The Sacred Prostitute*, defining the boundaries of this mysterious territory is less important than asking the question: “What is it that the world is bringing us when we are in harmony, when we feel very connected to our sense of inner life? If we are willing to suspend our insistence that we are merely physical beings who must maintain a concrete hold on the world, then we can be part of the numinosity that surrounds these synchronistic events. And we can ask, ‘I’m here. Where does the world want to put me?’”

Opening ourselves to where the world wants to put us also provides valuable insight on where we are right now. To access these clues, when we enter the Maginal Zone, we invite our rational, conscious mind to take a rest — except in matters of safety and health. We start listening

to the body, the emotions, and to our innate sense of fascination that seems to spring to life as soon as we give it room. Fascination demands that we close the distance between ourselves and some beguiling other and explore a possible relationship between us. Suspending disbelief, we allow ourselves to be surprised and touched by events that sweep around us and seem to implicate us in their flow, sometimes in astonishing ways. A woman with a terminal illness was drawn to two Ponderosa pines in a city park — one dead and encrusted with fungus, the other green and vibrant. That dead tree, that’s me, she thought. A magpie began circling above, and she was convinced it would land in the healthy tree. When it alit in the dead tree, she was deeply moved, as if she had been blessed by a spirit that accepted and valued her fully, despite her infirmity.

The easiest way to explore the Maginal Zone is through nature, says Meredith Little, who in 1972 introduced wilderness rites of passage into contemporary American culture. “We are nature,” Little says. “The land is nonjudgmental enough to allow us to be our whole selves fully. Nature expresses its whole-

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ness not through words but through its being, and that allows us to remember our own nature and step into that expression of ourselves.”

There is a fine distinction between the fascinations that beckon in nature and those we encounter in the commercial world. Boutique windows and advertisements kindle the urge to possess. They suggest that by acquiring something new, we can become a different and happier person. In the Maginal Zone, fascination gives us a deeper, more comprehensive sense of who we really are and shows us paths toward bringing more of that uniqueness

forth. And if we're attentive, we can immerse ourselves at any time and in any place in this inviting playground of the soul.

Nell decided to explore the Maginal Zone in downtown Omaha. She was missing her son, whom she had just taken to the airport for a visit to his father in California. Wandering into a small ice-cream shop, she discovered that on each of the tables was a coloring book and crayons. The coloring book at her table depicted a family vacation, and one of the pictures was of a boy getting off a plane. Delighted, she colored the boy in the kinds of clothes her son had been wearing that morning, then drew a

pink shield around him as a symbol of safety. When she left the café, her feeling of emptiness had been replaced by one of excitement and possibility for her time alone.

Clyde Hall believes that people once traveled more easily and frequently to the Maginal Zone. Traditional people had to be in close relationship to the animals and plants with whom they shared the land and on whom they depended for their survival. “Now there is no longer that need to be in sacred unity with Spirit,” he says. Yet Brian Swimme, cosmologist and author of *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*, believes we may actually be moving closer to conscious participation in the rich possibilities of the moment. He likens the Maginal Zone to a decision-making process that is constantly unfolding on countless levels, from quantum to human.

At the quantum level, says Swimme, “each moment of existence seems to begin with the whole. All things are possible, vibrating. Then there is a kind of decision made about how things will evolve. The variety of possibilities evaporates, or collapses. Think of the quintillion interactions made at the neuropeptide level in the brain. We are reassembling all decisions from moment to moment, at the atomic level, the cellular level, and finally the conscious human level. We are moving from what [physicist] David Bohm called the ‘implicate realm’ to the explicate, from possibilities to ‘explicate’ form. We realize that the psyche is participating with something more intricate than we realized.”



In the Maginal Zone we are in active play with aspects of ourselves that are often closed to us: intuition, the ability to relate intimately with nature, boldness arising from a sudden grasp of what must be done in the moment — and then doing it, greater awareness of our surroundings, a sense of the inherent worth of everything that makes up our reality on both the inner and outer levels, and, as Brian Swimme points out, a grasp of the possibilities of every moment.

The Maginal Zone is informative. Sometimes it reveals things about ourselves that we don't like. But because the revelation is so direct, so personal, so timely, we usually find we are grateful for the experience. For example, a man whose feet got tangled in a strand of barbed wire while on a walk in the mountains used the obstacle as a doorway to confront his pattern of isolating himself and wounding others with his love affairs. Often, too, the Maginal Zone tells us things about our deep, authentic self that have a validity and authority that we find we can accept more than the word of even our most trusted friends and mentors. The wisdom we grasp is both utterly surprising and a truth we seem to have waited all our lives to see brought to light.

Irish legend tells of a king, Sweeney, who stayed too long in

the visionary world and ended up lost and addled, living in trees and talking to the birds, but useless to his community. Similarly, we cannot remain forever in the Maginal Zone, for we need to bring the treasures we find there back to our daily life. We must extend our expectation of coincidences and possibilities to all we do and apply the same kind of creative, playful response we find so natural while in the Maginal Zone to more mundane situations at home, in the office — and in a traffic jam. Perceiving life as an adventure full of meaning, we can deal more effectively and imaginatively with all kinds of situations, painful as well as joyous. We find we have more compassion for other people and situations, as well as for all aspects of ourselves, for we recognize that every part is necessary to a great whole. There are many ways to enter the Maginal Zone [see box, below]. The doorway opens whenever we recognize the world's abundant invitations to us and accept them as we, and only we, can do. SEH

Trebbe Johnson is the author of *The World Is a Waiting Lover: Desire and the Quest for the Beloved* and the director of Vision Arrow (visionarrow.com), leading journeys worldwide that combine adventure travel, mythic imagination, and the quest for meaning. See more on page 8.

HOW TO ENTER YOUR MAGINAL ZONE



ou can easily explore the Maginal Zone on your own. All you need is some time alone for the journey and the willingness to accept all that happens as part of a great adventure story.

Give yourself at least 40 minutes — ideally, more — to be alone in nature. Go through a symbolic gateway (even something as simple as stepping over a stick) as a way of telling yourself that you're leaving behind your ordinary way of perceiving and entering the Maginal Zone. You might state aloud your hope or intention for the journey, for example: I ask to be shown something that has meaning for me, or I ask for insight on my problem with money.

Pay attention to where you go. Maybe you usually like wide-open places and today find yourself drawn to the woods. How will you respond to this prompting? Note feelings that arise, especially around the periphery of your consciousness. Note if any memories come up.

When something interests you, sit with it. It doesn't have to be something beautiful or even "natural." It could be a wildflower, dead tree, or an old tin can. Sit down with this momentary "host" and pay attention to it. Don't think too much. By all means, don't rely on symbolism you've learned elsewhere. If you see an owl, don't assume owl means wisdom or death or anything else. What is this particular owl conveying that strikes you?

Your rational mind will interrupt you and try to persuade you that this exercise isn't working, that you should get back

to more important things. Thank it and dive again into the moment. Do this at least once, maybe more.

Do you feel that some action is required? Maybe you're moved to lie down on the ground, sing, do a simple ceremony, let your tears flow. Pay attention to your intuition and respond accordingly.

When you do get up, note if your feelings are different. At the end of your walk, write down your journey or tell your story to a friend who will be interested in it. You'll probably find that, in the telling, you will realize that more happened than you thought.

Try this exercise again in a few days at the same place. It will be completely different, because you are completely different. Moreover, you're likely to discover that each time you practice this way of being, your perceptions of the experience while it's occurring are more finely tuned than they were before.

Here are a few other ways to enter the Maginal Zone:

- Step off the familiar path and follow something that beckons.
- Make a decision to move through the day as if something wonderful is about to happen. (It will.)
- Dress up as the person you're scared to be.
- Have a conversation with someone who fascinates you.
- In a bookstore, pick up a book on a subject you know nothing about.
- Ask a tree what it has to tell you and agree with yourself not to question what you hear.