



The Workings  
*of the*  
Subtle Heart

W<sup>m</sup> Widmer

“ . . . a pleasure to read, and spiritually therapeutic.”

— Kurt Vonnegut

Copyright © 2007 by William Widmer

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without written permission, except for brief quotations embodied in critical articles, reviews, and works of discussion.

Designed and composed in Fournier MT at Hobblebush Books,  
Brookline, New Hampshire (www.hobblebush.com)

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

*Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data*  
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Widmer, William.

The workings of the subtle heart / William Widmer.

p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9797562-0-7

ISBN-10: 0-9797562-0-0

1. Religion and poetry. 2. Mysticism and poetry. 3. Spiritual life. 4. Poetry--  
History and criticism. I. Title.

PN1077 .W53 2007

809/.93382

*Published by:*

ALACRITY BOOKS, INC.

P.O. Box 1168

Amherst, New Hampshire 03031

# Preface

THERE IS A WAY OF KNOWING, in fine detail, that proceeds from the heart.

This knowing is as subtle as the subtlest thoughts of some so-very-bright, stratospheric physicist, for example;

but rather is a subtle knowing that is achieved in the domain of feeling.

Have you ever watched a famous violinist, some dusty old master, near the end of his career, play the violin? His face contorted under some finely articulated inner rapture, which is now generating music through him?

That's the kind of thing I mean.

↔ 1 ↔

Facing God

## \* Peering into the Mist

WHEN I WAS A BOY of maybe ten or eleven, my parents and brother and I went up north to our summer vacation at a cabin on a remote lake, an hour's journey from the last major roadway. Through deep woods wound spidery, overgrown, wandering roads, paved to unpaved, which suddenly opened before us, coming at last to the glint of sunlight upon water. And then still miles along the water before we reached the cabin, a darkly angled building hung on a low ridge near the lake, in an inlet, a kludge of rough lumber and nails, with a misshapen, low outside table and a path to the dock. The next morning, I woke up first, and I went outside early. It had gotten colder overnight, and the cabin and the lake were all fogged in. One could almost drink the fog.

I went outside like a nearly blind person, hands before me, seeing only a foot or two before me badly in the mist, and made my way barefoot alone to the dock, the water nearly invisible but for its slap against the small pilings, and walked the gray boards of the dock to the very end. And stood there, on the water, in the fog, and listened.

“Listened for what?”

And watched.

“For what? Watched what?”

But upon an electric edge I realized that I was not alone there! And I ran back to the cabin, across the weathered gray docks, across sand, across the stones, the pursed weeds . . . my feet, somehow, knowing all they touched.



## \* Penetrating Poetry

AS A TEENAGER, I wrote poetry, as do many teenagers, forced or otherwise.

Usually, it's forced. Although a surprising number of people have tried to write poetry with some level of seriousness, prior to giving it up. And yes, just about all give it up (by the way) weighted down by the deadening effects of the practical world and the coarsening effects of age.

There are a few years between childhood and adulthood in which poetry has any significance at all. Almost no adults read poetry, really.

Poetry frustrates those people who have a strong need to make clear sense out of everything, which is most people; and all those uncomfortable with ambiguity avoid it. The attainment of its intangible rewards are hard to obtain; occupying, as it does, a domain that cannot be rendered into straight sense, and so must be found via another sense, or found not at all.

Like anything of significance, it takes a fair amount of energy to penetrate poetry.

People generally accept that it takes a considerable amount of work to understand, say, calculus. But poetry? Either they think they like a certain poem, or they think they don't like it. Few people ask themselves if they have actually mastered it, in any objective way.

So poetry has always been, and remains, a marginal sort of activity and interest that engages but the few. For good or ill, it is of significance only to those who get *that* particular thing, this poetry.

Anyway, as a teenager, I wrote poems, and I would go out into the countryside and “be poetical.”

What this meant, in practice, was that I would go to some remote spot, and would clear my mind and be fully there; and upon its own moment, would sense something. That *something* was always an explicit something. A specific taste. Not a vaporous thing at all.



## \* The World Is Not a Collection of Things

BY WAY OF EXAMPLE, you might imagine that it is early winter, in a land of farms and deep forests, way up north; and having grown housebound, you have pulled on your old trail-boots and gloves, and made your escape into the sharper cool.

And that you have now made the short way across your backyard, and across the fence and overgrown field that trails up to the old farm up the hill; and there have entered the woods, first guided on an old path and then by the remembrance of years, as you hike that way up. The sky is gray and rolling and smelling of snow.

The earth is frozen in some spots, and still soft underfoot in others, and there is the smell of earth and wood, bracken and stone. The interwoven branches, twisted fingers of the naked trees above you motion upward; the black-green pine, beyond, in broader and finer gesture.

You encounter an old dirt road, disused and tending toward weed, which you take up and which leads to the top of a large hill.

The road up is hemmed in by the woods. No one will go up or down this road until the springtime.

As you walk up the hill, you rise above the common level of the trees, the wind freshening from the north. The sky is so gray, it almost seems a shade of purple.

And up ahead, a low ledge approaches the road from both sides until one is in a gently sloping valley, a small V still forested among a facing of rock. To one side, from a fractured face of gray-black rock, you notice a small trace of water. And approaching, you see the steady flow of this water down the angular face, framed by ice, and below the trees, ferns still and mosses beaten-

green outlining where the earth and water slip away downhill. A little pool, before running into the woven undergrowth. And the gray only deepens.

And then, out of nowhere, a sense of imminence . . . the gathering of something, or the quick reduction of something, like the house lights being dimmed;

and then, in a shudder, a burst: everywhere snow, snow everywhere, a dance of flakes twirling silently through the naked trees. The sky white now in silent spiral.

Swirling white!

And then you realize that you are the only person for mile upon mile; and that all you can hear is the little water spilling down the rock, so quiet that you can even hear each flake coming to rest on your shoulder, between the oscillations of your own breath.

And then you enter a sudden, profound, quiet space; as you realize that this little piece of the world is not a collection of things, but is rather the Face of a fuller spirit, a Face that now spots its own delightful reflection in the mirrors of your eyes. A Face across which transcendent emotion plays, as fluidly as the swirl of flakes is carried by the vagaries of the wind.

Seeing Itself in you, now.



## \* Fullness & Distraction

THAT'S WHAT I USED TO call being poetical. Stuff like that.

Am I writing well enough for you to understand what I mean?  
Are you the right kind of reader to understand what I mean?

A sense of Fullness in a sense of Place.

\* \* \*

Perhaps in the example that I just gave, that place amidst the early snow would have been less compelling at a different time of year, or with company other than oneself.

Or, perhaps it would have been less compelling under the same circumstances, alone in the snow, if one had been worried about a sick child, or had sore feet, or wondered where one would get money to get the car fixed.

Or, I suppose . . . whether one could find one's way back in the gathering snow.

There's an endless source of distractions; some real, some less so.

But maybe, just maybe, if you were there in the right frame of mind, in spring during bud-break, there would be a magic there, too. Or perhaps in the hum of the August heat. A different magic, perhaps. A different fullness.

Many, many people understand this fullness, whether they call it fullness, or peace, or do not give it a name at all. It's nearly impossible to be a farmer, for example, and not sometimes know the fullness of your land. Those trout fishermen in the small and rocky waters are there for more than the fish. And it is no accident

that certain golfers awaken upon dreaming of the view across a particular fourth hole, in a May twilight, as they follow their ball in flight.

People are there for more than the exercise, the harvest, the score.

Something is singing to them there.

Now, the point I wish to make before getting on with the rest of my story is that this fullness that is sensed by the farmer, or the fisherman, or the golfer is the same fullness that is sensed by the poet. It is the same fullness sensed by the mystic. There is only one Fullness, the experience of which is modulated only by the manner of entry and the depth of one's surrender to It.



## \* Fullness Demands Poetry

BUT LET'S LOOK at poetry by itself for a moment.

It is of course no secret that the sacred texts of all people are either full of poetry or entirely poetry. What are the Psalms but poems? What is the gospel of John but one long poem?

In the beginning was the Word

and the Word was with God

and the Word was God.

The Qur'an? The Tao Te Ching? The Bhagavad Gita? Poetry, poetry, poetry.

A certain Fullness demands poetry, and at the age of seventeen, I sought to be a poet.

I was, in some sense, on a collision course with Fullness.



## \* A Catching of the Flavor

AT SEVENTEEN, I was a self-declared agnostic.

I was raised a Catholic, and an ardent one. My agnosticism, in retrospect, was pretty short-lived. But like many other teenagers, I had decided to put aside my beliefs, and then to think about them and add them back in one at a time, as they seemed true to me.

Poetry was true to me.

I liked taking long walks in the deep country, as far away from people as I could get. I'm not a real social person, it seems. I like being alone.

I always have. Always will.

I grew up on the edge of the country, and during my walks, if the fields and forests around me struck me in a particular way, I would stop, and fully attend to *this place*, and often would absorb a moment of particular peace. In this peace was a presence felt, and as I would pull away from it, I would feel an exquisite something. A knowing of something. A catching of the flavor of something.

I know this probably sounds kind of bizarre, but it's kind of like a sudden strong sense of smell, which resolves itself somehow to knowledge. A taste, as it were.

One spring afternoon, after school, I drove my parents' car into the countryside, twenty miles from home, on a rural road through farm fields. I had gotten my license only a month or two earlier, and taking the car for a ride was still, well, kind of a kick. This was a time of the small family farm, and there were many farms in various stages of upkeep along the main road and the many dirt side roads. It was a cool April day, and the sky was rolling gray.

Being late April in the North, the buds were just coming out red on the old maple trees along the roads amid stone walls built by farmers long dead.

I pulled up one side road, past the little farm on the corner, and drove a half-mile down the road and parked the car on the shoulder, next to a pasture that was so very green green.

The open land rolled upward for another half mile before a little hill, and as I got out of the car, I noticed that the wind was up.

As I walked up the hill, the wind pushed me from behind.

The smell of spring filled the air: earth and grass, cow and water.

I followed the meandering road gently uphill. The land below rolled to a low spot flanked by rising fields, and then spread again, out to the distant farm downhill.

Uphill, across the broad stone walls, the fields rippled slowly like a sea stopped, as it made its way across the brow of a small hill, gesturing away.

The road moved up a natural cleft in the land; and to the right, a dozen old maples ascended the road in a line. The fields were bordered by old stone field walls, which meandered along with the road.

The red branches of the maples danced in the wind.

As I approached the top of the little hill, it started to rain lightly—a very light, windblown rain, up from behind me.

I decided to go back to the car. I braced for heading back into the wind, and as I turned back and looked over the narrow rise that I

had just ascended, I came upon . . . the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

It was just the green fields, rolling away to the distant farm; the stone walls running downhill; the wind in my face; the red branches of the old maples responding perfectly to the wind. And I stood there and just emptied myself.

I had such great joy. It was an almost sexual joy, like looking in a lover's eyes.

And then, I somehow recognized something remembered in this landscape; something out of time that was now, yes, somehow again.

And as I looked at the scene before me, my joy, inexplicably, continued to rise. It was an accelerating joy that was no longer *my* joy, but rose of its own accord, under its own guidance, and it began to pull me out of myself. I became subordinate to *it*.

As the joy in me rose . . . accelerated . . . a flow, then a torrent, ran through me, upward, striking like a series of notes, and I quickly changed.

In a moment, the energy rose to my throat, and I suddenly grew larger than my body; I was able to look at the exterior surfaces of my body from all around, from each angle, from many distances, at the same instant. I looked deeply into my own eyes, at the back of my own head, without ever losing the sense that I had one, unified perspective.

No longer bound by my body, my unified senses were independent of my body and capable of understanding the essence of things by their interpenetration.

I was no longer bound by the apparent surfaces of things, but knew them in their interpenetration: trees stone air earth. I heard the

stone recite *IamIamIamI IamIamIamI IamIamIamI IamIamIamI*,  
and the sound was like the sound of stone on stone.

And as I sought to discern how stone could have such a presence,  
I caught sight of God, the movement of water upon water, who  
delighted, laughing. Emerged as the Reality of the *I am* of the  
stone. Unimaginably ancient, alive in incomprehensible fullness.  
And He laughed me.

We laughed together! Like a mirror I was to Him, like a Mirror  
He to me!

And was then directed to the making of the world; witnessed as the  
Most Real created all that we experience at a particular moment:  
the instant creation of the substance of the world by His ongoing  
will. What we experience, at *any* moment, exists at the instant  
will of God.

## Wake Up!

What we experience, at *this* moment, exists at the instant will of  
God.

And yet my self turned again to only God.

And I was a simple thing, light upon light, in the light of God.  
And yet I was delimited; my light had an edge, when laid upon  
the light of God. And in that bliss there was no span, no duration;  
no before or after.

(In some fundamental way, whatever it was that I was, before,  
went away then; and has never returned.)

Emerging from the light, I was with God, in unlimited joy, being  
allowed to participate in the nature of things. My God! God makes  
the universe as we make love!

But better! Better!

And then, in the sweep of such joy, I was aware of my body standing on the roadside, and then I felt . . . saw a certain energy being coiled into my nature, and then, and then . . .

I found myself standing along the road, laughing in the wind and rain.

\*\*\*

I've told you now, a little, about what happened that April day. But as you might expect, I cannot describe fully what occurred. Words cannot capture it. The mechanical limits of my human mind cannot process it.

It's beyond report.

But it's still there, right there.

Still there.



## \* A World Hidden

IN THE MONTHS that followed this event, while I was still seventeen, I wrote two poems.

Here's one of them.

There is a world hidden men  
freight around beyond the corners  
of their eyes, ungraspable  
in the black  
Smiling out its blackness crookedly  
on canvas paper air  
it is most unknown most  
untouchable most unattainable best  
loved            Struggling to free  
itself to nothingness beyond  
the dice roll to the place  
where ice boils—where space  
is inscrutable and the stars  
closed mouth



## \* Contemplation Is Everywhere

JUST ABOUT ALL of the major religions have a branch, or branches, whose primary practice emphasizes contemplation.

Christianity, for example, has within the Catholic and Orthodox churches a great tradition of contemplative, monastic orders—the Trappists, the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Hesychastic monks of the Orthodox Church; and many others, whose numbers now dwindle. And there are still a few persons who pursue solitary lives as religious hermits.

Buddhism is a philosophy singularly organized toward, and vivified by, contemplation.

Hinduism has yoga fulminating at its core, and the aphorisms of Patanjali, written in the second century B.C., have never been rivaled in the depth of their understanding of contemplative practice. The Indian culture was the first to develop a high understanding of mind-poise.

The vision-quest of the American Indian is a journey of contemplation.

The Sufis have distilled the inner aspects of Islam into a contemplative mysticism of immense depth.

I could go on and on.

And so as exotic, and perhaps, to some ears, as foreign, as all these orientations may sound, this contemplation of which I speak is indeed everywhere.

In farmers and fishermen and teenage kids, and lovers looking into each other's eyes.



## ✿ Organ of Spiritual Perception

THE SUFIS HAVE A CONCEPT, that in order for someone to be fully spiritually awake, a specific organ of spiritual perception needs to be opened.

Once it is opened, that understanding which was missed is now perceived. The Sufis understand this capacity to be affiliated with the opening of the *Lataif*, which is translated as *The Subtleties*.

The Subtleties are a capacity, like seeing; while the organ of spiritual perception, the heart, is like the eye.

You can't see unless your eyes are open and working; but if your eye does work, you can take in a huge amount of knowing in but a glance. The sky, mountain, lake and lodge before you.

When one's heart is open, one may take in a large spiritual understanding in a similar glance.

\* \* \*

Let me give an analogy for what I mean.

I am told that there is a Japanese word, *sabishii*, that is commonly translated as “melancholy”—but the Japanese word does not carry, exactly, the same connotation as that English word.

How can one translate the untranslatable?

Well, you might imagine yourself as Japanese (if you are not Japanese), a Japanese of a hundred years ago, who is standing on the promontory overlooking a bay, as twilight descends.

A few minutes ago, you might imagine, you just said goodbye to someone you love very much, a hard moment followed by that

person boarding a sailing ship, which is just now raising its sails as it begins to make its way out of port.

The ship suddenly picks up speed and you can see the sails now in full billow.

And then you stand on a rise on the shore, watching the progress of the ship as it heads out to sea, watching it as it slowly makes its way to the horizon; rapidly at first, and then resolving itself, slowly, to an ever smaller dot . . .

And then . . . *sabishii* is that very moment when you lose sight of the ship.



A distillation, as it were, of the gathering and scattering of intertwined lives, hopes, fears, and dreams, crystallized into a thing of no size and no duration. Which hangs out of time, in meaning.

To perceive this inclusively, in a single moment, is like the operation of the organ of spiritual perception of which I speak.

And once recognized, it can be trained, a little.

Do you recognize it?

