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INTRODUCTION

From the outset, I must warn the reader that when speaking of Frithjof Schuon I always say "the Shaykh", for I never addressed him otherwise than by this title; I used his first name only in the presence of my family members, and even then I avoided doing so, as it seemed to me totally inappropriate. During our fifty years together, I never ceased to be filled with a reverential awe in his presence and with a veneration that ever deepened as his spiritual and moral greatness unveiled itself to me by the reading of his books and by the qualities he manifested.

I met him for the first time in the spring of 1947. He was then living in a small one-room apartment in Lausanne (Switzerland), on a quiet lane without traffic, bordered on one side by a beautiful property planted with cedars and blooming trees and on the other side by a row of buildings whose entrances were adorned with little gardens. I was accompanied by one of the Shaykh's representatives who had lent me the most important books of René Guénon and who, seeing my enthusiasm and the seriousness of my intentions, had consented to talk to me about Frithjof Schuon and his role as spiritual master, and of his confraternity.

We rang the doorbell on the fourth floor, and the Shaykh, dressed in a brown caftan, opened the door. My heart, which had been beating very hard, calmed down immediately at the sight of this man whose great dignity was coupled with an affability that at once put one at ease, and whose voice was astonishingly soft and clear. He beckoned me to sit down on a cushion; he himself sat down on a low divan covered with a Turkmen blanket, while the visitor sat on the floor next to him. He was there, like a mountain of strength and serenity, his beautiful hands lying on his knees, his eyes half-closed. On the wall behind him hung a beautiful Indonesian fabric. The room was divided in two by a golden curtain behind which one could guess was the space reserved for prayer; the larger part, which looked out on a balcony, was furnished with the divan and a Gothic chest on which stood a Romanesque statuette of the Virgin Mary in majesty. The whole room was covered with nomadic Afghan rugs. Next to the divan, near the window, a ficus tree and two azaleas added a welcoming note to the sober and peaceful beauty that reigned in this place.

After a moment of silence, the Shaykh asked what my reasons were for being attracted to the spiritual life and whether I had any particular problems. Of course I had problems, but through the mere presence of this Master and by some of his words, they had as it were evaporated. Then he asked me: "Do you know how to make coffee? Could you prepare us a cup of coffee?" Delighted to be of service, I went to the kitchen. An old desk was wedged in between the door and sink by the window; on the opposite side, between the cooking stove and a closet, stood a table with piles of books and folders stacked on top of it and beneath it. A glass door gave onto the same small balcony, where an oleander was growing and flower boxes were waiting for geraniums to bloom. Everything was clean and neatly arranged so that it was easy for me to find what was needed to make coffee. I brought the coffee pot and two cups on a tray which I put before the Shaykh, happy to be able to show my respect by kneeling before him and by serving him the coffee. I refused as politely as I could his offer to drink also. He then turned to my companion and asked among other things: "How is your cat?" This disciple, in fact, owned a beautiful Persian cat and he recounted that he liked to blow soap bubbles to watch the cat trying to catch them. The Shaykh said with a slight smile: "I wonder whether you bought the bubbles for your cat or for yourself?" I do not remember anything else, except the fact that the Shaykh did not drink all his coffee and poured the rest into the pot of the ficus tree. Later I learned that this was his habit, and the plant was indeed thriving.

After this interview I went back home, my heart filled with a sweet joy. I had expected a severe interrogation, but everything had been so simple and natural. The sound of his soft voice continued ringing in my ears and I could not forget his deeply mysterious gaze; (for a long time I believed that his eyes were black, whereas in reality they were gray-blue).

A few days later, from the tramcar in which I was returning from work, I saw the Shaykh in the street: he was carrying a net filled with groceries, walking with an energetic gait that stood in contrast to the recollected expression of his face. Like so many times thereafter, I was struck by this fascinating combination of irresistible strength and serene inwardness.

But I began to ask myself some questions: how was it possible that a man, who for more than ten years had been the head of a *Tarīqah*

with numerous disciples, that such a man was living in the tiniest apartment, had to open the door himself for his visitors, had to do his own shopping, his cooking and who knows what else? Also, it seemed to me that he did not look well. Did he have any health problems? Was he well nourished? The answers came to me only later.

Soon after my first encounter with the Shaykh, I was invited from time to time to prayer meetings together with other friends. After a simple meal—rye bread, cheese, fruit, and tea—taken in silence, the Shaykh would speak of doctrine and the spiritual life and would answer questions. On these occasions, I would invariably feel a powerful breath of benediction coming out of his mouth; it was almost as if I could see rays of light emanating from him. He was seated on his divan in Moroccan dress, as were his disciples who were sitting on the floor in a half circle, the women in the rear. The traditional garment, which the Shaykh insisted upon, gave dignity to each one. Two Moroccan lamps of finely chiseled copper cast delicate lace patterns on the ceiling and walls, and while we were performing the rites, incense filled the air. All was sacred beauty and peace, and I would walk home after these evenings as if drunk with the wine of truth.

One day Lucy von Dechend (an old friend of the Schuon family and herself a disciple) who used to type the Shaykh's articles, asked me whether I could take over this job since she had to leave for a few months, and she handed me the manuscript of the article "Microcosm and Symbol" which was later to appear in *The Eye of the Heart*. I was to deliver my work on a Wednesday at six o'clock in the evening and fetch another article, thus having the privilege of seeing the Shaykh quite regularly. Each time he would ask me whether I had understood everything; so I acquired the habit of putting myself in the place of the reader and if a passage seemed a bit too difficult to understand, I would indicate it to the Shaykh who, to my great astonishment, would change the phrasing. I was astonished indeed that such an intelligent man would listen to a young "beginner" like myself, but humility was at the base of his character—it could not be otherwise—and he liked to ask for advice from his friends on many a question. He would write his articles in one stroke, in a few days, and would recast them only once they were typewritten; then one had to recopy them so that everything would be clear for the publisher, though his handwriting and his corrections were always very clear.

He also would fill page after page with thoughts and reflections in the form of aphorisms on the most diverse topics; it was the outline of the book *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*. One day he had on his desk a number of pieces of cellophane of diverse colors, the symbolism and meaning of which he explained to me. He had me look at the landscape through the different sheets of cellophane and asked me what impression it gave me; in fact, the yellow gives rise to joy, the purple to sadness, the blue is mysterious and cool, the green peaceful, the red rather frightening by its intensity and heat.

On another day he spoke to me about astronomy, a subject that seemed to fascinate him, for he had done a whole series of calculations so that one could concretely imagine stellar space. He showed me his globe and said: "If the earth had this dimension, the moon would have the size of an apple and would be at a distance of about eight meters from the earth, and the sun would have the size of an apartment building in Sauvabelin [a hill above Lausanne]. Venus would be where the cathedral stands; Jupiter, nine times the size of the earth, would be in the middle of the lake [Lake Geneva], and so on. If the sun is a big apple, the earth is a mustard seed and would be at a distance of ten meters from the sun. The solar system would scarcely occupy half a kilometer and around it there would be a space larger than Europe." He spoke to me about the Milky Way, about the Great Galactic System . . . it was dizzying. But much more vertiginous was what he told me later and on which he would enlarge in two of his books: "Modern men are . . . unaware of being involved in a titanic drama in comparison with which this world, so seemingly solid, is as tenuous as a spider's web. . . . [T]hey do not see . . . that this, which is so compact in appearance, can collapse *ab intra*, that matter can flow back 'toward the inward' through transmutation, and that the whole of space can shrink like a balloon suddenly emptied of air."[1] Or again, speaking of the divine Attributes and in particular of *Al-Ākhir* (God as "The Last"): "If one wanted under present condition to form some idea of the coming of *Al-Ākhir*, one would have to be able to witness by anticipation that sort of explosion of matter, that sort of revulsion or existential reflux, which will mark the advent of God; one would

[1] *Logic and Transcendence*, chap. "Concerning the Proofs of God" (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), pp. 59, 60. All the notes in Madame Schuon's Introduction are by the editor.

have to be able to hear in advance the sound of the Trumpet—that rending irruption of primordial Sound—and to witness the breaking up and transmutation of our sensible universe."[2] I witnessed in thought this cosmic drama and wondered, marveling whence he was drawing all that he was describing. He did not seem to be talking out of theoretical knowledge but out of direct awareness and experience. He gave me the impression of a man who, like an angel, flies through all the spheres of the Universe, up to the highest one, an impression that would again and again come to my mind as I frequented him and read his works.

On another occasion, the Shaykh showed me an old book representing the costumes of all the peoples in the world. He had always had the greatest interest in everything related to the different races of humanity. He knew the names of all the peoples of Asia, of all the African and American tribes, he knew their history, their religion, their customs, he had notions of their languages and their scripts; he could recite with verve passages of the *Iliad* in Greek, of the *Divine Comedy* in Italian, sing an African lullaby or a Sioux war song; he had learned with much facility the Arabic language and script and had acquired the rudiments of Sanskrit and some knowledge of Japanese and Chinese, knowing by heart the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* and also how to inscribe it with a fine brush. Almost all of this knowledge he had acquired from his youth on, in order to escape the narrowly European atmosphere which reigned at that time and which for him was stifling. He also could draw with a stroke of the pen a Chinese, Arab, Caucasian, or Red Indian face.

On the contrary, he had no memory for things he was not interested in and left the cosmological sciences to his best friend, Titus Burckhardt. He mistrusted astrology, thinking that erroneous conclusions could too easily be drawn from it, and he above all did not tolerate the making of predictions. After this topic had come up one day during an invitation, he asked me: "What is my sign?" I told him that he had the sun in Gemini and the ascendant in Pisces. He smiled slightly and asked: "And what does that mean?" I offered the little I knew of this science and he kept silent. He was so uninterested that the next day he had all but forgotten it.

[2] *Form and Substance in the Religions*, chap. "The Cross of Space and Time in Koranic Onomatology" (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), p. 83.

About one year after our first meeting, he asked me whether I could come and cook for him once a week. I tried my best to cook wholesome meals, to which he invited me without exception—an offer I had not expected. After the meal, he would read to me mystical poems of St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. He loved this young saint very much, saying that her greatness consisted precisely in her holy littleness, and he lent me *The Story of a Soul*. He was at that time absorbed in the reading of the Church Fathers and the Christian mystics; it was then that he wrote "Christic Mysteries", an article which helped me to understand Christianity in depth, like everything he would later write on this subject.[3]

Another book which was lent to me was *Black Elk Speaks*, the dictated autobiography of a sage and holy man of the Sioux, who in his youth experienced the heroic resistance of his people against the whites and who at the same time received visions in order to help his neighbors spiritually and medically. I knew practically nothing about the American Indians, and this book was an opening into a totally unsuspected world. The Shaykh himself was so impressed by it that he suggested to one of his American disciples, Joseph Epes Brown, future professor of ethnology, to travel out West to try and find this sage in order to obtain more ample information about his religion. Brown found him and stayed with him for almost a whole year, during which Black Elk confided to him all his knowledge on the seven essential rites of his people; the result was the book *The Sacred Pipe* and a friendship with Benjamin, Black Elk's son, who would open many a door to us during our travels in the American West.

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When we were engaged, we would on weekends go for walks by the lake. The Shaykh loved this lake which, with its calm surface and the majesty of the mountains in the distance, had become like an extension of his own soul. He used to go early in the morning to the Quai

[3] The French article "Mystères Christiques" first appeared in the journal *Études Traditionnelles* (Paris, July-August 1948), but remains unpublished in English; portions of this early article were, however, incorporated into Schuon's subsequent books, notably *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953) and *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (London: John Murray, 1959).

d'Ouchy to breathe in deeply the Presence of God. He would but rarely meet other pedestrians, also in search of solitude, as for example King Alfonso XIII of Spain, the venerable Bey of Tunis, or a then well-known orchestra conductor, or General Guisan of the Swiss army. He would greet them with a nod and they would respond to his greeting. During our walks the Shaykh explained to me the different meanings of the Islamic testimony of faith, the *Shahādah* ("there is no god but the one God"), saying that one could replace the word "god" by any positive quality: there is no beauty but *the* Beauty, there is no justice but *the* Justice, and so on, and finally: there is no reality but *the* Reality. He spoke much of the "metaphysical transparency of phenomena" and it was obvious that he saw God in everything and everything in God. For me, who until then had conceived of God as dwelling in a far-off Beyond, these conversations were like a revelation that allowed me to intuit the nearness of the divine Presence.

The respect which the Shaykh had for all creation manifested itself in little things. For example, when crossing a meadow, he would avoid stepping on the daisies, or if sparrows were picking up crumbs on a sidewalk, he would wait until they flew away or make a detour not to disturb them. He would never kill an insect: if a spider or centipede showed up in his room, he would get a drinking glass, put it upside down over the beast, glide a postcard under it and throw the thus imprisoned insect out of the window. He loved cats and would not tolerate that one disturb them during their sleep or in their contemplative states; when our cat lay down on the Shaykh's desk to prevent him from writing—he seemed to be jealous of the attention given to the pad—that was a real problem! I would be called to come to the rescue and lift our little feline off his forbidden couch. After we had moved into our new house in Pully, the Shaykh was helping me plant flowers in the garden, when suddenly he stopped, turned pale, and said: "I cannot go on with this task—with the spade I have cut a worm in two . . ."

Some animals would respond to this love and this respect. Dogs often would follow the Shaykh, wagging their tails, or they would stop barking when he walked by a house they were supposed to guard. At the zoo in Rabat (Morocco), all the sleeping male lions suddenly got up and roared powerfully at the exact moment that the Shaykh entered the half-circle of their cages. The lions wished to greet him! This impressive salute lasted a few seconds and then the

silence of the felines' nap reigned again. A similar thing happened during a visit to the menagerie of the Knie Circus in Switzerland where four adult elephants, who were peacefully swaying their trunks, suddenly lifted their trunks in salutation when the Shaykh passed near them!

As a child, little Frithjof had the habit of praying throughout the half-hour walk to school. During a lesson of Biblical history, his teacher had spoken about the injunction to "pray without ceasing", an injunction the child took very seriously. Now one day as he was walking home talking to God, a big black dog with a vicious look attacked him, threw him to the ground and threatened to bite his throat when a beautiful German shepherd appeared, chased away the black beast and accompanied the little boy all the way home.

Much later—the Shaykh had already been for some years the head of a flourishing *Tarīqah*—his mother, who had not the slightest understanding of her son, was criticizing him bitterly for not having studied law or medicine, asserting that he was a failure in life, etc., when a little cat appeared, jumped onto the Shaykh's lap and started dancing with its forepaws, gazing at him with its big eyes and purring loudly. Mrs. Schuon, who liked cats too, seeing this manifestation of love for her son, stopped on the spot and dared not continue her, at the very least, unwarranted diatribe.

(Once, however, Mrs. Schuon was proud of her son. She had, after a stroke, lost the ability to speak. The Shaykh brought her his statuette of the Virgin and said to his mother: "Look at this statue and try to say '*Ave Maria*'; if you persevere, you will be able to speak again." And this is what happened: after three days, she could speak normally and was telling everybody that her son had cured her—whereas the Shaykh knew very well that it was the Virgin who did so.)

As for human beings, they generally reacted towards him with respect or with a respectful inquisitiveness. His dignity and his recollected expression could not but attract the attention of certain persons. He walked as if he were carrying within himself a sacred object, and in fact, this treasure was the perpetual remembrance of God. People would ask him who he was, or tell him that he had a strong radiance or that they felt a state of well-being in his presence. The Jews took him for a rabbi, the Russians for a *staretz*, the Orthodox for a pope, the Muslims for a great *shaykh*, and some Western Americans for an Indian chief!

During a stay in Morocco, we were once invited to lunch by a merchant who was living in the middle of the medina of Fez. We went there dressed in traditional garments and the Moroccans started to follow us through the narrow lanes of the old city, forming an ever longer line behind us. The Shaykh accelerated his pace in order to escape them, but to no avail; they pursued us to the very door of our host and settled themselves, imperturbable, in front of it in the hopes of seeing us when we left. We had to wait until the time of the afternoon prayer, when everyone would go to the mosque, in order to be able to return to our hotel without hindrance.

His respectful affability also attracted the sympathy of simple people. After our engagement, the Shaykh introduced me to all the shops where he had been going during the last seven or eight years. The grocer, the butcher, the baker's wife, the proprietress of the laundry, all expressed their congratulations in the most cordial way. It was touching. Perhaps they had had a kind of gentle pity for this man who seemed as it were wrapped up in his solitude.

The caretaker of the building where the Shaykh was living, and who would come once a month to clean his apartment, had a true veneration for him. One day she begged him to please bless her and her family. The Shaykh could not but agree and one Sunday morning Mrs. G., her husband, and her daughter came and knelt before him. He prayed the "Our Father" with them and put his right hand on their heads while reciting a prayer of benediction, and the little family left overflowing with gratitude.

But the presence of the sacred can also generate hatred. Thus, the Shaykh had to suffer the painful experience of people who rebelled against him and heaped false accusations upon him. In the street it could happen that young rowdies would insult him with abusive language; usually the Shaykh would pay no attention, but once on Piccadilly Circus in London, he stopped and fixed his gaze on a group of youths who were mocking him, and he shouted in French: "Qu'est-ce que vous vous permettez?" ("How dare you?") The young people remained rooted to the spot, unable to move, and when I looked back after having crossed the square, I saw them still motionless in the same place. Exactly the same thing happened in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where a man at the passage of the Shaykh stood at attention with sneering laughter. The Shaykh stopped, fixed him with his gaze without a word, and went his way. The man remained there, frozen,

unable to take down his hand from the visor of his cap until we had turned a corner, as a friend walking behind us had observed. Thanks be to God, such incidents were extremely rare.

It was most touching when little children would come spontaneously to greet him, sometimes running away from their parents or nurse to do so. With the Red Indians, where the beard is unknown, they would ask him if he was Santa Claus, and he knew very well how to put himself at their level.

Some time after our marriage, my little twin sisters, who were then eight years old, came to see us in our new apartment. The Shaykh fetched from his closet a box filled with toys and took out of it a large humming top which he made spin by pushing down several times the spring traversing it; it would then emit a mysterious sound which he described as "the music of the spheres"; then he took out of the box a child's rattle which sounded like a Balinese gamelan and of which he said that it was the "music of the angels". My two sisters listened with delight to this celestial concert and, entering into the spirit of the game, one of them spun the top and the other shook the rattle. The Shaykh watched them for a moment and then retired, not without first having brought us some illustrated books on Bali and India. My sister Anne, future Carmelite, said afterwards: "I like your husband, he knows how to please little girls." This was so true that he once did not hesitate to take with him in the train from Lausanne to Basel a blue balloon for the little daughter of a friend, because he knew she liked balloons of this color. And how many times we played ball with our neighbor's children, just as we did with Dr. Martin Lings and his wife when they would visit us in the summer!

The Shaykh knew also how to entertain little boys; he would show them his collection of Red Indian objects: a bow and arrows, a peace pipe, a necklace made of bear claws, a tomahawk and pouches and ornaments embroidered with porcupine quills or beads; he would recount to them heroic deeds of an Indian chief, which moreover he was perfectly able to illustrate with humorous little drawings.

In a general way, he liked to give pleasure, not only to children but to adults as well, and he yielded easily to requests if they were reasonable.

The Shaykh would elicit tenderness by his childlike and sometimes almost too benevolent side. With a disconcerting purity of

heart, he would believe what was told him and he preferred to ignore the fact that persons with spiritual aspirations could be hypocrites or even liars. Concerning holy naivety, he often quoted the story of St. Thomas, whom a monk had summoned to the window to see a bull flying; when the monk mocked the saint for having believed him, St. Thomas answered: "I would rather believe in a bull that flies than in a monk that lies." The Shaykh would react in the same way.

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As a child, I had seen beautiful pictures of the Swiss National Park in the Canton of Grisons, and I had always wished to visit that place. Thus, I asked the Shaykh whether we could spend some time there after our marriage. He agreed; we arrived at the moment of the opening of the season so that during one week we were the only guests at the hotel and had the whole big park entirely to ourselves. Every day we went for lengthy walks, enjoying the flower-covered meadows and resting by rushing streams, observing the deer running and frolicking on the mountain pastures and the marmots playing like children in front of their burrows. For the Shaykh, who had always lived in cities, it was a wonderful experience. I felt that he was drinking in with all his being what was offered to his senses. We almost always walked in silence.

We had discovered by the side of a stream, in the middle of a pine forest, a large flat boulder where the Shaykh liked to sit and meditate. Wrapped in his cape, his eyes closed, deeply absorbed, he looked like a sage in a Taoist landscape. He was seated cross-legged, his hands on his knees, unshakable, infinitely majestic, and it seemed to me that the more I looked at him (I was sitting on the opposite side of the stream), the more his image was growing and finally merging into the grandeur of the surrounding nature. For me there was no doubt that he was one with God. I have only rarely seen the Shaykh like this, for in the presence of other people he tried to hide his spiritual states, and he always withdrew into his room when he was meditating—this is obvious—but this most majestic expression often showed on his face during sleep, and I wondered how such a man upon awaking could bear to live in a world like ours.

One day we had reached a place far above the limit of the trees, with a magnificent view on the snow-covered mountains; the Shaykh

sat down to rest, whereas I was tempted to reach the top of the ridge. There was no longer any trail and I was climbing through a scree of schistose rock, when suddenly I found myself amidst a field of edelweiss such as I had never seen before. I called out: "*Yā* Shaykh, come and see, it is full of edelweiss up here!" When the Shaykh saw where I was, he urged me: "No, no, I see that it is dangerous where you are. Come back; one should not risk one's life without a serious reason." I went down and admitted that he was right. We stayed on for a long time, contemplating the view; the Shaykh spoke about breathing, saying that air is the manifestation of ether which penetrates all forms and is at the same time a vehicle of the universal Presence of God; when we breathe, the air introduces into us ether together with light and thus we breathe in the divine Omnipresence. Breathing should be coupled with the remembrance of God, one should breathe with reverence, with the heart.

In the evenings, at the hotel, the Shaykh would write or tell me about his past. It appears that already as a child he was objective and logical like an unsheathed sword; adults took this for an eccentricity and would say: "He will outgrow this with time." His father alone would remark: "Frithjof will be someone great some day." Stories of anchorites much impressed him and one day he and his brother took the ashes of the fireplace, sprinkled them on their heads and rubbed their faces and clothes with them, then sat cross-legged with eyes closed to "meditate." When their horrified mother discovered them, they told her: "Do not interrupt us, Mother, we are *sannyāsins*!" Poor Mrs. Schuon had another shock when she found her sons trying to saw the legs of the dining table; they had seen pictures of Oriental interiors and thought it would be so much more agreeable to eat sitting on cushions around a low table. Fortunately, the wood of the table was very hard and the children were only able to scratch the precious piece of furniture before any real damage occurred. The Shaykh never laughed, but when he recounted these stories, he repressed the laughter, and only a soft "heu, heu" would escape him.

As a child, he had the gift of consoling his little friends who would, already then, confide their sorrows to him and ask for advice, and in their adventures he was always their leader.

On other evenings, we would sing all the songs we both knew, the Shaykh singing the harmony. He had a good voice and a fine musical sense. He regretted that he could not sing during our spiritual gatherings because the neighbors could hear us, and when after five years we finally

had a house to ourselves, it was for him like a liberation to be able to do this at last and he improvised the most beautiful spiritual songs.

The marvelous stay in virgin nature was the beginning of a slow recovery for the Shaykh, who since the death of his father had suffered incredibly from the ambience of ugliness, pettiness, lack of faith and—at the workshop of fabric designers where he was employed—from the vulgarity and wickedness of the surroundings where he had been obliged to live. He was a child extremely sensitive to beauty, grandeur, the sacred, to which bear witness a poem he wrote at age thirteen.[4]

Breath of the Night
Does thy velvet arm bear me aloft to Thee?
Does thy mantle silently descend upon me?
Devoutly I contemplate thy holy All!
I blossom in the fragrance of thy soul. —
To my senses Thou softly openest a door;
A sweet faith ripples gently down.

With all his soul, he aspired to an ambience which would manifest the qualities and virtues that were an integral part of his nature, but most often he would meet with incomprehension, scorn, or mockery. Only the priest to whom he went for confession would show him sympathy; but for the young Schuon, who had already read the sacred Scriptures of India and the sermons of the Buddha, a narrowly Catholic faith could not quench his thirst for the Absolute. Very early he had felt that God was calling him to fulfill a mission, but he of course could not know what it would be. His intuitions and his aspirations came up everywhere against closed doors; around him, everything was plunged in darkness! What enabled him to survive was his unshakable faith and the reading of sacred Scriptures.

During his military service—obligatory in France[5]—of one-and-a-half years, the officers ended by treating him with much respect and gave him easy work at the infirmary and the secretariat. During

[4] This poem and another poem written at the age of thirteen are presented in *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 9–10.

[5] Frithjof Schuon was born to German parents in Basel, Switzerland in 1907. After his father's death in 1920, Schuon moved together with his mother and older brother to Alsace, a province of Germany that was annexed by France after World War I; all the inhabitants of that region thus automatically became French citizens.

his military service he read, among other things, the life of Milarepa and the life of Ramakrishna, and he wrote down his thoughts which he communicated to his friends by mail; this was the beginning of his first book, written in German: *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* (Guiding Thoughts for Primordial Meditation). Like an icebreaker in the night, he tried to clear the way towards the light of which he knew the truth by intellection and in which he wanted his neighbor to partake.

When he lost his job as a fabric designer in Paris, it was for him a sign: he had to leave Europe forever—thus he thought—and flee to the Orient, putting himself wholly in the Hands of God who would show him the path to follow. And destiny directed him to Algeria and the venerable Shaykh al-Alawi. During his three-and-a-half months' stay in the company of this great saint, many a wound began to heal; but the French police were harassing him as well as the old Shaykh because of his presence at the *zāwiyah*, so that he felt obliged to go back to France.

A few years later, when he left for India with the secret hope of disappearing there forever, World War II broke out and he was obliged to return to be drafted into the army. It was obvious that the Almighty willed that the gifts He had put into this young man should be turned to account in the West, rather than be lost in the sands of the Sahara or the waters of the Ganges. "I wished to be carried towards the Divinity on the wings of exterior as well as interior beauty, without any self-deception and in a profoundly serious and sacred manner, and thus not outside of the Truth and what it imposes on us", he wrote to a friend; and it was finally he himself who had to create about him, and with those who understood and assimilated his writings, the world of his aspirations which, precisely, was a world of truth, beauty, and greatness of soul.

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After our sojourn in the Grisons mountains we moved into a new apartment with three rooms on the top floor of a building, with a view on Lake Geneva. My family, who only knew that Schuon was a writer, had opposed my marriage outright ("one does not marry a man without name, without money, who has written an incomprehensible book and who, on top of it all, has the face of a prophet!");

but at last they showed themselves to be generous and we were able to afford some Berber rugs and blankets and the necessary minimum of rustic furniture in light wood of which we were dreaming. The Shaykh was leading a highly disciplined life, punctuated by the times of prayer; ever hard on himself, he was on the contrary indulgent with his disciples, taking into account the difficult work conditions of the modern world. He never changed his habits during all the years we lived together. He would get up at dawn and perform his prayers. "As long as one has not said one's prayers, one is not a human being." After a simple breakfast, he would walk down to the lake alone, as he had always done before his marriage. He had a strict need for these hours of solitude outdoors. At ten o'clock, he would receive visitors and in the afternoon, after having retired for an hour, he would write articles or letters. He answered all his mail with admirable patience and generosity, not hesitating to fill more than a dozen pages if necessary, to shed light upon all angles of a problem. Often, he would write until late at night and would get up to go back and forth in his room, less to ponder what he wished to express than to remember God. Every day he would read at least one page in the Koran (in Arabic) and he also loved to read the Psalms—Psalms 23, 63, 77, 103 and 124 were his favorites, depending on circumstances.

We would eat either sitting on the floor at a small Moroccan table or in the kitchen, in silence. "One should respect the food", and in fact the Shaykh would always eat with recollection. He could not tolerate that people have intense conversations at table, and when I answered visitors out of courtesy he would say: "Let them eat", which sufficed to impose silence on everybody. When seated, he would never lean back, and in any case we owned no chairs, only two stools, one for his desk and one for the kitchen; apart from this, we had a few Moroccan poufs. For visitors who were not accustomed to life *à l'orientale*, we had acquired two folding garden chairs which could be quickly produced from their nook. It was only during the last years of his life that the Shaykh consented to sit in an armchair to receive his visitors, but he would avoid doing so as often as possible. He would always walk in a straight, upright fashion, even during the last months of his life, weakened though he was by three heart attacks. He would wash only with cold water; to take a hot bath occurred to him as little as to smoke a hookah! If it is true that some of his habits stemmed from the fact that he had always been poor, they corresponded on the

other hand to his ascetic nature. Everything he did, he would do well, without hurry, with recollected mien. One of his habits was to wash his cup or glass immediately after each meal; he also made his bed as soon as he was through with his morning prayers.

When he wanted to be informed on a subject of which he wished to treat, he would go to his bookseller friends, borrow a book and bring it back after a day or two, or he would read what he needed at the bookstore itself. He had the gift of falling immediately on the pages he needed for his information; it was as if an angel would open the book for him. This way he was not wasting his time in searching and in reading what was not useful to him. But he would also fall on errors and, with the sword of his discernment ever vigilant, he would combat them without mercy. "There is no right superior to that of the truth", seemed to be his chief motto, and his frankness did not of course attract towards him friends only. Sometimes he would buy a newspaper to know what was happening in the world; but the errors committed by the politicians would irritate him so much that he preferred to turn away from this domain. We would in any case always be informed in one way or another of the most important events.

In the 1950s, the Shaykh started to paint again. It lay in his nature to always wish to give; he would give through his books, his letters, his guiding texts for his disciples, his poems; he never ceased to give and to open inward and heavenward doors for us. Through his paintings he wished to express virtues or communicate states of being. As models, he took mainly on the one hand the Plains Indians of olden times, among whom summits of virile nobility can be found (Guénon, to whom the Shaykh had sent a dozen photographs of such Indians, wrote back: "These are indeed remarkable faces"); and on the other hand the Holy Virgin under her universal aspect of Mother of the Prophets or of the feminine Logos, who represents the summit of feminine sanctity. The paintings of the Shaykh could therefore have an ennobling and interiorizing effect for people receptive to this kind of manifestation.

The talent the Shaykh had for drawing allowed him, from the age of sixteen, to earn a living for his mother and himself as a fabric designer, while occasionally selling a painting. An art merchant in Paris, having seen some works of the young Schuon, said to him: "Young man, you have millions at the tip of your fingers." But this young man was not dreaming of an artistic career and had on the con-

trary at that moment decided to leave Europe forever, to withdraw from the world into a cave in the Sahara Desert or the Himalayas, while waiting, in a total annihilation of his individual will, for God's guidance. "One cannot know God's Will except in the annihilation of one's own desires; it is not for us to create an intellectual elite, it is for God to do so, if such is His Will", he wrote to a friend. "I would prefer to die rather than do something that is not the will of Heaven." In the same sense he said once to me that a *Shaykh al-barakah* is born from the ashes of his own ego.

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From time to time, we allowed ourselves the luxury of seeing a beautiful exotic show: the ballets of Bali, Kabuki theater, Hindu dancing; or a beautiful film on the Middle Ages or on the life of a saint. And the Shaykh did not prevent his disciples from doing the same: indeed, in a world of ugliness and triviality, the soul could learn much through the concrete vision of beauty and the expression of noble and elevated sentiments, and could thus be encouraged in the effort towards virtue. "One cannot enter the sanctuary of the Truth but in a holy manner, and this condition entails above all beauty of character." He wished us to cultivate beauty of soul and dignity of comportment, language, and dress—all qualities that threaten to disintegrate in a world where carelessness and slovenliness are almost becoming the fashion; and at that period—the fifties and the beginning of the sixties—the corrosive influence of psychoanalysis had not yet been able to creep into all manifestations of the dramatic arts.

Sometimes we listened to music; we possessed only a few records, but they were well chosen for the interiorizing and uplifting power of the melodies. In addition to records of Hindu, Japanese, or Balinese music, we had some classical pieces of which the Shaykh said they were true inspirations and like doors opening upon Paradise; for example, the "Lullaby" of Sibelius, the Moonlight Sonata, the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, the first movement of the Concerto of Aranjuez by Rodrigo, "Goyescas" by Granados, "In the Steppes of Central Asia" by Borodin. And Gypsy music! We never tired of listening to it. The Shaykh's father was a violinist and had given concerts in Russia and Scandinavia; he had specialized in

the Eastern European composers and he himself could play like a Gypsy. Curiously, when we would go to a restaurant where Gypsies were playing, they seemed to feel an affinity with the Shaykh, for the *primas* would always come to our table and make his violin vibrate close to our ears.

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The number of visitors was increasing year after year, and life in our little apartment became almost untenable. Thus it was a true gift from Heaven when one of my family members, who had joined the Path and realized our difficult situation, offered us the means to buy a piece of land and build a house on it. We found in the vicinity of Lausanne an old abandoned orchard amidst vineyards, with a view on the lake and mountains. We could not have dreamt of anything better; it was a true little paradise that offered the Shaykh the peace and space necessary for his activities.

Friends of ours, Mr. and Mrs. Whitall Perry, bought the land next to us, which brought many advantages to us—among others, to have access to a telephone close by. The idea of having such a device in his house occurred to the Shaykh as little as having a typewriter, and we were going to do without it just as in the past, when I had to go to town to make necessary calls. The Shaykh was a man of another age, and he seemed to live more in the world of ideas than in that of everyday facts. He was like the incarnation of the verse of the Song of Songs: "I sleep, but my heart waketh",[6] or of what he says himself in a text: "God is Being, and what he loves in us is the aspect of being; we must, when we think of God, repose in being." However, he was always aware of what was going on around him. While traveling with friends, we were sometimes engaged in conversation in which he did not take part. But it sufficed that someone utter a stupidity for him to swoop down like an eagle to correct the error. It was the same when he was asked a question: the answer would spring forth without the slightest hesitation. He used to carry with him a little notebook in which he would jot down ideas or phrases for his articles. Not long ago, I found in one of these booklets the following sentence, which had impressed me

[6] Song of Sol. 5:2.

when I read the chapter on the Koran in *Understanding Islam*: "The seeming incoherence of [sacred Scriptures] always has the same cause, namely the incommensurable disproportion between the Spirit on the one hand and the limited resources of human language on the other; it is as if the poor and coagulated language of mortal man would break under the formidable pressure of the heavenly Word into a thousand fragments, or as if God, in order to express a thousand truths, had but a dozen words at his disposal and so had to use ellipses, abridgements, and symbolical syntheses."[7] If ever he had forgotten his notebook he would ask me to remind him of such or such a sentence or word; thus one day he said: "Remind me of the word 'boomerang' when we are back home." "Boomerang?" "Yes, boomerang." Intrigued, I went in the evening to read what on earth he could have written, and I read: "To the question of knowing why man has been placed in the world when his fundamental vocation is to leave it, we would reply: it is precisely so that there would be someone who returns to God; this is to say that All-Possibility requires that God not only project Himself, but also realize the liberating beatitude of return. . . . Just as the boomerang by its very form is destined to return to him who has thrown it, so man is predestined by his form to return to his divine Prototype; whether he wills it or not, man is 'condemned' to transcendence."[8]

The Shaykh again and again surprised me by his presence of mind or his practical sense. If it happened that he dropped an object, he would catch it midway, before it reached the ground; when a candle had left spots of wax on the rug, he would put one or two blotting papers on the spot, heat some water in a flat cooking pot which he would put on the blotting paper, and in no time the wax would be absorbed. Or again: we had dug in our orchard a flat space in order to be able to pitch the tipi we had brought back from the American West; now the birds came by the dozens to peck the grains I had sowed to have grass grow on the freshly prepared patch, and I complained about this to the Shaykh. "Go and ask our neighbor for some hay and cover the area with it", he said, as if he had always been an agriculturist, and the system proved efficacious.

[7] *Understanding Islam*, chap. "The Quran" (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1994), pp. 40–41.

[8] *The Play of Masks*, chap. "Man in the Cosmogonic Projection" (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1992), pp. 19, 20.

The Shaykh loved thunderstorms and he would watch them from his balcony. The more lightning flashes and thunderclaps, the happier he was. "The Wrath of God consoles me and makes me breathe." There was in his character, besides his great goodness, a volcanic trait that made one think of Beethoven. He suffered from the fact that he could never throw someone out the door, as any spiritual master in the Orient could do with impunity; in the West, this was not possible and it was one of the reasons that made him ill. Thunderstorms were for him a manifestation of the divine Justice, which he knew some day would strike.

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The years went by, our trees blossomed and gave us fruit, the meadow with its many wildflowers and the birds with their variegated songs gave us delight. All could have been beauty and harmony if the Evil One had not constantly been on the lookout to torment the Shaykh; the defections, treasons, calumnies followed one upon another, and for a man like the Shaykh, who was faithfulness and rectitude incarnate and who had an almost superhuman capacity for forgiveness, these disappointments, *a priori* inconceivable to him, ended by breaking down his physical resistance; he became gravely ill with asthma and earnestly thought of no longer accepting new postulants to the Path and retiring somewhere in the mountains, far from the world.

But Heaven intervened and sent him its most gentle and most beautiful Messenger, the Virgin Mary, for whom the Shaykh had always had a great veneration; She gave him courage and renewed strength. After a stay of one month in Morocco, which was full of blessings, our life continued as before and a whole river of young aspirants came to knock at our door.

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Fifteen more years went by, interrupted by fruitful trips to the East and West and restful stays in the Swiss mountains, when one day the Shaykh received an absolutely certain sign from Heaven to emigrate to America. This sign was so imperious that when I told the Shaykh,

after a visit to the American Consulate, that there was no possibility for us to immigrate, he had a crisis of asthma and said in that case we should try Canada or Mexico. Fortunately, thanks to the help of an American friend who was a lawyer, the obstacles could be removed and it is thus that we left for the forests of Indiana.

I was anxious to tell this episode because there have been many erroneous speculations about our departure from Switzerland. In fact, the Shaykh would never have undertaken such a change in his life—he was then already seventy-three years old—without being sure it was the divine Will. Already a few years before, it had been suggested to us that we move to Morocco; we were shown very tempting properties near Tangier, but he said: "To take such an important step, I must have a sign from Heaven."

Thanks to the foundation of a publishing company specializing in the publication of the Shaykh's writings, which we helped to translate into English, the work of Frithjof Schuon became more and more well known. All his life the Shaykh wanted one thing only: to express the Truth, to draw to the Truth, and to live the Truth. Is the goal he proposes too high?

In a letter addressed to his friend, Titus Burckhardt, he writes: "Greatness is the necessary condition for the return to God, for God is great and only what is great can reach the great. This greatness is above all union of the soul with God. To him for whom this union is inaccessible, fervor may be accessible, and to him for whom fervor is out of reach, perseverance or faithfulness is certainly accessible, because this is a greatness accessible to any spiritual person."[9]

In the last two-and-a-half years of his life, the Shaykh wrote over 3,000 poems, didactic as well as lyrical—a testament, as it were, in which he distills to the last drop his wisdom and his soul in verses which go straight to the heart for whoever can read them in the original German.[10]

After arising for his prayers, he passed away at dawn on May 5, 1998, seated in his armchair, invoking the Name of God.

[9] Letter dated May, 1944.

[10] For more on Schuon's poetry, see *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, chap. 23, "A Profusion of Songs".

In recounting these memories and anecdotes, I have necessarily provided only a partial description of a man like the Shaykh, whose "adventures" are above all inward. Michael Fitzgerald has previously undertaken the daunting task of writing a comprehensive biography of Frithjof Schuon, which has the great merit of being based mainly on his own letters and writings and on the testimony of many people who came into personal contact with him. To this, Fitzgerald now adds the present volume dedicated exclusively to his letters written over the course of more than seventy years. The combination of these two volumes present a thorough study and give as accurate a picture as can be conveyed by words concerning a person of Frithjof Schuon's scope. May his message resound in the hearts of those who have ears to hear.

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