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Commentaries: Hexagon 38: Oil & Water Gian Lombardo

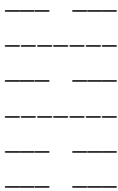
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Gian Lombardo

38



OIL & WATER

The rope you hold begs the question: How to tie a noose and toss it over a branch? Put it over your head to see how it fits.

But before you can braid that deadly knot, someone grabs the other end and runs. You dig your heels in.

With the rope taut, that someone circles around you. You twirl, describing a smaller orbit to keep from being wrapped in the line. Soon the world's a queasy blur. Who will let go first?

COMMENTARY

I've been using the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese book of divination, to wrestle with problems for over twenty-five years. The elaborate ritual of throwing the yarrow sticks to come up with the lines of a hexagram empties mind and heart of everything, so that I'm able to view the problem with fresh eyes, using the text of the resulting hexagram as a guide to seeing the world anew.

I always had the desire to create a book entwined in some way with the *I Ching*, though I could never decide on its proper form. Then, a few years ago, I realized that a commentary on or the symbolism of each hexagram could generate (as the surrealists said) the flash of an image. I wanted to let that image, or a complex of images, illuminate the barest backbone of a narrative. I wanted to explore the nuances of creating stories by "throwing" images; to investigate what it takes to "see" and how one proceeds from perception to thought and feeling.

"Oil & Water," the 38th hexagram, is named *K'uei*—disunion, or mutual alienation. It represents, symbolically, fire (which tends to move upwards) over a marsh (whose waters tend to move downwards). This symbolism yields the interpretation that even where there's general agreement, there still may be diversity. In terms of its symbolic repre-

sentation of family relationships, the hexagram can be seen as two sisters who live together but whose wills do not move in the same direction.

For the first thirty-seven hexagrams, the ability to see an image develop from the commentary or symbolism came easily. However, I became blocked by hexagram 38 because it let loose an avalanche of conflicting thoughts and emotions about my family. Instead of a “clearing,” followed by a quasi-revelatory apperception, I became fixed on the apparition of my mother, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease, and her sister, with whom she shared a two-family house. Steadfastly denying my mother’s affliction, my aunt endeavored to care for her, sacrificing time with her own children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For twenty years, both sisters lived together after their husbands died, recreating the love—and accompanying conflicts and jealousies—of their childhood. As my mother’s Alzheimer’s progressed her behavior became more paranoid and confused; she became incoherent and withdrawn—a terrible burden for her sister who was exceedingly trusting, lively and sociable.

For weeks I approached *K’uei*’s text, rereading and rereading, yet nothing came. Finally, afraid the project might grind to a halt, I moved on to the next hexagram. Eventually, the process of working on other hexagrams provided the same “clearing” relief as the ritual of throwing the sticks. Every once in a while, I’d go back to *K’uei*, until one time, out of the darkness, came an image from astronomy—that of a double sun (wherein two stars revolve around each other in close proximity). This image captured the essence of these two loving, strong-willed women. Going with that image, I likened the gravity that holds the two stars together (as well as the contra-acting centripetal force keeping them from colliding and fusing) to a rope. And from the rope, a noose. From that point on, the images fell in line in a way that allowed the possibility of a story of two people: one (or the other) decides to “check out” and one (or the other) attempts to keep the one (or the other) alive by pulling on the rope. They end up spinning each other around, locked as much by love as by their conflicting wills until one lets go—a letting go that makes us wonder whether it is a release of love or a refusal to serve.

“Letting go” represents, on another level, the process of relinquishing petty and major thoughts and feelings in order to be able to re-enter life again with eyes open. Considering all these layers of “letting go,” I felt it more appropriate to change the title of the collection from *The Briefest Zoo in the Universe to Who Lets Go First*.