

The Shapes of Sophia:

Alice Howell's Geometry of the Soul

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Sophia, that playful Goddess, is hiding in Nature but true philosophers—*lovers of Sophia*—will seek her out, revealing the sacred in the commonplace, says Alice O. Howell, who has written two books about her quest for Sophia's secrets. Some call Sophia the Goddess of Wisdom, but for Howell, *Hagia Sophia* ("Holy Wisdom") is a personification of a universal process or archetype. In this case, it's the distribution of wisdom and "divine intelligence" throughout the world of matter. A prominent Jungian analyst and educator in astrology, Howell turned to esoteric Christianity and the old Celtic mysteries for a "genuine revelation" of Sophia's presence in all aspects of our lives. Whether it's language, myths, fairy tales, dreams, alchemy, or sacred geometry, Sophia is present, urging us to discover her wisdom within created forms and to make sense of our lives and the world. "The earth is truly our home, and Sophia's presence is needed to bring it back to a place of wisdom and beauty and order," says Howell.

Sacred geometry, or the ancient science of the meaning of shapes and forms found in Nature and used in architecture—the square, circle, triangle, cube, cross, pi, Golden Mean, polyhedrons—is an aspect of Sophia's wisdom, says Howell. "Sophia lies hidden all about us in the testament of form and design," she writes in her latest book, *The Web in the Sea* (1993), in which she reflects on Jungian archetypes, Sophia, and what she calls the geometry of the soul. This is the inner, experiential meaning of geometric patterns and structures found everywhere in nature and creation. For Howell, the shapes and relationships of geometry represent a symbolic language of the psyche, no less than Jung's archetypes or astrology's Houses.

In all three, the key is to think symbolically. When she became a Jungian analyst, Howell saw how the archetypes (like Mother, Hero, Divine Child, Wise Old Man) outlined by Jung described living processes of the human psyche. When she took up astrology, she found in it the key, the "great decoder or algebra of life." Within the dynamics of astrology, Howell discerns a primary descriptive language of human psychological processes; it is a map showing how people process experience, a "symbolic language of archetypal processes." She published her insights gleaned from Jungian analysis and practical astrology in two popular books, *Jungian Symbolism in Astrology* (1987) and *Jungian Synchronicity in Astrological Signs and Ages* (1990).

Now in *The Web in the Sea*, Howells offers us a "humble introduction and primer at the very simplest level" to help us experience geometry within ourselves as a living process. After all, that is what Sophia is all about: She speaks a language of symbolic wisdom; She points to a "morphology of concepts, the very shapes of wisdom." Behind every physical appearance, from crystals to flowers, from the cowlick on a baby's head to the spiral of the galaxy, there is a spiritual implication, a glimpse of Sophia's pre-eminent wisdom, says Howell. Sophia mediates between our inner and outer worlds, between what C.G. Jung called the axis of ego and Self. Sophia, more than anything else, *unites* us with the world; experiencing this reunification through Sophia, Howell hopes, will be for us "a source of insight and delight." It should help us understand the world a lot better, too. Once known as God's helpmate, Sophia created and designed matter, clothing God's thoughts in form; then She hid in matter as drops of light, leaving clues everywhere. "Then God created humanity to put Sophia back together again, to rediscover and remember her," says Howell. "Sophia lies hidden in every atom and every stone. Her magic wand of revelation lies concealed within each of us." With this wand, Sophia created

the forms of geometry as a primer of our psychological states, as “something we can actually see and experience, not just speculate about.”

Nature is riddled with pre-existent geometrical patterns, with the web of “skillful formation” woven by Sophia throughout creation. When we discover it, suddenly the world is restored from bewildering chaos to meaningful order. When we find these evidences of Sophia, it is like receiving firsthand proofs of the divine order. In large measure, the problems we face today, both as individuals and as a culture, result from the severing of Sophia from science, of astrology from astronomy, geometry from mathematics, meaning from phenomena. We take things in life so literally, that we have lost all sense of symbolic thinking and hidden spiritual process. Our concepts have turned to stone, and it’s *this* stone against *that* stone in a perpetual struggle of opposites. “This forgetting of Sophia has cost humanity dearly,” says Howell. “Without her a sword seems to separate men and women, and a struggle for supremacy is underway on the part of both.”

So we need to reverse this destructive trend by seeking “the spiritual implications hidden within these physical symbols.” According to Howell’s quest for the archetype of Sophia, She represents “the loving, intimate, kind, helpful, and practical aspect of Holy Wisdom in each individual, and, at the same time, the great ordering principle of the physical creation of the cosmos.” Sophia twinkles, teaches through jokes, she reveals through unveiling, she confirms with synchronicities; she is eternally patient, never insists, inspires us with “attacks of insights, those wonderful Aha! moments,” says Howell. Sophia is the Comforter, the Paraclete, the inner guide and feminine face of intuition, sent to assure us that the world is orderly, beautiful, wise, and worthy of our love. Comforters after all are “kind, practical, cheery presences and usually give good advice,” adds Howell, who fits the description perfectly.

At 71, Howell is a rare soul for whom as she ages all of life is increasingly “magical.” She lives in the wooded, insular Berkshire mountains of Massachusetts, where she teaches, writes, conducts seminars, and praises Sophia every day. Howell treats profound issues of philosophy with a light, nimble, and insightful touch, no doubt Sophia’s feminine mark on her intellect. Part of Howell’s unflaggingly merry disposition may be the fruitful time she has spent throughout her life playing Sophia’s game of hide and seek, discovering “the wealth of wisdom and meaning hidden in both natural and constructed form.”

Finding Sophia hidden in Nature—that’s the game—is akin to releasing the spirit imprisoned in matter, or what the old Celtic mystics referred to as the “dove in the stone.” Sophia was anciently represented as the white dove of the Holy Spirit (as part of the Holy Trinity), released from the “stone” of matter through love. This quality of redemptive love comes through strongly in Howell’s writing. Both her new book, and her earlier, *The Dove in the Stone* (1988), are set in Iona, Sophia’s sacred island in the Scottish Hebrides, a place of unending pilgrimage for Howell who has visited there 18 times. She couches her ruminations about Sophia in the context of a travelogue across the hills and lanes of Iona with her “dearly cherished” husband. For Howell, Iona represents the receptive, loving state of mind that opens one to the activities and revelations of Sophia in the world of pattern. If Sophia has a temple, it is Iona, says Howell. “We invoke Sophia hidden in one of her drops of wisdom in our daily life whenever we connect an outward and visible sign with an inner and spiritual grace of *meaning*.”

Consider the circle. The empty circle has perennially been understood as a token of Spirit Unmanifest, the image of God, the inner Sun, the pearl of great price, the golden coin, the eternal center within us, the Self. When you examine a circle, you assume you can see the area contained within it, but you cannot, says Howell. Even though it is what we could swear we see totally, the area of the circle is limitless, incalculable, and therefore unknowable. The mystery of *pi* prevents this. In geometry, *pi* is an equation that denotes the ratio of the circumference of the circle to its diameter; as such, it has vexed mathematicians for centuries—and now computers, which have worked it out to 480 million decimal places—because the number is infinite. This fact means you cannot measure and explain everything; you can only approximate. The empty circle, through *pi*,

is a visible symbol of the unknown—as is the Self. “Sophia will make us humble with that,” quips Howell. Pi is one of Sophia’s secret weapons, capable of producing an attack of insight. Still, Sophia leaves us a way into the unknowable mystery of the Self—the Only Way.

Put a point in the center of the circle. This is the Bindu, the fertile egg, the point of conception and beginning of the world of Spirit Manifest. Draw a line from the circumference of the circle to the point, and you get the radius, a geometrical glyph for how the personality, or ego, relates to the Self, explains Howell. The ego spins around the periphery of the circle (along the circumference of the totality of the psyche) seeking illumination, seeking the central point. The ego’s life is to keep searching, from the Latin *circare*, which means to go round in circles. The ego (or persona) goes whizzing round and round the circle, “trying to make sense of the ten thousand things” of the manifest world—but it cannot. Eventually, we tire of this endless circling, feel completely lost, have a psychological crisis, then understand the solution is to go to the center. This is the radius—the Only Way to the Self for the ego suffering at the circumference. The radius is the *only way* to get from the ego (circumference) back to the Divine Guest—the Beloved, Christ, Atman, or luminous Self—within, says Howell.

The radius is a straight, single line, the first dimension by extension, and a profound proof of the duality the ego experiences. The line is length without breadth, the shortest distance between two points—a *dividing* line, dividing one into two, implying separation, otherness, opposites, heaven and earth, inside and outside. But the straight line draws us into “one of the most consuming dialectics of our time—the matter of relationship,” says Howell. It’s completely unavoidable. If the Bindu wishes to extend itself into manifestation, it must sacrifice the innocence of the Self for the painful world of dimension and duality. With the line comes linear time, ladders of hierarchy—and chakras. The inner spiritual centers called chakras are aligned in a vertical column contiguous with the human spine, and they represent the totality of the integrated higher functions of consciousness—no separation here; it’s all inter-relationship. That’s why Howell says, “Sophia, the wise and loving Comforter, waits on the bridge” between polarities “to guide us home.”

One way to express the bridge between polarities is the cross. As the esoteric tradition tells us, the human spirit is “crucified” on the dualistic cross of matter made of the two axes of time and space. The vertical line is masculine and creative while the horizontal line is feminine and receptive; together they represent the duality of being human with both male and female aspects. As a cross, they also represent the conjunction of these aspects. The cross is one of the oldest geometrical symbols known to humankind, in use far earlier than Christianity, explains Howell. One of its secrets is that its three dimensional expression is the cube, a polyhedron also perennially associated with matter, specifically the element of earth. The Sophianic surprise here is that when the six sides of the cube are unfolded into a two dimensional space, they form the cross.

This gives us the symbolic equivalencies of matter, incarnation, and conjunction/crucifixion. When we make a cube of cubes (27 cubes), the 27th cube occupies the center position, in contact with every other cube in the block. In the game of Sophia we now ask, what is the spiritual implication of this geometrical fact? “The central cube, like the Self, is present and contiguous in the three-dimensional world, though it remains different and invisible.” Here is the Self, undisturbed at the center of the cube or cross of matter or the midst of our life, reminding us that “we too have a hidden Divine Guest” within this body of matter.

But how do we transcend the duality of the cross made of the two intersecting lines? Through the power of three—the triangle, says Howell. The ego is hanging on to the opposites of the dualistic world for dear life. But as you look up from the conjunction of the vertical and horizontal lines to the top of the cross, you imagine making the first enclosed figure of geometry—in fact, the first enclosed space possible—using only three lines, which is the triangle. Something important has just happened here. The psychological interpretation of this simple geometrical construction is what Jung termed the “transcendent function, as a quality of

conjoined opposites.” There is the shuttling back and forth of arguments and oppositions, between conscious and unconscious contents; this confrontation generates a creative tension that produces a “living third thing,” said Jung. It is a movement out of the suspension between opposites into a “new level of being,” a synthesis. Or as Alice Howell puts it, the solution arrives “by our looking at the problem from another level or dimension.” Sophia, as our intuition, mediates between the oppositions of the ego and “lifts them toward the Self by extracting spiritual insight from experience.” In this way, we grow in wisdom.

Now, when we say *grow*, we imply the Golden Mean, one of Nature’s most elegant and ubiquitous design principles, making motion, evolution, and change possible. Take a line and divide it unequally in the ratio of 1: 1.618; this ratio is called *phi*, or the Golden Mean, and it unfurls into an infinitely expanding spiral. You find *phi* as the design feature in nearly everything, from the chambered nautilus shell, to human anatomy, to the sunflower blossom, to the pentagram, to the shape of the DNA helix, says Howell, who gets very excited when the subject of Golden Mean comes up. In geometrical form, phi creates an unfolding spiral; in mathematics, it creates an additive series called Fibonacci numbers; both sequences reflect the phi ratio as it evolves.

“Of all the mysteries of sacred geometry, this one is one of the most spectacular—at least to me. It is a place where the human mind connects a mathematical abstraction with a law of nature, and they coincide.” The existence of the Golden Mean is the grand climax, the masterpiece of geometry, says Howell, because it proves that “God geometrizes.” It shows that the value of symbolism may be geometrically proven. “It says that a symbol can lead to a truth which by extension can lead us to a greater truth.” As such, a geometrical symbol like phi represents a “theophany of the eternal” in the world of the mundane, a showing forth of Sophia.

The ancients likened this showing forth of Sophia to a vexing conundrum called squaring the circle. This of course is the ultimate resolution of dualistic oppositions because it’s impossible, technically, to make a square into a circle—isn’t it? Consider it symbolically, advises Howell. The circle (or sphere) symbolizes spirit and the Self, while the square (or cube) stands for matter and by implication, the ego. “Squaring the circle is the ongoing *process* of manifestation, individuation, and incarnation.” In Jungian depth psychology, the harmonization and integration of all aspects of the psyche—circumference, radius, Bindu, and all the contradictions and oppositions—is called individuation. Self-realization, or individuation, is really a lifelong project; in fact, as Jung saw things, it represents the teleology of the soul, the secret purpose for being alive.

When Howell likens squaring the circle to incarnation, she touches upon a profound insight. It’s as if the materialized human being (the square/cube) seeks to expand and grow into the totality of the Self by adding ever more surfaces to its originally cubic form. It evolves through the sequence of regular polyhedrons until it reaches the complex stage of the dodecahedron/icosahedron with 120 facets. As it adds surfaces through the process of individuation, the cube grows ever closer to the spherical perfection of the Self. It *almost* squares it. The person becomes “as total a human being in the flesh as is possible—God becoming human,” explains Howell. Individuation *is* incarnation, a coming into the flesh, into the manifest world.

Whether a circle can ever be completely, thoroughly, squared is a question in the same province as the unknowable mystery of pi. It’s the process that counts, says Howell. Whenever she contemplates this dizzying question, she imagines herself as being at the center of the diademed sphere of a dandelion in its final puffball stage. “I would not even mind being ‘blown away,’” she jests. The dandelion is not a common weed but a natural face of Sophia, a miraculous teacher, “a golden disk of rays at one stage and a perfect sphere filled with luminous white radii at another.” As such, it is a perfect living symbol for the geometrical mystery of human identity. Perhaps each of us is a “radius of the great mystery lying at the center of creation,” muses

Howell. The mystery, if one can speak of the ineffable, is the process concealed in all creation, that of “luminous, radiant love.”

That is the insight Sophia perennially seeks to inspire in us. In fact, nothing less than our loving affirmation of the material world and its Sophianic secrets will serve to release the dove of Sophia from the stone of the world. As the Celts said, the divine is at our fingertips; the physical world represents its “edge of glory.” With just a little effort to see the world “with a loving eye,” we can reveal Sophia in all her manifest, glorious beauty, and restore the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*, to Her divine life among us. “Sophia’s secret of secrets is that all of this can make life de-light-full.” Each of us has an Iona, a holy island of the Dove of Sophia, within us, says Howell. The rediscovery of this profound fact is part of the reemergence of the Feminine in our time, as we live on the verge of the new era of Aquarius. “The return of Sophia which is coming everywhere, is enormously important.” Some centuries ago Joachim of Floris prophesied that there would be in the future a new age that would be an Age of the Holy Ghost. This is Sophia’s age, in which She declares: *Omnia coniungo* (“I unite all things”). Sophia the God-bearer, becomes the “inner mother to the Divine Child, the incarnating Self within us,” enabling us to be born again, through the spirit, in the world. And in this new world, Sophia helps us to see in the geometrical forms of Nature, the natural shapes of the human soul.

Sophia’s Mondayschool:

Alice Howell’s Meditative Exercises in Geometry

Materials: You will need a looseleaf binder, index tabs, blank paper, lined paper, graph paper, a compass, straight edge, protractor, right angle. **Resources:** dictionary of symbols, Holy Bible (with concordance), sacred scriptures of various religions, books of mythologies and fairy tales, etymological dictionary.

Directions: Make categories in your notebook for symbolic associations such as hidden process, nature, mythology and folklore, religions, psychological archetypes, etymology, dreams, personal memories.

Concept: Take the geometric progressions and look for them in nature, in the psyche, and in your daily lives, by thinking symbolically. These are meditative, reflective, intuitive exercises with open-ended results, with whatever insights Sophia gives you!

a) The Point. Make a point in the center of a blank page. To get started, ruminate on these seed words: beginning, creation, spot, I am, conception, becoming, focus, center, bindu, no dimension, Brahm, yod, iota...

b) The Circle. Draw an empty circle in the center of a blank page. To get started, ruminate on these seed words: oroboros, spirit unmanifest, boundary, limitless, totality, zero, egg, ring, girdle of Venus, totality, psyche, cycle, wheel, zodiac, womb, encompassing...

c) Circle with Radius. Draw a circle with a point in the center; connect the point to the circumference, forming a single radius. To get started, ruminate on these seed words: the Only Way, self-ego axis, clockhand, way in/way out, first line, first dimension, ego questing in circles, meditation, concentration...