

four cups of wine
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fours, and what comes in fours - not pairs of twos, binaries of binaries, but actual fours. they're not as common as you might think. the european tradition - which means the christian/roman tradition, and sometimes the pagan/celtic tradition it erased and absorbed - loves turning things into binaries a lot more than it loves letting things sit as other numbers. the four elements get broken down into hot/cold and dry/wet. the four directions get turned into two axes. the four suits get divided into red and black - or in the tarot, associated with the four elements, which - you get the point. jewish traditions do a bit better - the four children, the four questions, the four matriarchs, and so on - and i'll wind up there, but only after some excursions in other directions.

so the foursome that meredith suggested playing with is the four stages leading up to birth: CONCEPTION, GESTATION, LABOR, DELIVERY.

which are interesting in themselves, as much for what's ostentatiously not known and not studied about them (and their relation to the kids that result from them) as for what we think we know these days. i've been thinking about the fiction of the category of "biological sex" a lot these days, so i thought a bit about digging into that. there are some fantastic tidbits, like these from Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body*:

(on gestation) Mallard ducklings still in the shell must hear themselves quack in order to respond to maternal quacks. (Wood ducks need to hear their siblings quack in order to develop the ability to recognize Mom.)

(on conception) When researchers ask identical twins to solve puzzles, the twins come up with answers that are more alike than those of paired strangers. But if monitored using PET scans, while working on the puzzles, the twins' brains do not show identical function.

but really what's compelling about those four stages is the analogies that we can make with them. and a nice thing about analogy is that it comes in four main flavors:

METAPHOR - you are a rose

SIMILE - you are like a rose

METONYMY - your heart is a rose

ALLEGORY - you are a rose, your fluttering eyelids petals, your sharp tongue thorns, your weird extended family an elaborate garden surrounding you

so there are two quartets to think with. i'll add two more with later glasses of wine. but for now let's use these two, simultaneously:

let's drink a **first cup of wine** to METAPHOR, and go around the room talking about projects that we're involved in, and where they fit at this moment, metaphorically speaking, in that process from CONCEPTION to GESTATION to LABOR to DELIVERY.

CONCEPTION - a somewhat arbitrary starting point, that opens outwards to a past that goes on as far back as you want to look

GESTATION - a process of development through continuous change, in which causes and effects intermingle promiscuously

LABOR - concerted effort towards a particular result, often understood as individual but rarely in fact solitary

DELIVERY - a somewhat arbitrary ending point, that equally marks a starting point for further development

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our **second cup of wine** comes after we've told the story of Exodus, probably the most important founding myth of Jewishness, and one of the most powerful allegories used in struggles for liberation over many centuries, everywhere that Jewish and Christian mythologies have traveled.

storytelling is how we make things part of ourselves, how we create structures of feeling, how we place ideas in our bodies. and allegories, extended metaphors turned into narratives, are one way we turn stories into other stories - old ones into new ones, new into old, familiar into strange, or the other way about - or turn a series of events into a story we already know.

now that we've told the story - from Moses' conception to the delivery of the Israelites into the desert, if you will - let's drink a cup to ALLEGORY. and while we do, think and talk together about the ways this particular story does and doesn't serve our movements well as a standardized narrative for liberation.

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now that we've eaten, it's clearly time for a **third cup of wine**. let's stay with literary fours, but switch traditions. allegory, in a fourfold division, is strongly tied to medieval christian analyses of the bible: it's used to read literal history out of sacred text, to connect the "old" and "new" testaments, to come up with morals for stories to guide everyday life, to explicate prophecies of the future. there's a medieval jewish version of that - a fourfold path called PaRDeS, which is an acronym for

PSHAT - simple
REMEZ - hints
DRASH - inquiring / seeking
SOD - secrets

we've been dancing among the first three - looking at what the stories we share with each other say, what we can read into them, and what we can elaborate out of them. but this third cup of wine is for the whole set.

PARDES means "garden", or "orchard". it comes from the same persian root as the english "paradise". orchards and gardens, places of planned conception, gestation, labor, and delivery, are also places of surprise. the unexpected hybrid, the serendipitous juxtaposition, the novel flavor. so as we drink a cup to PARDES, let's tell each other about the new things emerging into our lives this spring.

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the **fourth cup of wine**, the one that makes this a seder and not just a symposium, comes almost at the end. it is not the end, but it heralds it. this cup, tonight, is for the last part of PaRDeS - for SOD, for secrets. while we read two short pieces of writing about uncovering what's hidden, neither of which gives up a meaning clearly or easily, let's think to ourselves about the secrets our stories contain, tonight and on all other nights. the things we choose to leave out when we recount our truths, and why and when and how we make our choices about what to hold for ourselves alone and what to release and share.

the four who went into the garden

(lightly edited from Jerusalem Talmud [*Hagigah* 2:1](#), translated by A. Oded):

Four entered the Pardes: One looked and died; one looked and was harmed [or, went mad]; one looked and cut the shoots [or, became a heretic]; one entered in peace and left in peace.

Ben Azzai looked and was harmed. Concerning him the verse says, "If you found honey, eat what you need only, lest you be filled with it and vomit it." (Prov. 25:16).

Ben Zoma looked and died. Concerning him the verse says, "Precious in the eyes of God is the death of his pious ones" (Ps. 116:15).

Akher ["the Other"] looked and cut the shoots. Who is Akher? Elisha ben Abuyah, who used to 'kill' Torah scholars. They say that [...] when he would enter the academy and see children before their teacher, he would ask, "Why are they sitting here? The profession of this one is a builder, the profession of this one is a carpenter, the profession of this one is a hunter, the profession of this one is a tailor." When they heard this they abandoned their studies and left. Concerning him the verse says, "Do not let your mouth bring guilt on your flesh" (Eccl. 5:5), for he spoiled his own works.

Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace. Concerning him the verse says, "Draw me after you; we will run together" (Song 1:4).

and finally, a poem by kari edwards:

How to explain a picture to a dead hare*

torment me-but do not grant me your favors.

drench me in language

dissipate & leave me nothing

*I want to know your definition so to set it ablaze
and taste its ashes*

I am working on a concept of where I have been

*I am working on a concept of where I am so I can destroy it
along with those objects I bought yesterday*

*I want to know the tree that is the earth in the star forecast of the
river lost over the edge of the table that was only a thought as I
turn to you and try to speak*

*drench me in language that is a concept of ashes
so I can dream it.*

it is an equation - a simple one at first - then
as if in paradox - others enter - it becomes
something else - numbers that possess close
cropping details of groundcover - daylight - or a
cube - that becomes something more than when
first discovered - like the one who found a statue
of someone who never existed - in a field that was a
myth - that was carried from one generation to the next
- on the backs of butterflies and wings of wing-tip shoes.

* from Joseph Beuys