

A Glastonbury Experience

The Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Centre (PRC) arranged an evening in February 2009 with the object of exploring the phenomenon of individuals being 'Called' to Glastonbury and their experience on their arrival - often termed a 'Glastonbury Experience'. It was hoped that a sharing of individual personal experiences would be a start in achieving a better understanding of a more generic process that might lie behind the individual experiences.

The PRC plan to produce a paper on what emerged during the evening

Three speakers, Michael Orchard, Dr Liz Williams and Barry Taylor gave the opening talks – this is a transcript of the talk given by Barry Taylor.

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When I was asked to give this talk, I thought that it would be helpful to look at the case of someone who had been called to Glaston and who had completed the process and their work in this place. I am still here! - and hopefully have not yet completed the process or my work – and so I was not a suitable case. But my very good friend, Helene Koppejan, was called to Glastonbury and has completed her work here.

Helene and I were born on the same day of the same year and were astrological twins. We worked together and were colleagues and friends for ten years until she died in February 1998. So I feel that in Helene there is someone who I knew very well and whose life here was an interesting example of the complete process of being 'Called' to Glastonbury. Knowing Helene as I did, I feel sure that she would be happy for us to share her experiences and learn what we might from them.

Basic assumptions

The experiences of all who are called to Glastonbury are individual and different but there does seem to be an underlying pattern to these experiences. To make sense of what I am going to say I need to ask you to accept, if only for the moment, my own personal understanding of how Glastonbury works. I need to stress that these are my views and not necessarily Universal Truths!

The key assumptions that I am making are that;

- There is an Unseen Presence that cares for Glastonbury and seeks to help the place attain its true potential
- This Presence has many names including the 'Angel of Glastonbury' and the Company of Avalon. I will use the term the Angel – the Angel of Glastonbury – in this talk.
- This Presence knows exactly what Glastonbury needs in the way of people, skills and resources
- This Presence uses various means to call the people needed and to guide them once they are here
- This Presence has a purpose that is two fold:
 - To help the individual with their own personal spiritual transformation
 - To help Glastonbury reach its full potential

So, having set the scene. I would like to look at what seems to be a Universal Pattern that falls into a number of clear stages in the process of an individual being Called to and working in Glastonbury – and how this process seems to have worked out in the life of Helene.

The First Stage 1 – The Awakening

The Universal Pattern seems to be, that in order to be able to hear the Call, the individual needs to have what we might call a spiritual 'awakening'. That is that they are able to listen to and respect their own intuition – their inner voice.

This awakening seems to take time. The individual usually starts off by living and working in a conventional way in the material world. At some stage there comes an 'Epiphany' or 'Spontaneous act of Grace'. This is frequently triggered by a crisis of some sort that leads to a questioning of the current way of living that in turn may lead to an awakening to an awareness of the world of the Spirit.

With the awakening comes a question - whether or not to respond to this awakening call? If the decision is to respond positively, then follows the possibility of a fundamental change in the way of life. This positive response to a spiritual awakening often results in an active search for a new understanding through books and courses. In turn this may lead to the individual finding a new Spiritual path and practice

The specific case of Helene

So how does the life of Helene fit the general pattern of this First Stage?

Helene was born in August 1927 and grew up during the war in German occupied Holland. After the war she attended Amsterdam University and graduated with a degree in Social Psychology and set up her own practice as a child psychologist. In her mid twenties she met a doctor, Willem Koppejan, who was also a widely respected Astrologer. She set up a joint practice with him and in due course they married.

Willem was quite a bit older than Helene and shared with her his already well established knowledge of astrology and the history of the Christian and Hebrew religions. Helene also developed an active interest in these subjects and together they wrote and published several books and films on the subject of Astrology and lost tribes of Israel

So Helene had become sensitive to the spiritual life and was a very suitable subject to be able to hear a call from the Angel of Glastonbury!

The Second Stage - the Call to live in Glastonbury

The Universal Pattern appears to be that the Angel decides that a particular talent or resource is needed and for that talent to be fully used the owner must live in Glastonbury. A call is put out to a person who might be able to meet this need and who is in a potentially receptive frame of mind.

The call is couched in terms that will attract the person. I sometimes think of it as the individual being 'seduced' into coming to Glastonbury. A reason is given that is immediately attractive to the individual. But it is not the real reason. If the real reason was given the individual would almost certainly not come!

The call goes out and the individual has to decide whether or not to respond. If they do decide to answer this call, then they duly arrive in Glastonbury.

The specific case of Helene

For Helene, this second stage took place in a very interesting manner. In their activities in Holland, Helene and Willem were deeply involved in researching the Christian and Hebrew legends. In the early 1950s their researches brought them on occasional visits to Glastonbury where they stayed in B&Bs. In 1959 they became amongst the first companions of Chalice Well.

On one such visit, Helene was walking up Hill Head when a woman who Helen had met at Chalice Well, Grace Emmerson, came out of her cottage at No 55 and said "Are, there you are – I just wanted to tell you that one day you will live in this cottage – would you like to see it ?" – Helene was

astonished as she had no such plans but she did accept the invitation and had a look around. She had no intention living permanently in Glastonbury and soon forgot the matter.

Some years later, a Dutch friend of Helene was visiting Glastonbury and walking up Hill Head. Grace somehow knew that this woman was from Holland and, coming out of her cottage said "Do you know a Dutch woman called Helene? If you do, please tell her that I am now ready to sell her the cottage" - and mentioned the asking price.

The visitor thought that there were many Helenes in Holland but she would at least mention it to her friend Helene Koppejan. Helene had no plans for a house in Glastonbury but on hearing the news it did occur to her that the cottage would make a good base for summer visits – but she could not afford the asking price.

A few days later Helen heard from a solicitor that she had been left, in the will of a relative, a plot of land – and its value was exactly that which was being asked for the cottage. Helene, seeing the apparent synchronicity of these events, decided to sell her newly inherited plot and buy the cottage. In 1967 Helene bought 55 Hill Head.

Willem and Helene used the cottage for occasional visits for a number of years and became very familiar with Glastonbury, the surrounding countryside and the local community.

In 1976 Willem felt that it was time to retire from his practice to give him time to write. At the same time there was a growing concern that Holland might once more be invaded – this time by the Russians.

They felt that Glastonbury would probably be a more peaceful place in which to retire. So in 1977 they sold their practice and their various houses in the Hague and moved to their cottage in Glastonbury bringing with them their substantial capital and a huge library of thousands of books.

55 Hill head was small. They needed extra space to house their books and as Helene was a believer in property as an investment, they purchased a number of houses in and around Glastonbury to give themselves extra space and an investment income.

Willem, with Helene's support, could finally settle down to completing the books on Astrology which he had long wished to write.

The Angel had successfully lead Helene to live in Glastonbury. But the real reason why the Angel needed Helene was not yet apparent!

The Third Stage – The real reason for the Call begins to emerge.

The Universal Pattern is that the new arrival feels excited about the potential in Glastonbury and sets out to make friends and establish how they will live their new life. The first glimmerings begin to emerge of the real reason for their being Called

The specific case of Helene

On their arrival as permanent residents, Helene and Willem already knew the town quite well and had made many friends. Willem sat about his writing but Helene, who was a very active person, soon found that supporting Willem with his writing was not enough.

One of Helene's hobbies was needlework. She found that the materials that she needed were not readily available in Glastonbury. She thought about setting up a small craft shop in the town and employed a local estate agent to find something for her.

Initially nothing suitable turned up but then the agent told her that he had found a possible property. On a cold and rainy November day, he took her along to see numbers 2 and 4 the High Street. These were two adjoining dilapidated shops, with a passage way between leading to what had been gardens but was now filled with 75 years of accumulated rubbish, including the remains of a garage and its petrol tanks

This appalling sight was enough to put anyone off – but Helene was given – no doubt by our friend the Angel - a vision of the whole converted into a medieval style courtyard complete with gallery.

Helene felt strongly that she was being asked to buy this place. Her advisers advised her against it as there were plans for compulsory purchase of the rear of the property for a proposed relief road and car park. Despite this, Helene decided to go ahead and in November 1977 she purchased the properties.

Helene had been given a clear vision of what was needed. She and her architect drew up plans and instructed a local builder. Furious development work took place, clearing out the rubbish, renovating the High Street buildings and creating the new inner courtyard with surrounding buildings.

So the first three stages of the plan of the Angel had been completed. Helene had been encouraged to come and live in Glastonbury with the ostensible purchase of writing books and enjoying a leisurely retirement with a comfortable income from her property investments. Now she had been subtly persuaded to use a substantial part of her resources to buy and convert a substantial complex of buildings.

For some reason, Helene decided to call this complex the Glastonbury Experience. To avoid confusion, we will call this complex the GE from now on. The GE certainly lived up to its name in the case of Helene.

The Fourth Stage - The Testing – The ‘Glastonbury Experience’

This stage is what we are here tonight to explore. This is a testing of the individual - a 'Dark Night of the Soul' in which the individual is brought face to face with their own inner frailty and darkness. A test by the Angel to see if the individual has the strength to carry out the task for which they have been Called

The specific case of Helene

Helene had only planned to set up a small shop, as a hobby,

She was now the owner of a complex of two High Street shops and another ten rooms. Her own craft shop occupied only one of these spaces! She felt that what the GE was to become was a craft centre. In her usual dynamic manner, she set about filling the new spaces with other craft shops and exhibition spaces. She set up and stocked a number of shops selling books, candles and craft materials; installed a café; and equipped exhibition galleries and function rooms in the upper floors.

In March 1978, after the extraordinarily short time of four months, the mayor opened the gleaming new complex of what is now the front courtyard of the Glastonbury Experience. It all looked completely conventional and was welcomed by the whole town as a great contributor to the economic prosperity of the High Street. The real reason why Helen was needed in Glastonbury was now becoming very clear.

Helene personally owned all the buildings and owned and managed all the enterprises, employing staff wherever necessary. The first year was a success and it made a small loss which was to be expected in a new venture. A huge amount of work was involved in getting this new project going and Willem helped in the whole project. He was rather dismissive of what he called 'Helene's little shoppies' but he completely supported the project.

Then in May 1979, catastrophe struck when Willem died suddenly and unexpectedly

Willem had been Helene's, friend, husband and mentor all her adult life. They had moved to Glastonbury to write Willem's books and he had supported her in the intense work of developing the GE – now he was gone.

Helen missed him desperately but she threw herself into running the GE which began to dominate all her working life.

Helene had no experience whatsoever of running and managing any sort of business but had had Willem at her side to give advice. With the loss of Willem's steadying hand Helene's lack of experience became more and more apparent.

Helene's area of competence was astrology and this became the area in which she was most tested. She relied heavily on astrology for her guidance in decision making but did not have the practical experience that would have allowed her to moderate what her charts revealed.

There were two direct results from this method of working.

- With the staff and managers that she employed, Helene was inclined to make sudden decisions without prior consultation with those involved. These lead too many deeply disturbing relationship problems.
- With the businesses, Helene was reluctant to agree with her staff a clear steady policy and the result was frequent interference and unexpected changes of plan.

The result of this was that, despite the best efforts of a number of sturdy helpers, the businesses made steady and increasingly heavy losses. There was also a marked change from conventional crafts to more esoteric activities. The complex gradually came to be seen by the town as a dangerous place, financially unstable and full of undesirable goings-on.

The steady down hill spiral continued for some years with the increasing losses being funded by a combination of the proceeds from the sale of Helene's houses and steadily increasing bank borrowings.

By 1986 the bank had finally had enough. They took financial control away from Helene and installed a management committee. The committee was instructed to give notice to all the occupants who were not capable of paying a commercial rent and to fill the vacant spaces with acceptable new tenants. Helene was allowed a say in the activities of the new tenants. This decision effectively meant that that Helene had to close all her businesses as none of them could afford a proper rent. Helene incurred further heavy losses as unsold stock was disposed of.

In 1987, after running the new scheme for a year, the bank decided that, despite the changes, there was no hope of the GE generating a sufficient surplus to allow it to service and pay off the substantial loans. They insisted that Helene put all the buildings up for sale and appointed an agent to find a buyer.

This could be said to be the completion of the Fourth Stage – the Testing. Her belief in the guidance of her beloved astrology had not prevented the complete failure of the GE into which she had poured so much money and energy. She had also lost many friends.

Coupled with this a charity which Helene had been running was investigated by the Charity Commission and found to be operating illegally. At one time there was talk of her being prosecuted but, as no money other than Helene's was involved, the case was dropped and the charity closed.

Helene, as a proud law-abiding Dutchwoman of independent means, found the whole process of financial failure, possible law suits and passionate resentment from many people, humiliating and difficult to bear.

The Fifth Stage – The Decision

Eventually the individual emerges from the most intense part of the testing process - although it may continue at a more gentle level for the rest of the individual's stay in Glastonbury. The individual emerges as a changed person, often having been humbled in the area in which their pride was invested. They then come face to face with the decision of whether to stay in Glastonbury and continue with the work that they seem to have been asked to carry out - or whether to leave the town.

The specific case of Helene

The selling agent produced an offer from a property developer for the GE. Sale at the price offered would have cleared her debts and still left her with a small income on which to retire in peace to pursue her hobbies of writing, music and embroidery - and back in Holland.

Helene could not bear the thought of the GE being turned into a commercial office block. She felt passionately that she should continue to be responsible for the GE until such time as its sustainable future could be assured. A future in which the GE could continue to operate within the spiritual ethos with which it had been invested.

Although she did not know how this could be achieved, she made the decision to stay in Glastonbury and finish her work, whatever this might involve.

The Last Stage – The Final Outcome

There can be no generalisation of the final outcome as it will always be highly individual. But if our assumptions have any value, we would expect to see the completion of some piece of work which had been planned by the Angel.

The specific case of Helene

Helene's decision to stay with the GE until it was in safe hands seems to have been a turning point in the fortunes of the GE. About this time new help arrived from various sources. This enabled a plan to be drawn up for the continuation of the GE, in Helene's ownership, for a further twelve months to prove whether or not it could be made viable. The bank accepted this plan and Helene was able to refuse the offer from the property developers.

The new plan was successful and, in due course, the finances of the GE were stabilized and the complex began to generate sufficient income to enable a competent manager to be employed.

In 1994 all the GE premises and their borrowings were transferred to a new company, Glastonbury Courtyard Ltd, the shares being owned by Helene and a partner. The bank did not ask for personal guarantees, but insisted on an insurance policy on the life of Helene to cover their borrowings.

Helene's huge personal borrowings had been transferred to the new company and the GE was being competently managed. Helene had made the decision to stay in Glastonbury; she continued to take an active interest in the GE but was now able to spend time on the hobbies which she had neglected for many years.

In 1996 a new charity, the Glastonbury Trust, was set up with the charitable objects of promoting religion and education but with the underlying objectives of supporting the growth of spiritual awareness. Helene and her partner drew up an agreement that they would leave all their shares in the Glastonbury Courtyard, and its bank borrowings to the Trust in the event of either of them dying.

Quite unexpectedly, Helene died in 1998. All the shares in Glastonbury Courtyard Ltd were left to the Glastonbury Trust and the life policy paid off all the remaining bank loans.

The Glastonbury Trust found itself the owner of a thriving income-generating business in the GE, and with no borrowings.

- A charity, with objects that allowed it to support the work to which Helene herself was so committed – that of supporting the growth in spiritual awareness
- A charity with sufficient maintainable and sustainable income to enable it to look after the buildings, pay a manager and to generate a surplus to use in its own charitable activities.
- A charity with as assured a future as can reasonably be achieved in these turbulent times.

What of the Angel of Glaston?

We can only measure the effectiveness of the work of the Angel when a life's work is completed – In Helen we have such an example.

Of the Angel's two-fold purpose:

To help the individual with their own personal spiritual transformation

Helene did not talk much of her personal spiritual life - so I do not know how she felt about any personal spiritual transformation that resulted from her quite traumatic experiences in Glastonbury. But she found tranquility and a sense of completion and fulfillment in her last few years, as she emerged from her 'Time of testing'. She was able to see how the completion of her allotted task had lead to the setting up of a soundly based charity which could carry on her work.

To help Glastonbury reach its full potential

I think that here the Angel as been entirely successful!

The Angel called, inspired and guided an individual who had the material resources and the personal qualities of enthusiasm, intuition, courage and tenacity needed to bring the desired result about.

My very good friend Helene