

UNITED WISDOM

The Sublime: An Experience beyond a Familiar Measure

Meaning and Direction

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *“a sense sublime Of something far more deeply interfused”*

— William Wordsworth, Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, two selected lines following the passage on presence; Lyrical Ballads 1798 text. A fragment of the original English.

What this article is about

An encounter with something large need not be exhausted by measuring its dimensions. A familiar way of seeing can prove insufficient: one wants to hold the whole, yet it resists the usual picture. Such an experience may be called sublime, although authors give the word different grounds. We consider Edmund Burke’s selected sections on terror, astonishment and distance, Kant’s distinction between beauty and sublimity, and William Wordsworth’s poem about returning near Tintern Abbey. A historical theory of feeling, a philosophical question about judgement and a personal poetic voice form no common method. Contemporary scenes are invented for reflection, rather than reports of research on human states. The question is not how to seek compulsory intensity, but how to describe an encounter that has occurred: what exceeded a familiar measure, what grounds were attributed to it and what remains unknown. Sublimity requires neither danger nor prescribed insignificance, and promises no subsequent improvement of the person.

I. When a familiar measure is insufficient

Imagine someone looking at a large photograph of the night sky indoors. The person knows it is an image, not space itself. The print can be measured, its composition considered and labels for visible objects read. At some point, however, the question changes: how does this bounded surface relate to what it invites one to imagine? Our fictional viewer acquires no new knowledge of the universe simply by pausing before the photograph. A difference appears between the object nearby and thought’s possibility of moving beyond its edges. Scale enters the conversation here. It concerns more than how large a thing is: it also concerns the measure through which someone tries to hold what that thing means to them.

A familiar measure may be literal: distance, duration or quantity. It may also concern meaning: a habitual account in which each impression already has a comprehensible place. A large

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

object can fit that account easily, while a small one can unexpectedly unsettle it. Sublimity therefore cannot be assigned by a photograph's dimensions, music's volume or a journey's price. We are discussing a person's question, rather than a quality guaranteed inside every enormous object. The viewer might simply look and leave, become interested in a label or decline to continue. None of these possibilities establishes deficient sensitivity. An impression and a person's worth are not connected here through an automatic rule or required response.

The encounter's description should remain distinct from a claim about the world. "I cannot take this in through my usual approach" concerns a present relation to the object. It proves neither infinity nor a special will in the object, and supplies no reliable decision on the person's behalf. Feeling can prompt a question without already answering a factual one. Our sources offer different explanations: Burke turns to intense feeling, Kant to relations between imagination and reason, Wordsworth to memory and poetic presence. There is no need to choose an account before reading or to declare them identical. A precise boundary can come first: a familiar approach proved insufficient, while the grounds of the encounter still need distinguishing.

II. Beauty and sublimity differ by more than size

In § 23 of the Critique of Judgement, Kant begins the move from beauty to sublimity through form and limitation. Beauty concerns an object's form, considered as bounded. Sublimity can be discussed where an encounter resists representation as such a bounded whole. This is no simple rule that small things are beautiful and large things sublime. Kant asks what occurs in judgement when representation cannot be exhausted by a readily grasped form. His argument moves from agreeable proportion towards a relation with reason's ideas. The present account remains limited to the selected section; it replaces neither Kant's entire system nor turns every failure to understand into a philosophical achievement or evidence of superior personal development.

This distinction can prevent an argument about impressions from starting too early. One viewer describes the photograph's clear composition; another describes being unable to imagine its distances. They may concern the same object through different relations to it. Hearing that difference need not establish whose response is higher or more correct. The image's form remains bounded, while thought about what it depicts can exceed what is immediately visible. Kant's account is not reducible to this everyday scene: it has particular grounds in capacities of judgement. The scene only makes a question accessible. We distinguish an account of the object's arrangement from what arises in relating it to a wider thought, without treating the latter as a measured fact.

For Kant, sublimity cannot simply be stored inside an object as a physical property. In § 23 he shifts the explanation's location towards the state and relation of capacities, rather than a thing

guaranteed to be sublime. “This must overwhelm you” therefore adds a demand that the object’s description does not establish. An exhibition can become a test of the proper visitor: the person starts assessing whether enough astonishment occurred instead of understanding their own question. A more precise invitation leaves room for encountering a limit of familiar representation, or not encountering one. Philosophical explanation of a possibility should remain distinct from an order to experience it, before depth, maturity or significance is assigned to what was seen.

III. Burke’s astonishment and a pause in ordinary attention

At the start of Part II, Burke connects sublimity with astonishment: a powerful encounter can seem to fill attention with its object, leaving little room for other thoughts. His historical explanation includes horror, rather than pleasant surprise alone. The following section discusses terror and compares the ocean with a great plain: dimensions by themselves do not explain the impression’s difference. This account should not become a contemporary law of psychology. Burke offers a particular theory and examples; they remain a philosophical source here, rather than a measured description of everyone. Our narrower question is why an intense encounter may interrupt attention’s habitual distribution instead of merely adding another beautiful object to an already familiar arrangement.

Such an interruption need not immediately receive an elevated meaning. In our imagined scene, a viewer stops reading the photograph’s labels and looks silently for a few moments. The pause can be noticed without making it evidence of a spiritual event. Another person keeps reading, and their attention is no less real. Burke’s astonishment helps name one possible course of feeling without prescribing the only worthy response. An impression’s intensity remains distinct from its truth. Even if an encounter temporarily occupies attention, that does not verify the interpretation of the world that accompanies it. Nor must a decision, changed conviction or transfer of the feeling to someone else follow the pause as its necessary outcome.

Wordsworth presents another register. The Tintern Abbey poem includes a serene and blessed mood, recalled natural forms and a sense of presence that deepens thought. This is not Burke’s horror under another name. The poetic speaker recounts an experience and its memory, rather than comparing different participants’ responses. Reading them together shows that “sublime” need not refer only to intense fright. A quieter relation to what was seen can enter a particular account where the text supports it. Yet the poem supplies no guaranteed procedure for obtaining calm. The sources’ difference matters more than a convenient shared recipe: a historical theory of astonishment and a personal poetic witness answer the question of exceeding the familiar on different grounds.

IV. Distance does not turn danger into an assignment

Burke makes a significant qualification in I.VII: when danger or pain approaches too closely, it supplies none of the particular delight he is discussing. He speaks of distance and modified conditions. This permits no calculation of a safe dose of danger from a literary text. It first unsettles the quick inference that a powerful aesthetic encounter requires actual threat. Even within the historical argument, immediate suffering and the contemplated encounter do not coincide. A contemporary situation cannot replace assessment of particular conditions with the word “sublime.” The source distinguishes subjects of conversation; it does not tell anyone where standing is safe, where to travel or what exposure must be endured for the sake of an impression.

Kant’s § 28 also distinguishes a fearful object from a person actually afraid. His account of the dynamically sublime assumes that nature’s might can be considered from a position of security. Its grounds differ from Burke’s explanation: Kant concerns a capacity to think of oneself as independent of natural power in a particular relation to reason and moral vocation. “Both advise against fear” would erase that difference. They offer no identical advice, and actual fear becomes no moral defect in a contemporary person. Kant’s scene belongs to a philosophical argument, rather than a test of an exhibition visitor’s courage. Its condition neither cancels the question of actual safety nor establishes that reflection alone proves a location secure.

Our practical boundary is simpler than these historical theories. If an encounter requires a dangerous action, calling it sublime does not make that action necessary. An image, memory or description can be discussed, or the conversation ended. These alternatives guarantee no identical feeling, but they do not turn feeling into a justification for risk. It is particularly inaccurate to require exposure to threat as proof of depth or understanding art. Such an invitation already decides what the person must gain and who they must become afterwards. This essay leaves an unknown result unknown. A difficult past experience need not be renamed a beautiful lesson; its factual description can remain without compulsory gratitude or a verdict of insufficient capacity for sublimity.

V. Magnitude and might raise different questions

Kant distinguishes the mathematically and dynamically sublime in § 24. Within the complete section read here, this names two questions: how magnitude is represented and how might is regarded. This division opens the subsequent argument of §§ 25–27; naming two questions alone does not establish the complete account of either. For an everyday conversation, it helps interrupt a conflation. An enormous distance on a map and the thought of power capable of disrupting a familiar arrangement of things need not produce the same impression. They can combine, but need not. Naming the source should clarify which question was actually taken from it and which remains our own proposed inquiry.

Burke's ocean example in II.II likewise shows that magnitude does not exhaust a relation to an object. He compares the ocean's impression with that of an extensive plain, introducing terror as important to his explanation. This does not exactly reproduce Kant's division. Burke's comparison serves a theory of intense feeling; Kant's distinction belongs to an inquiry into judgement and its grounds. A shared question can remain without a shared answer: why cannot an experience be assessed through external dimensions alone? Placing the passages together should not make one author validate the other's entire system. They offer different approaches to a problem, rather than independent measurements automatically establishing one law of aesthetic effects.

In the imagined room, the viewer can clarify an impression without choosing a philosophical school: it is not the print's size but the difficulty of imagining the distance; or it is a thought about power that the image recalls. These statements need not be final. Sometimes the question turns out to concern an unknown fact, requiring another source such as the photograph's caption. Sometimes the impression may remain unexplained. Sublimity should not displace ordinary uncertainty: an aesthetic word cannot replace a missing factual label. Distinguishing magnitude, might, facts and personal response makes conversation more precise without promising a measurement of experiential depth or assigning identical significance to what every participant has seen.

VI. Wordsworth: place, memory and a changing view

Wordsworth’s poem begins with a return after several years. This arrangement matters: the place is encountered in the present and through what memory retained during the interval. The speaker recounts different ages and ways of responding to nature. Earlier immediate enthusiasm is not simply repeated; thought, memory and life among other people enter the later view. This sequence should not become a compulsory developmental ladder for every reader. It is a particular poetic witness, rather than a verified law of ageing. It raises another question of scale for this essay: an encounter can exceed its present moment because earlier seeing, years of absence and a changed account of one’s relation to the place have entered it.

In the poem’s recollection, nature is associated with support and tranquillity, but these claims belong to its speaker. They do not establish that every place or memory works alike or prescribe treatment. Accurate reading retains genre alongside the claim. Poetic confidence can be powerful and significant without becoming a general guarantee. A reader who recognises no such experience does not have their actual life disproved by the poem. They can consider how the writer connects present and past without accepting every connection as their own. Encountering the text then allows another person’s measure of experience to be heard, rather than requiring evidence that nature or memory has already supplied the reader with an assigned state.

Our fictional viewer might recall a similar image once seen elsewhere. The present photograph gains no universal meaning, but another layer enters the conversation: what is depicted, and how someone has returned to something familiar. Another participant does not share that past and need not see the same significance. Naming the difference need not end discussion. Personal memory explains part of a relation without making the object private property of a feeling or prohibiting another account. Wordsworth makes an encounter’s temporal depth visible; Kant asks a different question about judgement. Their comparison retains two grounds instead of turning poetic biography into an example that automatically proves sublimity’s philosophical structure for everyone.

VII. Exceeding the familiar does not unite every ground

The selected poetic fragment gives Wordsworth’s sense of sublimity and something more deeply interfused. The surrounding poem connects presence with nature, motion and thought. This is a particular language of poetic relation. Kant’s § 28 instead turns towards a rational and moral vocation irreducible to natural power’s superiority. Burke examines intense feeling through terror and astonishment. Placing these grounds together does not let shared vocabulary cancel their differences. They may illuminate a question from different sides without proving that nature, reason and feeling only accidentally possess different names. This essay preserves comparison without claiming that all three texts uncover one hidden doctrine beneath their distinct arguments, genres and particular assumptions about the relation between a person and the world.

This distinction matters particularly when an impression is immediately treated as an answer to life’s largest question. A powerful encounter may make a question more visible without answering on the person’s behalf. Poetic presence is no verified message about destiny; philosophical explanation chooses no particular action; a historical theory of feeling does not validate a resulting conviction. Significance can be acknowledged while further interpretation remains open. That is precision rather than devaluation: an experience occurred here, an explanation was proposed there, and another fact remains unknown. Distinguishing these levels permits a question to be addressed to a source instead of using its name as a seal that closes doubt and discussion of a decision’s consequences.

A reader need not adopt an entire source either: Burke’s qualification about distance can matter without accepting his whole theory; Kant’s question can interest someone without every historical judgement; Wordsworth’s voice can be heard without making his confidence about nature one’s own belief. Such reading must identify the selected passage and the limit of adoption. Otherwise a convenient part quietly begins to stand for the entire book. Kant’s § 28 contains historical statements about war, peace and cultural differences; they are not adopted here as contemporary standards of human worth. Comparison retains a specific ground. Exceeding a familiar measure does not require surrendering critical attention to the text from which a word for the experience was taken.

VIII. Personal insignificance need not be proved

Large scale is often accompanied by a ready statement about the smallness of human beings. It may simply compare dimensions, or slide into a judgement of worth: because you are small, your questions and promises do not matter. Neither a photograph, the sea nor a poem establishes that transition. Physical magnitude and a relation's significance concern different questions. Kant's § 28, especially, cannot be reduced to helplessness: its argument seeks another way of thinking about the person before nature's might. Accepting Kant's complete answer is unnecessary for noticing this abbreviated account's problem. Remove his particular grounds, and an impression of power remains, mistakenly presented as the whole source and an order to diminish the importance of one's life.

Someone can acknowledge lacking control over an enormous space while retaining a particular commitment to another person. A large world does not cancel a small promise. In our imagined scene, the photograph decides neither whether unfinished work should be completed nor whether a companion needs an answer. These questions possess their own conditions and participants. Sublimity should not become an easy exit: everything now seems trivial, so nothing deserves attention. That statement requires consideration separately from the experience of scale. It adds a conclusion neither measured nor necessary. An encounter's significance can coexist with ordinary precision in action; thinking about something large need not displace respect for what was actually promised in the situation available to the person.

Nor is there an opposite duty to become more responsible, spiritual or grateful immediately after an intense impression. That report again assigns the outcome beforehand. A person may leave with a question, without one, or describe the encounter differently later. The sources offer a language of distinctions, rather than a certificate of development. Feeling need not be compared with another's or proved sufficiently sublime. A thought of personal insignificance can be considered as a particular interpretation rather than a final verdict. This essay offers no procedure for changing a state. Its question remains substantive: which observation produced the conclusion, and were size, power, knowledge and worth confused although they form no single scale by themselves?

IX. Conversation permits different measures of an encounter

When several people look at one object, distinguishing their accounts can be more useful than seeking a compulsory shared feeling. One concerns form, another memory, a third a fact. What each is describing can be clarified. This does not make every interpretation equally correct: factual assertions still require grounds, and a text can be read inaccurately. Yet differing relations are not always errors needing correction. Participants sometimes answer different questions. Comparing our sources makes that possibility visible: Burke’s astonishment, Kant’s judgement and Wordsworth’s return need not coincide within one conversation to become subjects of attentive reading, argument and clarification. The words can be considered precisely without requiring an identical experience from everyone who hears them.

A question can be offered without assigning participation: I am interested in the difference between this image’s dimensions and what it permits us to imagine; would you like to discuss it? An answer may be brief or negative. The impression is not automatically disproved, but the other person becomes no compulsory listener. Wordsworth addresses his sister with hopes about her future. This matters to the poem, yet a poetic wish establishes no agreement by every possible addressee to such a role. The contemporary participation boundary belongs to this essay’s reasoning. It permits a powerful address to be read within its genre while distinguishing the writer’s wish, a companion’s actual consent and an unknown future that cannot be promised on another’s behalf.

A conversation can end before a shared interpretation appears. Sometimes it is enough to understand that participants describe different aspects rather than dispute one fact. Sometimes a real disagreement remains, without needing to be renamed hidden unity. Burke, Kant and Wordsworth become no arbitrators obliged to reconcile all readers. Their texts can be compared and challenged within the named limits. Ending need not include a promise to return, obtain a deeper experience or prove that a view has changed. A question may remain private and unfinished. This retains attention’s seriousness: polite agreement is not presented as actual agreement, and an unknown next step is not mistaken for a common path that has already emerged.

X. An encounter leaves room for an accurate account

Sublimity can remain the name of a question rather than a final assessment of an entire life. An encounter revealed a limit of familiar measure; its further grounds may remain subjects of reading and reflection. Less can be claimed than a ready story of transformation promises: I saw differently; I do not know whether anything will change; I presently connect the impression with memory but may refine that connection later. These statements need not prove the experience exceptional. They distinguish occurrence, interpretation and expectation. If nothing similar happened, that requires no correction either. This essay provides no compulsory last step where every reader must experience an enlarged world or accept the sources as explanations of their own state.

The sources leave different supports. Burke distinguishes intense encounter from immediate suffering, and attention from terror, within his historical theory. Kant separates sublimity from sheer dimensions and from a quality supposedly lying automatically in an object; his particular grounds concern reason and moral vocation. Wordsworth presents an encounter including memory, a changing view and poetic address to another. None of these moves makes danger necessary without our adding that requirement ourselves, and none removes precision about facts. A specific textual question can be taken, its limit named and differing grounds retained, rather than combining the passages into a convenient recipe for an intense experience supposedly available or required for everyone.

At the end of our imagined scene, the photograph remains a photograph, and people remain participants with their own questions and conditions. One wants to read a label, another thinks about time, a third leaves without a particular impression. No winner needs appointing. If someone calls the encounter sublime, what the word distinguishes can be understood. If it does not fit, its absence does not automatically impoverish the person. Attention retains its object, a claim’s measure and freedom to finish. The large need not humiliate the small, nor exceeding the familiar require abandoning criticism. An encounter can matter without a prescribed result when its significance is not presented as universal fact, another’s obligation or guaranteed final transformation.

What this means in practice

If you want to consider an encounter that has already occurred, one small question can be chosen without trying to repeat the impression. Name what was actually before you: an object, image, text or memory. Separately consider where the familiar measure proved insufficient: dimensions, an established explanation, holding the whole together or finding words for the relation. The experience need not be called sublime, and this conversation can end if it is unwanted now.

Then distinguish observation from inference. What is known about the object, what belongs to the impression and what remains a supposition? If Burke, Kant or Wordsworth supplies an account, identify the particular passage and its limit. This is no test of correct feeling. A factual question may need another source; a poetic line need not answer on that source's behalf.

Finally, one accurate sentence about the encounter may remain without promising transformation or judging personal worth. Before sharing, a companion's willingness can be checked. Discussion may end without a shared feeling or further assignment. This small inquiry requires no dangerous exposure, journey, special state or gratitude. It promises neither calm, treatment nor growth, and need not produce an outcome.

Key quotation

> *"at certain distances, and with certain modifications"*

— Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, I.VII, selected fragment of the final sentence. The original English; the sentence's beginning and continuation are not included.

Connections between traditions

1. **Distance and the encounter's condition. Burke I.VII ↔ Kant § 28, the fearful object and security paragraphs.** The shared question is why immediate threat differs from the sublime encounter being considered. Burke separates pain and danger too near from feeling at a modified distance; Kant distinguishes an object capable of causing fear from an actually frightened observer, assuming security. The similarity concerns a changed relation to the object rather than an obligation to endure exposure. For this topic, it separates exceeding the familiar from seeking risk. The boundary is substantive: Burke's historical account of feeling and particular delight differs from Kant's argument about rational and moral vocation. Neither passage certifies a location's actual safety or calculates permissible exposure.

2. **Form's limit and poetic presence. Kant § 23 ↔ Wordsworth's presence and sense-sublime passage.** What happens when a familiar bounded representation does not exhaust the relation to what is seen? Kant shifts sublimity's explanation from the object's form to relations between capacities and reason's ideas. Wordsworth connects a particular experience with presence, nature, motion and thought, using an image of deeper interpenetration. The similarity refuses to exhaust an encounter through external outlines, permitting scale of meaning to be considered alongside dimensions. The difference remains essential: poetic presence within the world is not identified with Kant's grounds in reason and the supersensible. A shared word proves neither a common doctrine nor a verified account of the world's constitution.

3. **Astonishment and quieter depth of attention. Burke II.I ↔ Wordsworth's serene and blessed mood passage, before the later changed-view account.** Burke presents astonishment as attention filled by the object with horror involved; Wordsworth gives a quieter poetic register and recalled natural forms. Their shared question concerns how an encounter exceeds simply adding a pleasant impression to an ordinary day. Neither relation is exhausted by a quick habitual survey, but mechanism and tone differ. This comparison leaves sublimity more than one register without ordering fear. The boundary remains: Burke's theory is no contemporary measurement of psychology, and Wordsworth's personal witness guarantees the reader neither tranquillity nor nature's healing efficacy.

4. **Magnitude and might. Burke II.II, the ocean and extensive plain ↔ Kant § 24, the mathematical and dynamical sublime.** Why do external dimensions not determine an encounter's entire character? Burke introduces terror while comparing two large spaces; Kant distinguishes questions of magnitude and might. Their similarity is the need to identify relation and grounds rather than merely quantity. This helps distinguish difficulty imagining distance from a thought about power. Burke's example serves his theory of feeling, while Kant's division serves another philosophical construction; one validates no entire system of the other. Section 24 does not grant adoption of the subsequent proofs of §§ 25–27 not read here, and comparison establishes no law of everyone's identical response.

5. **Present relation and memory. Wordsworth's return after years and changed earlier view ↔ Kant § 23, sublimity's place in the relation of capacities.** Is an encounter's meaning an unchanging property of its object? Wordsworth brings absence, memory and changed perception into what is seen; Kant does not place sublimity in a natural object as an ordinary quality of form. The similarity attends to the perceiver's relation, unexhausted by an external inventory of properties. It allows companions' differing impressions without ranking depth. A personal temporal history, however, does not prove Kant's structure of judgement, nor does his philosophical argument automatically explain a person's biography. The poem's age sequence is not assigned as everyone's necessary development.

6. **Hope for an addressee and a condition of consideration. Wordsworth's closing address to his sister ↔ Kant § 28, security and relation to natural might.** Can the encountered object be separated from a particular person's position? The poet connects place with his sister and hopes about her future memory; Kant qualifies the observer's position before developing the argument. Their limited similarity concerns relation and conditions, rather than one promised state. For this topic, it resists ordering an identical experience of grandeur. The boundary is explicit: poetic hope guarantees no addressee's future, and Kant's condition establishes no actual location's safety. A contemporary freedom to decline participation is this essay's editorial boundary, not a thesis falsely assigned equally to both sources.

Primary sources

1. Edmund Burke, **A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful**, I.VII and II.I–II, original English in Works, Volume I, John C. Nimmo, London, 1887; Project Gutenberg 15043. These complete sections were read for proximity of danger, astonishment, terror and the ocean/plain comparison. The key quotation selects part of I.VII's final sentence; its Russian rendering is ours. A historical theory becomes neither a contemporary physiological law nor an exposure instruction. Burke's text.

2. Immanuel Kant, **Critique of Judgement**, §§ 23–24 and 28, translated by J. H. Bernard, second edition 1914; Project Gutenberg 48433. These sections were read in full; § 29 supplies critical context rather than an adopted scale of culture. The selected questions concern form, magnitude, might and security. No separate quotation is displayed, and German was not collated. Historical judgements of war, peace, cultures and religious fear become no standards of worth or contemporary advice. Kant in Bernard's translation.

3. William Wordsworth, **Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey**, Lyrical Ballads 1798, the named edition's English transcription at Wikisource; its heading dates the return to 13 July 1798. The complete poem, heading and notes were read. The epigraph selects two lines following the passage on presence; the Russian rendering is ours. Poetic claims about nature, memory and his sister's future establish neither treatment nor a guaranteed state. The poem's 1798 text.

Russian quotations are our translations from the named original English texts; Kant is paraphrased from Bernard's translation. The English edition retains these different grounds. Comparisons concern specific passages actually read. Contemporary hypothetical scenes and participation boundaries belong to this essay's reasoning; the sources form no identical doctrine and verify no universal outcome.

Tags

sublime, aesthetics, scale, magnitude, might, beauty, attention, astonishment, fear, distance, security, judgement, imagination, reason, memory, return, nature, poetry, Burke, Kant, Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, form, boundaries, uncertainty, worth, participation, critical reading, impression, meaning

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.