



## A Book, an Invitation, a Hint of Gold

by Van Waddy

“**E**verything that conscious human beings experience is brought to us in pairs of opposites.” Such is the underlying melody running through the new book Robert Johnson writes with Jerry Ruhl, *Living Your Unlived Life*. In our attempt to choose the good, to become the person we want to be, we automatically exclude large portions of experience or potentials—essential aspects of ourselves—that would contribute to our wholeness.

---

**Van Waddy** is a licensed psychotherapist in Atlanta. (See [www.vanwaddy.com](http://www.vanwaddy.com))

Our choices lock us in to “truths” by which we live, identities in which we become trapped, unknowingly setting boundaries that keep us “stuck with the unrealized opposite of every choice that is made.” Our dualistic consciousness forces these vital un-lived characteristics to fall into our unconscious, as we cannot hold the paradox of integrating both our “truth” and its opposite.

The book takes up the task of pointing out the possible “road not taken” by each of us that would reconcile the opposing opposite energies in symbolic synthesis. Ruhl offers an “Inventory of Unlived Life” with questions and scales for measuring our development and satisfaction with our present life. Who might we have become had we chosen to activate other aspirations, ambitions? In what areas of our life are there significant unlived and underdeveloped potentials? Where have we over- or under-identified with certain aspects of our being? As this effort at self-examination and synthesis of unlived potentials usually surfaces in the second half of life, this book seems a perfect companion to James Hollis’ book, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*.

Johnson is a guru on the subject of the symbolic life. “The unifying power of symbols is one of the deepest and most powerful secrets of human life,” he says. “That which is lived through the power of the imagination is an experience, and it changes us.” Try out other aspects of ourselves, Johnson and Ruhl suggest, other ambitions or daydreams we neglected or purposely did not choose in our life up to present, but try them out symbolically. Through symbolic life, through active imagination, we can “satisfy the hunger for the path not taken without upending the life we have worked so hard to build.”

Johnson uses an example of this from his own life: A physical handicap as a result of a childhood accident caused him to lose his ability to run, to be an athlete, which “created a quantity of unlived life.” His unlived life as a runner caused him to overdevelop his other abilities: music, writing. “Symbolic life demands that you take two pieces that have been torn apart (in this case, an inborn capacity to run and the loss of that ability) and put them back together again.” He devised an imaginative exercise in which he had a talk with his defective legs. An image came to him. He devised a ritual with two toothpicks running across a cutting board, and, on a symbolic level, experienced the freedom of running, something he could not experience in his outer life.

“A symbolic act, in the plainest of terms, is doing something while simultaneously not doing it. To transform any collision of opposites, we must do the unlived thing while simultaneously not doing it.” That part of ourselves we have cut off, chosen not to integrate into our psyche and personality, even for the best of reasons, can be symbolically experienced and therefore made part of our conscious self – even though we never try it in our outer life. Neural pathways are established in the brain whether we experience something externally or through a vibrant inner experience. “The key is getting things on the correct level.”

“In dialoguing with some aspect of your unlived life, it is important to keep your practical everyday life at the level of your true character.” If our passion, never chosen in real life, was to be a movie star, it would mess up the life we have built to suddenly move to LA and abandon the very relationships that give our life meaning. Deal with your unlived life sym-

bolically so it can be integrated into your ordinary human life without destroying it. Don’t live your fantasies in a literal way. Let the unconscious, not the conscious ego do the sorting.

Johnson explores his Active Imagination method as means for exploring the unknown “other.” “Inner work provides a means to live out the gold as well as the dark, those unlived potentials within. . . The central aim is to relieve the neurotic pressure of these things and the anxiety of choice, and transferring it to the level where it really belongs, the celestial dialogue of the pairs of opposites, the song of heaven.”

**T**hose aspects of our unlived life that present themselves to us, ready to be made conscious but are refused—denied or repressed—are the ones that cause us trouble, so troublesome, in fact, that our authors call them “a cause of evil.” The higher Self informs us if something crucial to our fulfillment has been refused in the form of symptoms, accidents, and dreams. Evil, I suppose, is not cooperating with this higher Self, not opening to the creative synthesis pushing us towards authentic fulfillment, something we cannot see from our egocentric position.

Learning to accept (to “allow”) what “is,” to say “yes” to the unfolding events of one’s life, is to embrace what Johnson calls “creative suffering.” It happens from a place of *being* rather than a place of *doing*. It requires moving into a non-split consciousness where we learn to quiet our egos and stop fighting the situation at hand. “When you stop fighting your situation, you still have the situation but you no longer have the struggle to cope with.”

And how could we have a book by Robert Johnson that is not chuck full of insight and profound mystical wisdom? There is a chapter on death—“We die and we do not die.” There is a beautiful section on what he calls “The Twilight Years”—“Paradise exists, but at a level of consciousness, and it is available to you when you are ready to receive it.” Paradise “consists of reality looked at from a different consciousness. . . It was never lost or gained. One need only clarify one’s vision to see it.”

Johnson broaches the subject of reincarnation—“Understood psychologically, reincarnation refers to the redemption of our unlived life, the necessity of addressing all our potentials before we can realize God (unity).” All our potentials want to be incarnated, to be lived out before our journey back to wholeness is complete, he says.

“Anything looked at through your ego will continue to be an irresolvable pair of opposites, and this can only grind you down. But the same situation viewed through enlightened eyes can be seen as part of the creative play of God.”

This requires we hold the tension of the opposites we experience rather than force one-sided solutions. “All of the possible incarnations are within us—this is the call of the unlived life, but will we respond? Only if we can learn to moderate our reflexive patterns, cease defending partial, provisional identities, and open to what is waiting beyond the known.” A world of synthesis, a world in which the human and divine of us are one.

I thank Robert Johnson and Jerry Ruhl for capturing the symbolic quest in such practical, mystical, simple language. Their book invites the light and the dark of us to dance in non-threatening space. And the dance is, indeed, everything ■