



A Book Report by Van Waddy

Reading James Hollis' new book, *What Matters Most*, reminds me of how I felt as a child at summer camp visiting Mammoth Cave in Central Kentucky. We entered winding tunnels that opened on to sudden surprises of beauty—sculpture-like stalactites hanging overhead formed from moist limestone drippings.

Hollis—the lucid thinker, the clear, concise skilled teacher—carries us initially through his usual themes of lethargy and fear, feeling overwhelmed by life or abandoned, then vaults into the second half of the book with poetic ease and dramatic depth. Feeling tones, words rich with metaphor and “enthusiasm” (as if possessed and summoned by the gods), relevant picks of other’s wisdom writings and insightful reflections flesh out his own wanderings through the labyrinth of what, indeed, really matters.

He cites Rilke’s words that our task in life is “to be

defeated by ever larger things” and acknowledges that, for the “metaphor challenged,” this is often daunting. Learning “to live with ambiguity” is the challenge of the mystery-driven life, but this allows our openness to that invisible, felt, transcendent experience that spins us around and points us out toward that continuously transforming Other beyond ourselves. We learn from this to experience life as a “verb,” as a transforming encounter, and not as a “noun,” as something that happened. When we are doing what is right for us, Hollis contends, the psyche provides this “enthusiasm” and yields the energy to support our investment in life. After all, he reminds us, psyche has a better plan for us than our ego’s plan, our culture’s plan.

Fate is what is given to us, Hollis points out. Destiny is what we are summoned to become. To reclaim the story the gods inferred to us before we got trapped in the myth that captured us, the map we chose to orient our lives, we have to develop a larger consciousness. To rediscover the “keys” we lost while we were adapting to the world, we have to move into a larger, more compelling, evolved map or myth that will reorient our journey. “In the end, we may not love our fate, but we can love the life we wrestled from the grips of fate.” This does not mean to escape death, Hollis reminds us, but to find one’s story, *in the here and now*, more interesting, more enlivening. “Meaning is found both through acceptance of fate *and* in the struggle to remain free, to make value choices amid a constricted range of possibilities.” Having a supportive circle and discovering a linkage to transcendent experiences is vital.

Achieving personhood—to contribute most to others by becoming who we are and standing for values which matter in this world—is to come home to ourselves, says Hollis, to release that more authentic narrative written deeply within our psyche. It is to get in right relationship to “the gods,” those transcendent energies which course through all finite things. The tragedies of our life gift us with humility, remind us we “never know enough to know enough,” yet are still bound to choose, always responsible for choices made or avoided. The psychodynamic approach demands we ask what role our problems play in the larger story of our lives (“What does the soul want from me?”), not how can we solve this problem?

Hollis draws heavily on other people’s words in the second half of his book, as if pouring over the life learnings of such men as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, Camus, Frankl and others reinforce a layer of knowing in us we knew at our birth but forgot while trying to forge a life in this world. I basked in these reflective moments and found the weaving of them to only deepen Hollis’ own message. They brought comfort and encouragement to me, just as I imagine they brought comfort to Hollis, who lost his son while writing the second half of this book.

I loved Hollis’ talking about his personal life being a life in service to the god Hermes, his journey, “a search for God.” “I spend my life pondering the obscure messages of the gods and interpreting, clarifying, being led to new levels of mystery. This is service to Hermes.” He takes up the question of afterlife and chooses to stand beside those before him “who learned to foreswear shaky promises and to live more fully in *this* fallen, precious, richly divine world.” “Whatever we think, feel, believe, hope from a limited ego frame is literally irrelevant to the

mystery of mortality itself.” Hollis points out that an aroused awareness of our mortality is not the same as fear of mortality.

Hollis has a delightful, nostalgic, whimsical chapter on baseball. Baseball, he says, provides a way for men to meet and talk to one another as well as providing a religious dimension to our fragmented experience. He uses baseball as metaphor and journey: Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, but perhaps it is still the bottom of the ninth, runners on second and third.

“All is open, it seems, *still*; the game is on, *now*; the game is on now and *we are in it*.”

The game? To “claim selfhood, to find and nurture relationship, to work creatively within the limits of a contingent world, and to live more fully in the shadow of death.” And again: “Tipping our hat to fate, acknowledging that the gods choose the playing field upon which we find ourselves, we are still here to play the game. The object is not to win or lose, for that is already decided, and already irrelevant—for us it is rather to be on the playing field, with utmost exercise of *élan* and investment of spirit to the end.”

And Hollis? Any “God” I would have “found” on my journey, he says, would have become an object, a noun, and not “God,” a verb, a transcendent, transforming energy. Finding “God” would have been a death of sorts, an end.

We can take heart, then, in knowing this—that Hollis never found “God,” that he has many more books to write and to share with us. May the gods continue to tease him forward, ever more deeply |



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