

# On Finding a New

by Jutta von Buchholtz

Sometimes, when my dreams seem to have no interest in helping me with critical life situations, I try to look at everyday reality as if it were a dream or a myth or a fairy tale. This symbolic approach often opens up the daily, seemingly meaningless, drudgery or crisis so that the underlying archetypal pattern can become apparent. This happened when I sold my house, rented an apartment, and eventually bought another house. Halfway through the process, I realized that I was unconsciously living through what Arnold van Gennep called a *rite de passage*, a major lifestyle adjustment.

When I think of passages, the first example that comes to mind is the very well-researched rites of passage for puberty that ethnologists and anthropologists documented extensively. They visited “primitive” communities that Western culture had not influenced. They observed and documented the spiritual practices of these people and collected and brought back information about rites of passage connected with other major life events such as birthing, marriage, death, and the rituals that accompany these difficult, often treacherous times in human lives. This research yielded a pattern for times of transition cross-culturally. Typically there are three stages and their accompanying rituals in any life passage: the *rite de sortie*, the transition proper and the *rite d’entrée*.

Some of the training for Jungian analysts comprises courses in ethnology: we learn about rites and rituals of other cultures. By becoming aware of patterns in other ethnicities, we can make analogies to our own lives and discover archetypal energy patterns that give orientation beyond ego concerns when we look at our own lives symbolically. This knowledge reminds that we belong in the family of man and firmly anchors us there, which is the ground that supports us and has become almost totally lost to us in the West. Furthermore, we apprehend archetypal energies at work cross-culturally and can draw insights into our own complex-driven mysterious psychological life and note solutions and viewpoints we had been unaware of.

The rites of passage van Gennep and others discovered and analyzed typically fall into three phases:

- *Rite de sortie*, departure, moving out and away
- The betwixt-and-between time
- *Rite d’entrée*, an entry or re-entry into the group as a changed individual

## RITE DE SORTIE, DEPARTURE

My husband and I had bought our home in the 1970s. We had a small baby, and as young parents we were nesting. It was a lovely older two-story house. There

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was a nursery next to our bedroom upstairs. It was a welcoming home with a great sense of space and light. Over the next thirty years, it became home to my four children, who claimed different rooms as “their” space! If the walls of my old house could talk, they would tell many stories, some hilarious, some deeply troubled and sad. They’d talk of several pets we had loved and ceremoniously buried in an area of the garden. A patch of bamboo grew into a magical bamboo forest and the car park in the back of the house became a courtyard dominated by a generous fig tree. A downstairs guest room changed into a library, and in its last incarnation it welcomed clients for analytic and dream sessions. Boyfriends came and went; my son went to the Navy and my oldest daughter to law school. The two younger ones eventually went to colleges out of state, and then married. After that, the house seemed to be living on its memories—and so was I.

I was single then and took in several roommates to bring energy and rent money. Finally a series of events that affected my seeing clients in my home made it clear: the house needed to be sold. For the next year I worked to get it ready to sell—it was like dressing a woman for a fancy dress ball. It sold quickly—someone fell in love with it the first time I had an open house. That was the end and not yet a beginning. I had nowhere to go.

The children came and took what they wanted; I had a yard sale and gave away lots of “stuff.” The house was disrobed of us and our lives—although I like to think it still had our spirit in its pores. I packed and also pared down my life to the bare essentials: a few boxes of winter clothes, a few for the summer. The most difficult decisions had to do with my books: which ones would I need for this time of transition I was approaching? As it turned out almost all of them were in German, my mother tongue. Then I understood that this way I remained connected to my cultural origins, which gave me much-needed stability.

The time of *sortie*, departure, can come often in a lifetime. It is usually a time of loss, of grieving—there can also be a sense of “good riddance,” of relief and lightness: that which has become extraneous and superfluous is gone. It always is a time of separating out from a known group, from the known in general. I needed to leave my diverse and supportive neighborhood friends of many years, my neighborhood park and shops—the entire patterns of my daily routine had to be abandoned.

In fairy tales the hero or heroine has to leave family or kingdom and go into the deep, dark forest or to a strange, unknown, and faraway land: Snow White, Mother Holle, Little Red Riding Hood, the Seven Swans, the Handless Maiden. Sometimes they may take something essential along for this part of their life journey. In all cases, life, as it had been, had run its natural course, and a change had become inescapable. At times it is not easy to live through this jumping-off time; it can be like standing atop the 10-meter high-dive board and looking



at the pool below, which now seems dangerously tiny. But you must jump and trust that the pool is actually the size it was when you saw it from the ground. Psychologically speaking, turning back would mean a regression, a move to a psychologically outlived, often-infantile way of behaving and assessing life. This could result in a sense of being stuck, a depression, and the anxiety that goes with being in the wrong place at the wrong time, of not having faced what is called for at this time in your life. At times dreams show this: the dreamer is back in school and has not done her home work, has not prepared for a test, has forgotten her books, does not know where her classroom is.

Entering the stage of life when the nest is empty and we have amassed a lot of “stuff”—postmenopausal for women, or retirement age for both sexes—libido, vital energy, becomes more precious. It is a time of paring down, sitting still to decide which things to eliminate from our lives in order to make psychological space for what might want to emerge.

#### BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

**B**y great good luck—synchronicity I call it—a friend offered me a lovely two-room studio in her house. There was space for a few potted plants, a lovely shaded sitting area under old trees, and a view from my bed of the setting sun. It was well furnished, and I loved it right away. During that time I seemed to be uncharacteristically open, even gregarious. I “accidentally” ran into someone I had never seen before, got in a conversation and learned he was searching for someone to take over the next three months of his office lease. Since I had no idea where I would be next, we worked out a

three-month renewal deal, and thus I started up my office outside my home.

I brought only essential kitchen things to my studio space—one pot and one pan, five old pottery plates that reminded me of a love, a small vase my dissertation advisor had given me which now held teaspoons, my father’s scarf, and a few essential photos together with a paltry three boxes of books I was simply unable to part with. I bought a hibachi and a two-burner hot plate and was set. Everything else went into storage. I felt light.

There is no space for extras during the time of incubation. A cocoon is tight quarters where all the energy is focused on one thing: the dissolution of the old ego—persona, way of being in the world—the melting away of all that has become superfluous. In her cocoon stage, the caterpillar literally liquefies before she morphs into the butterfly. Fluidity is one of the hallmarks of the time betwixt and between. While the season of departure is hallmarked by grief and loss, the season of being under the lintel is hallmarked by fluidity, flexibility: “this ’n’ that,” a friend once called it.

The hermit crab comes to mind. When she has outgrown her home, she leaves it—naked—and emerges from the safety of her well-worn shell on the perilous search and journey for a new, more appropriate home. While the hermit crab grows and needs ever-larger accommodations, transitions after midlife or menopause in humans require that we jettison extras—it helps to become smaller in the size of accommodations and belongings in order to make room for the soul’s growth.

I loved my tiny studio. I was like a creative student once more—and truly I was back in the school of life consciously trying to learn what my soul yearned for now. I felt gloriously unencumbered, free from the many chores and responsibilities that had been part of my everyday living. I was also out from under some debt, a mortgage payment and other money worries. I was unencumbered and could pay attention to my psyche; focus on the inner rather than outer life. I concentrated on my dreams and nurtured my relationship to the unconscious. Academicians take a sabbatical every seven years in order to renew their vital energies, assess their lives and their work, and address where their creative urges want to lead them. During this time I tried to listen to what my unconscious had to say. The studio was a sweet, nurturing place for a safe emotional passage.

I had no idea how long this process might take nor where it would lead me. At times I was impatient, restless, needing some kind of resolution—some terra firma. My children and friends kept urging a decision, but I was too moist to be firm. I lived in this limbo for a year—four full seasons. I had looked for places to live in many towns and several states. I had seen dozens of houses and worked with several real estate agents. Until one day—and it felt like I was living in a fairy tale—as I drove around a little neighborhood in Birmingham, not far at all from the little studio, that I chanced on a little house, securely nestled under several large grandfather trees. My soul, which had been silent on the topic for a year, immediately said: “Yes!” and the house and I were joined within three days—and that was the fullness of time for that decision! The betwixt and between time was over—as naturally and vehemently as it should be.

#### RITES D’ENTRÉE

**M**y new home filled all the requirements of an aging grandmother-analyst who already sported titanium hips. There was a glorious light-filled sunroom where I

could see clients, enough space to put up children should their marriages go wrong or guests who wished to stay a while, as well as a backyard with a hammock for rocking the youngest grandchild and me.

This house came with its own story of origin. Years ago a streetcar connected this part of town—which was then mostly small houses of workers at the edge of pastures—to downtown. I imagined the streetcar conductor must have gotten tired of having to hoof it back into town for the night and decided to purchase a few acres at the end of the line. He built himself a house, and his house is now mine: the streetcar conductor's house—what an image for an analyst's house and practice! The one who helps people go from one place to another and eases the commute. What also came to mind was the great ferryman Charon, who ushered the shades of the mortals on their last journey across the river Styx into the underworld. Psyche was able to charm Charon into ferrying her across the fearsome, dark, and dangerous Styx on her errand to obtain a jar of Persephone's beauty for murderous Aphrodite. Among the few items I have that belonged to my father, a pilot who was killed in the Second World War, is a coin with St. Christopher on it. This saint carried the Christ child across the river and onto firm ground. He is the protector of those on journeys. My new home embodies the spirit of these archetypal ferry men.

When I carried my first basket of belongings—some books and pictures—over the threshold of my new home, I stumbled on the entry and fell, scraped my knee and bled. It seemed to me as if the spirit of the house—the *genius loci*—wanted to remind me that it needed honoring, which I had blithely omitted by being wrapped up in the material, taking possession of a piece of property. And so the unconscious saw to it that I made the proper blood-sacrifice. All initiation rituals require an ordeal—pain and sacrifice. I left my blood. Blood is symbolic of one's very life force, libido, and my new house now had some of mine. The house has been content and protective ever since.

A few weeks later—I had been away for a while—I found a small dead snake at my front entrance. That night I had a dream in which the snake on my front steps was alive, a brightly colored poisonous looking snake, hissing at me. I woke up screaming—it got my attention! I understood that the snake is always part of paradise and the agent that leads women to the disobedience of rules and regulations in service of increased consciousness.

This foreshadowed another incident having to do with the *rite d'entrée* to my new home. I wanted a house blessing—to honor the spirit of the house and the people who had lived in it as well as to ask it to embrace my children, my clients and me. I called several priests—but none would or could do this ceremony, which is part of the Episcopal liturgy. I was familiar with this rite, because my former husband had been an Episcopal priest. Suddenly I understood about the dead snake—to have a male Episcopal priest do the blessing was to be obedient to an outdated life pattern. It would have been a denial of all that this new house stood for inner-psychically, all the insights and the increase in consciousness, all the recent gains of my individuation journey of which this passage was a meaningful part. Therefore I reconnected with an old friend, and she structured the blessing, which my children celebrated for the house and all of us in it. It was a memorable evening. The new awareness of Charon, the blood sacrifice, the snake, and the blessing, these four events, inner as well as outer, are now part of my new

home, my life and my practice as a Jungian analyst.

Carl Jung thought that humankind in our Western civilization was suffering primarily from a deeply troubling sense of meaninglessness. Modern woman's and man's psyches are on a search for the journey home, to reconnect deeply with their souls and the spirit of their culture. If we can learn to understand our daily lives as embedded in the ancient spiritual stories of our culture—as well as those stories and rituals that speak to us from other cultures—we find ourselves located, grounded, and nourished spiritually, in Tao or in the hands of a greater power.

Jung suggested that telling the story of the Rainmaker should start each Jungian gathering. The Rainmaker first had to see to it that he himself was correctly spiritually aligned—in Tao—and only then might the rain come. When we tend to the relationship with our individual as well as the collective unconscious by living life symbolically, we can be at home inside ourselves: grounded, in synch, in balance.

My big move was not only a matter of selling my old home, of unburdening myself from money worries, a bunch of furniture and “stuff,” a matter of departing from the empty nest and its lonesome sadness, of putting memories in their correct place—all that had eaten up vital life energy—but it was as well a moving on into a new phase of my ever-changing life, where creative energy would be once more available for me. I thought that we could look at all of life as one enormous, mysterious transition, composed of many, many smaller passages, a vital, vibrant, fluid, and flexible “happening” betwixt and between the awesome portals of birth and death. And now that I am approaching old age, I hope there will still be more new homes for me, more new friends, engaging ideas, causes, and loves in my life, in the eternal, cyclical death and rebirth in the process of my life's journey.



Don Huntley—Detail of Two Meeting Street Inn, Charleston