

# What is Life Trying to Tell Me? The Meaning is not so Hidden

by Christopher Bennett

**A**NYONE who has heard me speak over the past couple of years has probably heard me say “we are not in an economic crisis but rather an identity crisis being expressed through an economic crisis.” We are living in a time that Carl Jung would describe as being a period when the collective unconscious has become active in “times of great social, political and religious upheaval.”

The need for this collective activation of the unconscious in part stems from a prolonged period of having defined ourselves based on externally referenced identities and structures. Such an externally defined self loosens its soul and becomes a hollow shell of the Being inside. Without the fuel of one’s true self being expressed in the world, we run out of energy and become spiritually depressed. Is it any wonder that coffee and energy drinks have become so prevalent in our society coupled with the extensive use of anti-depressant drugs?

What is needed on a massive scale is a shedding of the false expression of oneself and replacing it with a more authentic self, one filled with inner truth and substance; however to do so requires us to look within and seek to “know thy self” without seeking validation from external sources. Unfortunately most tend to avoid the inner journey and as such our external world usually needs to collapse and become unreliable for us to venture within to find our meaning and truth, much like what is happening in our world today.

Fortunately our Soul has a beautiful way of helping us restore balance by illuminating in our external world what is out of alignment in our inner world. The external is truly a reflection of our inner. This process not only seeks to aid in restoring balance it also serves as a mechanism that continuously nudges us towards greater self-awareness and integration of all aspects of our being, what Jung would call the process of individuation.

Individuation requires courage to stay the course, but the rewards for doing so can be enormous. The

word “courage” stems from the old French “cuer,” meaning heart. Thus to be courageous is at its core to be heartfelt and truly alive. Such a journey edges us to the frontier of our known limits and invites us to discover our potential and purpose in life. As poet David Whyte puts it “a frontier where passion, belonging and need call for our presence, our power, and our absolute commitment.”

So how does one consciously and deliberately go about the process of individuation? Certainly there has been lots of attention paid to the value one can gain through dream analysis and active imagination, and while I encourage the use of any tool that aids one in becoming self-aware, I’ve discovered that the fodder found in the situations, circumstances, and relationships we find ourselves in (past and present) to be some of the most readily accessible information about our unconscious and what it is our Soul is seeking to heal and evolve at any given time.

As the Buddha said we live in the world of illusion, which one could translate as a waking dream. By applying the same symbolic approach to our external world that we do to our dreams, we open a doorway into an enormous amount of information that aides us in our process of individuation at every moment. As Jung’s Soul related to him in one of his sessions of active imagination, “It is not as rational as you are inclined to think. The way is symbolic.”

The way I’ve applied this in my life is by playing a little game with myself whereby I assume that everything outside of me is symbolically me interacting with me - much like we do in dream interpretation. I truly embrace the concept that the external world is totally a projection of my inner world and that all the characters in my life represent aspects of my inner personalities. From this perspective, every interaction I have with another is an interaction with that part within me. Whatever “they” out there are doing to me, that is what I am doing to myself on the inside; and whatever that person out there is saying to me, that is what that personality wishes to say to me. By looking for and finding the inner truth from my outer experiences I have not

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only come to understand myself at a deeper level, I've also reduced my stress and anxiety and expanded my compassion for others at the same time.

As an illustration, this approach to my life has been a huge gift most recently in dealing with a major health crisis that otherwise could have brought me to my knees on all levels of my being. In November 2010, I was diagnosed with stage three colorectal cancer. While I've certainly had my unconscious human moments with all that my situation entails what has emerged by seeing this situation symbolically has been nothing short of profound.

By considering the news of cancer as not something happening to me but rather an expression of my inner being getting my attention through cancer, the questions I began to ask and the answers I went looking for were very different.

My first question was "What does cancer represent symbolically and specifically colon cancer?" According to Louise L. Hay in her book *Heal Your Body*, the mental causes of cancer are: "Deep hurt. Longstanding resentment. Deep secret or grief eating away at the self. Carrying hatreds. 'What's the use?'" Pertaining to the colon the mental causes are: "Holding on to the past. Fear of letting go." Whether one believes Louise's perspective or not, it was a

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great place for me to start looking at my experience symbolically; and I was able to identify several examples in my life where I have been holding

very strongly to some of these mental patterns.

The one that was loudest for me was "What's the use?" Interestingly, the couple of months prior to my diagnosis I was heavily focused on why everything in my life seemed to require so much struggle and fight. I had gotten to the point where I was exhausted with this experience and was becoming increasingly aware of my tendency in life to make decisions that would take me down paths that were more challenging if not the most challenging options I could choose. No wonder cancer was showing up to get my attention as if to say "enough already...you're eating yourself alive." Yes, this was a wake up call for me.

Another thing that came to my awareness was the degree to which I had ignored my physical body and my lack of appreciation for it. I was more concerned with intellectual and spiritual understandings and on some level wished I was no longer in physical form. I so longed to live in what I understand to be the spiritual realms that I was literally rejecting my physical life—much like cancer devours and rejects the physical host within which it lives.

I continued my investigation by recognizing that the tumor living and growing within me was in and of itself an entity that represented a part of my inner world. With this

awareness, I sat down one day and merged my awareness within the area of the tumor (active imagination). I immediately began to sob from the pain of rejection and hurt I felt from this tumor. The tumor was expressing how much it suffered due to the collective rejection and misunderstanding it experienced. There was no love or support for it, only hatred and war was directed towards it.

Given my emotional response to this mental impression, I knew that in order for me to heal, I was going to have to embrace and shower this cancer ("me") with love and seek the understanding that it sought to bring. In other words, its presence has a purpose and until that purpose is fulfilled the cancer might continue or need to recreate itself in order to bring about the needed balance my Soul is seeking.

From that point forward, it was no longer my "fight" with cancer but rather my "dance" with cancer.

There certainly are many other levels of awareness that have surfaced as a result of taking this approach to my life situation. I use my health crisis as a means to demonstrate that the process of individuation is not an intellectual conversation simply relegated to the purview of the mind, but rather a living breathing experience that one can engage with in every moment of their life, no matter how benign or extreme. In fact, if one is to devote themselves to individuation and the journey of becoming conscious, eventually a commitment to be fully present to the details of one's life and a shift from its literal interpretation to its symbolic interpretation is absolutely necessary.

Carl Jung's work has certainly been revolutionary, especially around the process of individuation and its part in consciousness. It is particularly relevant today as we continue to attempt to make sense of the events in our world (i.e. the economic crisis) and our part within them. One piece for sure is that we are being called to become more personally aware and present; to identify and begin to understand who we really are individually; and to take this personal awareness and extrapolate it out to others with compassion knowing that everyone out there lives within each and everyone of us.



# Painted Perceptions

by Dennis Patrick Slattery

He went among the blue river  
casting it in the summary of a  
brush stroke  
then stepped back, gazed with one  
eye at the mountain and  
knew that it existed only in  
space given by the mind  
where numerous dolphins  
could swim just below its  
summit, nuzzling the blue  
of mountain air with their  
hard snouts, then  
diving deep into air swirling  
in eddies and fathomless  
without bottom  
skeletons swam in swirls  
and paints mixed, creamy  
with impressions of where  
mind and matter spent  
themselves in arias  
of noble smells that  
baked into one another  
full of nakedness of form  
with no gaps, no fissures  
or fingered groves.

No,  
the world came to a  
cunning conclusion  
in paint the color of  
perception.

Completed was its death  
so he stepped back  
for lunch and left it  
to dry into itself  
with a firm conviction  
of its empty fullness.

The painting came to rest  
in a gallery brimming with  
galaxies of other palettes  
that carried their own pastel fictions.

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