

The Quest *for* Renewal

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It is that time of year when we turn our thoughts to vacation. Immediately our minds turn to images of deserted beaches, sparkling streams, mountain hideaways or foreign lands. We play out the anticipated scenario in our imaginations: departing our familiar worlds of home and work, venturing forth into new or different territories, meeting new people, having new experiences and returning home energized and renewed. We can hardly wait to give up, if only for a short while, the conformity to our regular routines and external demands and give ourselves over to those natural impulses for adventure and play. In our fantasies we see ourselves responding more spontaneously and naturally to everything around us. We anticipate and dream about being able to follow our internal clocks and to respond to our inner desires rather than an external structure. We hope to gather the pieces of our fragmented lives and find a renewed sense of self.

It occurs to me that this collective ritual and annual quest for renewal forms a parallel to that larger quest for consciousness, what Jung defines as Individuation. Our desire to leave old patterns and structures and return to a more natural and spontaneous way of responding to life reflects an archetypal pattern that is lived out over and over. Joseph Campbell, in his classic work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* has written about the infinite ways in which this archetypal paradigm is reenacted again and again. His explorations show how figures, from Gilgamesh and Odysseus, to Lancelot and Gulliver have participated in a quest that is essentially identical. Typically the journeyer follows a three stage pattern: separation from the known world, a penetration to some unknown territory which puts the explorer in touch with an inner source of power and then a life-enhancing return to the collective.

A vacation is often seen as an avenue to avoid stagnation, a way to find new energy and a new perspective. For most, it is taken willingly and is entered into with high anticipation and excitement. However, leaving old routines or going into new situations does sometimes create a certain amount of stress and anxiety. Some resistance may set in as worries about money, travel arrangements and accommodations begin to surface. "Can I really afford it?" "Will everything be the same when I return?" "Will I have the energy for the trip?" "Will I be able to find my way?"

Anything can be instrumental in initiating the quest for consciousness. It may be a dissatisfaction with the status quo, an urge to find new meanings or explore new territories, a religious illumination, a fascination with an object or figure, an intrinsic longing for unity or a desire for more intentional living. The unconscious may send all sorts of images, desires and urges into the mind to carry the human spirit forward. Whatever it is that lures the journeyer away from the familiar world, it carries the power of destiny, and when activated, calls up not only a sense of adventure, but also situations of danger, trial and mystery. The call it issues may feel like an impossible undertaking, because what has to be faced is unknown and often frightening to the conscious personality. Leaving old concepts, values and emotional patterns for the unknown promised treasure creates fear and a desire to remain with what is known and familiar. In the tension, the ego may become paralyzed and life may be filled with a sense of anxiety and confusion. Jung points out that this is often the time a person seeks the direction of an analyst, hoping to find an alternative solution, a map, an answer that doesn't require taking the journey. Resistance sets in because sacrifice of the old nature is part of the great paradox of the Quest.

If there is an initial refusal of the call, the messages may appear with increased strength and warning. Sometimes consciousness has removed itself so far from its roots in the unconscious that the tension between the two poles becomes extreme. Such situations can bring about powerful reactions from the unconscious and it may confront in unexpected and frightening ways, pushing one to turn to the stagnated and dying side of life which is lying in the unconscious. If the questions which pose themselves are refused altogether and the response is "I can't", then the quest is turned into its negative and life becomes meaningless, a wasteland. The future is then seen in terms of one's present system of ideals and the goal is to remain fixed and secure.

It takes a high degree of conscious motivation and courage to embark upon the journey. If the ego can take a decisive stand, it will elicit a compensatory countermove by the unconscious. If the messages and demands of the unconscious are disregarded, then it cannot function in a compensatory way but is instead forced to disturb and sabotage. Acceptance of the reality of the questions, messages or conflict that the unconscious presents us with is the required first step and requires a conscious act. The quest is energized by the ego's questions and search for answers.

Once the journey is undertaken, the question becomes how to survive the succession of trials and difficult tasks that are encountered. Just as we often hope for and rely on unknown forces and synchronistic events when we are traveling in our outer journeys, we come to realize the necessity of relying on the supernatural powers which present themselves along the way. In fairy tales, we often find the helpful animal, the fairy godmother, the dwarfs and elves, the wise old man or woman who appear as guides for the journey. In classical myth the guide is known as Hermes-Mercury. In Navaho tradition one of the most enchanting guides is Spider Woman, who warns of dangers, gives magic formulas and charms. Such figures, when they appear, provide reassurance of the decision that has been made and provide assurance of the protective powers that are always present within. These figures support the present struggles and assure us that we are on the right path. The

journey forces one again and again into impossible and dangerous situations which can only be overcome through faith and trust in the secret helpers and instructive figures which appear through dreams or in outer reality. For example, one of the first figures one may meet is what is known as the “threshold guardian” which stands at the entrance of the unknown area. These figures, which may appear in a variety of forms, stand for the limits of the quester’s present life or sphere and for the life beyond which involves the perils of the unknown. The Quest is always a passage beyond the veil of the known and the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous. They can only be met by those who possess the competence, courage and psychological readiness to face them.

The third stage, which is the return and reintegration into society, may be the most difficult part of the journey. This is when the journeyer returns with his or her treasure and tries to bring it into the known world. There is always the danger that the returning person may not be able to adjust to the world left behind or that the task of making the illumination or insight known to others seems too overwhelming. This stage of the journey makes us realize that the Quest is one of re-discovery and re-linking.

In the language of analytical psychology, the Quest can be summarized as the ego’s encounter with the archetypal elements of the psyche. The journey entails separation from the containing collective group (persona), conflict with repressed or unacceptable parts of one’s personality (shadow), establishing a relationship with the contrasexual elements in the psyche (anima or animus) and an encounter with the suprapersonal core of the psyche (Self). These psychic configurations express themselves as personalized complexes, which have an archetypal background.

Erich Neumann interprets the quest psychologically as the emancipation of the ego from the power of the maternal unconscious. The ego is what allows us to experience the Self and is the receiver of the unconscious experience. In the beginning of life it is contained in the Self. As circle, sphere, primal waters or garden it is the Self that contains, surrounds and infuses us. This first unity with the Self is unconscious, without conscious differentiation. Erich Neumann calls this situation a “unitary reality” of the archetypal field. Here the psyche of the infant or child operates in a relatively undifferentiated wholeness where there is no subject-object separation. Ego development gradually splits this “unitary reality” into an inner subjectivity and an outer objectivity. The second stage establishes the separation of ego and Self and the third is that of the “return” or fulfilling of the personality potential when the ego is drawn toward a re-establishment of the relationship with the Self. The return or re-linking with the Self is a conscious encounter and is always experienced as a mystery, something beyond oneself, a transpersonal being which can only be grasped symbolically.

For Jung, the Self is the transcendent goal toward which we travel. It is both what we came from and what we travel toward; it includes ego but can undertake dialogue with the ego. The Self stands for a union of inwardly reconciled opposites and eventually it demands new ways of being in relationship with these opposites. When the Self begins to exert influence on our personal and unconscious lives it can often seem like a destroyer,

because the ego is forced to move into an unknown position. Our personalities undergo reorganization which can be a painful process until gradually our lives come to be governed by a center of gravity and organization that includes transpersonal and unconscious realities. The Quest, the process of individuation, any truly creative act requires the abandonment of all cherished illusions and sense of order so that something deeper may arise. Releasing inner powers depends on the ability to submit to the journey and the process and chaos of becoming who we truly are. Then the questions change from “Why me?” and “What is the meaning of my existence?” to “What does this mean in terms of my potential wholeness?” “What can I understand from the situation in which I now find myself?” “What do I need to fulfill in my life?” These questions require an adaptation toward the disregarded inner world, a shift from the concrete to a symbolic approach to existence and an openness and freedom for creative initiative to emerge. They demand a position in which the answers to questions that pose themselves are allowed to evolve, sometimes in ways that cannot be anticipated, expected or hoped for, even in ways we may fear. This position, this attitude and response to life is the treasure we bring back from our journeys.



photo – Don Huntley