



# Robert Johnson

Kathy Brown

**R**obert Johnson, wise elder of the Jungian school of thought, is retiring this year at the end of a long and distinguished career. Johnson probably did more than anyone else to popularize the theories of Carl Jung. He is the author of many best-selling books covering a variety of topics related to the exploration of inner life. For the past 21 years his lectures and workshops have been a mainstay of the Journey into Wholeness conference offerings.

Events in Johnson's early life conspired with his introverted nature to turn him away from the world at large and toward the world within. As an adolescent, he was involved in an accident which resulted in the loss of his leg. At the age of sixteen he took a night job in a cannery and was overwhelmed by the extreme physical effort required for the work. It was following the first difficult shift there that Johnson reports having his initiatory grail experience. He left the cannery full of pain and despair and knew he must see something beautiful or die. He drove some distance, and then hiked to a quiet area to watch the sun come up. It was a magnificent sunrise, the likes of which he would not see again for another twenty years, and its beauty filled him with awe. He chuckles when he talks of leaving after the experience and returning to his car to find it had a flat tire. His life since then has been centered around connecting with the golden world of transcendent beauty that underlies what

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appears to our limited senses to be the mundane world of flat tires and time clocks.

His retirement from public appearances feels to me like a personal loss even though I heard him speak for the first time only a little over a year ago, at a Journey into Wholeness conference where he was one of the featured speakers, along with Marion Woodman, Paula Reeves, and other notable presenters.

Johnson chose as a lecture topic the living of symbolic life. The word *symbol* he said, meant to strike together, just as its homonym referred to a musical instrument whose sound was generated by the clashing together of two pieces of metal. A symbol then is the collision of two worlds, the inner and outer, the human and divine. Johnson spoke eloquently that day of the need to live symbolically, owning all the while that doing so was a tremendous struggle. He broke the struggle down for us into two parts, and warned that the first was very difficult. The second, he said, was impossible.

The difficult part was the frequent conflict between the need to live to the full extent of one's being and the necessity of being a civilized person. Not everything that lives inside of us is fit for public consumption and these parts of our personalities are naturally and properly harnessed.

Yet un-lived life goes rancid within us, and we are called to make every effort to express what we can of it, through the use of symbol when the actual living is unacceptable or impossible to achieve. Johnson used what he termed a "silly" example from his own life to illustrate. He spoke of his lanky runner's frame, indicating that he had an innate talent for running, stolen from him through the loss of his leg. He told his audience how he had compensated for this by performing a symbolic act which ritually reclaimed his identity as a runner. Although he did not go into the details of the act, he alluded to the use of toothpicks and a cutting board.

Most situations which beg for the acknowledgment and symbolic reclaiming of un-lived bits of personal life are more difficult than Johnson's running illustration but he warned us that part of this work would be difficult. Now, on to the impossible.

The impossible part is the need for symbolic manifestation of that which is too deep and too sacred to be fully brought into awareness. Johnson spoke of Moses' experience of this, when even on the mountaintop he was directed to hide his face so that God could pass by.

At the end of his lecture Johnson took questions and it was no surprise that the first one was a request for details about the ritual he had performed to symbolize his running of the four minute mile. Our interest in his personal journey probably reflected that for many of us Johnson himself is a symbol of the successful navigation of deep inner waters.

It was a later question however, and Johnson's answer to it, that held the group's attention and left us talking for days about what had happened. "To add to this conversation," a female participant said, and ...*bang!*... the world of a seated audience member

and the world of gravity came clashing together as a chair leg broke and threw its occupant to the floor.

For several minutes the mood in the auditorium changed as people assured themselves that the woman was unhurt, turned to those around them and remarked on the interruption. It seemed as if an unseen force had entered the room and shouted, "Now pay attention!"

Then the speaker began again, "To add to this conversation..." She spoke of an earlier lecture by another conference presenter, Marion Woodman, and said she believed that the acknowledgment and bringing into being of un-lived life of which Johnson had been speaking required the protection of the Great Mother symbol, a safe container in which to do the work.

"Now I m angry," Johnson said, a response that drew the audience to instant attention. "Not at you," he quickly continued, "but because you speak of how things ought to be, which is of no help, at least for the likes of stupid me." He then went on to speak of the difficulty for males of accepting outside authorities, and from there, into subjects posed by further questions.

As he began to close, Woodman herself rose from her chair in the audience and probed Johnson about what had seemed like a vehement response to the earlier question about a safe container. She talked about her own need for such a container, and asked, "Does that make sense?"

"The best of sense," he answered. "But I'm angry again." He went on to talk about the inadequacy of words for conveying meanings so profound and said he was angry not at any individual but at the "thunder of the proximity of God...and still the alienation."

In the past year I have often thought about this part of the lecture, and wondered about the energized response of many of the conference participants, some of whom were upset that the

women's comments were not more warmly received. However it was intended, I took Johnson's words to mean that we have the container we have. God is everywhere within the container, a fact too deep and sacred to be fully within our awareness, and available to us only symbolically. To some degree our safety within this sacred container depends on our willingness to do the work required to be fully ourselves, whatever the danger. To do less really puts us at greater risk.

When Johnson announced that his appearance this year at Journey into Wholeness would be his last, several Atlanta Jung Society members decided to make the pilgrimage to sit in his presence and listen to him speak one last time. Phil Cousineau joined him in these lectures, clarifying and gently guiding the conversation between us. Johnson spoke quietly about zero point, the point of stillness sometimes reached in meditation, the point of connection to the golden world. He alluded again to the early work experience which had had such an impact on him at a young age, both from the pain it caused him and the blessing it brought as opener of the door to the golden world.

"How many of you have seen the golden world?" he asked, and when a number of us raised our hands he nodded in acknowledgment and softly said, "It's right here."

As our time with Johnson drew to a close, he put his hands together, rose, and bowed to the audience, a gesture he prefers to the applause that more typically ends such events. As the audience members began to mill around, Deborah Herberger approached Cousineau and Johnson and asked if we all might sit together at zero point for a few minutes. They graciously complied.

The lights dimmed and we sat in a circle in the darkness, breathing silent prayers and goodbyes to Robert Johnson, beautiful symbol for our own depth, our own quiet knowing, our own connection to the golden world ■