

Van Waddy interviews

Jerry Ruhl

Jerry Ruhl, Ph.D., will be our speaker at our September meeting. He presently serves as the Executive Director of the C. G. Jung Educational Center in Houston, Texas. Jerry has collaborated on three books with Robert Johnson. He will speak to us in September about the “Hidden Gifts of Chaos and Confusion.” In order to understand some of his personal history, I recently had a chance to talk with Dr. Ruhl by phone.

VAN WADDY: You met Robert Johnson in 1987 and have been in a collaborative relationship with him ever since. Tell me about the “slender threads” that led you to Robert and his work and how this collaboration has served to only intensify your own creativity.

JERRY RUHL: I met Robert at a “Way of the Dream” Conference in Colorado and we recognized one another from across the room. The “slender thread” that brought us together was the physical manifestation of deep suffering we both had experienced in our early lives. Robert had been injured in a terrible accident at 11 yrs old, leaving him with deep unconscious wounds and a visible limp. I had polio as a child and had suffered subsequent reconstructive surgeries, which left me with a limp as well. When we began comparing our lives, our dreams, and our current interests, such as traveling in India and in the East, we found common passions and a shared vision.

VW: You had a mid-life conversion, so to speak, from a life in the corporate world to the world of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung. Was the music always playing for you and you just didn’t hear it, or was your fall from the corporate ladder even a surprise to you?

JR: I’ve been on this journey one way or another for a long time. I worked for two decades in the corporate world, a time centered in the ego and drawing upon the requirements of the persona. The inner callings of the Self were always there, but in the background until I reached mid life. I climbed the corporate ladder quickly, and while Director of Communications for United Artists Entertainment, a \$6 billion company, I used to think that my life had to be about something more than making

the world safe for cable television and multiplex theaters. As Campbell once said, I had climbed up a ladder only to realize it was leaning against the wrong wall. About the same time, I began to explore my own woundedness from childhood, instead of trying to hide it. I began the search to find meaning in the suffering I experienced as a boy.

VW: Where did your gifts come from?

JR: Whatever gifts I have as a therapist, as an author, and perhaps as a human being, are directly related to making suffering conscious. Campbell was famous for saying “follow your bliss.” Most people forget the next line in which he went on to say that your bliss is found as the rapture at the core of your suffering. That statement moved me profoundly, and it took years to realize its promise in my own life. Bliss is not some hedonistic pursuit of what the ego thinks it wants.

VW: Have you experienced in life any of those places Robert calls the “thin” places, where the Golden World shines through for a moment and then disappears from view?

JR: Yes. I have developed a deep and profound trust in what I call greater awareness, or the “slender threads.” The ego must learn when to assert itself, what its proper domain is, and when it should surrender to the slender threads, which is a way of talking about Tao or synchronicity or the dynamics of Jung’s Self. The important things in my life have all been decided by slender threads: events such as my first meeting Robert, a dream I had which foretold of our first book together (*Balancing Heaven and Earth*), my decision to move to a small town in Ohio after my son was born, the beginning of my friendship with Jim Hollis, the opening last year of the position at Jung Center Houston. My wife died last year after a three year battle with brain cancer. There were many “thin” places of great suffering during that time. The ego’s catastrophe can be God’s opportunity if we have ears to hear it and eyes to see it, but we usually can’t stand the pain and want to move out of the suffering. The word “to suffer” in its etymology means “to allow.” It is difficult to hold that center place, suspended between desire and fear – to allow it. This takes the ego to the end of its rope. One notch past the end of your rope is a still, quiet place. Surrender is necessary at critical points. The ego must do all it can, and then know when to surrender. It generally only goes down kicking and screaming. The part cannot conceive of the whole.

VW: Do you see these “thin places” happening in childhood or only after we become more conscious of them? I think of the many children who have experienced great loss and hardship as well as highly charged encounters, such as the children of Fatima, Bernadette of Lourdes, and my own experience as a young child growing up in the deep woods.

JR: My son is 12 years old. He was 11 when he lost his mother to cancer. Robert reminded me at that time of deep suffering that he lost his leg and almost bled to death at 11 – this was when he got his first taste of the Golden World and began on the path to the man he would become, the man who has touched the lives of so many. In the morning he was a giddy kid and by

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that night he was an old soul trapped in a child's body. These dangerous moments of profound suffering—times of total chaos and confusion—can break us, but with consciousness, they can transform us and shape the rest of our lives.

VW: What has loss and resilience taught you?

JR: It's a mystery, really. We have a natural resilience in us that will try to regroup as best it can; we can repress and dissociate painful events, but there is some other force in us that moves toward greater wholeness and integration and even enlightenment when we can stand it. This is "selfing." It once was called grace, because it cannot be willed but comes as a gift.

VW: What was the one most significant intervention into your life that saved you from becoming an "Eternal Boy"?

JR: The gift of my son. Fatherhood knocked out any latent puer tendencies in me; I had to get grounded, fast. However, I must add that regardless of our chronological age, we need access to puer energy or we become stiff and rigid. Hopefully, even at 88, you will still be in touch with the energy of the eternal youth because this is the fountain of creativity and new things.

VW: What would you like people to know about you?

JR: Following my mentor Robert's lead, I strive through stories to make accessible the deep and the great aspects of life, those invisible determining factors that surround us on every side and are available in the ordinariness of daily life. You don't have to go meditate on a mountain top to cross a little corner of heaven. You don't have to be a scholar to experience what Jung struggled so hard to express. You just have to take the inner world seriously, listen to it, stay true to it, and live with an ethical obligation to it. Do this and, as Jung said, "by your patience you shall win your soul."