

The Cross as a Tree of Life

By Masimilla Harris, Ph.D.

“**L**ife is difficult”... Scott Peck’s famous book, *The Road Less Traveled* provocatively opens with this assertion. Continuing, he says, many are called, few are chosen and that those who are chosen are dragged through the door kicking and screaming. Oh, how I identify with these words when I think about the Individuation process! As we know this is the process of becoming whole and who we are meant to be. It is also the process of having our ego come into an increasingly close relationship with our Self until it becomes an expression of it in life. Such a coming closer is uniquely personal and brings a confrontation with our old identities and thus becomes life changing.

Jung told us clearly that every step closer to the Self is a defeat for the ego with its old ideas about who we are and who we can become. This struggle is meant to transform us and if we understand this process it should make our ego more balanced and stronger. To take up this struggle of transformation reminds me of the symbolism of “taking up my own cross”... and in the Individuation process, the cross becomes a symbol of our transformation, a symbol of Life.

As a symbol, we can see the cross representing, as Edinger proposes, what our ego—our self with a small “s”—must go through in the dynamic journey of transformation that marks the path of its increasing relationship to the Self. Scott Peck is right about life being difficult. Each step in the journey of transformation includes dying to some part of our ego. The Individuation process is marked by learning that life doesn’t conform to who we think we are or want to be, or how we think life should be or we have dreamed of it to be. As we give these things up it feels like a crucifixion, the *mortificatio* stage in alchemy, and we suffer as we are symbolically scourged, hurt, torn apart, depressed and lost. Understanding and embracing this process, enduring it, submitting ourselves to its passion leads to a fuller life. If we accept the challenge of the confrontations with the dark aspects of transformation—instead of fighting it or avoiding it, then something extraordinary happens. Our cross becomes the “true” Tree of Life and we experience the new life and creativity that the Self has to offer.

I love the fresco by Giovanni di Corraduccio detto Mazzaforte in the Monastery of Saint Anna, also called the Monastery of the Countesses which is in Foligno, Perugia, Italy. The fresco, circa 1430, gives us a wonderful visual representation of each step in the Individuation journey. Mazzaforte, a great artist, devoted his life to religious symbolism. Here in this image he represents Jesus Christ hung on a tree. At the base of this tree, there is a skull and next to it a scroll that says “Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.” (John:



Giovanni Mazzaforte fresco in the Monastery of Saint Anna

12:24). Psychologically, this statement can be interpreted as describing the moment when we reach a certain point of desperation/determination and say, “Enough, this is it” and from that moment we are able to take a new direction in life. This symbolic tree of life shows both our own life’s journey and the journey of each of our periods of transformation. I have found it especially meaningful that this image is in a sacred space dedicated to a woman saint and that it has been a refuge for women over the centuries. This fact seems to ground this cross/tree of life in the feminine just as the cross is grounded in the earth.

Since our space is limited I am only able to give a brief description of each scroll and a psychological parallel to each one of them as a turning point in the Christian myth and in our periods of transformation.

The first scroll is about the Incarnation of Christ. It also includes Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the Annunciation, Visitation and Nativity of Christ.

The birth story of Jesus can represent both the birth of our conscious ego and the potential for the incarnation of our Self in life. There is also the reminder that as King Nebuchadnezzar, if our ego reaches too far in its belief that we can control our psyche, we will lose touch with our humanity and fall into a dangerous regression.

The second scroll contains the Circumcision, the Adoration by the three Kings, the Presentation of Jesus to the Temple and the Slaughter of the Innocents.

In the Hebrew tradition, circumcision comes eight days after birth and symbolizes God’s promise of the future to Abraham. In psychological terms, this ritual act can symbolize the promise of a fulfilled life if the path of individuation is faithfully followed. The promise represented by circumcision can ma-

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ture into the circumcision of the heart, a symbolic purification of love. Psychologically, this can mean that Individuation can carry us into experiences of love that are not contaminated by complexes. In every transformation there is a slaughter of our own innocence, our old identity, pieces of our old self concept, old values, how we see old obligations, sentimental values, even what have been our strongest ideals.

The third scroll has the Baptism of Christ, Christ in the desert, Christ tempted by Satan, Christ giving Sight to a Man Born Blind, and the Transfiguration.

Our ego is accepting the journey of individuation which brings both a sense of loneliness and temptation. We are easily tempted to identify with the Self, become inflated with the power of our new journey, and have old complexes try to usurp the vitality and creativity of the Self. Staying authentically in touch with the Self teaches us how important it is to “*open our eyes and see*” the true nature of our reality. Transformation, rebirth and renewal implies a change in our former nature.

In the fourth scroll we have Christ in the garden of Gethsemani, the Resurrection of Lazarus, Christ’ Entry to Jerusalem, Washing of the Feet and the Last Supper.

In these scenes our Ego is facing the death, agony of an old orientation that precedes the birth of a new one. It is a moment of despair, where there is no comfort or support. The Self, though, is shown to be able to bring new life to the dead. Many people today have difficulty understanding the symbolic life, yet in order to grasp this higher understanding, it is essential to understand and actually live the deep life which takes us out of our heads and illusions of safety and into the blood, sweat, tears and exuberance of life. Such earthiness always results in humility.

In the fifth scroll Judas receives his Compensation, Christ is praying in the garden of Gethsemani, there is the Kiss of Judas, the Death of Judas and the Capture of Christ.

From a psychological point of view we can say that at some point in our Individuation we discover that when we betray ourselves to please others, to gain approval, or meet social and cultural expectations, what we are doing will lead us to bitter consequences. Jesus praying at Gethsemani and being captured shows the powerful tension we are caught in between collective values and obligations and our sense of responsibility to the Individuation process.

In the sixth scroll Peter denies Jesus, Christ is in front of Caiphas, Christ is in front of Pilate, and there is the Scourging.

How often do we deny our true self in the face of conventional wisdom and social pressure? How often do we betray our true self in response to the pressures of collective ideals, obligations, responses? Our question is: can we remember and build on these events, and have them become the “rock” in our foundation and not fall into discouragement, self-criticism and abandonment of the journey.

Christ is mocked in the seventh scroll and we have Christ Ascending Mount Calvary, Christ nailed to the Cross, Soldiers Quarreling for his Tunic, the Crucifixion, and Christ is given vinegar.

When we pursue Individuation, we become easy victims of

negative projections and we are often accused of being inconsiderate, selfish and self-centered. It appears that we are not the person we used to be by the people closest to us, whom we have relied on for love, support, and friendship. In this journey in which we thought we would find fulfillment, we may first find the pain of rejection and loneliness. This adds to the challenges and pain of our transformative periods.

In the eighth scroll we have the Death of Christ, Longinus piercing the side of Christ, God the Father and Two Angels showing the bloody tunic of Christ and Christ in the Sepulcher.

There is a paradox in this image that shows both the death of an old part of our ego, the agony of that process, the finality of that process, and also that the strength required to suffer and endure this process had been attained.

The ninth scroll contains the Descent of Christ to Limbus, *Noli me tangere*, Christ holding a rod that is blooming and Christ resurrected appearing to the Apostles.

After the crucifixion of our ego, there is a period of darkness and despair when everything seems lost. It is what the mystics call the Dark Night of the Soul when our life seems totally alone, without vitality, purpose, meaning and future. But the rod that is blooming reflects the hope in the Tree of Life and the new transformed ego.

The tenth scroll has the Ascent of Christ, Christ seated at the Right Hand of the Father, Pentecost and Christ forgiving the Sins of the Elected.

The ego has become integrated in its relationship with the Self. The Ego is now in its proper relationship to the Self and is receiving new vitality from the Self. The value of the Shadow has been recognized and accepted.

The eleventh scroll contains the Resurrection of the Dead, the Last Judgment, the Fall of the damned and the Coronation of the Virgin Mary.

Now, forgotten parts of our personality come back to life. Through reflection, through the act of cognition and judgment, we strengthen and enlarge our consciousness. Thus, the Self becomes manifested in the human acts of reflection and living. As healers, or simply as conscious human beings, we must accept and transform our dark side and honor the feminine within us if we desire to be of a positive influence in this world, and accept and deal with the dark aspects in others.

In the twelfth scroll Christ is surrounded by the Virgin Mary, Apostles and Angels, Christ is at the Right Hand of the Father with the Apostles, *Christ fons vitae*.

The feeling of wholeness that we attain in Individuation connects us with eternity in this life. Only if we are capable of truly accepting ourselves including our most undesirable aspects, will we be able to accept others with their own troubles and miseries. In this way, we become true fountains of life. Like the grain of wheat, we have fallen on the ground and died, and now we yield a rich harvest of wholeness and renewed life.

In the Individuation process, “embracing our cross” means accepting the transforming power of suffering or as Jung says accepting that “every psychic advance of man arises from the suffering of the soul (CW 11,497).It means that Indi-

viduation brings about a passion within the ego that is necessary for us to come into relationship with the Self. When the Self becomes the center of how we live our life, it is a humbling defeat for the ego and often threatens the foundation of our self-esteem during our period of transformation.

Many people are interested in Jung and Jungian psychology but, as Scott Peck pointed out, not all of them are willing to pay the demanding price of Individuation. Some people are willing to do the work up to a certain point but are unwilling or unable to threaten their prized, convictions, values, old establishment thoughts, or obsolete positions that are asking for renewal. In terms of images, they opt for a normal tree as their representation for the Individuation process. Their development is acceptable, open to life, but not truly fruitful or truly life-giving because their standard is in some aspects still a collective or complex dominated one.

There are other people that do understand what Individuation is about—they know and accept that life is difficult and humbling. They are willing to honor that recognition with their own sacrifices in order to completely fulfill their destiny. It is not an easy path because we are all called to face our fear of life, fear of failure, doubts, insecurities and to face and transform our major complexes. But along this path we are accompanied step by step by the Self which gives us the tools to create Our Tree of Life—something beyond what we could have imagined was possible.

Jung himself went through his own crucifixion. In *Memoires, Dreams, Reflections* he writes that “the daemon of creativity has ruthlessly had its way with me.” Before he died, Jung had a dream in which he saw a square with trees growing in it, and the roots of these trees were intertwined with green and gold. It is as if the unconscious was saying, “Job well done. Your life has developed into something life-giving and precious.”