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Cleaning Clutter... and More

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It is the beginning of another New Year, bringing with it possibilities of new beginnings and resolutions about new ways of living. The collective messages tell us it's the perfect time to clear out our clutter and get organized. So, like many other folks, I head to the store to purchase all of the bins, containers and other products that will help me with the process of cleaning my own clutter and getting organized. I imagine how much better I am going to feel when I go to look for a file and it's neatly labeled and correctly situated in my file cabinet. Or how much time and energy I'm going to save by being able to easily put my hands on a particular quote or book that I need. Or the enjoyment I will have when I am able to view my photographs displayed in albums or on discs instead of scattered in boxes. Life will be different.

But when the excitement and the visions of a new way of living come face to face with the actual task, something changes. As I sit surrounded by the growing upheaval and

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chaos created by the piles of papers, books, photos and keepsakes I'm trying to sort through, my mind and body begin to falter at the Herculean task in front of me. What was I thinking? Why didn't I leave well-enough alone? I hear the voice in my head that says "it will just have to be done again in another year or two." As I haul trash bag... after trash bag...after trash bag down the stairs and out to the garbage pickup, I'm reminded of Sisyphus hauling the stone up the hill over and over only to have it fall back down again. I am caught by the absurdity of the task I'm engaged in and have to fight the desire to flee. But I persevere and stay with the project. It is indeed "Sisyphus work."

Even more difficult perhaps than the physical part of the task is the mental aspect, of making decisions about what to keep and what to throw away. I'm often caught in the paralyzing position of not being able to decide between letting go or holding on to something. Item after item pulls and tugs at me to take a stand. Of course if my courage fails me, I can always (and sometimes do) trick myself by just placing the items in new folders or containers and putting them back where they were. This of course guarantees that I'll probably find myself caught in the same position in the future, sorting through the very same items, caught in the same dilemma. As I work to hold myself to the task, I begin to think about what might be happening on a psychological level. What is the archetype at work here?

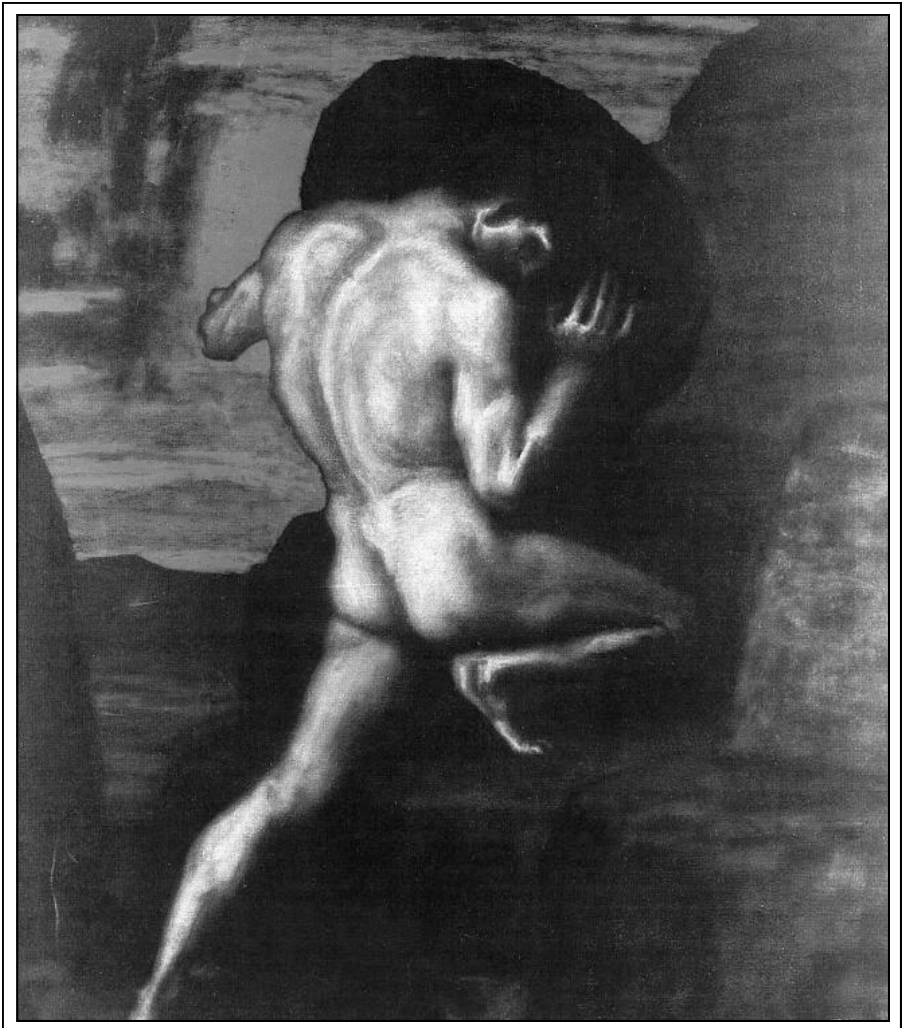
Clutter is stuff we don't need or want. It weighs us down and we feel suffocated under layers of stuff. Clutter steals our time when we can't find anything. It takes up space in our head as well as in our closets, files and shelves. It nags at us with reminders of unmade decisions, unfinished projects. It keeps us in the past, reminding us of decisions we haven't made or things we just haven't gotten round to yet. Clutter not only makes it hard to find anything or close the cabinets. It also makes it hard to achieve closure about anything.

Mental clutter also suffocates us, steals our energy, nags at us and keeps us in the past. Some of the mental clutter that we may carry around are old beliefs that restrict us, past hurts, images of ourselves that are no longer valid or true, a false sense of responsibility, outdated family beliefs and unrealistic expectations of ourselves. Why would we want to hold on to these things if they prevent us from living more fully?

Letting go of something to make a new beginning requires more than perseverance. It also requires an understanding of what it is within us that undermines our resolve and casts doubts about moving forward. Holding on to our physical as well as our mental clutter can be like holding on to a security blanket. It reassures us about who we are and it may also hold back the fear that we might feel if we were free to move in an uncluttered way into a new and challenging future. We are all torn between the developmental thrusts that push us forward and the impulses toward repetition and regression that aborts them. That old voice that says "Just leave it alone" or "Don't rock the boat" or "Not now" represents that regressive pull to hang on to the security blanket a little longer in order to feel safe.

Another reason we may not be able to let go of our clutter is because we've adopted the hero or heroine's stance much too long. This stance is appropriate for the first half of life, but the second half often calls for something else, which usually has to do with letting go. Letting go and holding on are two sides of the same coin and both attitudes are necessary. Sometimes it is important to persevere and keep rolling our stone. At other times it is important to recognize when there is no alternative but to let it go. For example, if we overreach or handicap ourselves with unrealistic expectations, then it may be time to let go. Sisyphian behavior needs to be applied in the right life situation.

We are always caught in that tension between struggling with a fruitless task or position and letting go too easily. The myth tells us that Sisyphus defied the gods and outwitted death two times, suggesting his unwillingness and refusal to accept the inevitability of death and to let go of life voluntarily. Accepting death means recognizing endings. Sisyphus' punishment (or fate) was that he was eternally bound to labor with no prospect of ever being able to let go. He became a prisoner of his own decision not to give up.



Franz von Stuck, *Sisyphus*, 1920

We use many excuses for holding on to a belief, an issue or a position for too long. One of the most familiar ways is to make others responsible for things we just can't seem to change. This is often most clearly seen in our relationships. Like Sisyphus, we kind of get into a groove, repeating the same dysfunctional patterns over and over again. We blame it on our partner or hope that next time things will be different, without doing the hard work of self-examination and change. Or we refuse to take a stand and make difficult choices, rolling the stone up the hill yet another time, following the same path because that is what we're used to.

The classic view of the Sisyphus story contends that Sisyphus' labor conveys a hopelessness about one's fate and a punishment that has been decreed by the gods. Albert Camus, the existentialist, sees Sisyphus as a figure of life. He goes on to say that the unilluminated man normally lives in hope and the belief that his labor will lead to something. Sisyphus knows however, that the labor of getting his great rock up the hill will end with its rolling down again and that this grim labor will last forever (Camus, 1955).

Joseph Campbell speculates about the pause that must occur before Sisyphus has to roll the stone back up the hill again. He imagines it as a breath of relief and an hour of consciousness and in these moments, says Campbell, Sisyphus is superior to his destiny, stronger than his rock. If the myth is

seen as tragic, it is because its hero is conscious, for where would the agony be if at each step he were sustained by a hope of success. It becomes tragic in those moments when Sisyphus knows the whole extent of his condition (Campbell, 1968, p. 422-23).

Verena Kast, a Jungian analyst, explores the Sisyphus myth in terms of the challenges we all face in dealing with the possibilities of change and the limits of growth. She points out that such issues can never be solved or eliminated, only coped with, like the stone of Sisyphus. There is no hero's reward for Sisyphus. He is engaged in a solo task that will bring him no outside recognition.

We might see the Sisyphus image as a picture of the intense engagement we undergo with our own familiar complexes. The endless repetition that Sisyphus is engaged in reflects on the one hand the apparent feeling of fruitlessness and despair that we sometimes feel as we encounter the same recurring complexes over and over. We all know that feeling of "Oh no, not this again." We try to change, but it often feels like we're getting nowhere. Kast reminds us that "...no matter how often the same old struggle seems to be repeated, it is the way in which we tackle it that brings us an increase in autonomy during the course of our lives. As long as we are firmly convinced that the problem must be overcome once and for all, we will be repelled at the prospect of taking up the stone once again. But if we can accept that our principle problems will show us only very little that is new, and that we can only achieve a certain amount each time, then we will hoist the stone when it is time to do so just to see how far we can get with it this time." (Kast, 1991, p.78). This attitude amounts to embracing the rhythm of life, of confronting our limitations and the ongoing struggle we are all engaged in.

Jung also reminds us that "...the greatest and most important life problems are basically unsolvable...They can never be solved but merely outgrown..." (Jung, 1929, p. 12) Change is only possible when we can let go and accept our situation, or accept that the particular complexes that we keep painfully encountering over and over will always be with us. We have to let go of our illusions in order to see the real possibilities.

In this light, Sisyphus may be viewed as a resilient character, a mold for a person who perseveres and does what is possible with his assigned life task. Sisyphus continues to exert himself, is disappointed over and over again and yet refuses to run away, despite disappointments and resistances. He risks new beginnings in the face of defeat. He is a model and a reminder perhaps, about the importance of living life as intensely as possible while accepting the inevitable losses and changes that occur.

As I read more about Sisyphus, I find that he is connected to Hermes, the god of change and creativity. Hermes brings about connections and transitions and expresses the possibility of new beginnings and creative transformation. As a messenger of the gods, Hermes connects heaven with earth as well as earth with the underworld. He was the patron of merchants, travelers, rogues and thieves. We also find that stones and gravestones were sacred to Hermes. For example, stone pillars which protected Greek houses were viewed as the residence of a god and were called Herms.

Because of the connection between Hermes and stones, as

well as the connection between stones and fertility goddesses, Kast challenges us to think of the stone not just in terms of a burden but in terms of something divine that may be trying to break through into our lives. In reality, a stone may be an assigned life task and it is the Sisyphean work that ultimately facilitates the breakthrough of something divine in a human being. We know that the greatest potential for our development is usually offered through our greatest problems. How often have we shouldered or been faithful to an assigned task and found that it was in the very process of being faithful to the task and giving it our all that we found our greatest strength and our most divine aspects.

Individuation is a lifelong task and we are called to meet the challenges as they present themselves to us. It is also a creative process and creative acts don't usually happen in a single attempt. Instead, they usually require many steps, often with many small failures along the way. The Sisyphus myth may be viewed as a representation of an essential aspect of that creative process.

Genuine changes do begin within us, but they are often brought to our attention by external events or circumstances or in our everyday tasks and obligations. Following the same routines in our daily lives, whether it is going from appointment to appointment, making those reminder phone calls, balancing our bank account over again or explaining our ideas for the hundredth time may seem hopelessly dull and repetitious. But these are the trivia of life from which new life may spring. It is the perseverance and attendance to the particular tasks that our life presents us with that is important and that may bring us to a deeper understanding of ourselves.

The impetus and necessity for tackling my own physical clutter seemed to come from outer circumstances. But then I started noticing that the themes of clearing out clutter, letting go, holding on and making space for myself were popping up in many other places and situations. Jung refers to these as synchronistic events, when there is a meaningful coincidence between a state of mind or a dream and events that occur in the outer, physical world. Each synchronistic event that happened to me illuminated the greater reality that was addressing me and reinforced the link between my external project and the internal changes that needed attending to or that were already occurring.

Jung often recognized that there is a deeper dimension to the external events that capture our attention and that they can play an important part in the process of our development. When we attempt to live meaningfully and soulfully, the distinction between external and internal world, or subject and object breaks down. Sometimes the internal world speaks the loudest and acts upon us, as in a dream or through a depression. At other times the external world initiates the challenge and motivates change. Our job is to make the connection between our external and internal worlds and to be attuned to how the occurrences in both worlds are supporting our individuation process. Without the convergence of our objective and subjective experiences the full depth of our personalities will not be realized. As Thomas Merton said:

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived."