

# Back to the Future:

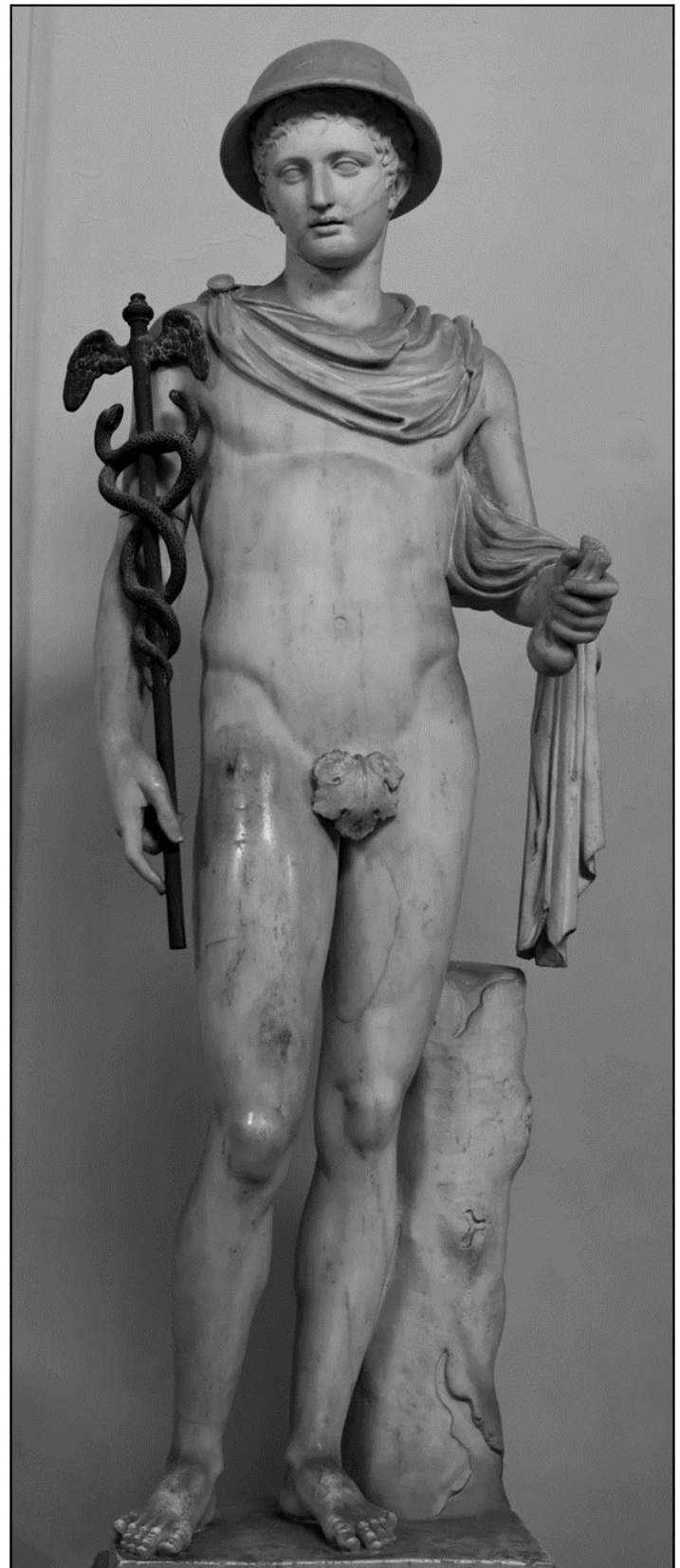
## Moving From Hercules to Hermes

by Doug Tyler

In thinking about various ideas for this essay, a persistent theme kept emerging for me—that of consciously shifting more deeply and meaningfully into our lives. This idea may carry little novelty for us since we all share an interest in Jung and in the muddling through of our lives; when we are conscious of and attend to this process we more elegantly call it individuation. Recent articles in this publication alone wonderfully address the call to grow down and into life. And, of course, Jung demonstrated the unique path he took in *The Red Book*, and the unconscious was at times rather aggressive in its unequivocal treatment of him. He described his encounter with the unconscious as moving from “the spirit of the times” to “the spirit of the depths.”

Following this lead, we also can access an image of what the spirit of our times looks like and another image to help us move into the “spirit of the depths.” A most prominent characterization of our time is the myth of the hero—a vital psychic process needed to establish our place in the world. The hero is a constant companion in conversations, the media, and in our daily lives. It is the primary myth that constellates the first half of life, whereby we grow into adulthood and make decisions regarding work, family, and life. No doubt Jung possessed a strong heroic attitude to confront the unconscious as he did. And this is just the reason to develop a strong standpoint in the world—to then possess the strength to pursue the depths.

One enduring image representing such heroic effort is a familiar one for all of us—that of Heracles (more commonly known to us as the Roman Hercules). Perhaps you have even seen the most recent cinematic iteration of this archetypal image. He is fully powerful, fully strong and focused, and fully heroic. We all carry our version of herculean strength and effort, for it is archetypal in nature—common to all. For us to successfully participate in the conscious and extroverted world, we must activate this energy beginning at a relatively young age. You might ask what this looks like in yourself. Perhaps it appears as pushing forward and conquering some aspect of life; or perhaps it materializes as defending who you are to yourself and others. Certainly there is no shortage of resources to assist this latent archetypal calling. Parents and family exhort us in our quest (if even to satiate their unfulfilled desires), and our education system challenges us to take in what it deems valuable and draw out what is within us. Society bathes us with images of success and offers the necessary ingredients to accomplish such. Books, movies, sports, games, etc. all implore us to build an ego that can both live in the world and simultaneously withstand the various shadow assaults we encounter. All of this requires herculean energy—exemplified in Hercules’ 12 heroic labors noted in the classical Roman story. Our lives are inundated with herculean imagery, and no doubt this tale is a guide for



Hermes

us in our formative life quests.

But the herculean effort required to develop our participation in the “spirit of the times,” as necessary as this is, can take us only so far. This power is primarily of this upper ego world, not the underworld (although Hercules did enter the underworld in the 12<sup>th</sup> labor—with help). But into

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the underworld (unconscious) we must go if individuation is honored. For this we need another image upon which to rely—one requiring “powers” different from but inclusive of the hero. Hermes (or Mercurius, whose invaluable spirit Jung describes in CW 13) is such an image—a divine being for whom the Greeks assigned varied powers. His rational and serious older brother Apollo dubbed him “Prince of Thieves;” he became a messenger of the gods and for humans as well as a guide for souls to the underworld. The author of the classical Hymn to Hermes describes him as, “...the very crafty, super-subtle Hermes: thief, cattle rustler, carrier of dreams, secret agent, prowler...” We know him as a trickster, the god of boundaries and crossroads, and, importantly, he is associated with the night (unlike Apollo, the god of truth and solar consciousness, etc.). So what can we learn from this ancient psychic image?

Even though Hermes was a god to the Greeks and an archetypal image to us, his character suggests less a spirit of heroic accomplishments through power and more a spirit of relationship with the journey, our process—including death. Hermes embodies a peripatetic character—always moving. He seeks no particular end point, only moving toward. As Karl Kerényi, Jung’s associate, wonderfully points out, Hermes is not akin to the later Christian God of repentance and salvation where one turns for cleansing of their sins; he is the god, the psychic energy, of becoming. For this reason, it is of little surprise that he is known as the patron saint of Analytical Psychology. He symbolizes the individuation process. But we must not complacently imagine Hermes as a conceptual being. He represents a living archetypal process—full of surprises, trickery, crossroads, and thievery.

Let us first consider Hermes as messenger of the gods. In this guise he delivers the will of the gods, images from the Self we would say, through our dreams, fantasies, and active imagination. And those out-of-the-blue slips or “mistakes” in our daily thoughts and interactions—like waking dreams that deftly bypass the ego’s sentries—are Hermes’ doing. I imagine most of us are guilty of taking ourselves too seriously at times, which brings some unintended response to reflect our folly in such high-minded pursuit. Hermes is the culprit, the trickster, delivering our lesson. In our current language Hermes is, in part, the movement of the Self, ferrying images from the unconscious into consciousness as he moves seamlessly between these two worlds. Dreams are brought to us, fantasies surprisingly appear, and we are left with the choice to invite our new “guests” into the ego’s space or rebuff them at the threshold. If we invite them in we then have a guide in Hermes as well. He is the psychopomp, the guide of souls into the underworld; he knows the way. At this point we are holding the opposites of what we know and possess along with discoveries from the unconscious. Mind you, this is no ordinary journey as surprises and bumps in the night lie ahead. But we can now move ahead, albeit most often not as we plan. When Jung speaks of the transcendent function, he is referring to this Hermetic/Mercurial spirit which births a new image, a new discovery out of opposites consciously held. The messenger conveys the message and the guide steers the course. Perhaps you have been in a situation where you suddenly know what is coming next—a comment, an idea, an image, a phone call, etc. Hermes is in your midst—delivering without detection.

To my thinking, this is where we psychologically cross from the Herculean over to the Hermetic realm. We can call this transition the point of initiation—the transformative space wherein we sacrifice the ego’s control of the intended trip and come into rela-

tionship with the soul’s journey. For transformation to occur something is sacrificed, and this most typically is our attachment to our ego’s desires. Hermes is the deliverer and guide into discovering who we are beyond whom we have learned to be. Initiation requires a ritual to carry us across a boundary into this new territory (of our being). Analysis is an example of such a ritual—where two souls move into a shared space to discover and assimilate the abiding images of and in the unconscious. Such a ritual space serves as an in-between vessel where we hold and experience both “worlds.”

I wish to not idealize nor romanticize this process. Because we discover meaningfulness in our lives within such sacred space does not mean we easily nor blindly accept what we experience. Jung was quite clear about this as he demonstrated in active imagination the need for the ego to be solidly moored in one’s being. And here we see a value of herculean energy—the strength of a developed self with which to meet the unconscious. However, at this point we must also sacrifice our adoration of this herculean attitude and use it instead to come into *relationship* with the Otherworld of soul. Much like the archetypal nature of our intimate relationships, this one too is fraught with all kinds of ups and downs. And this now brings us to a rather perplexing quality in Hermes: the “Prince of Thieves” who operates in the darkness.

Thievery among the ancient gods was laughed at and enjoyed. But for us mortals it is quite a serious matter all together because thievery threatens personal and collective order. As we know, Hermes’ power to move swiftly between worlds via his golden winged sandals includes his relationships to humans as well as the gods. He is a divine being (i.e., archetypal reality) and yet a divine thief. The Greek scholar Kerényi again helps us as he describes this aspect of Hermes’ nature: “through him every find, which in itself belongs to the Gods and not to man, becomes a theft that is put to better use.” So we see here that what is stolen (or brought to us by the Self) is intended for our gain. The theft and delivery is a gift of the gods. This divine theft is beyond the ego’s moral obligation not to steal from one another. In our daily lives we are punished for such behavior. But for our purposes here, being in the realm of the active psyche, we are asked to relate to and assimilate such thievery. The origin of this notion is found in the ancient culture. When one would approach a crossroads, he would find a monument to Hermes (a Herm or Herma) upon which offerings were laid to aid travelers. It would please Hermes when one stole or partook of the offerings to the god, thus caring for oneself and sustaining his journey. In this motif we see the need for an offering to the god—or, for us, the conscious offering of honoring and trusting the psyche for what it holds and then offers back to us. In this manner receiving a “theft” as a gift now creates a pair of opposites (what is known to us and what is given by the Self), which is held in tension in order for us to become (via experiencing our respective journeys).

So, the hero, imaged as herculean energy, initiates and guides the ego’s journey. And by offering sustained attention to one’s individuation process, this energy can transform into Hermetic energy, initiating and guiding the soul’s journey.

Blest be the traveler.