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The New Stories of Our Souls

Please know this. You are not an encapsulated bag of skin dragging around a dreary little ego. You are an evolutionary wonder, a trillion cells singing together in a vast chorale, an organism-environment, a symbiosis of cell and soul.

—JEAN HOUSTON,
EGO DEATH AND PSYCHEDELICS

Our normal waking consciousness ... is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.

—WILLIAM JAMES, *THE VARIETIES
OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE* (1902)

Everything you see has roots in the unseen world.

—RUMI

The ultimate awakening, say the great wisdom traditions, is radical, nonseparate, “nondual” awareness—stable, conscious wholeness. Paradoxically, though, applying nondual orientations to the messiness of life

often results in delusions. In practical terms, transcendental spiritual teachings are certainly an incomplete description of what it actually takes to engage in a total and integral life of practice. For most people, a second and simultaneous mystical adventure is also real and necessary. I call it “soul work.”³⁷

This kind of mystical growth is visible in the life journey through its tests, lessons, and adventures. Soul work contacts intuitive guidance, cultivates character, and discovers purpose. It draws upon the power of the foundational structures of the human psyche and human culture as they are revealed in archetypal stories. Every one of us is living out a unique story, even while we all share a collective story. Today, all those stories unfold in an unprecedentedly urgent context. We are living through a particular moment in our great collective story, and it confers an extra dimension of meaning and purpose on every individual life journey.

Whereas the ultimate spiritual awakening is to radical and transcendental consciousness, soul work intuits and participates primarily in the subtle animating energetics of our lives and their sources of guidance and inspiration.

PURPOSE AND SOUL

A great deal of dynamic personal growth work focuses on purpose. Purpose gives us meaning. Meaning confers value. Value is a basis for dignity. And dignity is essential to health. People who have a sense of positive purpose thrive more. Research documents that a sense of purpose or meaning correlates with dramatic benefits to mood, quality of relationships, success in careers, cognitive function, cardiovascular health, immune function, and longevity.³⁸ Egoic purpose is sufficient for basic health, but larger purposes beyond the apparent separate ego—for example, those centered around one’s community, or nation, or the world, or the cosmos—have the potential to liberate progressively higher levels of happiness and thriving. As a result of these observations, the fields of coaching and psychotherapy have evolved a new specialty, in which people are guided into a full, healthy relationship to their life purpose.

As methodologies are charted for thriving at a new level, we learn the art and science of mastery as it emerges organically from meaning and motivation.

This is an important contemporary expression of the ancient tradition of soul adventure and maturation, which is celebrated in the esoteric traditions of all religions. In that ancient framing, the hero's purpose was his story. He or she seized a means by which to live a meaningful destiny. Today, we all must become the heroes of our own stories. None of us wants an insignificant, ignorant, impoverished, diminished destiny in a diminishing world. We feel called to be the heroes of our lives, and perhaps heroes of our collective life. So a focus on purpose is an ever more crucial dimension of personal transformation. It is an important dimension even of indigenous soul traditions. Ecopsychologists like Bill Plotkin have been exploring how people can incarnate their soul life and purpose by deriving virtue, vitality, and guidance from relationships with natural places, animals, trees, and plants. From both local and global foundations we can become heroically related to our whole more-than-human world.

Socrates, as related by Plato in *The Republic*, told “the myth of Er,” which describes what happens between lifetimes. After death each soul drinks the water of Lethe and forgets everything of the life just ended and all past identities. But your character, shaped by the virtue you cultivated in your previous life and lives, remains. And on the basis of your character, you are assigned your *daemon*, your life's soul companion, the carrier of your deeper flavor, your soulful nature and guiding spirit. Then you go before the Fates: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos.

On the basis of your character and daemon, Clotho spins forth the unique circumstances of your birth—including everything we ordinarily associate with both heredity and environment—as your “spindle destiny.” Next you go before Lachesis, who assigns your luck, the subtle magnetism that surrounds your daemon, attracting and repelling certain people, events, and qualities of experience. This too is responsive to your character, and like your character, this magnetism remains malleable as you continue to practice and cultivate virtue. The last fate, Atropos,

assigns the moment of your death, which is determined before you are even born. She was “she who cannot be turned”—not malleable at all.

The deeper significance of this ancient Greek view is what it says about a soul’s task, which is to cultivate virtue, to develop character, and to build a relationship with one’s daemon—to learn to listen to the voice of the daemon with the “ear of the heart” and to realize one’s soul’s highest destiny. This resonates with James Hillman’s “acorn theory” (1997), in which, like an acorn, which is potentiated to become an oak, the soul is potentiated to gradually express its unique character across the trajectory of a human life. Serious soul work is directed at discovering and realizing the soul’s deepest purposes.

In this work, we ask to hear the voice of our soul, our daemon. And then we make ourselves a pleasing offering and wait in silence. After a time, it blesses us by awakening a channel of communication, eventually helping us discover that our own way of being, our own way of seeing things, our own way of going through the world, is, paradoxically, a kind of salvation. By this means we arrive in soul-level authenticity, where our purpose can naturally show itself to us, and show us how to grow to incarnate it more and more fully, and discover its far corners. As we each do this, traveling every step in our unique paths, we can discover that together we are all dancing a precise, beautiful holographic choreography, through which the soul of the world is working out its passionate logic, or *entelechy*.

FROM THE TRANSCENDENT TO THE SUBTLE

Soul work is very different from spiritual practice of transcendental wholeness. Ultimately these two dimensions of practice and growth are complementary and unitary. They engage different levels of our conscious experience—corresponding to the *causal* and *subtle* sheathes of our esoteric anatomy. It is useful to understand that even though the causal level is senior, radical, and fundamental, the subtle is equally necessary and central to awakening the kind of consciousness and culture that will be adequate to navigating our epochal developmental transition. So let’s digress and clarify what that means.

The deepest organizing principle of practice is wholeness. Spiritual growth, both transcendental and embodied, begins with an intuition of wholeness. Transcendental spirituality is the “direct path.” It proceeds by the release of all contracted patterns that can obscure wholeness; and it culminates in the transcendence of identification with separation, in which the diverse world of apparently individual parts and beings and forces becomes transparent to its underlying divine unity.³⁹

A new, deeper motivation flows from this recognition, usually felt intuitively rather than conceived mentally, since it releases thinking. If verbalized it might be: “My highest destiny is to serve, or to be used by the larger wholeness that is my real nature. How can I keep awakening from contracted patterns of separation to consistently experience and enact wholeness and serve this same freedom in others?” This transpersonal love flows spontaneously from intuitive freedom.

Such awakening to the transcendent divine catalyzes deep humility—the recognition that we exist to serve the whole, in its goodness, truth, and beauty. We come to recognize and celebrate the fact that, while there are profound moments of fulfillment in this life, they are byproducts of a life that is more fundamentally all about *giving*. Our highest happiness comes from being of service, transparent to the Whole, a catalyst for the evolutionary emergence of unprecedented kinds of health and wholeness. The revelation of the undivided divinity of the Whole keeps inspiring and humbling us. It brings us into more authentic cooperative mutual relations with one another. It levels all arrogance. The being simply enjoys and rests in radiant wholeness, with no motives to seek anything. There is just kindness, and a free, caring impulse to be of help.

In a way, you could say that such awakening uplifts us into a transcendental relationship to life, and that it also brings us to our knees in humble service. But we cannot live all of life in the sky or on our knees. After flying we have to land, and after bending we have to get up. Either way, we have to engage the messy fray—creatively, and each in our own unique way. To live our lives along a meaningful trajectory that responds creatively to our current predicament, transcendence isn’t sufficient. While the perception of unity leads us to respond to life in dramatically new

ways—because the entire living cosmos is, as the Native Americans say, “all my relations”—it doesn’t tell us exactly how.

Transcendental consciousness has nothing to say about our specific life choices. Shall I marry this one or that one? Move to a new city or stay put? Study medicine or philosophy? Should I go to the Amazon to support indigenous people fighting Big Oil? Should I write another book? Commit to starting a new business? Sell my house and live communally? Retire now or later? These are hugely consequential decisions. It is important that they be guided by our highest wisdom. But transcendental consciousness and radical realization do not engage them. They offer “no comment.” The deepest source of specific guidance regarding the particulars of our ever-changing lives comes from the “subtle” field and the soul. Our access to subtle intuitive information can be powerfully enhanced (or, alternatively, bypassed entirely) by our orientation to transcendental awareness, because it is a distinct domain.

THE SUBTLE REALM OF PRACTICE

According to the universal mystical cosmology known to ancient India, Egypt, Greece, and China (and echoed by indigenous shamanism), there are three broad domains of existence: *gross*, *subtle*, and *causal*. Our familiar, concrete, *gross* physical reality corresponds to the waking state, and it has knowable laws. But the creative shape of its randomness arises from a spectrum of dancing *subtle* energies, which correspond to hypnogogic theta or dream states. Finally, there is the *causal* (also called *extremely subtle*) domain of consciousness itself, corresponding to deep sleep.

The vast range of the subtle realm has been codified in numerous ways. Perception of it is dependent on one’s state of attention and consciousness, so it is often therefore regarded as “merely” subjective. It is far more significant than rational skeptics realize. But knowledge about it involves a very different kind of “science” than the physics and chemistry by which we measure and understand the gross physical universe. And the “art” of that “science” has many expressions. One’s intuitive faculties are awakened, and one becomes interested in the beliefs and the

metaphors, the archetypes, the stories that pattern the expression of the subtle energies.

Popular self-improvement projects often relate to the subtle domain indirectly, by recognizing the powerful connections between thought and reality. For the most part, the self-improvement phenomenon recognizes a correspondence between beliefs and experience and works to use it on behalf of our desires for love, fortune, status, and good luck. Although this is widely exploited with regard to the desires of the ego personality, it relates to the real dynamics by which subtle energies create concrete experiences.

Whole bodies of practice cultivate subtle awareness and intuition. With expanded awareness practitioners learn to tune in to the subtle field containing vast domains of intuitive knowledge, and even more deeply the voice of their *daemon* or soul and their deeper life purpose. They can learn to release subtle obstacles and participate in the subtle domain in a way that attracts freedom and blessings.

The human psyche's hypnogogic theta states and dreams are subtle experiences. But so are emotions; so is the energy of will, power, and commitment; so are acupuncture meridians. So also are the sublime spiritual states of *savikalpa samadhi* (a high meditative state in which sublime subject-object experience continues). There is a broad spectrum of subtle energies, from the edge of the causal to the edge of the gross physical. The seven chakras, including the three primary energy centers of the body—the hara below the navel, the heart, and the “third eye” in the center of the forehead—express three broad domains, layers of density with different dynamics. All of this lies within the totality of the subtle body.

Subtle-realm mysticism is associated with visions, nonordinary experience, and certain powers. In its purest forms, aligned to although not concentrated in the causal, and embodied concretely, we find a spectrum of individuals we often call “saints.”

Indigenous spirituality does not view humans as separate from nature, and it is very much attuned to the animating energetics of the primal forces, places, and creatures of the natural world. Indigenous cultures are

replete with stories of these encounters, especially as they confer some measure of influence over life events. Indigenous spirituality attempts to “see” how the subtle soul “dreams” gross physical life events. It knows (in a way that most “civilized” Westerners do not) that it is important to take care of Gaia. In taking care, it is sometimes guided in extraordinary ways.

In this context, the integral evolutionary scale needs to be understood correctly. “Higher” levels of culture and consciousness are of tremendous value and are valorized appropriately; they can scarcely be overemphasized. And it is also true that the “lowest” are most basic and fundamental, and the “higher” are utterly dependent upon them—and thus, in a sense, the hierarchy operates in both directions and sometimes must be stood on its head.

There are human beings who have gone out in the desert alone, taken care of themselves, and stayed safe—even, for example, running through a cactus-strewn desert on a moonless night without any missteps. This is a vivid illustration of how the subtle can exercise powers in the gross realm. Wild nature has been in conversation with us since our most archaic origins, so it’s no wonder.

Indigenous spirituality draws on the universality of the human being and the human structure, so it has elements of all three centers. But it is especially strong at the root. It is rooted in the feet and the hara, the vital center and the bright vital force of creation that affirms life.

Radical integral ecology integrates transcendental and earth-based spirituality. It recognizes that nondual realization must be lived *in relationship* with conditional experience, where we are family with the whole more-than-human world. And we can do that most efficiently by inhabiting a role in a story that organizes our faculties. Thus, it is true to our heart impulse, but also *easiest and most productive* to worship our Mother Earth, to repent of our violence to her, and to discover a new, technologically advanced spiritual relationship with her. That is only healthy and sane. Indigenous people all over the world are imploring us to stop dynamiting the mountains, damming the rivers, and polluting the oceans and skies. They are right. An integral spirituality may start with the transcendent recognition of Oneness, yet it also must include

the subtle dimensions, the soul, and our vital, living connection with the Earth and all our relations.

At this point in the journey of the human species, an integral revolution of the heart asks us to reclaim and reopen our connection not only to radical consciousness but also to the embodied heart and soul, and not only to ourselves but also to the vital energies and intelligence of the living earth. As an Australian aborigine elder of the Warlpiri people said, “It was the land that cultivated the people, before the people cultivated the land.”

THE ROLE OF THE TRANSCENDENT IN SUBTLE SOUL WORK

This middle, subtle position of soul is called “the transformation realm” or *Sambhogakaya* in Tibetan Buddhism. It stands between the gross realm (*Nirmanakaya*) and the *Dharmakaya*—the transcendental Reality. The subtle realm is a place of profound and necessary practice, although it can also be a slippery domain that easily gives rise to confusion. The highest spiritual realizations of the *Dharmakaya* are transcendental and radical, while the subtle (*Sambhogakaya*) is concerned with the characteristics that are unique to each of us.

Subtle soul work is necessary—and it cannot be fruitful unless it is informed by transcendental, nondual wholeness. As you develop in relation to the energies of the subtle, you get to a place where instead of passively feeling the effect of the subtle influences around you, they begin to organize around you. You become a more forceful presence. You begin to attract the energy of the universe. Instead of being on the receiving end of others’ ego energy, they are at the receiving end of yours, and it feels almost like magic. But without being informed by the disposition of radical self-transcendence, these feelings can lead to a profoundly deluded “spirituality” based on ego-inflation—a spirituality with a big “me” at the center. You may believe you have a very special, unique purpose—or that you will achieve a life in which all your deepest desires are fulfilled. The subtle field can be an enormous trap for the

ego—that part of one’s self that only really cares about itself. This is why the subtle field that holds the soul needs to be understood in the context of the transcendence of ego.

Many high spiritual teachings agree that human beings don’t really exist as separate entities. My first teacher, Adi Da Samraj, taught that what seems to be an “entity” is only a superficial arising pattern. The actual consciousness of each so-called person is identical to Being itself—and Being is what it is that is showing up as the dream of conditionally manifested existence. We presume ourselves to be such entities when we identify with experience, and at best we think the realm in which we are “one with God” is somewhere “else.” But actual divinity is simply the shining, conscious being that is our nature at all times and under all circumstances. My teacher described his awakening as the literally felt realization that the body is arising in the psyche, rather than vice versa—in other words, the perception that the body is a psychic manifestation, not merely an elemental one. Then it is obvious that the true self is not hidden deep within us, attainable only through dramatic mystical experiences. Spiritual realization is simply awakening to the direct stable perception that all beings are already and only the one Beingness of all things.⁴⁰

Informed by such an intuition of one’s inherent nonseparate identity with the universal, you can engage all of life—including subtle soul work—in an ego-transcending fashion. You become moved to surrender at all times to a higher principle. Full enlightenment isn’t required, but an intuition of this orientation is a necessary foundation for a healthy relationship to soul work.

Eventually the limitations of “me”-centered spirituality *must* be transcended. Nothing in the world exists in a vacuum, and no part of the world can achieve fulfillment apart from or at the expense of the whole. As we continue to push past so many “red lines” on global warming, and the social fabric that held us together is torn apart, does seeking one’s personal glory, wealth, and fulfillment even make sense? Is the ego immune to a threatened life-support system?

Our interconnectedness makes an intuition of radical wholeness absolutely critical. It shifts our identity and our sensitivity so that we

begin to allow the *animus mundi*, the soul of the whole natural world, to operate through us, from our deepest psyche to our most ordinary behavior. Then transcendental, causal, and nondual spirituality (most radically understood) can instill an intuition of a larger identity and an aspiration to be of benefit to the whole. This is the telos of wholeness. It “wants” more health and thriving and coherence and integrity, extending always wider.

A glimpse of the nondual undividedness of all being can function as an initiation. It can make a lasting imprint on the soul. Transcendental spiritual practice helps us to develop the spiritual strength to continually open to the transparent aliveness that is the essence of all experience. It is called “Luminous Emptiness” in Tibetan teachings. It can confer a self-transcending intuition, liberating the ability to see through the fears and resentments and pride and greed and insecurities of the separate self. Again and again one sees that this life is not for the “separate me.” We awaken to love as a fundamental attitude and life commitment. We want to serve and glorify life itself. We discover that our deepest, truest soul purpose is the hero’s journey of being used by, shaped by, and transparent to that greater life.

THE HIDDEN NARRATIVES OF OUR LIVES

When we orient toward the transcendent, we sometimes use practices that realize “the emptiness of self” and “the emptiness of time.” We wake up from the story of our lives. It can seem as if it all was just illusion. In a way that’s true. We expand beyond the conditional boundaries of the self in a process that “expands” our consciousness, which is an apt metaphor, because transcendental spirituality is analogous to space.

But when we open to our deep interior life, carried through time through the soul-lineage of our ancestors, something shifts. We feel the whole living Earth, the universal, free, primitive spirituality of every tribe on Earth, and suddenly we are selves—bands of individuals—moving in *time* through our life journey. This is known to everyone in any sincere soul-based or earth-based spiritual practice. For this purpose, we accept

a perspective in which our self and soul are real, and time and space are real too. Instead of transcending it, we meet the soul directly, discover its story, and enact its journey—even though, from the radical transcendental perspective, it is ultimately nothing but the playfulness of luminous emptiness.

From this perspective, even radical, nondual enlightenment and the dissolution of the separate self sense—even the ultimate realization—would still be an event in the story of the soul’s journey. Everything can be viewed in terms of that journey. The “final” truths of nonduality are true too. But every perspective is both true and partial, including the very “highest.” So our life story is another valid and very useful perspective. Much can be understood and accomplished using this perspective; a strictly transcendental perspective does not provide this information. Both perspectives are profoundly true, but when alienated from one another, they are each also critically *partial*.

What a journey we are on—all of us. Describing it in the poetic language of the soul, we could say, “We all chose to take birth at this moment in evolutionary time, right when we are beginning to blast off into amazing technological advances, right when we are beginning to imperil the health (to human-friendly conditions, at least) of our Mother Earth with our population and pollution. We have stepped onto the stage of life at precisely the moment that an almost mythic heroism seems to be called for—and from as many awakened people as possible.”

STORIES OF TRANSITION

The modern narrative has failed us. We are not just separate egos competing in a meaningless materialistic world for dominance, in societies that must grow or die. The postmodern narrative too has failed. If we embrace our feelings and all creatures and other victims of the system, rejecting all “grand metanarratives,” we find ourselves lost in the aperspectival madness of a posttruth world. The integral narrative of evolution opens up a space in which many stories can reveal new levels of meaning and purpose.

A single coherent narrative can return, one that engages our imagination far more than the mere ascent of a staircase. The story of the unfolding and complexification and awakening of spirit in matter is beautiful, inspiring, and capacious; there is room in it for many stories. And we are each living out a particular *story*. We show up most fully in our lives by inhabiting an identity on a journey, so that our way of being is organized by metaphors, archetypes, and stories. When we fall in love, a sense of joy pervades the being and our attention and interest are magnetized to our beloved. Although we could do practices to cultivate love and hope and positive expectations, it is simpler and more intuitive to simply arrive in an actual love story, inhabiting the powerful archetype of the lover. We can fall in love with all existence, with Mary, with Shiva, with our own Buddha nature, or with another embodied human being, but it is a real love story, regardless. Metaphors are an empowering shorthand that organizes our attention and neurology and intention.

Joseph Campbell and other neo-Jungians have mapped many great archetypal stories that human beings have tended to enact: the hero's journey, the divine romance, the death and rebirth cycle, the coming-of-age ritual—and on and on. Meanwhile we are all waking up to the fact that we are on a journey together—and that it is time for the human species to undergo rapid transformation. So our soul's archetypal story involves participation in the archetypal metacrisis we are collectively encountering—which calls for our humility, maturity, and heroism.

How can we make sense of this crisis? What is our real story? Certainly, the entire cosmos is one unfolding evolutionary story. But its drama contains plot twists—moments of extinction, birth, and transformation. Stars and dinosaurs have gone extinct, as have 99 percent of the species in our planetary history, as have whole ecosystems millions of years in the making. Meanwhile, there have been extraordinary times in which many new creatures have developed. So, how would we describe our present moment, taking into account all levels of physiology, purpose, and commitment?

Futurist Duane Elgin has observed that social and cultural transformation will depend on the stories that we believe and inhabit—stories

that can either keep us paralyzed, or catalyze new responses to our predicament. Elgin reports that when he asks people how they perceive the future, the answers are telling. “Many people say: ‘We are going to hit the wall,’” he says. “People have a very diminished, impoverished, and frightening view of our common future. As a consequence many people pull back in denial, living in the present and ignoring the future. And if they are not in denial, they are often in despair.”⁴¹

Two stories come from these responses. One is “It is not happening,” which allows us to go on living as we are. The other is, “It is happening and there is nothing we can do about it,” which ends up leading to the same thing—inaction—as well as depression. Although the collapsing and rebuilding of civilizations has happened throughout human history, the world is now one integrated system (geologically and sociologically)—so we will rise or fall together, depending on how we respond. “We need a story that will take all of us to a more promising future together,” says Elgin. “But what kind of story is that?”

Elgin argues that the climate crisis is *not* such a story. The crisis itself needs to be contextualized and placed within a story to give us human beings a way to coordinate and cohere our imagination and energy. “The climate crisis is fundamentally a communications crisis,” he says. “We are not going to handle climate change and the crises that it represents unless we begin to communicate it more effectively. I think for this reason a story is helpful.” Elgin offers several overarching narratives that can hold the reality of climate change and the other, interlocking tensions and crises I have been speaking about:

- *Humanity is growing up.* We are in our adolescence as a human family. We are rebellious and reckless, our thinking is short-term, our appetites large, and our behavior impulsive. All of us adults remember how difficult this passage was in our own lives—it is an initiation that most of us end up figuring out ourselves because our culture doesn’t provide us with any guidance as we make this passage from child to adult. Imagine, then, our entire species of 7.5 billion people trying to make this rite of passage with no guidance.

- *The global brain is waking up.* More than three billion people have internet access today, and within the next few years five billion will have access. This gives us an extraordinary capacity to communicate. It is a remarkable coincidence that, just as we are in this transition, we are developing new ways to communicate, to develop collective understanding, and to share human consciousness. This is new in human history. The entire world is being woven together into this communicative web. What can happen if this “global brain” becomes more conscious and even self-aware?
- *This is a time of planetary birth.* Like a woman’s labor pains, this process is painful, frightening, difficult, and unpredictable. Amazingly, on the other side of that pain and contraction is new life! What we are seeing now is the labor pains of a new species civilization getting born. How can we help this birth process along? How can we hold the intention and “live into” the new life world that is coming?

The Great Transition Story project⁴² has imagined more than a dozen other positive narratives, which can be freely “woven together.” This may be a great hero’s journey, whereby humanity learns to trust the power of love and chooses to evolve consciously. Perhaps it is a great reconciliation, in which the hypermasculine modern world learns to appreciate the divine feminine and integrate indigenous wisdom. Maybe we are awakening from a false dream of a dead world and reconnecting with the living universe. Maybe our travails express a great healing crisis. Maybe humanity is coming together as an emergent superorganism with a new kind of wisdom and intelligence. (And perhaps our story is that we are “waking up from all stories” into unmediated wisdom that can even begin to organize our life.) Clear and resonant stories enable us to understand who and where we are and what we are doing, so we can respond effectively to our current challenges. We can contemplate them and be inspired. They are not mutually exclusive—in a way, each is a metaphor for the others. Imagine how remarkably different our experience would

be if these great transition stories became the working metaphors for global culture—and we followed up by enacting them.

Sinking deep into yourself, do you see a trajectory for your life in any of these stories of transition? What powers and capacities are called into being? In what ways do these roles require you to practice and evolve? Maybe your heart says, “The world is in trouble and I feel called to rise heroically to defend Gaia.” How can that guide and shape your choices and behavior and capacities to enact that heroic archetype?

By inhabiting a narrative, our beliefs, behaviors, and speech become coherent. The fragmented parts are made coherent by the story, and we also invoke subtle energies and graceful synchronicities. The laws of the subtle realm are implicit in the structure of mythic and archetypal narratives. If you are at first uncomfortable with the “irrational” nature of this principle, think of living a narrative that is congruent with your being and the reality around you, one that can empower your participation in life.

THE POWER OF ARCHETYPES

A single metaphor or archetypal story can much more efficiently and powerfully uplift our state and our effectiveness than a series of disconnected daily practices can. All practices, however powerful, have new meaning and coherence when enacted as expressions of an archetypal story. Realizing, for example, that this whole world is my Beloved transforms how I move through my day. Whatever is before me is God! In these times of challenge, that metaphor can take us deep, through layers of defense, doubt, and compensation into a fundamental trust in life that can withstand an environment of confusion and chaos. Metaphor is how we are structured. Story is how we are built. Archetypal stories make sense to us neurologically.

At this point in time, it is critical that we discern archetypal stories that can be *true for us individually and also culturally*. Luckily, the great transition stories we’ve mentioned above weave together organically. On one level, we seem to be asked to grow into our true identities as

sovereign protectors of our Mother Earth. On another, as I said earlier in this book, we are also addicts, called now to finally break our collective addiction to our comfortable but degraded lives of bourgeois consumption. We can support each other as brothers and sisters in the good work of addiction recovery—like a twelve-step program run by the whole living planet. But we also perhaps feel like peaceful revolutionaries. That archetype resonates in me—after all, I was raised in an intentional community,⁴³ and mentored by my co-op aunts and uncles to be a nonviolent revolutionary. And some of us feel called to serve as a doula, supporting Mother Earth in her difficult birth of a new civilization. All of us are awakening, perhaps going through a process of dissolution in the chrysalis, and subsequent metamorphosis into a human butterfly.

To quote Michael Meade's *The Genius Myth*:

*The answers to the overwhelming problems and daunting global issues we all face cannot simply come from the limited consciousness of abstract reasoning and scientific attitudes that currently dominate the world. The problems run deeper than the simple facts of the matter. The answers must be found in deeper places as well. The loss of a felt connection to the divine spark hidden within each person may be the greatest curse of modern mass societies. When the dark times come around and great changes are afoot, it becomes more important that awake people remain awake and that more individuals awake into the nature of the spark they carry within. And the great drama of life, the human soul becomes the extra quantity and distinct living quality needed to tip the balance of the world toward creation.*⁴⁴

When we begin to participate in the subtle field, an enormous range of potential opens up. We discover that we are conducting a whole symphony of animating poetic energies through our bodies and psyches. We can become lightning rods to the greater energies of the anima mundi or World Soul. This is the domain of practices that teach our gross life to honor the subtle, opening a new dimension of creativity. We can learn to let in the bigger forces that want to enact a particular archetypal story through us—the warrior, the magician, the tragic hero, the lover, the mother, the king, or the queen.

Human beings are structured to experience all of this bodily. We *feel* it. Like an actor inhabiting a character, we feel our way into our role in the archetypal story we are actually living. This resonates within us at multiple levels. It draws on a wide range of hidden abilities by reverse-engineering the neurological cues that trigger higher capacities of the brain, the nervous system, and our biochemistry. Without naively believing in the objective ontological truth of these archetypes, as someone with a prerational magical or mythic perspective would, we can still “believe” and inhabit them in powerful ways. Taking up the archetype organizes and liberates our gross, subtle, and causal capacities—particularly the subtle—which in turn affects our bodies.

Living a new story is unavoidable, in any case, now that we have entered an era when our world drama has flashed its apocalyptic teeth and stopped making sense. The absurdity and existential danger of the world crisis that is gaining momentum gives us leave to take risks, to take theatrical poses, to assume the mantles of our archetypes, and to lovingly and playfully unleash their power through a kind of ceremony of transformation, a magical dance, whose intent is to conjure forth a better story for all of us. To the degree that our larger human world is in crisis, facing new challenges that require new responses, this is expressed not just in gross physical ways but also in subtle energetic and psychic ways.

There are larger subtle dynamics, even an impulse in the soul of the world that is trying to express a new level of intelligence through each of us. Recognizing this, soul work opens up a political practice, a form of subtle activism that complements the gross. We are each artists, showing up face-to-face with the soul of a world that has summoned each of our souls to its unique destiny. We are all in play with other souls, tasked with becoming new human beings in a new kind of human culture, one that naturally cocreates a healthy future for one another and for our children, our species, and all our other relations on this planet.

It is clear to climate activists that our governments and industry are responding far too slowly to the reality of global warming. But the physical trends leading to disaster don’t tell the whole story. Subtle and other nonlinear dynamics are also at play, and they open space for additional

hope. Too often, we forget that collective ceremonies and rituals and other communal psychophysical enactments of archetypal metaphors and narratives can be valid dimensions of activism—ones that perform the vital function of restoring gross, subtle, and causal harmony and wholeness to both individual activists and their whole community.

MY OWN SOUL WORK

To give you an example of how one can engage in what I call Integral Soul Work, I will share my own reckoning with the hero archetype. The hero is a primary archetype, particularly for men. The original magic and mythic heroes were male, and their journey from the safe harbor of home and mom out into a worldly quest, battle, victory, and subsequent return has been a subtle blueprint for men's lives for millennia. This myth has always resonated in me. But in light of our current global predicament, my understanding of it has gone through dramatic changes.

I come from a line of people who go back to the Pilgrims, intrepid, righteous pioneers who came to the New World in a quest for religious freedom. A generation later, as settlers, our forebears pioneered a life on a new continent, trying to live a new pious, hardworking way of life in a wild new place. In the process at least one of my ancestors became a perpetrator of the genocide of the native people, but not before his wife and children had been victims of native slaughter.

Although it was invisible to me for many years, I have been shaped by the character of my lineage. They held and transmitted the idealistic values that drove the whole Western civilization project, I now see, with a nearly overwhelming tendency to subordinate all other values to their own. This same hubris enabled other members of our WASP tribe to believe wholeheartedly that they were “doing good” when they introduced “savages” to Jesus and his gospel of love, and did the work of spreading their “civilized” way of life.

I remember my grandparents teaching me reading and math and history and the great Western literary canon and the value of hard work. They nurtured in me the classic values and capacities of white

Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. These values are in my blood, and were in my mother's milk. I contain in me the dignities and disasters of the modern spirit, and also its growth into pluralistic postmodern values.

But now that project is colliding with planetary limits, and our overshoot of our planet's carrying capacity is doing untold violence. Seeing this, I want to respond heroically. To do so, I must question my heroic instincts, since they are rooted in the very worldview that has created the predicament I feel called to address.

Ironically, the lifestyle of the great global educated middle class *is* the very unsustainability I want to transform. Conscious practitioners are all now asked to question and transform the nature of the striving by which we perpetuate our well-being. We are in many respects the very hope of the world, and yet the fact that there are so many of us, consuming so much, means that we are also the greatest threat to the world—the very thing that is most overheating our biosphere and noosphere, diminishing our descendants' prospects and our own well-being, and threatening our planet. We can say again, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

After periods of renewed hope and despairing recognition, I struggled to absorb the implications of this for months. Even though I understand the futility of moral self-flagellation, I also recognized the allure of too-quick self-justification. Heroically, I had taken it upon myself to face and comprehend the crisis of our moment. And in confronting the complicity of my own lineage and lifestyle, I realized I must question my very way of being. The heroism of progress and idealism embodies the very arrogance that has brought us to the brink of destabilizing the balances of the whole biosphere.

Ironically, the climax of my hero's journey wasn't a heroic battle and victory; instead, it took me into uncomfortable new territory. It did not look or feel or taste like any heroism I could have imagined when I began. In the hero's journey, at the apex of the drama, the hero does battle with his nemesis in the underworld and is nearly killed, but then realizes who he is and uses his magical powers to slay his adversary and emerge victorious.

But it seems now that this story needs to be turned inside-out. Instead of slaying an outer nemesis or enemy “other,” I am asked to slay the monster within, subtle arrogance that tends constantly to creep through the aperture of idealism into our life quests. I must act, but first I must watch and listen.

Out of this emerges a new hero archetype, that of the *yin hero*. Instead of winning a conventional victory by slaying a discrete, incarnate “other” adversary, a very different “inner heroism” is called for. I can perhaps meet and slay the residues of the whole legacy of arrogance within me. I can repent of it. I can be converted. There can be authentic renunciation. There can be service and kindness and generosity. Instead of a heroism predicated upon a presumption of separation from the world, this might be the heroic spirit that sees through that separation and enacts wholeness in its place.

Not only is this humbler than the classic heroism of the ancient myths, it is nobler than the story of the ironic antihero of so many films and stories. It is a new story, of humble spiritual heroism. It is perhaps a *feminine* heroism—not just balancing the previously masculine heroism and its excesses, but expressing an important developmental advance.

I didn’t commit the sins of my lineage but I did inherit its privileges. I can own some responsibility and face the reality of my tribe’s role in the human predicament. The white man’s tribes conquered the globe. I am part of that. I can seek relationships of depth: within my ancestral tribe, and across tribal boundaries, with other tribes, and also with new tribal brothers and sisters—people who are now “my tribe” by virtue of our shared commitment to the wisdom of the heart. I can perhaps “declare peace” and approach others humbly, genuinely intending to be of benefit.

The model, then, is not the warrior hero, but the humility of the saint. Not Achilles, but St. Francis. Maybe now is the time to wash the feet of the leper. So my first intention in transforming this archetype in myself has been to be honest enough to face what I would rather not see, and customarily avoid. By my example, I can perhaps thereby elicit others’ courageous honesty.

This is not a *yang* (masculine, active, agentic) matter of *doing* or *asserting* insight or strength, like an ancient mythic hero. The heroism that is needed now is *not* for me to assertively act upon my existing level of understanding of the big impossible questions posed by the human predicament. The answers I already have at hand are an insufficient basis for effective action.

The new challenging truths of our predicament must be *opened to and received*. It is a *yin* (feminine, receptive, communal) matter of allowing a much bigger view of reality to register in awareness, and to surrender into full apprehension of its totality. This yin yoga requires building new attentional and attitudinal “muscles,” new capacities human beings have not until now often exercised and developed. This requires a deep, sustained capacity for *receptivity*. But it’s not that simple; at the heart of yin heroism there’s a call for a new level of yang action.

WILD OLD STORIES

It’s important to appreciate that these great archetypal stories are not the only tales to which we can turn. We are busily writing new stories of many kinds, large and small, and discovering old ones. The great integral evolutionary metanarrative is perhaps the simplest, biggest, and newest of all these stories. Contemporary storytelling is groping for new terms—using everything from comics to sci-fi to myth—to startle us awake and into contact with a deeper relationship to life. And some are reviving our oldest stories, which can work a different magic, informing the psyche of aspects of their depth.

The primary great archetypal stories are seemingly very neat when compared to our most numerous ancient stories—the richly textured and often macabre folk stories, fairy tales, and myths whose origins are lost in the shroud of prehistory. There are thousands of such stories. We know just a few, such as the stories of Hansel and Gretel, Iron John, and Rumpelstiltskin. Each of them expresses in some way a great archetypal story—but with indelible dark images and special plot twists, each one unique and resonant. These stories, perhaps five thousand years old, are

replete with vivid details and terrifying ugliness. But in them we can sometimes catch a glimpse of something more than human speaking to us in a strange but familiar symbolic language. Perhaps that is in part because they have no particular author—they have been passed along by countless oral storytellers. They originated in a domain the aboriginal Australians called the “dreamtime,” a place where humans encountered something powerful, fierce, sacred, and deeply humbling. Something in that “other side” was dreaming the human story in terms that might offer us keys to understanding our humanity now. These dark old folktales may help us unlock the doors through which each of us must pass in order to find our way through and to the other side of the great Genjo Koan we are facing now.

As our culture is broken open by the consequences of our careless destruction, these dark, complicated stories may prove more resonant and revealing than ever. They express a sensual, reflective, troubled psyche, quite like our own inaccessible depths. Maybe the ancients knew something that we have forgotten and now need to remember, something that underlies our anxiety, something that opens up a vital, exciting new way of being human together. I’ve discovered the importance of discovering and invoking the stories that resonate with me—insights that go back to a time before I knew too much to be wonderstruck.

In my own journey into “yin heroism,” I find meaningful instruction in the story of the lindwurm and his bride, as told by mythologist and storyteller Martin Shaw. In this Norwegian fairy tale, the future of the kingdom is held hostage by a royal dragon (the “lindwurm”) who demands a bride before the only prince will be allowed to marry. But each maid he weds disappears and is never heard from again, until there are no more takers. A shepherd girl from the edge of the kingdom agrees to wed him—in a year and a day. She makes this offer on impulse, without knowing why. Then, wandering in the woods, she encounters a wise old woman and asks for her guidance.

Marry the lindwurm, she is told, but here is her price: She must spend this year making herself ten white nightgowns. She is to richly

embroider the bosom and heart of every layer, so that each gown is fitted to wear over the last. She must procure a tub of lye, a tub of milk, and many whips. Come the wedding night, she will offer to disrobe, but must order the groom to first shed his skin too—then another, and another, layer after layer, until all the skins are shed. She will then scourge him soundly with lye-soaked lashes and then bathe him in milk—and embrace him.

All goes according to plan. When the monster has shed his last layers of protection, the bride embraces her handsome prince. In the morning, the apprehensive court opens the door of the bedchamber to find the pair sleeping in each other's arms. There is great rejoicing, another wedding is held, and the two live happily ever after.

This kingdom was saved by a poor unknown young girl, one who stepped forward without knowing why, who spent months stitching, caring for the heart, layer after layer. She was willing to give herself completely to the unknown, but learned to require a reciprocal submission, layer upon layer.

In this story I catch sight of rich, mysterious instruction. Some monsters need to be transformed and loved, rather than only fought and slain. I identify with the lindwurm's bride. Each stitch to the bosom of the wedding shirt prepares me. I need to wander into the forest to find higher guidance. My guidance and heart intelligence allow me to negotiate from strength; after all, even my "adversary" wants and responds to wisdom and love.

Like me, my fellow citizens of this new republic of the heart will discover themselves stepping forward before they have a plan. They too will need to find their unique guidance. It may be our willingness to love what on the surface looks unlovable that will make a crucial difference to the kingdom. We may need "a year and a day" of active preparation.

And we are advised not to expect our love to be reciprocated until we have applied the balm of milk, and after requiring the stripping off of many layers of mutual defenses and being strong enough to apply the most painful kind of healing medicine.

There is much darkness to transform, and the single lindwurm of the story has in our time multiplied into a thousand serpents and a few vile dragons, all of whom must be married and transformed into princes. But fierce love, defying fear, is a potent secret weapon.

FROM YIN TO YANG

Practicing wholeness draws me to the yin posture of deep receptivity. Typically we tend to opt quickly for action, rather than a prolonged engagement with the big questions. We live in a maze of culturally constructed narratives and mental structures that are always limiting what we can perceive. The big questions of our time require us to open our minds and hearts via a whole series of profound shifts and an ongoing process of resting in profound inquiry, questioning our assumptions.

This is hard. Our nervous systems did not evolve to remain in deep receptivity for too long. And we are afraid of what we'll see. It is hard for me, but I seem willing (perhaps to an unusual degree) to tolerate the discomfort that prolonged questioning provokes. It stretches the range of the nervous system, which hasn't adapted fully to doing such a task on such a scale. Most people become impatient when a decision requires more than a few hours of deliberation. It can be torture to press into urgent questions for days at a time, let alone months or years or decades. And yet the nature of humanity's great Genjo Koan seems to ask us to build this capacity, individually and culturally.

The human nervous system rebalances the stresses of sustained receptivity with the flow of the experience that unfolds once we go into action. It is a relief to go from the abstract to the concrete particulars of direct life experience. We gather a different kind of data that way, grounding our interior lives with real-world feedback. But for us to be effective agents of change requires alternating cycles of receptivity and enactment. We gather data, but then we design a strategy. We may question that strategy, but then we revise it and execute. We take in information, but then we analyze it and draw conclusions. Action is never far away, always an essential part of the process.

Our desire to short-circuit the yin process results in our almost universal tendency to jump to premature conclusions. Our unprecedented encounter with planetary limits and the exponential complexification it involves places us in a radically new situation requiring profound receptivity to a new kind of logic. But we are structurally biased to interpret our situation using our familiar, inadequate cognitive and intuitive structures.

To respond to this new and changing reality, our action must be grounded in a greater wholeness, which calls us to an entirely new mode. We must become capable of taking perspectives and metaperspectives (perspectives *on* our perspectives) that we cannot yet fully comprehend. That requires surrender—the yin mode of being.

Surrendering means relaxing the compulsion to act based on the overconfidence of the analytic, separative mind. The yin mode of being allows us to drop into a sense of undividedness, so that we are informed by the whole of which we are a part. This creates the ground for transformation. You have to let go before you can come together in a new way. Through the most profound yin receptivity, I allow myself to be reorganized by contact with that which I have not previously been able to see and know. It is a profound process, one that leaves me with little to hold on to, which is why it requires humility and spiritual courage—to trust the unknown.

From this yin receptivity, new action unfolds. In the classic yin-yang symbol, a spot of yin (white) lies at the center of the yang (black) field, and yang (black) within the yin (white).

This points to the fact that, paradoxically, the most powerful, quintessentially yang essence comes from yin, and vice versa. Our predicament calls for action, but truly effective yang action must arise from the receptivity of yin. In cultivating this deep receptivity, we “slow down to speed up.” Although the transformations dictated by our predicament are certainly urgent, an anxious, uptight sense of urgency arising from the already-known yang agency will only trip us up. What *will* help is curiosity, humility, openness, a sense of humor, and compassion for ourselves and one another. These are the qualities of a yin approach.

Yin receptivity brings us in touch with our soul. This deep receptivity drops us into *being* (with which you might sometimes feel like you are very much in touch, or barely in touch at all). You are always already utterly inseparable from your soul. You've always been in touch with the voice of your soul. You must simply sink deep enough to recognize it.

Nietzsche evokes this in the third of his Untimely Meditations, "Schopenhauer as Educator":

How can man know himself? It is a dark, mysterious business: if a hare has seven skins, a man may skin himself seventy times seven times without being able to say, "Now that is truly you; that is no longer your outside." It is also an agonizing, hazardous undertaking thus to dig into oneself, to climb down toughly and directly into the tunnels of one's being. How easy it is thereby to give oneself such injuries as no doctor can heal. Moreover, why should it even be necessary given that everything bears witness to our being—our friendships and animosities, our glances and handshakes, our memories and all that we forget, our books as well as our pens. For the most important inquiry, however, there is a method. Let the young soul survey its own life with a view of the following question: What have you truly loved thus far? What has ever uplifted your soul, what has dominated and delighted it at the same time? Assemble these revered objects in a row before you and perhaps they will reveal a law by their nature and their order: the fundamental law of your very self. Compare these objects, see how they complement, enlarge, outdo, transfigure one another; how they form a ladder on whose steps you have been climbing up to yourself so far; for your true self does not lie buried deep within you, but rather rises immeasurably high above you, or at least above what you commonly take to be your I.⁴⁵

What is surging forth here is existential, passionate, and assertive, which is profoundly yang. Each of us has a vital need to discover the *real* shape of our being, to live our life's real purpose, to bring to life and action our soul's reason for bringing us into our mother's womb.

We must say "Yes!" to this—we must *choose* it. It is what makes it possible for our busy minds to get out of the way so that we can fall silent and take the dictation of the voice of our soul. Something profoundly passionate and active is the basis for our most profound openness.

This is the yang at the heart of the yin. At this point in the journey we must dive deeper into the depths and discover a hidden treasure that shines in the darkness. We tune in to this deepest yin essence and discover not an escape, but the soul's passion to show up in *life*. Our yin listening has earned us a depth that makes something new possible. We can act and choose in yang mode without just going back to the superficial, compensatory, reactive level of our being. Something whole and new becomes possible.

In this, I discover that a deeper level of yang heroism is possible. I imagine that it might naturally emerge as the redemption of my pilgrim ancestors. This heroism is not rugged individualism, but instead is likely to cocreatively dance in *mutuality* into a collective nobility.

This discussion of soul in the context of culture requires an acknowledgement of something else: tribe. Souls make tribes. And tribes have souls. Nations' and tribes' souls are the source of the positive evolutionary purpose and meaning of nationalism. This is how we can all coexist. Now tribes of national and ethnic identities are asked to go beyond the "us versus them" mode of behavior and cooperate peacefully and discover new synergies, not just with one another. Globalism and nationalism are an enduring dynamic polarity; neither can vanquish the other. These tribes can thrive by cocreating an enduring relationship to a new species of globalist tribes.

Most human beings participate in many tribes—local, virtual, biological, noetic. Many of our tribes are globalist in their flavor and disposition. But most of us have dual (or more!) citizenship in tribes of overlapping and nonoverlapping domains. And it is the archetypal stories by which our tribes make peace—and make a shared future—that will matter for the time ahead.

DISCOVERING AND TRANSFORMING YOUR ARCHETYPE

How can you come to know the narrative thrust and arc of your own life? You begin by awakening beyond your narrow preoccupation with petty egoic concerns. But that is just the first step. What follows is a visioning

process in which you allow your soul, or daemon, to assert its dominion over your destiny, and to connect you with your collective soul destiny.

You begin this process by dropping down into whatever it is that glows in your bone marrow, and asking from the heart, and from the very depth of your being, for help with aligning you to your soul, to help you learn to hear its voice. Knowing that you cannot come to know its unique contours simply via awakening as wholeness or the aliveness of pure awareness (as absolutely essential as that is), you begin to feel into the pulse of the sap that rises through your body and soul. You wait to hear a new, deeper, previously hidden voice. You ask, and then you fall silent and faithfully keep a vigil of listening, until you are able to discern the still-small voice of your soul.

You open your feeling further, to learn what is being said to you by the DNA of the protoplasmic informational energy that surges, nurtures, and replenishes your very consciousness, the actual nerve spark in your cerebrospinal fluid. Your soul or daemon is recognizable because it speaks in chorus with your heart and blood. Life wants to live. That which has always animated evolutionary emergence is still alive in you and wants to keep evolving. And it has a particular way it wants to more fully express this right now through your body, your emotions, your mind, your imagination, your relationships, and your creativity.

Metaphors that make vivid the journey from your “current way of being” to your “new way of being” are part of the transformational process as it is taught by New Ventures West and by Integral Coaching Canada.⁴⁶ The new metaphor provides the vibrational signature through which we can attune to, resonate with, and embody our next higher possibilities. In coaching, new “capacities” are methodically cultivated. But the work derives a great deal of its efficacy from the ease with which the body and imagination can feel and inhabit a clear role in a story. This is why inhabiting a metaphor or an archetype is a skillful way to elicit our best capacities.

Such profound transformation ripens over time, and deeply. As Carl Jung wrote, “I ask myself what is the myth that you are living and I found that I did not know. So I took it upon myself to get to know my myth and I regarded this as the task of tasks. I simply had to know

what unconscious or preconscious myth was forming me.” Likewise, in *Integral Soul Work* we ask: What is really going on? What archetypal stories am I enacting in my life? Generally, we come to realize that we have been living out some pretty unproductive stories, stories that limit us, based on limiting beliefs we hold about ourselves and the world we are in. And we make new choices. As Rumi said, “Don’t be satisfied with stories of how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.” So, at this stage, we tune in to the metaphors and archetypes, these deeply familiar story lines that we have been living, in order to enable our particular transitional stories to come alive. As we practice accessing an archetype for a new way of being, we access something clear and fresh and full of possibility—a clean, blessed energy of grace that washes us and opens us.

What might this look like? While there are common themes within our common history, each individual’s particular metaphors are unique.

Some lives are heroic in their experience of discomfort, pain, and distress. In such cases, the heroic task is for the heart to rise and willingly hold this pain, so as to transmute it, rather than just contracting or withdrawing and pulling away in the face of the pain. The hero’s work is to find a way to use the pain, working with opposites, holding tensions and paradox, recognizing that life in a violent, mortal world in crisis is not black and white. Radical compassion and great empathic capacities are necessary to any truly mature consciousness or society.

Perhaps you (the hero) are accosted by an enemy who is going to slay you, and you have to discover a new power, a new magic quality, to become invisible and to change form. Something new is necessary in order not to be blocked on your path. Or you may be at a moment where an old way of being is getting in your way. Suddenly, you notice, what was impossible becomes possible. It needs to be released, and then something new can come into being. Maybe your story is about tenderly holding a key wounded part of your own being that has not previously been loved, opening your heart to the disowned part, bringing this aspect of yourself into the family, and giving it a place. The work is wide-spectrum—largely aspirational (*eros*), but also charitable (*agape*).

In soul work we tap into the archetypal energies that are driving us apart on this planet, and we begin to work with those energies to care and to heal division.

At this momentous time in the human planetary journey, your unique way of being heroic—your way of being a lover, a warrior, a king, a queen, a sage, a leader, or a citizen—matters. Even your unique way of entering into the process of your own death will allow the fullness of life to course through you. Something original and unique happens at an energetic level when you do this authentically.

Blocked energies want to flow. When we let go into a new story, these energies begin to flow through us with new power. When a myth begins to show itself, it often signals us somatically. You can *feel* an archetype taking you over and imbuing you with new capacities. You discover that something in you is ready to take over, an intelligence that already knows how to be the sovereign—the lover, the tantric, the tragic hero, or the magician. This is a fractal pattern that is enacted again and again, in micro and macro scales, during the process of authentic soul work. It can take place in an hour even while it is unfolding in larger terms over a period of months.

Consider the following pairs of metaphorical terms. In each case, the first metaphor might describe a way of being toward which you might be tending, as your *current way of being*, and the second metaphor might describe a *new way of being* toward which you might be growing when you practice. Perhaps this evokes a sense of how metaphors can catalyze growth.

Warrior → Sage

Seeker → Practitioner

Secret Prince → King

Orphan → Loving Parent

Martyr → Beneficent Elder

Hungry Hunter → Wise Gardener

Anxious Planner → Faithful, Confident, Powerful Listener

These evocative inner journeys name only a very few of your ultimately infinite metaphorical options. There are dozens of powerful archetypes and mythic stories that you may be unconsciously acting out of or moving toward. Allow yourself the time to contemplate your life narrative, in relationship to the larger context of the story of our great transition that resonates for you. If you are able to consciously identify “current way of being” and “new way of being” metaphors, a transformational narrative can begin to inform your life, intuitively, every day, in random moments. You might notice opportunities to shift from one way of being to another in any moment, perhaps many times a day. And over the course of years of practice, a powerful transition will begin, mature, and even stabilize.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND SUBTLE ACTIVISM

We don't only enact our archetypal stories individually of course, but also together, each of us playing a unique role in a larger drama through which the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*, is living out its own great story. The great evolutionary journey of life and our human cultural and civilizational experiments are expressing their character through our collective behavior. The subtle fields of human collectives are multidimensional, including a full spectrum of soul qualities and feeling intelligence, but also collective traumas that tend to reenact themselves. Every family, clan, tribe, and nation has its own soul qualities, its own shadows and karmas, its own archetypes, angels, demons, and heroic qualities.

Working with the subtle fields and shadow dynamics of students in German-speaking countries, Thomas Hübl discovered a shared deep trauma in the collective subtle field, related to the holocaust and the Second World War. After exploring it for some years, he arranged large events in which thousands of Germans met together, with a video link to a group in Israel. These events resulted in the surfacing of the trauma in everyone's subtle field, thus allowing this collective shadow to heal. He noticed that underneath the numbness people had layers of fear, grief,

shame, and anger. He saw that trauma creates “frozen ground” in the subtle fields of both individuals and collectives, which diminishes the flow of life energy, intelligence, and functionality. By developing additional subtle competencies, one can hold a space in which these layers can be felt more fully and precisely. When that is done consciously in the present moment in a relational field, the “frozen ground” can begin to melt, and life energy can start to move down into the field and the somatic being, restoring intelligence and functionality. Hübl brought this collective trauma work from Europe to America and Israel. Now he has been joined by other healers⁴⁷ in attempting to restore coherence to a fragmented world by deepening understanding of the nature of collective and intergenerational trauma and its integration. This work focuses on both universal principles and local particularities: raising awareness of collective and intergenerational trauma, and building cultures of prevention that can reduce the effects of PTSD and cycles of abuse. An intended goal of this project is to create “pockets” of healthy, integrated coherence in individuals, groups, and cultures where shared trauma is otherwise dominant.

This is perhaps a new transrational expression of an ancient intuition. Mystics and shamans from all cultures have long enacted ceremonies on behalf of their community, intending to elicit grace and win blessings. In his book *Subtle Activism*, David Nicol describes the emerging cultural response to our collective emergency—the thousands of people and organizations who are exploring the power of collective meditation and prayer to support a positive shift in society as a whole, seeing it as a potentially crucial component of a more integrated approach to social change. This work is not a substitute for practical activism, but rather a dimension of integral transformation.

Collective trauma, shadow, soul, and healing are deep patterns in the subtle dimensions of our lives. Every one of us is participating in them and shaped in part by them. Thus, our lives of practice are an arena in which we can express and magnify the healthy motive toward healing and wholeness that is so crucial to our collective future. A more conscious relationship to the science of our interior and subtle lives—individual

and collective—together with the emergence of more and more vivid and compelling stories, may enable us to more rapidly reweave the fabric of our psyches and society, and thus restore our inherent wholeness.

DEATH AND REBIRTH

All of this has intensely personal implications for each of us. Some part of us must die to our old ways of being in order for a new level of capacity, courage, love, presence, and consciousness to be possible. This implies an ordeal—but every archetypal transition contains within it a process of death and rebirth. It is a metamorphosis, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

The caterpillar weaves a cocoon, goes inside of it, and lets go. It turns into mush. It becomes completely disorganized. After a while what scientists call “imaginal cells” begin to appear. At first, they seem alien to the immune system of the caterpillar, and it tries to kill them off, but then more and more appear. After a while, some of them clump together bit by bit and become “imaginal disks.” Then they overwhelm the immune system and a new principle reorganizes it. The imaginal discs gradually become the wings, the antennae, and the body of the butterfly. Everything that is ready to be reborn out of the process of dying into disorganized mush takes shape. Its own new quality comes into form. A similar process of death and rebirth occurs in each of us as we let go of our old, limiting stories and open up into a new, healthier way of being.

It is often shocking to recognize the archetype that you have been living. A role, story, and identity have been patterning your life outside your awareness—which has deep roots in your psyche and even in your somatic patterns of tension and compensation. And this must take place on a cultural scale too. In facing the unfathomable enormity of our ecological predicament, we recognize our own lives and projects as part of the collective cluelessness, collusion, and denial that has produced the mess. While this is not our “fault,” it does require reckoning, repentance, and reframing our larger story and our roles within it. If we go deeply into this we must wonder whether our “higher purposes” are ways to

control our basic anxiety, to deny our terror of our own inevitable death, or to keep the crisis and our collective mortality out of our awareness.

That is what Ernest Becker described in his classic book *The Denial of Death*. Sam Keen, in his introduction to that book, summarized it well: “We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information-society and global free market.”⁴⁸

Becker coined a term for all the things we do to give our lives meaning: “immortality projects.” Paradoxically, human immortality projects inevitably come into conflict with each other, becoming engaged in life-and-death struggles: “my gods against your gods.” Because nothing could possibly be more important than *my* immortality project, I am willing to sacrifice all other values that seem to conflict with it. And thus, in a grand tragic irony, we have brought the greatest evils into the world by pursuing the “higher good” of our heroic immortality projects.

This recognition can deepen and profoundly humble us, but we must not let it negate our life’s higher purposes. They are crucial if we are to create a sustainable, thriving world instead of destroying ourselves. Becker’s observation, however, reminds us that at least some of the motivations behind our best intentions are often self-serving. In engaging our archetypal transformation, opening to some measure of responsibility for the future of human and ecological life on this planet, you will probably eventually face what I described in my own journey—the ways that our desires and inner myths express the forces in our world that have been causing so much destruction. Our old ways of being have developed an inertia that we will need to skillfully parry, like the aikido move that flips an opponent using the force of their own momentum. Then our new way of being can reveal and confer a new kind of power and motivation that transcends our personal pleasure, comfort, fame, wealth, or fulfillment. This doesn’t mean becoming hostile to our human needs and embracing self-abnegating asceticism. But we can contact a source of joy and passion rooted in a much larger and higher purpose on behalf of life.

Our life can be grounded by our care and commitment to serving the embodied wholeness of life, even while everything seems to be coming apart. When our practice enacts wholeness via our unique role and story in a stupendous collective journey, it helps develop our soul strength—what Gandhi called *satyagraha*.

The journey of each soul is cyclical. It inevitably requires repeated expeditions into the underworld, times when we must face terrible truths we had previously avoided. These self-discoveries shock us, break our hearts, humble us, and ground us. Each time, we are shaken. Like the hero who narrowly avoids defeat, we are driven to the brink of despair. It takes great soul strength to find the inner resources we need to bounce back, despite everything. It takes the reclaiming of our naive, intense vitality, our “will to power,” our “third intelligence” (centered in the hara, or gut), and the genius of will—which powers all success, for good or ill. We must not only find a way to embrace this powerful vitality; we must find a way to live it with yang excellence. These yang powers operate at a whole new level once we make the yin journey to the underworld, and plant the seed of yin that is the heart of a new level of yang dynamism.

As we turn this evolutionary corner, it is our moral responsibility to affirm life. We must contact and conduct the irrepressible, unreasonable happiness that is willing and ready to go on even in the face of what seems unendurable. We must become the bold, daring, creative, loving, wise heroes that create a new human story. This is an evolutionary challenge toward which all of us can aspire, but humbly. It is a new emergent opportunity. It requires a deeper strength, something that comes from the very depths of the being, rising up like the sap of a great tree. That strength expresses itself as innocent willingness, commitment, leadership, love, and courage. It is the raw power that is the true fruit of our soul’s journey. And it is the “X factor,” the primal love of life that is the engine of survival for every individual, every family, every city, every nation, and our whole species. In the words of a famous Rumi poem,

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*