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Chapter 6 (Excerpt)

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## METAPHORS AS BRIDGES TO THE SOUL

The golden light of metaphor, which is the intelligence of poetry, was implicit in alchemical study. To change magically one substance into another more valuable one is the ancient function of metaphor, as it was of alchemy.

—PATRICIA HAMPL, A ROMANTIC EDUCATION

**M**y depression in my early thirties became a challenge from my soul to fill the empty form of my personhood. My response to it generated the search for the kind of self-knowledge that would give me the ability to follow my best instincts and discover the dreams of what I might become. My restlessness had been driven by an energy developing in the depths of my psyche, like oil forming under the pressure of the earth's surface. It signaled that it was time to shift the foundation of my life away from the dark fear and grief from my childhood.

As I strove to cultivate insight into my life and myself, the *Odyssey* became my book of common prayer, guiding me on a journey that was more sacred than any I had experienced in a religious setting. The flame of longing that drove Odysseus through the haunted waters of the eastern Mediterranean likewise pushed me to reject the sleepy Lotus Isle's temptation of a conventional life. Taking in every passage of this great epic until it was a part of me became my path to liberation.

I had fought a war for entry into adulthood and success. Now I longed to find my home in life, where I could live because I loved

it and didn't fear the future as an enemy creeping up in the dark. Every insight gleaned from my reading delivered a small shift in my fate. Though I often couldn't explain this feeling, I vaguely realized I had found something to help me discover the path of my soul.

In one famous episode of the *Odyssey*, Homer presents a metaphor of how we have to steer our way carefully between the dangers of being pulled one way or another. In the tale, Odysseus, the voyager, had to travel between the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. Scylla had once been a beautiful young woman whom the temptress Circe had cursed and turned into a six-headed monster. She was known to leap out of caves and devour the crews of ships who sailed too close to her. The second terror, Charybdis, was a whirlpool that sucked any vessel sailing close to it into an abyss of destruction. Odysseus and his men had to simultaneously watch each danger carefully as they steered their way between them. Even then, they lost a few men, showing that even when we survive danger we cannot escape without paying a price.

The story taught me that as I worked with my depression, I had to keep the two sides of the situation I faced clearly in mind as I steered my way through them to live into a new answer. Initially I imagined Scylla as the devouring aspects of my successful life as a businessman, which could become consuming. I envisioned Charybdis as the way I might be swept away if I abandoned the rudder of morality, responsibility, and love for my family. Conventional morality and responsibility generally set up the conflict with our need to live authentically that will spur our growth and transformation. I could not simply abandon these conventional values, because, in part, they were genuine for me. I had to steer steadfastly through the contrasting dangers and with the awareness Odysseus demonstrated.

As time has passed I interpret the journey between Scylla and Charybdis more generally, representing the dangers I can fall into if I become emotionally lazy and choose easy answers in important situations. Practically every major decision I've faced—divorce, raising my children and educating them, remarriage, middle age, new vocations, detaching from toxic family members, deciding

where to live and where to commit my energy—involved such a journey. It is a journey inward, carefully guided by the values of my heart as they represent my soul.

The *Odyssey* spoke directly to the heart of my experiences. It helped me wake up and say again and again, “Yes, yes, this explains it. This helps me.” This story gave guidance and purpose to my journey and meaning to its struggles. It reminded me that life isn’t as simple as we are taught, and things aren’t always as they seem. Such stories are metaphors that become bridges connecting our everyday experiences with the deeper world of possibilities held by the Self.

My encounter with the *Odyssey* led me to realize that I hadn’t even considered looking to the Bible, the religious book of my childhood, for help or metaphors. I strongly believed it gave hypocritical, simplistic answers, that it was an endless source of feelings of inadequacy and guilt. But this is what happens when a resource is robbed of its mythos. I have since discovered that if we lend a mythic ear to these stories, they may inform us in a new way. Being caught between Scylla and Charybdis is a very similar metaphor to Thomas Merton’s feelings of being in the “belly of a paradox,” an image he took from the Bible.

*Opening the Channels to Life*

Many of the great spiritual texts illustrate the value of metaphors. Years ago, while listening to my wife lecture on the psychological meaning of Abraham and his journey, I realized that this story could also have been a guide for me, perhaps even better than the *Odyssey*, in my search for wholeness at midlife.

Abraham's real story begins when he is an older man. He hears a voice urging him to leave the comfortable status quo of life in his father's land and risk everything for the promise of a new country and a renewed future. I could see a parallel to my restless depression as an urging from within to leave old ways and values. Like Odysseus, Abraham also faced a number of trials and challenges. But, unlike Odysseus, Abraham was seeking a new life and a new home, and not a return to an old one. In this search Abraham built a relationship with God, one that began with hearing an impersonal voice and progressed to where he could argue with God. He developed a personal relationship that didn't rest on faith but on his experience.

One friend of mine used the story of Moses as a guide for helping him journey out of the slavery of alcoholism. After years of drinking and several weeks on a binge, he woke up on his living room floor hearing a voice telling him it was time to choose whether to live or die. This was his "burning bush" and the spiritual experience he needed to begin his quest for sobriety.

In her discussion of the Old Testament Book of Ruth in *A Psychological Interpretation of Ruth*, Nomi Kluger-Nash views the woman Orpah through a similar psychological lens. Orpah refuses to return to her mother-in-law Naomi's native land with her after their husbands have died and the famine in that land has ended. Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth does make the journey with her. Kluger-Nash suggests that Orpah may personify our doubts, our lack of courage and taste for adventure. In other words, Orpah wants to play it safe. This lovely story shows that while safety is not a bad thing, in situations where we are meant to grow our longing for it may become destructive. Orpah becomes a negative figure in the story, because playing it too safe is its own kind of famine, drying up one's spirit and vigor.

There are many other themes in the Old Testament that can inform us and help each new generation find meaning and direction. The patterns of exile, famine, going in search of new lands, renewing one's relationship with the Divine, returning to a time of plenty, and starting new life abound. Famines are caused by

drought. I could certainly have identified with that metaphor during my depression. Just as in Orpah's story, famine or drought can mean that our desires have dried up; or perhaps our childhood was too barren, lacking the nurturance and affirmation we needed to feel safe and at home in life. Or it may mean that stress and anxiety have led us into a desert of emotional rigidity. It can also mean our spirituality has become flat and stale.

In these cases a man may become rigid, depressed, or constantly angry; he may become impotent or promiscuous as he searches for new vitality through someone else. A woman may find her body reflecting this same condition as her menstrual periods begin to become infrequent, or her vagina may lose its moisture, making sexual acts painful. The health of our spiritual and emotional life affects our sexual desire. When seen metaphorically, our symptoms are calling us to transform, to leave old attitudes, beliefs, ways of seeing ourselves, and to travel to a new place that is lush and fertile.

We too will have our version of the journey out of bondage, of the Jonah experience, the temptations in the wilderness, the desire and longing in the Song of Songs, and other pivotal moments outlined in this book. Metaphors that strive to bring the largeness and the meaning of life and spirit into our lives in an immediately understandable fashion help us see *what* is happening to us, *how* it is happening to us, and how what is happening is an expression of life supported by a deeper meaning. Religious stories can guide and comfort us when we are stuck or wounded, and in chaos they can guide us on our way.

In his book *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell summarized Jesus' temptations in the wilderness as the temptations of economics (the good life); of politics (power in the community); and of spirituality (the inflation of being above the ordinary). He also described the three temptations of Buddha as being lust, fear, and the submission to public opinion. If you remember the case of Fred, the depressed building contractor who was experiencing a midlife crisis, you may recognize these as the same forces he was battling.

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This comparison helps illustrate how archetypal patterns expressed in stories as metaphors are still alive in our life today.