
Chapter 9

THE STAGNATION OF DESIRE

The great principle of transformation begins through the things that are lowest. Things . . . that hide from the light of day and from man's enlightened thinking hold also the secret of life that renews itself again and again.

—C. G. JUNG, MODERN MAN IN SEARCH OF A SOUL

Most of us travel a long way in our lives from the point where we began. Some of us continue the process of becoming more spontaneous and creative every year, while others seem to become content and static in their lives. The novelist Gail Godwin speaks to this issue in what has become a well-known passage from her book, *The Finishing School*. She writes,

Death is not the enemy; age is not the enemy. . . . But what we ought to fear is the kind of death that happens in life. It can happen at any time. You're going along, and then at some point, you congeal You solidify and from then on your life is doomed to be a repetition of what you have done before there are two kinds of people walking around on this earth. One kind, you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very *nice* self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keep moving, changing.

By intention or neglect, desire has stagnated in people who have congealed. When this happens, life begins to lose its soul.

When I began my journey years ago, I thought that now that I was on the path, I would never congeal. I looked forward to a life of continuous self-actualization and growth. That was a naive assumption. I have since discovered that because our personality grows by successive transformations, we are going to repeatedly congeal, which is the necessary death for a psychological rebirth into the future.

I have always liked the analogy of comparing our personality's evolution to the way a lobster outgrows its shell. As the lobster gets larger, the shell doesn't grow—our soul longs for growth but our personality doesn't want to change. Eventually the pressure of the lobster's growth begins to crack the shell, until the lobster is able to emerge from it. Then the lobster must live in a vulnerable condition until it can grow a new shell. A person who has congealed is like a lobster who refuses to leave the old shell. But, unlike lobsters, we have a choice.

* * *

By midlife the new shell I had begun to grow after my career change was strong and secure. I had grown, through many difficulties, into my new profession and had worked to create a family that I thought would be stable and fulfilling. But my inner turmoil was still growing, and my marriage turned sour as my life once again started to feel stale and empty. Desolation soaked into my blood and marrow.

One night I awakened with a start, aroused by a single image from a dream. In the dream a naked, starving woman was sitting in a straight chair. The chair was in the shadows of a damp prison cell whose only light came from a tiny barred window high above her head. I lay in the dark of my bedroom, picturing this scene again and again until finally I felt compelled to get up and write it down, carefully noting every detail, every shade and every nuance of her expression. While I hadn't yet realized it, the shell was cracking.

As I followed the line of thinking this dream led me into, I slowly became aware that the balance I had sought through psychology, my studies of Zen, religion and other spiritual practices had imprisoned my soul. I needed another radical change in attitude toward my life to free the desires deep within me.

It wasn't easy to think about leaving what I thought was a new shell, or to consider that I had become stuck again. I was unhappy about having to face my situation yet another time; I didn't realize it was the archetypal pattern of growth. Additionally, I was proud of my risk taking, growth, and success so far and was reluctant to step out of the place I had earned for myself. I was also tempted to solidify into an image of an admired and respected person—the image Gail Godwin termed a *nice* one. The dark side of this image was to see myself as noble, sacrificing myself to my psychotherapy clients and family, and it was seductive. We are devilishly creative in looking for ways to play it safe. Even my analyst lacked faith in the process taking place in my psyche and seemed unconvinced that I faced a further transformation. I had never felt so alone.

Throughout this period I remained haunted by the image of the woman in the cell—I began to see her as a symbol of my soul. I sketched her in my dream journal. I saw her face in my mind every day. I was convinced that if I didn't learn how to free her, I would have a heart attack or some other illness, that whatever yearning that was imprisoned would soon turn toxic.

Gradually a daring thought began to emerge in my psyche. I no longer wanted to be centered or balanced. These initial longings had perhaps come about only to balance the effects of my early life. Now I longed to be on fire with the love of life. The image of this poor starved woman helped me understand that my despair was my yearning passion that my ego wasn't yet strong enough, brave enough, to live. This awareness caused me to change analysts and eventually to move out of my old shell and to Zürich to study, where I became a Jungian analyst.

* * *

Unlived life becomes a destructive, irresistible force that works softly but powerfully for transformation. Whenever life becomes congealed, the serpent energy (desire and the longing for transformation) in our psyche begins to surface and cause what I earlier defined as neurotic suffering. When we become rigid, overly responsible, repressed and duty bound, sexual problems are likely to stand out in the array of other problems. As an expression of my inner turmoil, I was also experiencing a lack of sexual desire, which eventually helped me understand how much I needed a more passionate approach to life. Sexual problems are always a tip-off that something else major is going on. We have responded to this emergence with several decades of scientific studies, educational approaches, and a continuous flow of self-help books about sexual methods and techniques. A very small amount of this response has been helpful. But confronting sexual problems should really introduce us to the deeper questions we would usually like to avoid. And more often than not, just like we find with the disenfranchised segments of our society, our shadow aspects symbolically represent the disenfranchised aspects of ourselves.

When we encounter a stuck place in our development, it is often because we have become rigid. The more we have entrenched ourselves in particular beliefs and attitudes—both personal and social—the more we will think we have found the *right* course in life, the *right* ideals, and the *right* principles of behavior. As a result, we suppose these beliefs and attitudes are eternally valid; we make a virtue of clinging to them and of resisting change. But this seemingly natural perspective leaves the “becoming” nature of life locked and struggling in our unconscious. Intolerance and even fanaticism are liable to result as we fight desperately to validate and strengthen our positions, even while life endangers them—as it inevitably will.

Wendy was a chic, thirty-five-year-old CPA for a large firm. She was unmarried. She drove a BMW and owned a comfortable condo in a very stylish area. But she had a troubling, repetitive experience. Every day when she left her apartment, she encountered an old, wretched bag lady. Filthy and toothless, the woman held out a grimy hand for money every time Wendy passed her. Frequently, a

pool of urine was at her feet. Wendy wished someone would make the woman go away but never had the courage to report her to the condominium complex management.

During an analytic session, we decided to pursue the meaning this woman evoked in Wendy as a psychological image. It turned out that she represented everything Wendy despised. Wendy was perfectionistic and compulsively sanitary. She couldn't live with anyone else because she was unable to tolerate the clutter. She didn't like sex because it was too messy. In fact, she didn't like her body from the waist down for the same reason. Wendy had succeeded in cutting herself off from many of the experiences of being alive, particularly those that had to do with desire. After all, real life, beginning with childbirth, is inevitably "messy."

If this poor old woman had appeared in a dream of Wendy's, she might have seen her as representing an aspect of Wendy's shadow that reflected how Wendy had cut herself off from life and perhaps reduced her feminine self to the state of a beggar. As a real-life psychological image, she helped Wendy in the same way a dream image could have done.

She still stands in front of Wendy's building, but now, having benefited from her new insight, Wendy greets her by name and feels concern for her, though the woman refuses to go to a shelter or other social agency. In my reflection, I wonder if she isn't a useful image for all of us, reminding us what our attitudes are doing to life and the feminine soul, the animating force that seeks life through us.

Societal Problems and Transformation

As I've previously stated, sexuality is not a problem to be solved. In the case of infidelity, for example, deeper questions must be faced and lived into that address not whether what happened was right or wrong but "what does it mean?" Invariably, it means the partners need to redirect their energies toward finding the value and meaning of their relationship, or more specifically the value and meaning of their individual lives.

nation and toxic attitudes. Whenever we are transformed, it affects everyone around us.

Marriage is more than a legal document. It is a metaphor that expresses both cultural values and archetypal patterns as they come to life in human experience. In archetypal terms, marriage symbolizes the source of our creative selves, masculine and feminine, conscious and unconscious, feeling and thought, love and authority brought together through a desire for greater wholeness. In symbolic systems, such as mythology and alchemy, marriage represents the joining of opposites in order to birth something new, or to transform the level of consciousness. A deeper river of reality runs beneath all of our acts, giving them a meaning more compelling than we may realize. This doesn't mean we should stay in destructive marriages. It means we must work as hard as we can to discover the true meaning of transformation. If we don't, we may unknowingly take a course that is destructive to ourselves and to our society.

Cultural Transformation and Spirituality

The word "transformation" can be traced to the Latin *transformare*, which means to change the shape or form of something. Transformation does not mean revolution in the political sense, nor does it mean the mindless destruction of old values. It requires that we continue developing and refining the good that has been won throughout our lives and over the centuries. We force revolutions to happen only when we unconsciously hold fast to attitudes that are egocentric, stifling, and destructive. Such a calcified position eventually brings about a rebellion rather than a transformation.

The Garden of Eden story teaches us that all new growth in human consciousness begins with a necessary sin. The so-called sin is a step outside of conventional attitudes towards life. But if we are going to give our life to the Self—or to the image of the Divine within us or to any other transcendent value—we must first have our own life and personality to give. A personal life assures

us that our actions and achievements disclose our true nature to others, whereas unconsciously following the conventional path means our behavior is involuntary. No matter how many proper things we do in the latter case, our life will reflect no unique personal or spiritual expression.

* * *

Before there was *The DaVinci Code*, Martin Scorsese in the late 1980s produced a film version of Nikos Kazantzakis's book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Our entire country went into a state of shock—in the movie, Jesus had a sexual fantasy. Poor Nikos must have been spinning in his grave, because his novel had little to do with sex. Nikos Kazantzakis meant that Christ's last temptation was to become a successful upper-middle-class man, someone his mother, family, and community would be proud of.

While there is nothing wrong in being married and middle-class, it is the *spirit* of how we are living—whether we are conscious of what we are doing or not—that gives meaning to our life. We must ask ourselves if we have become free enough from our past to become a creative expression of our Self. The spiritual question that I believe challenges all of us is not “What do I do to be good?” but “How do I live to serve a value that is transcendent or Divine and can bring meaning into my life?”

Choosing to accept responsibility for our individuation, however, doesn't do away with our sense of freedom. Certainly it requires many sacrifices. But these sacrifices only affirm the tasks life has given us and can lead us beyond ourselves and into an authentic experience of meaning and fulfillment. Living with such authenticity can be difficult, for it brings us into continual collisions between our inner obligation to ourselves and our outer obligations to other people and society. It is as if authentic living, even when serving the Self, requires that we must always violate someone's idea of the “right” thing that we should be doing. But the more deeply we come to know ourselves, the more clearly we will experience what is “right” for us.