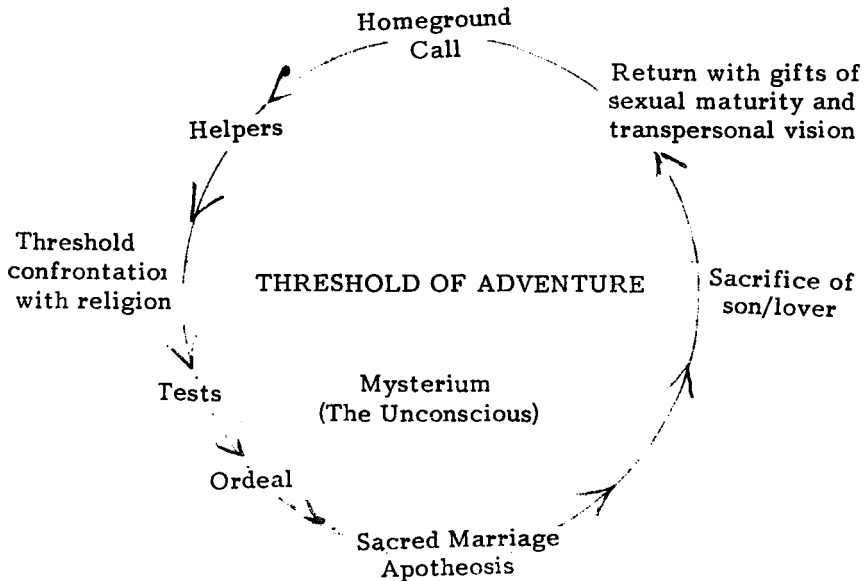


Ruth Harrison

A HUMANISTIC THERAPIST DISCOVERS THE TRANSPERSONAL

The following is an extremely condensed account of a process that extended over two years and followed the archetypal course of an initiation ritual in the midst of my everyday life. The diagram below is a chart of this course, adapted from the work of Joseph Campbell and Paul Rebillot. 1)



Homeground in Bodymind Therapy

My training was in a very intensive neo-Reichen therapy, both individual and group, in the early seventies. I threw myself so completely into the world of process work that I spent most of my free time supplementing my therapy in weekend workshops with various leaders and in frequent and regular co-counselling. Then I began to work as a therapist myself, under the supervision of my therapist. I was living and breathing process work and training groups when the call to initiation came to me, and its utter strangeness disoriented me. I couldn't place it in the framework of body needs or emotional expression. However, one thing therapy had taught me to do was trust the quiet voice that speaks from within. So I listened.

At the time the call came my immersion in humanistic therapy had already received a couple of jolts. Firstly, I had got over-involved with one of my clients, and secondly, I had found myself mysteriously drawn towards workshops on alien themes.

My client, whom I shall call Simon, had entered therapy because of a sexual problem he had had since childhood. After two or three sessions he asked me out to dinner, and I introduced this into his next session as relevant to his process. He was surprised, but worked readily enough on his attraction to me, tracing its similarity to his relationship with his wife and even his mother. But he went on asking me out. Some time later, I discovered that I was attracted to him myself and realised that in (correctly) bringing his feelings for me into the sessions I had also been unconsciously teasing him. Worse still, I had an unresolved pattern of relationships with married men. Mortified at my unprofessionalism, I decided that the only honourable thing I could do was resign. I hated the idea of depriving him of sessions altogether, though, and after much soul-searching decided to suggest co-counselling. At one stroke this would preserve his sessions, free me from my professional responsibility, and open the way to a more personal relationship.

This solution proved even neater than I expected. Simon turned out to be on the verge of bankruptcy, a fact he had considered irrelevant to his therapy and never mentioned, so my offer unwittingly saved him from having to stop the sessions himself. I then turned out to be able to arrange a private loan for him which was ultimately to save his solvency. All the same, it was over a year before my desire to help him and give him sessions began to reveal itself as a mask for the drive to play the good mother. The reason it took me so long to recognise what was staring me in the face was that the drive was so sexual. I did not connect mothering with sexuality.

During this time I found myself drawn to a workshop on astrology, and then later to one on Siddhi yoga with a visiting Indian guru. I felt unexpectedly disappointed with both of them. The astrologer, whom I consulted for a reading that proved equally disappointing, told me I was "seeking the Truth or the Godhead or something", and gave me a leaflet about transpersonal psychology. I finally got to this third workshop several desultory months later and here I found the broader vista I had been feeling out for so vaguely. They talked of the psyche here rather than the bodymind, of spirituality and meaning and purpose as well as body and feelings. They presented psychological growth as continuing beyond the familiar Freudian phases through the staging posts of adult life towards wisdom. Here at last was

a sense of something to look forward to, something to work towards instead of out of. And they talked about symbolism and imagery and guided us into fantasies where I rediscovered the lost world of imagination and myth and magic. Enchanted and intrigued with these new perspectives, I consulted one of the leaders and decided to enter therapy with her.

The Call

Initiation was never mentioned in those early sessions, nor in the subsequent workshops I attended. The idea came entirely from me, about a month after starting. My guide in the strange, numinous world I now entered was thus not my leader, more of a resonator really, amplifying the experiences I brought to her with informed discussion and Gestalt process work. The creator and arbiter of each of the rites I was to undergo was thus my own unconscious. So when the word first cropped up in my vocabulary, it was not in a professional session with her, but in a co-counselling one with Simon. It just popped into my head as I was relaxing after some deep breathing exercises. "I need an initiation ceremony", I said.

I didn't know anything about initiation ceremonies. I couldn't even remember when I had heard the term used, or in what context. The only association seemed to be with ritual. The chanting I had found myself performing among the followers of the Indian guru had surprised me into a profound nostalgia for ritual, but when I had tried to remedy this by attending a service in his temple, I had found the Sanskrit prayers as alienating as the Hebrew ones I had had to learn in childhood. What form, then, would my initiation ceremony take? I wondered. An image immediately came into my mind's eye of my mother placing her hands on my shoulders and saying, "Now you are a woman".

The First Rite

When I told my new therapist about this imagined rite of initiation, she offered to act it out with me. As she laid her hands on my shoulders and pronounced the words, I burst into tears. She took my right hand and placed it on her breast. I sobbed harder and harder. I had sometimes felt a secret desire to touch a woman's breasts, but had never openly acknowledged it and assumed it was something to do with a repressed infantile wish. I had even wondered vaguely whether I was a repressed lesbian. Now that I was actually doing it at her own instigation, and feeling the deference due to her greater experience of life, I knew that it hadn't been the breast I was seeking but the heart behind it. I wanted to reach the heart of womanhood.

The Second Rite

About two months after this, I attended a co-counselling workshop and had a session with an older woman there who also seemed to be seeking a deeper experience of her own womanhood. I talked about my rite, and my suspicions of latent lesbianism, and plucked up the courage to ask her if she would let me put my hands over her breasts. She assented quite readily. I slowly put my hands out towards her, closed my eyes, and felt the fear and trembling rise up in me until I was finally touching her. It then came to me that I wanted her to touch my breasts in the same way. I asked her to, and she did. I began to cry. "I feel accepted as a woman", I said, and knew that the second stage of my initiation ceremony had been completed.

The Third Rite (Threshold)

A month later I took an extended journey into my unconscious in the form of a two-hour guided fantasy with my therapist. It was a puzzling experience in which a number of archetypal symbols appeared for the first time, the most disturbing being the cross. A more personal link with religion also appeared in a vivid recall of the family scene on the day my brother died, when he was thirteen. I was struck by the different ways everybody found to deal with their grief, and my own puzzling inability to feel anything at all. My talisman on the journey told me that these different ways were the vessels they had chosen to cope with death, and that I was still looking for mine. My grandfather's seemed now to have been the most appropriate, combining release of feeling with religious ritual. I saw him again rocking back and forth on the traditional low mourning stool, weeping and chanting prayers quietly to himself in the ritual Jewish manner. And I realised that because his religion was not mine I could not adopt his way. If I wanted a religion, I would have to find one for myself.

The following morning I woke up with a painful stiff neck. A friend happened to pop in and offered to massage it for me. I knelt before her chair with my back to her and slowly relaxed under her gentle hands. I began to talk about the guided fantasy and the cross and how bewildering and frightening I found it. She shared my interest in transpersonal psychology, and with her convent background found the religious symbolism quite natural. I sank with relief into the yearning for religion I had fought off for so long. Then I asked her to cross me. "I already have", she said. "I crossed your back. Didn't you feel it?" "No", I said, "but will you do it in front too?" and I turned round to face her. This was the first time my initiator was seated higher than me, and it seemed wrong to tell her how to do it, even though I "knew" the act had to be threefold. I knelt in silence while she hesitated, then bent forward and crossed first my forehead, then my face, and then my whole body across the heart and down from

forehead to genitals. I experienced a profound sense of completion, and of communion with my friend in something that enveloped us both.

The Ordeal in the Mysterium

After this third rite my initiation became a continuous process. I entered a hyperactive state, sleeping too little at night and having to fight sleep off during the day when I was giving sessions. There were moments when my thoughts would race, my tongue trip over itself, and my feelings over-react to my clients. I had to control myself very hard at these times. I also had attacks of tachycardia which were very uncomfortable. The mysterious force that had manifested in isolated ritual moments seemed now to be spilling chaotically into my everyday world. My process work was haunted by the cross, which remained impervious to questioning, saying only, "You have to accept me without understanding/.

About ten days after the third rite, I woke up from a disturbing dream in which I was fussing obsessively over the locks in my house. My heart was beating frantically. I got up and did some typing to get back to normal, but after a couple of hours felt totally spaced out instead. So I decided to get in touch with my inner process by lying down and breathing deeply. After a few minutes my body began to shake, and I registered a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach and at the back of my mind. It was terror. I "knew" that if I gave in to it I would never come back. It was too big for me to handle alone. I rang everyone I knew who might be able to give me an emergency session, but no one was available.

Then I remembered a book I had recently read 2) which suggested that obsessional rituals are sometimes a reaction against the perception of pure evil. I recognised that I had been veering towards the obsessional myself lately in my restless activity and worry about locking doors and windows whenever I left the house. "Right", I thought briskly, "I'll use my obsessionalism consciously", and hoovered the house systematically from top to bottom.

The evil that was threatening me, I realise now, was the vastness of the unconscious terrain I had entered during the guided fantasy. It dwarfed my sense of myself. I had faced many repressed experiences in bodymind therapy, but they had come singly, piecemeal. This was my first encounter with the suprapersonal immensity of the archetype.

Three days later, breakdown threatened me again. Again it was on waking very early in the morning with rapid heartbeat. This time I dreamed while awake. I saw myself as a bride at my own wedding reception making a speech to my guests, and I saw my groom clearly, replete with top hat. Then I heard myself arguing in my head with Simon, going over and over the case for breaking up, proving with point after point that he didn't love me. I got angrier and angrier and eventually decided to masturbate, just to relieve my speeding head and agitated heart. For the first time in several years I achieved a climax. I broke down in sheer exhaustion, recognising that I was nearing the end of my stamina. Thank heaven I had arranged to go away on holiday only a few days later.

The weeping continued for two or three hours until I reached my therapist for my weekly session. I collapsed on to her couch, told my story, and listened with relief as she affirmed my nervous exhaustion and talked of my tendency to overwork and to control everything from my mind, and then told me a fairy story to illustrate her point which transformed my helpless tears to laughter. The obsessive argument with Simon and the fantasy of the wedding dwindled to the status of mental trickery.

However, within hours they had re-established their obsessional control. My fantasy groom had been someone I knew quite well who was eminently eligible and had even expressed an interest in me in the past. Racing and breathless, I rang him up. We met within forty-eight hours, and I became obsessed with the idea of marrying him, despite not being attracted to him at all. I saw Simon that same evening for our customary weekend together, picked a row and screamed hysterically at him, quite uncharacteristically, and then again the following day. I made up for it each time by giving him a session, which gave him the space to express his bottled feelings, and after the second one told him that at some point we were going to have to split up. "You know, it's a drag being a woman", I heard myself say, to my utter amazement. "I wish I could go on as I am now, living a full, interesting life, with lots of close relationships, seeing you at the weekends. But I can't. I have to be a woman". Being a woman clearly meant getting married and having a child. It had the same meaning for him, for he proved to be surprisingly understanding about my urgency. But then he broke down and begged me not to leave him. And we cried together, and I promised.

The holiday in Greece gave me space to slow down in the warm Mediterranean sun and catch up on my sleep. But on my first morning

back home I woke up after too little sleep with my heart beating rapidly, and knew that the mysterious problem had been shelved only temporarily.

A couple of days after my return, I attended a workshop on trans-personal psychosynthesis. Soon after arriving I found that I was shaking internally, and during the first experiential exercise this became very evident. The leader encouraged me to follow that rather than her prescribed structure, so I lay down and allowed it to take my body over completely. I found myself writhing and screaming at the top of my voice, in a state of utter terror. Yet at the same time it was an immense relief to give in to it at last, knowing that someone was holding the world together for me while "I" disappeared. After what seemed a long time, an image appeared of the cross with a live snake round it. The leader suggested I talk to it, but it remained as implacable as ever. She did not push me further but stayed with me in silence, and after a while the snake disappeared and the words, "Die, you infidel dog!" came into my head.

I hesitated before uttering them, but the leader simply instructed me to repeat them. Her voice sounded strong and reassuringly authoritative. She was to tell me two years later that this experience caused a crisis in her professional career, for she felt completely out of her depth. So for both of us it was to be a test of faith in the ultimate rightness of process work. As she repeated her instruction again and again, I took courage and began to play into the role. My voice grew louder and more commanding each time, and the terror subsided to a fine tremor. I experienced a sense of detachment, as though some weird melodrama was being played out on my body and in my soul that bore no relation to me personally. This sense then translated itself into an image of a figure that I knew was me being pressed flat into the ground by a man-sized cross. It lasted only a flash. Then the cross was upright before me again. "You have to accept me", it seemed to be saying. "If you don't accept me, you'll suffer for it". "But you're threatening me", I protested, "you're persecuting me. I can't accept out of fear". "I exist", came back the reply. "You have to accept me".

Impasse. Silence. Then the words changed to "Suffering exists", and the cross turned into a crucifix. The leader asked me to come back to the present and say to each of the other people in the subgroup, "I don't have to do your suffering for you". As I did this, I thought of my clients and suddenly saw that I had been trying to take their suffering on to myself. Like Christ. That was what being a therapist was for, wasn't it, to banish suffering? One of the people in the group

answered this unspoken question for me. "I don't want to be cheated of my suffering", she said. "I grow through it. Don't cheat me of the opportunity to grow". Only then did it hit me that suffering might actually have a purpose, might not be intrinsically evil.

The leader asked me if I could now accept the cross without understanding. I was still unable to answer yes or no, but when I came to reflect on the experience later I began to see beyond my terrified mystification to the concept that suffering itself is beyond understanding. It is part of the whole process of penetrating the Mystery that is life. All our faculties get drawn into this Quest, not just the intellect, and we find ourselves being stretched to our outermost limits (ordeal) only to find that the Mystery is still beyond our grasp. If we then give up the struggle for mastery, if we humbly acknowledge our own limitations, we may then find ourselves being mysteriously moved from centre (transcendence). This is the experience that lies at the heart of all mystery cults and is the aim of initiation rites all over the world, the experience of the internal moving centre, the mysterious source of life itself.

The Sacred Marriage

There is a profound similarity between the mystical experience of oneness with the source of life and the sexual experience of orgasm. I had never yet experienced orgasm during sex despite all the bio-energetic therapy I had had, and the morning after I went into my terror at the psychosynthesis workshop I woke up "knowing" why it had never happened. I had been sacrificing my body to the wrong god.

In her book "Woman's Mysteries" 3), which I had read so recently in Greece, Esther Harding discusses the ritual act of sex (known as the sacred marriage) that formed part of women's initiation into the Mysteries of the Great Goddess in ancient Babylon. In sacrificing (making holy) her integrity to the Goddess' representative, the woman was psychologically taking on to herself the responsibility for her own sexual instinct. "Her act concerned her relation to the goddess of love and did not concern her relation to a husband, possible or actual . . . Realising that the love aroused in her is a manifestation of the goddess of love, she will recognise it **and the suffering it brings** as part of her experience of the feminine principle". (Emphasis mine). I had been trying to give something to men that I had not yet owned for myself.

Simon came to stay with me as the workshop ended. It was our first meeting since my return from Greece, and to my horror we fell back into exactly the same kind of quarrel we had had before I left, with me accusing him bitterly of not caring, and he growing stonier and stonier. After some time I managed to pull back enough from my ranting to become aware of his acute discomfort, and as before I offered him a session. He accepted, and used it to give full vent to his frustration, screaming at me and pounding a cushion with a force that shook the whole house. "You've made it impossible for me to need you", he said at the end. "You set this situation up", I retorted. "The needs were mutual at the beginning, but you demonstrated time and again that you had no time for my needs. So all that's left is yours".

This was unfair, of course, for I was equally responsible. We had both brought basic, biological needs to the relationship that were being frustrated: he needed a mother and I needed a mate. Yet he had set out to sexualise our relations, and I had known that he was married and had learnt after our first night together that he had had a vasectomy. That evening we had each recognised our frustration and given it full expression in our different ways. There seemed to be nowhere further we could go.

In the morning we made love. Something was different about it, though. As we lay quietly afterwards, I suddenly "knew" that this time it had been a ritual act, this time I had dedicated my sexuality to the Goddess, and Simon had been acting as her priest. I had a vague sense of her presence before me, a hazy figure standing facing me from the end of the bed.

After some hesitation I told Simon about it. He listened in attentive silence, and then there was a long pause. "You know", he said eventually, "I'm still waiting for the heavens to open and the lightning to strike. Like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He was struck blind". He suddenly burst into tears. "I've been blind for twenty years", he sobbed, "ever since my mother died. It was because I never noticed how she was suffering". He had been fifteen when she died and could not remember what she looked like. He wept and wept in my arms, recalling how miserable her life had been. Since he clearly experienced his "blindness" as a punishment, I suggested he ask her for forgiveness. He refused vehemently with a tantrum of childish rage, then suddenly surrendered and poured out his love for her with a passion I had never seen in him before.

The key for both of us seemed to be in reowning the suffering that is the feminine experience. When I came to reflect on my own with the Goddess, I was struck by its undertones of primitive savagery. I had found myself reacting unusually during the intercourse, as though I was in pain. I had suddenly needed to use my teeth, and had taken the pillow and bitten into it as though trying to withstand something. Yet the sensations in my vagina had been exquisite, so it was not that. It had simply felt something I had to do: a ritual act. And I had uttered a strange cry when his orgasm came, a cry of pain that seemed to be wrested from me as if by force. Yet I had felt no pain in my body. I seemed to be acting out an unwillingness that I did not feel.

Or perhaps it was not an unwillingness. Perhaps it was an "I can't". Perhaps my womanhood was not something I had the power to give away in the first place. Perhaps it had to be torn away as though it were part of my body. Like the hymen.

It was the exact reverse of everything humanistic psychology had taught me about taking responsibility. Gestalt therapy teaches us to replace "I can't" with "I won't", to reown the power we abdicate to others. Yet here was I acting out "I can't", even though I patently "could", and recognising my sexual instinct as an autonomous entity outside myself that was not even mine to own but belonged to the whole of womankind. I felt no emotion towards her, no sense of kinship. I was simply acknowledging her divinity, and Simon as the agent of her will. After all, it was **his** orgasm that had done the tearing. My own part in the process had been in preparing myself to submit to his ritual penetration: to offer him my love and to sensitise myself to the call of religion. He had rejected the love, and so the sexual act had taken place purely on the levels of body sensation and instinct. And on that body level what I had experienced, like an act of grace, was something **new**: an orgasm.

I had expected an orgasm to be a clitoral climax occurring spontaneously during intercourse, but this was completely different. And the difference lay not in any technique, but in my sense of myself. My body seemed to have welded itself into a flowing unity that needed no directing and moved of itself without effort or decision in tune with Simon. I felt I was sinking deeper and deeper into my very essence, and ecstasy occurred with each moment of that most intimate, most exquisite contact, that physical sensation of being touched in my innermost depths. The writings of Reich and Lowen, those pioneers of a therapy based on the organic unity of mind and body had led me to expect build-up to a climax. Reich draws the course of orgasm

as a wave rising gradually to a clear peak and then descending sharply. 4) But for me there was no ascent and no climax; rather, a sinking and a roundedness. I have come to the conclusion that what Reich and Lowen describe is a male orgasm, and that it is completely different in quality to the female experience.

My obsession with marriage to the eligible man disappeared after this. I realised that I had turned to it as I had turned to obsessional housework, to reinforce the bounds of my familiar (and familial) self, to ward off the call to transcendence.

The Sacrifice of the Son-Lover

Simon and I continued to meet after this powerful experience together, but it was clear that something had changed. When we were together I experienced myself as pure giving. There was nothing I wanted from him any more. I stopped having sessions with him, though I continued to counsel him, and his interest in sex waned away. "It feels incestuous", he eventually confessed.

Some three months after my vision of the Goddess, I attended a bio-energetics workshop and during a centering exercise received an image of my brother when he was very small. I had been three when he was born and had believed he was my baby. I then wandered into a confusion of thoughts around my mother's womb, my own womb, my brother's death, and human sacrifice, and suddenly "knew" that the next stage of my initiation was going to be the bloody sacrifice of my baby to the Goddess. It was only later that I recalled Esther Harding's name for the last stage of initiation into the feminine mysteries: it was the sacrifice of the son. The following morning, I was shocked to find blood on every item of my bedclothes, even the pillow-slip. My period had started during the day, but I had "felt" it unnecessary to use anything to staunch it when I went to sleep that night. I realised on seeing it in the morning that I had needed to see blood included in the ritual.

But what was the meaning of the blood? Was it to do with human sacrifice, or perhaps my psychologically broken hymen? The answer came about a fortnight later when I went away with Simon for a late summer holiday. I woke up one night feeling strong pressure round my bladder and vagina, and acutely miserable. Remembering what cystitis was like, I held out as long as possible before going to the toilet, and when I did get there what happened was not urination but an obscene fantasy of ceremonial self-exposure which played over and over in different variations. In all of them I was standing

in the centre of a stage in a night-club, but sometimes I was naked, sometimes I was wearing an ornate, chorus-girl costume, and sometimes I had two girls in attendance on me. A comper in evening dress was introducing me through the microphone to an all-male audience. "A nice juicy cunt", he kept saying. Another variation involved individual men coming up on to the stage at his invitation to touch me. Running through it all like a fluid thread was an awareness that I was actively opening myself to the play of these images upon my soul. just as I was actively opening all my orifices on the toilet seat. It was a more participatory version of the sense I had had during the psychosynthesis workshop after expressing my terror. This time, though, the imagery was more explicit.

The following night I woke up in the same way, but when I got to the toilet this time, what I became aware of was the contrast between the openness of my orifices and the tightness of my bowels inside. So I asked myself what I was holding on to, and the answer came back clearly, "To my relationship with Simon". He was the lover who had become my child. He was the sacrifice I had to make.

What finally drove me to do the deed four months later was not those nocturnal experiences themselves, but the drive towards sexual maturity that they portrayed the last stage of. I got very frustrated in the end with a lover who didn't want sex and offered me only a dead-end relationship. The Mystery was calling me to life.

References

- 1) Joseph Campbell: "The Hero with a Thousand Faces". Bollingen. Paul Rebillot leads a five-day group experience called "The Hero's Journey".
- 2) Arthur Guirdham: Obsession. Neville Spearman
- 3) Esther Harding: "Woman's Mysteries Ancient and Modern". Harper-Colophon.
- 4) Wilhelm Reich: "Character Analysis". Vision.