

# human development by nature's design - a heroic journey for all times

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Recently, on two separate occasions, I was asked what my 'speciality' was. First my friend, Jock, a newly trained psychotherapist who was interviewing me in order, as he put it, 'to gather pearls of wisdom from his elders', asked me the question. I was stumped. Some 'elder', I thought, thirty years of practice and teaching and I had yet to declare whether I specialized in 'trauma', 'addiction', 'sexual deviance', or what (all terms that he offered to try to help me to decide).

Recently, on two separate occasions, I was asked what my 'speciality' was. First my friend, Jock, a newly trained psychotherapist who was interviewing me in order, as he put it, 'to gather pearls of wisdom from his elders', asked me the question. I was stumped. Some 'elder', I thought, thirty years of practice and teaching and I had yet to declare whether I specialized in 'trauma', 'addiction', 'sexual deviance', or what (all terms that he offered to try to help me to decide). The second occasion was when a client, who was shopping around for a therapist, seized upon this question as a way of trying to determine if I was going to be adequate to meet her needs, which she described in categories of 'survival' and 'recovery' — as in 'survivor of sexual abuse' and 'recovery from addictions'. In both cases, I was entirely caught off guard. I witnessed myself saying that I 'specialized in life'. 'I am a steward of life', I said.

Eavesdropping on myself is often the way I find out about myself. But what does this actually mean — 'specializing in life' — what was I getting at? As I pondered my awkwardness in the face of these two occasions, I was brought home to a profound memory that took me back to my undergraduate years at university in the 1960's. At the time, I had already gone through three possible majors and was about to discard my fourth, psychology, having become lost in the labyrinth of 'rat psychology' (as we came to call behaviorism) and Freud's theories of endless hysteria and sublimations (which is how I looked on it then). Right at that point, I was assigned a book that sealed my commitment to my major in psychology and sociology and changed my life, forever. The book was Abraham Maslow's, *Toward a Psychology of Being*. In this most inspiring book, Maslow declares the impossibility of discovering what it

means to be 'fully human' by extrapolating health from disease. To know what 'actualization' or the fulfillment of potential looks like we must, he says, rub against those that appear to be living in such a way. And this was not all, he also postulated, in no uncertain terms, that human beings had a need to actualize their full potential. In other words, getting better from what was hurting us – 'recovering/surviving', adjusting and coping – was not and never would be enough. It would leave us hungry and, I dare say, the symptoms of such hunger are all around us.

So what does it mean to 'specialize in life', to be a 'steward of life'? First and foremost such a 'specialization' speaks to our having forgotten to take notice of the magnitude, the sheer awesomeness and beauty, of life. Life needs advocates these days. Secondly, and this follows from the first, we need to remember how absolutely trustworthy the energy and rhythms of life are, for when we become distanced from nature we come to distrust and fear her. Thirdly, specializing in life has to address the question of how we can find our way back to this, our place in the river of life, the web of all living things, our true home. Specializing in life, therefore, means inviting people to remember who they fundamentally are and what song their life wants to sing in the larger chorus of life. Specializing in life reminds me, each moment, that all things are interconnected. As a 'steward of life', as each individual I come to work with begins to remember the pleasure of the life pulsations in his or her body and the song of purpose in their heart, I am reassured that this person will be a valuer and a protector of all of life, whether that life appears in the form of a child or our natural environment.

## Threshold Moments

In the life of each one of us there are threshold moments. I remember where I was and exactly how I felt holding Maslow's, *Toward a Psychology of Being*. I was in the lounge of the ladies room, in the Student Union, catching up on my reading between classes. I wasn't watching a beautiful sunset or pondering the vastness of the universe on a black and starry night, though it could have happened in such circumstances. What is significant about these threshold moments is that suddenly we know something that we sense we have always known. With a jolt, we remember and in that moment, nothing looks the same as it did in the moment before, yet we know that this place we are now seeing from is more of a home than any place we recently inhabited. Our vision is expanded in these moments, our hearts race with the passion of some unbelievable rejoicing and our voice wants to call out to join others. In our depths we comprehend that we have both been granted a gift and a responsibility. Don Juan, the Yaqui Indian, teacher and sorcerer, in Carlos Castaneda's books, speaks of such moments as thresholds where 'spirit descends'. He says that 'there is a threshold that once crossed permits no retreat'. Don Juan explains that one did not have to be an apprentice of sorcery to reach this threshold and that the only difference between an average man and a sorcerer, in such cases, is what each emphasizes. A sorcerer emphasizes crossing this threshold and uses the memory of it as a reference. An average man does not cross the threshold and does his best to forget all about it

In all of my years of working with people, it is these threshold moments that inspire my passion. I rejoice that they are available to everyone of us and I live humbly in the mystery of the grace that determines both the crossing over and the pattern of the life that follows such a crossing. I am convinced that such moments are 'wake up points', places of remembering, but not a simple personal memory and yet, it is this too, but a most expansive memory of our place in the larger picture, a sense of purpose, a return to the piece of song that we are to sing in the larger chorus of life. If we can muster the intention, not just once, but again and again, we will somehow enter the river of our life, join a sense of inner knowing of purpose so expansive that we know

that we are living in balance with the way of all nature — in accordance with nature's design.

Indigenous peoples — peoples whose lives are still being lived in close relationship to nature, community and spirit — understood such moments and understood the importance of creating the means of enabling them to occur. Beyond this, they also understood that elders were significant in that they could also affirm the existence of such occurrences, as well as the ways in which such gifts might be nurtured. Indigenous peoples also understood that the well-being of the larger community and indeed all of life and evolution, depended on the maturing of these threshold moments and their manifestation in the lives of the people.



Indigenous peoples also recognized the mystery existent when it came to each individual choosing to follow in the path of such moments and the very particular unfolding of such a following in each life. Indigenous cultures not only recognized the need to awaken new ways of seeing at significant places of development (typically and most significantly, adolescence) but recognized that all of life was a journey of unlocking the gift that might have been perceived in but an instant, in one of these threshold moments.

The longing, however unconscious, for such moments, is part of our native blueprint, part of the need for actualization that Maslow was reaching to understand in his inspired works. It is as much a part of our life script as bearing apples is to the apple tree. We all long to come to fruition, even while many remain unconscious to this longing.

There are times in our lives when this longing is closer to the surface, in a natural and native sort of way, in accordance with what appears to be a universal blueprint. We tend to call these places, in our cultures, points of crisis – ‘two year crisis’, ‘the crisis of adolescence’, ‘mid-life crisis’. It is true that these are times of crisis because our life, as we have formulated it, is in danger and a threshold leading to a new place is calling to be crossed. But in our Western cultures we tend to see these as times to be contained, controlled and got through, whereas in a culture closer to its indigenous roots, these were understood to be significant points of crossing over into new states of being. In these cultures too, the crisis was most assuredly recognized and therefore guidance would be offered to not only assure a safer passage but to capitalize on the

birthing of the new that was potentially a product of such dynamic times. These were times of great ‘callings to adventure’, a journey to some greater state of knowing was potentially afoot. These times were not to be handled as mere commutes to the next point.

A heroic journey commences when an individual, for whatever reason, responds to such a calling, in spite of fear and doubt, with an affirmative gesture. A heroic life is one that has a trademark of sustaining this gesture, so that one’s intention becomes impeccably married to the direction in which one senses one is called. No one but each individual person can know if one’s life is on such a course. This evaluation can and should only be made from the inside, in accordance with one’s own unique inner compass. The paradox is, however, that only by being on such a journey of transformation does one’s compass become trustworthy, clear of distorting elements.

## **Myths and the Challenge of Being Human**

I grew up in Israel so the myths of the Old Testament became the stories that accompanied my development. In spite of the fact that the Old Testament suffers from and reflects a period of great movement toward patriarchy and therefore the masculine element, the myths are enlightened and enlightening. Read in a certain way, these stories, together, may constitute our first ‘self help manual’, in that the stories are ingenious maps of human development and evolution, potentially leading to the highest order.

A story that accompanies me daily is the story of the Israelites in Egypt. As the story goes, Joseph, an Israelite, travels from his homeland, Canaan, to Egypt because there is a famine in his land. He goes to Egypt out of hunger. His people follow and they come to be established in Egypt and they not only fare well over time, but become wise advisors to Pharaoh, King of Egypt.

As the years pass, however, a new Pharaoh arrives who recognizes the Israelites as the strangers that they are and relegates them to the position of slavery. They live in this condition for many years until Moses, an Israelite who is raised by Pharaoh's daughter

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(a story in and of itself) , remembers his people, notes their suffering and decides to lead them to freedom, with a little encouragement from God. Pharaoh, of course, has to be convinced, but through a series of catastrophic events, outstanding among them being the crossing of the threshold of the Red Sea, the Israelites find themselves in the Sinai Desert on the way to the 'Promised Land', back to their original home.

Even by foot it should have taken the Israelites only about a month to arrive in the Judean Hills, the threshold to the 'Land of Milk and Honey', but alas, they get hung up. What hangs the

people up in the wilderness of the desert for forty years, is a consequence of their own perception, their particular and limited world view. As the story goes, the Israelites complain bitterly to Moses (who, in turn, complains to God) about the lousy conditions in the desert. Basically, they ask and then plead to go 'home' again to Egypt, saying that at least in Egypt they knew when their next meal was coming and what was on the menu. So what if they were beaten, they asked, at least they had a roof over their heads. Basically, they said, that slavery was preferable to some abstract promise of freedom, especially and particularly since the wilderness was so undesirable. God therefore makes a decision that results in their forty years of wandering. We can see it as a punishment, but I invite you to see this as part of the divine plan, an essential portion of the blueprint of life (as are all other parts of the story, I believe).

God (and we must ponder the meaning of 'God' along with all else) makes it so that the Israelites will wander in the wilderness until the slave generation dies. In other words, only those whose world view is not formed by the experience of slavery, will enter the Promised Land. Even Moses dies and is replaced by Joshua, a Warrior, for the purposes of entering into Canaan. What a story!

It seems that as we grow, we leave our home (often because of hunger, but not only) and become servants to a foreign master. Although this works for a while, at some point we wake up — a threshold moment — and realize we have lost our freedom. Naturally, we want it back again. The story, however, lets us know that freedom is obtained through the process of much journeying and that there is to be a

significant dying off, in the wilderness of our wanderings, before we can even entertain the meaning of inhabiting a 'promised land', which I believe, we are still evolving toward understanding. We will, most likely, be required to develop the knowledge and practice of the Warrior's Way beforehand.

This is the Heroic Journey of all times, told in this particular way in the Old Testament, but such a theme underlies all of our great world myths and all of our riveting fairy tales. These are the stories of ordinary heroes leaving a place of familiarity, wandering in the wilderness of transformation — the vast and dangerous unknown — in a direction that calls to them, that they instinctively and courageously recognize is full of promise. This direction, or 'land', may constitute a point of orientation that may never actually be reached, in fact, but once called forth, the intention to journey makes all the difference in the life of the individual, the people and, the planet.

Stories serve as maps, guidelines, inspirations, invitations to set forth. Stories can never take the place of the actual living but we love great stories because we can become any or all parts and characters within a story. We can join a story at any point depending on how it speaks to our own life. There is no better or best place in the story. The point is to embrace the whole of it, knowing that each part is meant to speak compassionately to the challenge of our humanness. Each of our individual stories is a heroic journey told in two parts. We can think of the first part as the heroic survival and adjustment that causes us to leave home in the first place. The awakening that then calls us home again, is the second part. Each part is heroic in its

own right. It seems, therefore, that we are somehow meant to forget and it seems we are also granted the opportunity, in threshold moments, to remember. What causes one to cross the threshold that leads back home, to enter the wilderness of transformation that brings us home to our own inner way of knowing, which in truth is part of a larger and universal way of knowing, is one of the great mysteries. But the potential is there for each of us.

The gift of awakening comes, but the willingness to face the dying of that which has enslaved us, constitutes outstanding heroism and it is no accident that a Moses and others, in the company of 'God' (spirit help), are offered to give perspective and mentoring to the people in their darkest moments. But each person must walk on their own feet. The trip is the hardest one we will ever take, it is life-long, and apparently, it is not chosen by everyone. I remain inspired, however, by the story and the fact that within it, an entire 'new generation' at some point is poised to enter a 'promised land'!

## **Human Development and the Life Force**

The life force, as it exists in all sentient beings, is a most powerful and creative force. One can only stand in awe of such a force and its infinite creativity and potential. As we grow, our potential becomes narrowed through the force of socialization as well as insults and woundings to what we perceive as the integrity of our being. This should not be seen from the point of view of victimization but rather from

a position of understanding the miracle of the adjustability of the life force within its infinite potential. As such, we assemble ourselves in such a way so that there can be some 'consensus on reality'; we adjust and alter ourselves in such a way that we can survive in the environment that we find ourselves in. Nevertheless, this adjustment narrows down significantly the range of our human potential and at some point we become enslaved to a certain perspective or outlook.

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This limited perspective, this assemblage, organizes and in turn continues to reinforce, a particular emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual alignment.

There is a paradox, as I said, in that only we, based on our own inner compass, can know if we are living our hero's journey. For although in the first place the adjustments, that ended up limiting us, were made heroically in the most tender time of our life, we are lulled into forgetting and therefore maintain a survivalist outlook. This outlook does not and never can constitute our deepest knowing. In fact, this outlook schemes in every conceivable way, to keep us from venturing forth — we lie to ourselves.

So, paradoxically, the only way we can assess if our life is being lived in heroic dimensions, is by venturing forth, embarking on a journey of remembering, transforming, allowing ourselves to purge that which served survival but can never affirm full living. Thus we

clear ourselves to see beyond our own chosen limitations.

We are always approximating our goal. Perhaps in this sense, we are perennial travellers, once having crossed the threshold. But the journey toward freedom is constantly and ever reinforcing of itself and of that which is illuminating.

This journey has the trademark of the intention to be a 'steward of life'. It is one that recognizes, at every turn, that which is not in service of life. And then we pray to muster the courage in each moment, to choose that which best serves it. At first we may find ourselves in a battle for our own individual lives, but soon we learn that the force of life has no borders, no threatening divisions. As we move forward we will find ourselves to be one among others, travellers journeying along a road of remembering and stewarding the full promise and potential of life.

#### **Further reading:**

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