

# Strangers in a Strange Land

An exploration into the meaning of exile and return

Camilla Gugenheim

'Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high,  
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.  
If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow,  
Why, oh why can't I?'

*Judy Garland in The Wizard of Oz*

Three events occurred within one year that have had a profound effect on my life subsequently. The first was in my personal life, the second was as a therapist, and the third was where the two met. In 1994 I went to Berlin with my brothers and cousin to see where our fathers had come from, and from whence they had escaped the Nazis to become exiles in England. We felt we were honouring our ancestors and, in so doing, we discovered we became a family. My father had been happy in England, and I didn't know that I had Jewish blood in me until I was 13. I had no idea that he had been forced to escape; he never talked about that time. Except, I remember very clearly him telling me about the exceptions to the rule about not lying: he told me they had had to lie to get out of Germany. This was perhaps the only clue to how serious the situation was. After all, in my black and white child mind, all lying was wrong and grown-ups never lied, so the situation must have been even more drastic than lying.

There were two significant moments for me in Berlin. The first came as we approached the gates of the house in Babelsberg and saw our grandfather's monogram in the wrought iron gates. This monogram I had seen every day of my life as a child; it was on every knife and fork and spoon we used at home, (somehow, they had got the family silver out then!). That was a homecoming that was so real and tangible, something so familiar in such a strange place. My family had definitely been there: it was wrought in iron. The other powerful moment was as the aeroplane took off when we left Berlin. We had been there as tourists; we could come and go as we pleased. My father had had no choice: Berlin had been his home, German was his mother tongue, his leaving was forever, he never went back. Because he was a Jew - that's all. As Berlin disappeared beneath us, I wept for his exile. He was 15 when he left for ever, the age I was when he died. His father killed himself shortly after they had all escaped; too much had been lost to the Nazis.

The second incident happened that same year, as a therapist just before the end of my initial psychotherapy training. I was working with a Jewish American man who was in England for a year on a Jewish Studies course. He

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was experiencing the fact that he felt in exile in England, and as we went deeper into this feeling he realized that exile was, in fact, the reality of his existence, that he felt like a stranger even when he was at home with his family. He then started to remember that his grandparents had been exiles from Russia during the pogroms against the Jews earlier this century. Deeper than that, he began to identify with the great diasporas of the Jewish peoples who have been exiled so many times over the millennia. And deeper still, he felt the poignant longing that Jews feel for an eternally transcendent God. At this profound moment in his session I found that I could make this journey with him as I had done only a few months earlier in Berlin, and we met each other in an eternal truth of being people who could become aware of, and find meaning in, our exile. Thus we had an experience so important and connected, not only with each other, but also with our families, our ancestors and our spirituality that I can only describe as a moment in the promised land. This was a profoundly

therapeutic moment for both of us; an example of how both client and therapist are changed by the process of meeting.

The third event that happened the following summer was when my psychotherapy training school split apart, literally as I was graduating. So I was left, a fledgling therapist, with no solid organization behind me. I had been extremely involved with the whole organization and was devastated by the fact that it could no longer support my therapeutic development.

I was now in a truly strange land and through my grief I thought much about the way in which for many of us this experience of feeling like a stranger in a strange land is a life story. Gradually I saw how I might be able to use these linked experiences, both positive and negative, in my life and practice.

### **A Map**

Some of us have the profoundly disturbing experience of feeling like strangers in a strange land even when we are at home; feeling in some way exiled from where, or how, or those with whom we feel we ought to be. Whilst it is probably true to say that most have this experience at some time in their lives, for some it is a life story. The feeling of exile will come round again and again, strange and yet alarmingly familiar. There are so many world mythologies, songs and stories that speak directly of this experience, that it would suggest it is a common experience. It seems to me that a condition, which produces so much creativity, could be the source of creativity itself. The paradoxical circumstance of feeling that one is

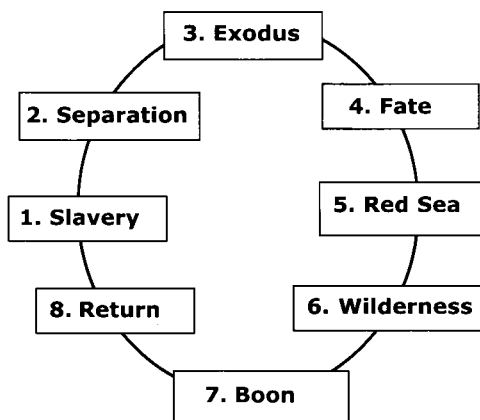
both outside a situation and participating in it may have a curious advantage; one which is used by many of us daily in our work as therapists. I am suggesting that this experience of feeling like a stranger in a strange land can give rise to a sometimes heightened consciousness, creativity, and an opportunity to relate to self and others in a meaningful way.

Storytellers the world over have given us the metaphor of the journey. At the beginning of this journey the promised land is somewhere over the rainbow; an impossible, imaginary place you desperately long for but cannot get to. Forever over there, always at least a bit further on; and how often does it feel like that in life, that everything would be all right if only we were somewhere else, someone else, or somehow other than we are now? "Why, oh why can't I go there?" is a good question. I want to examine the meaning of such experiences, and how we might use the metaphor of the journey that is given to us.

I am weaving together the strands of a song sung in a longing to be at one, to be at home, to be whole. This song, this story is experienced on many time scales, from millennial to momentary, over and over again throughout history, mythology and also in our personal experiences, which can make each experience of it an eternal one. In The Book of Exodus the story is told in various different time scales. There is a small cycle of exile and return that prefigures the whole of Moses' life. Moses' mother sends her infant son off in an ark of bulrushes on the river; he is found by the Pharaoh's daughter who decides to keep him, but first gives him back to his mother to wet nurse him. This sort of prefiguring of the story of exile comes up again and

again in mythology. The hero is brought up by a woman who is not his or her biological mother. So Moses, for example, is brought up in an Egyptian household, specifically the Pharaoh's, so when he must try to get the Pharaoh to 'let my people go' he, uniquely among the Hebrew people, has access to the ear of the Pharaoh. It was his original small experience of exile that somehow created his destiny and the abilities to lead his people to the promised land.

I would like to offer a sort of map. It is important to see this map in a holistic way (as indeed all myths should be), so that, like a hologram, each fragment of the map also contains the whole map. I have based the structure on the one that Joseph Campbell draws in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is circular, because the journey is continuous in a fractal sense. The Book of Exodus is a very clear example of the cycle of exile and return, so I have used it as the basic model.



It would also be possible to see this map in terms of the life cycle, the day or year cycle, and in terms of the process of resolution of any difficulty in one's life. I will refer to all of these on the journey, while using the Book of Exodus as the model for each stage.

## 1. Slavery

In the darkness before dawn we know not who we are. We are not yet born, we are not individuals and have no authority. This is natural enough for the unborn and infant child, but another matter altogether if a person finds themselves with no possibility of acting with authority. It seems significant that in the Book of Exodus the Jews are called the 'children of Israel'. They are enslaved by the Egyptians and seem to have existed in a childlike state for generations, unable to change their situation, until Moses came along. This is what I am calling slavery here, the condition of being unable, and maybe unaware of the possibility, to act for yourself. Which is not to imply that a slave doesn't know she or he is enslaved, but that the fact of slavery as the effect of destroying one's ability to act, or knowledge of how to act with one's natural authority.

An example of the psychology of slavery is the double bind as described by Gregory Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, and elucidated by R.D. Laing in *Self and Others*. They describe the double bind as a situation in which a person is repeatedly given at least two contradictory injunctions plus an injunction not to leave the field in which these injunctions operate; which leaves the person acting, in a sense, in the dark about themselves.

## 2. Separation

On the map of a day dawn breaks, the light of consciousness reaches us: separation is inevitable. I say this in the sense that dawn is inevitable. The human being moves towards consciousness as day follows night. There is a freshness, a vigor and power in this phase. Somehow anything is possible. The infant tests with all the might of their lungs the power they

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have to assert their will. It has the arrogance of the teenager, the rudeness of youth. There is a need for this raw power to achieve separation and it will often be the dramatic energy of anger. For example the violent force with which a nation will fight for its independence, and women and black people have had to fight for civil rights.

Awareness is now possible and, given the right conditions, slavery may be broken out of and an understanding of the situation may be reached. This is the task of consciousness raising. Simply being able to see the ways in which we are enslaved is the first

massive step with which the journey really begins. There is usually a lot mitigating against this step being taken. The existing hegemony, consciously or unconsciously, is constituted to stop this dawning of consciousness and yet, consciousness continually emerges. Separation is the anti-entropic work that humans seem to be continuously moved to do, in spite of the huge effort involved. It is as if we are God's separators.

There is a significant event in Moses' early life where he asserts his identity in a violent way. He sees a Hebrew brother being abused by an Egyptian, and suddenly makes a drastic distinction about his identity and slays the Egyptian, even though he grew up with them.

### 3. Exodus

The heat of the midday sun is on, its strong light shines, illuminating our talents. It is summer, our accomplishments blossom and we are conscious of what we do. We are adult, creating security in an identity and we believe we know who we are. Having become aware that separation is even possible, we now may develop the ability to put it into action: decisions can be taken, moves made. The heroic ego may achieve more or less success and, of course, this may involve pain and sadness. There may be the leaving behind of loved ones, or loved places. Leaving home for the first time may feel like exile even when it is very consciously chosen. There may be great joy in the sense of liberation. Although ambivalence at this stage about the decision is probably inevitable, it may well not be experienced ambivalently. The ego tends to see things in a rather black and white way: this or that rather than this and that. There may be a powerful sense of rightness of action

or feeling of righteousness, even a sense of being *chosen* for the task at hand.

Most myths, fairy tales and history itself are told from the perspective of the heroic ego. The brave beleaguered

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individual, family or nation sets off and by overcoming great odds, defeats the enemy, retrieves the lost treasure, rescues the endangered maiden, conquers and colonizes land, feeds the starving, finds fame and fortune, etc. and it would seem that this surely is the aim of our cycle. Moses, as a classic example of the strong ego structure, is able to achieve the tasks God demands of him. Something in Moses' life gives him his peculiar permeability to the unconscious: his ego does not get blasted by his frequent and direct encounters with God. The Heroic ego is one that is developed enough to withstand much deformation, fragmentation, transformation, ugliness, and other strange manifestations of the psyche along the way.

#### 4. Fate

'The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate. That is to say, when the individual remains undivided and does not become conscious of his inner contradictions, the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves'. (CG Jung; CW Vol. 9 part 2, Aion; Christ, a Symbol of the Self)

So, what we see on the map is that the upper part is the journey of the spirit, a coming into consciousness, the outer journey. These are the aspects of life that we have some degree of choice over. If life were really as simple as we occasionally, and erroneously, take it to be, this would be the whole trip. We would decide what it was we wanted to do and do it. However, as we really know, life is not that simple. Things happen. Events seem to divert us from our desired path in all kinds of disturbing ways. Our identity, the person we take ourselves to be, is shaken in more or less profound ways. This can happen through illness, outer events, falling in love, falling out of love, death, being left etc. I call these events fate simply because they are the things we do not seem to have any control over; they seem to happen to us. However, they are often the events that have the strongest effect on us. These situations may be fascinating and draw us towards them with delight, or they may repel us and we recoil from them in horror and distaste. But avoid them we cannot.

What we do at this point is of great importance. If remotely possible we will probably simply choose to ignore this twist of fate and attempt to carry on regardless and try to ignore our

inner contradictions and persist in our righteousness. This is generally what is expected in the prevailing western late twentieth century just-get-on-

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with-it ethic. Will the early twenty first century ethic be the same?. But, as you can see on the map if fate is not embraced and there is an attempt to stay in the top half of the map the next step would be back to slavery: 'do not pass go', or, as Jung puts it, remain undivided. And this is what happens to many of us much of the time, we repeatedly find ourselves in an unredeemed situation of unconscious slavery. But if we choose not to take the next step, the chances are that the twists of fate start to become more and more predictable, stronger, and even life threatening. Even if we do have

any choice about it, it is not an easy step to take, and sometimes we really seem to have no choice.

## 5. The Red Sea

The Red Sea represents a time when we can embrace our fate and understand there may be more to this difficulty than meets the eye and, without simply returning to slavery, we step onto the threshold of a very uncertain place. On the day cycle it is dusk. Shadows lengthen, things become mysterious and unpredictable. On the year cycle, it is the autumn equinox; fall; things returning to the earth; an inward folding of nature. On the life cycle it is perhaps best seen as the mid-life crisis. Now with excitement and fascination, or fear and loathing, we arrive at the next threshold.

For this fateful event to make a difference, a profound change must take place within the psyche. This change is often described as happening when the protagonist crosses, is immersed, or simply has contact with water. This seems to symbolize the dissolution of the ego as it has so far been constructed. This stage is named after the episode in the Book of Exodus where the children of Israel are led across the Red Sea by Moses, thus taking them out of slavery and into freedom. The miracle is that they do not drown, in fact they do not even get wet. What are we to make of this dry water? I suggest that it is symbolic of change rather than destruction; a fluid rearrangement of the people, not a drowning. Suggesting that all the necessary elements for the new arrangement are already there within the psyche, they just need stirring up; 'but doth suffer

a sea change into something rich and strange' (Shakespeare; *The Tempest*)

There is often a meeting with women at the water's edge that suggests this threshold is also a conscious meeting with the feminine principle. The phases of separation, exodus and the creation of identity are the work of the spirit and the masculine principle of differentiation. We now find ourselves entering the realm of the soul: altogether more mysterious and disturbing. Moses is associated with water from the moment his mother puts him in the river; it is a woman who finds him there; and Moses' first meeting with his wife-to-be was at a well, where he stands up for the women. So many wells and springs are associated with healing, and with goddesses, including a vast number specifically associated with the Virgin Mary.

## 6. The Wilderness

This is the deep dark, midnight, mid-winter. There is no light, we have entered the heart of darkness. It has many names. In mythological language it may be called the wilderness, the underworld, the wasteland, hell, the labyrinth. In psychological or medical language it might be called illness, depression, madness, grief, despair. In sociological language it would probably be known as alienation, or indeed, exile. I use it here to describe any state that leaves us exiled from ourselves as we would choose to identify ourselves, or from the community we identify with. It is necessarily a very hard place to be; hard even to talk about. All the stages we have already passed through have been preparing us for the profound difficulty of the wilderness.

Although it is one of the purposes of religion, mythology, fiction, mysticism, philosophy and psychology to provide us with maps of the soul's journey through these most appalling realms, the experience is mapless. Always, every time, the experience of the heart of darkness, the loss of soul, the death of the ego, the sojourn in the wilderness, the trackless wasteland, the labyrinth, feels completely uncharted. Even though we may know many others have already suffered here, even as desperately as it feels now, it still seems impossible that this is survivable. It can even stop mattering. It is hard to talk, or write prosaically about this stage. It sounds a bit over-dramatic. This is not a mental space; the mind makes no sense of this region. The mind craves order and comprehension. There is little to grasp hold of here. Only chaos.

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For those of us who do experience these deep dark regions, and for whom the experience leads to a sense of exile, we look for maps of every step that can be mapped, precisely because there is so much that is uncharted. In the very desperation to get out of these places, promises of ways out, even fantasies of promises, seem very attractive and profoundly tempting. My belief is that the only way out is in. By reaching an understanding that all the descriptions of this place in mythology are descriptions of states we do experience, we discover, if not the way through, that there is a way, and that it is for us to find it in our own personal way.

Many descriptions of these regions are earthy. The wilderness of the Book of Exodus is clearly a barren desert. We see the Sinai desert with thousands of starving people encamped there, and now in the age of television journalism we know exactly how ghastly that looks. No wonder the children of Israel murmur against Moses. Why do they only murmur, perhaps they are exhausted? Complete exhaustion is often part of this experience. Certainly a barren wilderness, a wasteland, a desert are symbols of that exhaustion.

When we chose to make our outer journey we may have felt like a stranger in a strange land, but now we may have become strangers even to ourselves. Who is this different person, who will I become, out of this place of illness, mental or physical; bereavement; aloneness or despair? This is a journey of entirely different dimensions, the dimension of life and death, the unimaginable realms of the psyche, of myth, of dreams and nightmares, of the soul. It is impossible to speculate how long this may last; it may be a matter of moments, but it may last for years.



## 7. The Boon

Eventually the light begins to dawn in a new place, unexpectedly, in a mysterious and strange way, recapitulating the previous dawn from slavery. The redeeming spark, the boon, the pearl of great price, the treasure appears, although it may not be what we would have expected for the boon is not just an individual gift, but a collective boon. Each time we are changed in this profound way the world is changed; our ability to be transformed transforms everything. The most important thing about the boon, however it manifests, is that it is relational. The Ten Commandments, for example, are a manifesto for the relationship with God, with yourself, and with others.

There is an experience every exile has in some way, that of longing. The longing itself is clearly relational, towards an other, yourself, God, home, and it comes from the heart. Here, at last, the experience of exile may create a heart connection, and this is surely a gift.

## 8. The Return

'And if you find her poor, Ithaka hasn't deceived you.

So wise have you become of such experience,

That already you'll have understood what these Ithakas mean.'

(C.P. Cavafy: *Ithaka*)

We have been changed by this journey. None of the children of Israel who left Egypt makes it into the promised land. Even Moses, the heroic ego, glimpsed it and died. The ego does not make it

intact through this journey. It is the ego that gets us going, but it is ultimately only the servant of the integrated being that Jung called the Self. Each time we truly experience that yearning, as homesickness, or falling in love, or longing for god, or simply a longing to be ourselves, we have an opportunity to participate in the world. This is the gift that must be brought back, returned to the world. Then the promised land is no longer over the rainbow, but right here and now. It comes from the wholly subjective experience of exile that is at the same time acknowledged and experienced as the return.

Our expectations of the promised land are so huge, how can the reality of the here and now satisfy us? Obviously it can't, in the sense of the temporal moment. Here and now in place and time is but a shadow on the wall, and what I hope I have created is a sense of how the promised land includes, in a holistic sense, our very longing for it. The promised land is a process not a place, and in this sense the here and now may become transparent to eternity; how could that be simply a geographical entity that can be drawn round on a map? On the map I have drawn here I would suggest that the promised land is the experience of the whole cycle, not the destination. I have felt moved to share it in different ways as my way of returning with the boon I found.

The process I describe is not something achieved only in the mind, it is a journey of heart and mind, body and soul. Without some integration of all these the promised land is still somewhere else, somewhere over the rainbow. I think this is also what Cavafy refers to in his poem *Ithaka*. It is the journey that creates the

promised land, not the arrival. Ithaka may ultimately be a spot of sand in the desert, and it takes a wise person to find it thus: a person who has suffered, who has lost their name in the wilderness, but who has discovered themselves in the process.

### **Further Reading**

Joseph Campbell; *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; Fontana 1949

Gregory Bateson; *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*; Ballantine 1972

R.D.Laing; *Self and Others*; Penguin 1961

CG Jung; CW 9 part 2, *Aion Christ, a Symbol of the Self*; Routledge 1959

Shakespeare; *The Tempest*

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