

Going and Growing with the Flow: Awakening the Healing Centre of the Self

We live in demanding yet potentially regenerative times - at the threshold of a new global consciousness through the lens of which everything is seen increasingly in terms of its relationship to all else - and each node of this vast web as a link within a greater whole. Long-standing barriers and divisions are tumbling down - between Earth and the wider Cosmos, between cultures and individuals, between the sexes, between science and spirituality - and within ourselves.

Conversely, all illness, whether spiritual, physical or cultural, stems from 'disease' (imbalance) caused by stresses and conflicts that lead to crises such as war, violence, anxiety, depression, lack of meaning, loneliness, relationship failure and loss of soul. Health, in contrast, involves working toward and maintaining a holistic flow and balance of well-being on every level of life, relational and reflective, emotional and physical, individual and cultural.

Jung, like all holistic healers, believed in the ultimate unity of all existence, hence in the undivided spectrum of body and psyche (the Greek term for 'soul'). It follows that since psyche has a physical aspect and living matter a psychic aspect, any bodily disease expresses itself psychically, and vice versa. Hence by working on becoming individually whole, we are each helping to bring about the greater communion (= 'common union') which is needed to heal our relationships, our communities, our world, ourselves; this oneness is potentially already here yet can be birthed and embodied only through the individual's courage to nurture the inborn drive toward wholeness.

In these uncertain times of shifting values, widespread fear, global crises, increasing personal responsibility and the undermining of traditional gender roles, many folk feel not only socially isolated but also inwardly alienated from themselves. While outer demands centre around doing, the inner self longs for a sense of being - living in tune with an inner core of selfhood that is independent of and untouched by the sometimes draining or stifling demands of the daily grind. It is consoling, then, to accept that we are all born with the instinct for wholeness, just as a planted seed has the potential to develop into a full-grown tree, or an embryo to grow into a child. Indeed, we need to pay attention to the gestating self within us - by nurturing the embryos of new directions, creative urges and life challenges which draw upon our undeveloped potential.

Service to others, too, must flow naturally as an expression of love offered freely, not as a response to demands, or emotional blackmail, or expectations that can come either from ourselves, or from others who may feel insecure or threatened by our need follow our unique life path. It is not unreasonable, after all, to desire an authentic life of one's own - one guided by the compass of the heart rather than by the dictates of cultural conformity.

If life hardens into mere habit, routine, or action void of deeper meaning, then the glow of its intrinsic magic and spontaneity dies. For our true Self craves the full spectrum of life - from agony to ecstasy - and life demands far more than mechanical obedience to duty or restricting stereotypes of behaviour. When we consciously live in harmony with the self-balancing 'law' of life - which the ancient Chinese called 'Tao' and which reflects the true essence of personality - we experience a tranquil sense of cyclic flow and direction - an awareness of following a journey toward the elusive treasure of the Self. But when life hardens into rigidity and one-sidedness, we betray its deepest rhythm - the ongoing Medicine Wheel of conception, gestation, life, death and rebirth - universal energies of transformation which, when transposed to a level beyond the biological, incarnate in each of us the naturally cyclic journey of soul.

We are each a dynamic dance of interlacing energies, a complex blend and weave of opposites, wild and instinctual, sane and sensible, individual and social. Individuation - the journey toward wholeness through which life balances and integrates into daily existence these various life polarities - is probably the most difficult and (potentially) rewarding quest we can undertake, and if we're honest with ourselves, our 'busy-ness' is all too often a means of avoiding or running away from the need to confront and harmonize these sometimes opposing drives, needs and - overriding all other concerns - longings for a more calmly centred personality. Hence common dreams include those of trying to get somewhere yet being unable to move, or of running away from a dark or threatening stranger, who symbolizes our unrecognized potential - the ignored, disliked or denied 'shadow' side of ourselves to which we need to be reconciled in order to heal our inner schisms.

A state of conflict, then, when viewed from this holistic perspective, is an opportunity to outgrow our current level of consciousness, either through finding a resolving 'higher' synthesis of the choices involved, or - while patiently waiting on and having faith in life's purpose - through allowing a (hitherto unconsidered) 'third option' to emerge, a development which results from moving beyond the conflict to a more detached perspective from which neither extreme is seen to be 'right'. Obstacles and blockages are thus signs of a need to pause, to go within and listen to one's heart before taking action.

Similarly, loss - whether of possessions or work, or through death, illness, or an ended relationship - is an 'opportunity in adversity' which arises when the darkness fades and it dawns in us that our strength lies in our ability to meet suffering with a tranquil mind and an open heart.

To face these challenges requires the kind of wisdom which knows when not to act; which is prepared to let go, wait, get on with other matters and allow fate to resolve the stalemate. Hence it is possible - and health-wise desirable - to arrive at a level of self-composure where conflicts of 'duty' - which we may have previously decided on the basis of what was expected of us - are no longer resolved by appeals to traditional gender or social roles, media-derived stereotypes, or fixed morals, but are decided instead by obedience to the higher 'ethic' of individuation, which means listening to and trusting the still inner voice of one's core Self. For whereas the mind usually agonizes over its limited choice of possibilities, the centred Self moves beyond this no-win situation by choosing only that path which does not compromise its unique tao and holistic integrity.

Far from being an unreachable ideal, this level of decision-making is attainable, indeed is a desirable alternative to being torn between seemingly irreconcilable extremes. But it requires a great deal of inner work, a willingness to cultivate and nurture an ongoing 'instinct for truth' - an ability to act and react with an intuitive spontaneity which is sensitive to and trusting of its own beacons of inner guidance. For while certainty devoid of understanding is merely instinctive, consciously understanding one's choices means being aware of the mysterious origin and destination of one's own mythic journey, sensing how each part, including from a Cosmic perspective one's own life, reflects an overall design which seems to have a purpose of its own.

The more we remain free to choose our destiny - in obedience to the law (Tao) of life - the more our actions spring from an indefinable centre of personality and the more our lives are full of unexpected events, changes in direction and unforeseeable help. How can we attune ourselves to this centred Self? There is no infallible 'method' (another form of a rule anyway), but we can take steps to nourish, respect and stimulate neglected or undeveloped personal powers and abilities, such as our dreams and imaginations. Many native cultures set aside sacred spaces in which people can do the vital inner work of meeting the divine in dreams and visions. Native Americans seek important dreams to receive a guiding vision, to discover their secret names, or to commune with spirit ancestors. Western society, in contrast, has taught us to repress this rich dimension of life, or to regard such visions as mere day-dreams, delusions, or wish-fulfillment.

Like mythic journeys, which are powerful symbolic dramas of transformation, dreams and creative imagination draw from the deep wellsprings of the psyche and so contribute to our well-being; firstly, through helping to reconcile the often warring opposites of life and so find our quiet inner centre; secondly, through their gift to us of a whole world within, a sacred space which can become populated with helpful guides, gods, friends and animals, a place which is uniquely ours yet which touches the universal concerns of others, a place into which the noise and clutter of daily life cannot intrude.

No-one can show us who this inner Self is - we must find him or her - and be prepared to travel a long way to do so. Here, then, are some guidelines that may be helpful on this path to wholeness. Firstly, one must take time out to listen to the still inner voice, perhaps through a time of quiet meditation, artistic expression, or creative visualization. Take time to listen to your dreams and visions. We are not often encouraged to take such things seriously, because through a logical and extraverted bias our Western society privileges the rational, the objective and the factual, while denying the equal reality of the often irrational life of the psyche. Create a sacred space and time for yourself, one where the inner voice is free to speak and where you can simply be. Enrich your life with plants and animals, mythical objects, personalized rituals, or other meaningful symbols of healing and transformation

Live in sensitive response to the requirements of life rather than to the materialistic dictates of society. The more we ignore the inner self, the more it craves recognition, sometimes by making us ill, depressed, angry, quarrelsome, neurotic, accident prone, or lacking in energy or a sense of purpose. We can dull its voice through dehumanizing work, slavish sacrifice, denial of gut instincts, feelings and intuitions, but like buried treasure it doggedly waits to be unearthed. To find it, we must dig deep, even be prepared to venture into the dark labyrinths and unexplored underground of the psyche. A deeper knowledge of unconscious processes results in a richer and fuller life in which the boundless potential and infinite horizons of the psyche can surface in the form of new creative energy, new understanding, healing symbols and a sense of realizable destiny. Throughout the journey, we must trust that there is within us a divine 'archetype' which understands more than our waking minds can grasp. The inner journey is a pilgrimage, a quest for the healing draughts of one's own Holy Grail, for the self-sustaining God or Goddess within.

Be aware of how your inner state is mirrored in outer situations. We attract to us - through sympathetic resonance or (what Jung calls) 'synchronicity' - that which will either hinder or further us along the journey. Fear attracts the object

of fear, while trust in and passion for what is truthful attracts its mirroring outer forms. Learn not to ask, 'What should I do', but rather 'What must I do? What is right for me?' 'Should' is a collective legalistic term that appeals to rigid standards of right and wrong, while 'must' responds to the higher ethic of personal integrity. Don't be afraid to turn aside from the unreasonable demands of others. Don't let others, however well-meaning, tell you what you need or what you 'ought' to do. The courage to be true to oneself may also necessitate a breaking away from the pack, or in some sense going it alone, for a time at least.

Watch out, then, for the catch phrase, 'If I were you . . .' No-one else is you. Don't demand of yourself what you are unable to fulfill. Accept with good humour your gifts as well your limitations. Ultimately, responsibility as 'response ability' is the capacity to respond sensitively to life's boundless drama and energy flow. So, too, understanding comes with a readiness to 'stand under' in humble reverence for life's untamable mystery. Be kind, be tolerant, be patient - with yourself as well as with others. Never lose your sense of humour - or proportion; to laugh kindly at oneself is to forgive oneself of one's faults and ignorance - and to be able to forgive others for the same. Don't be afraid to cry and let go, again and again. Tears may blur our physical sight, but they form a lens through which life is seen anew; they soften pain, dissipate stress and emotional blockages; they are a way of releasing and letting be, the natural rain of the heart after which can come the rainbow of new vision.

To help activate the inner realms, try keeping a dream and imagination diary into which you record whatever dreams, insights and visions you sense to be valuable or meaningful. They may be trying to tell you something about yourself which you need to understand if you are to move beyond your present level of development. Allow time to cultivate the healing power of imagination, for it will express itself in terms of the unifying dynamics of Nature, through balancing life and death, growth and quiescence, dark and light and the elemental forces of earth, air, fire and water, which relate to what Jung calls the 'four functions' of relatedness to life: sensation, thinking, feeling and intuition, all of which need to be developed, embodied and harmonized. Follow these images of transformation and see how they change, where they lead, what they might be telling you about imbalances, or about dark, neglected, or unresolved areas of your life.

Remain in harmony with Nature, its rhythms, seasonal cycles and pulses, its secrets and mysteries, its ageless wisdom. There is nothing in Nature which is untrue to itself, which tries to be other than what it is or has the potential to be. Nature abides in the reality of the present, knowing when to lie dormant, since

waiting sometimes achieves more than doing. Bear in mind the strength of quiet persistence, imaged by the mushroom which, though soft and fragile, is able without haste and without pause to break through concrete. Likewise, let your doing (or not doing) flow from your sense of being. Who you are needs to express what you do; the reverse doesn't work because we cannot bring about wholeness through will power. We can choose to cooperate with the urge for wholeness; in fact consciousness must play its part in order to make sense of new phases of growth which, like bulbs in spring, push upward at the right time, watered by streams of living water from within.

When life is rigid and inflexible, it breaks when the winds of change and storms of emotional upheaval assail it. Above all, listen to and follow your heart as it beats like a drum, expanding and contracting to the pulse of life. Keep pace with your own inner drummer, not with someone else's. Remember, the orchestra harmonizes only when each member faithfully plays her and his own part.

Yoga and meditation, creative dance or drama, pottery, gardening, cooking, sandplay and art therapy can also aid the process of becoming whole, since they draw equally upon conscious and unconscious activity and mediate balance through creative self-expression. As one example, mandalas or 'magic circles' are useful as centring focuses of meditation. These universal symbols, which people of all cultures often dream of or draw spontaneously in crisis situations, are diagrams of the spiritual life of the psyche which express the mystical yet supremely practical goal of self-realization - the uniting of the circumferential opposites within a still centre. Life's ultimate challenge is the conscious realization of this centre, which involves the progressive shift of our centre of gravity away from the outer perimeter toward its natural midpoint of balance, a task which is never fully achieved but which, like the proverbial carrot before the donkey, lures us ever onward toward the horizon of personal - and ultimately global - wholeness. This ongoing quest is aptly imaged in an ancient Chinese symbol of Tao as a person perpetually passing through a doorway. We never arrive, in other words, but we can change our consciousness so that the journey becomes more meaningful, more fluid and in harmony with the unchanging and ever-changeable Tao, less self-preoccupied, hence paradoxically, more truly our own. The realization of the centred Self, achieved with modesty and attentiveness and through a compassionate relationship with the world, blossoms into wisdom and simplicity and bears as fruit unconditional love, which loves itself as much as others, which is freely offered and which knows no bounds.

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