

Contents

Introduction	<i>1</i>	
Threshold Work at the Eight Gates	<i>7</i>	
The Eight Gates of Initiation in the Second Half of Life	<i>23</i>	
The Silver Gate	<i>31</i>	Facing New Experiences and the Unknown
The White Picket Gate	<i>51</i>	Changing Identities, Discovering One's True Face
The Clay Gate	<i>69</i>	Intimacy, Sensuality, and Sexuality
The Black and White Gate	<i>87</i>	Relationships—The Crucible of Love, Generosity, Betrayal, and Forgiveness
The Rustic Gate	<i>109</i>	Creativity, Service, and Generativity
The Bone Gate	<i>127</i>	Authenticity, Character, and Wisdom
The Natural Gate	<i>145</i>	The Presence of Grace— Happiness, Satisfaction, and Peace
The Gold Gate	<i>163</i>	Non-Attachment, Surrender, and Letting Go
After the Eight Gates	<i>183</i>	
Photo Acknowledgments and Permissions	<i>186</i>	
Bibliography	<i>196</i>	

Threshold Work
at the
Eight Gates

Does one really have to fret
About enlightenment?
No matter what road I travel,
I'm going home.

Shinsho

Crucibles of Meaning: Symbols, Images, and Metaphor

The second half of life requires that we come to understand what has been most significant and meaningful in our lives. To accomplish this, we can make use of symbolic crucibles that evoke our memories and spark our imaginations. A crucible is a fired-clay vessel used to contain high-temperature chemical reactions. In alchemy, the medieval science and philosophy that sought to transmute base metals into gold, the crucible was the vessel that contained the transformational process. In spiritual alchemy, it is a symbol of the capacity to change or transform. It is a container that reveals what is authentic within it.

Each of the eight gates of initiation makes use of figurative crucibles: symbols, images, and metaphor. These vessels contain the significance and meaning that stimulate and support our physical, emotional, and spiritual transformations during the second half of life.

Symbols, images, and metaphor have the power to reach us in deep and intimate ways, often signaling what is most important to us. When something is deeply meaningful,

we often use figurative or symbolic language to express it. Meaning is expressed by all cultures through music, poetry, art, and stories. Romanian physicist and philosopher Basarab Nicolescu describes how meaning is contained in symbolic language, and goes even further to explore what is beyond these expressive forms of meaning.

What keeps me alive is found between the images, between the words,
between thought, the emptiness of feeling, and in the emptiness of the
body ... there arises the fullness and significance of life ...

Nicolescu tells us that the symbolic languages found in images, music, and story all point to what is meaningful, and to the hidden presence that awaits us in the spacious and empty place between thought and feeling, where our spirit resides.

The language of symbol is of the felt senses of the body, of the numinous, of the spirit, and of the heart's yearnings. It transmits meaning in a way that touches us deeply, and leads us to wisdom. When we are drawn to a particular symbol, it often signals a transition that we are about to undergo, announcing its arrival and preparing us for it, and directing us toward the inner work that can help us change, deepen, and grow.

In our later years, we integrate the significant stories and dreams of our lifetime. We are drawn to the beauty and timeless comfort to be found in music, art, and poetry. These creative and symbolic forms of expression braid memory and imagination together to provide opportunities for reflection and to help us see what is truly meaningful in our lives.

Symbols of Transition: Thresholds and Gates

Perseverance is a great element of success.

If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate,
you are sure to wake up something or somebody.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Throughout history, images of thresholds and gates have served as symbolic passageways into new worlds. Imprinted on the human psyche, they herald the possibility of a new life, a new experience, or a new identity. They offer an opportunity for communion between different worlds: the sacred and profane, the internal and external, the subjective and objective, the visible and invisible, waking and dreaming.

Symbolically, there is a marked distinction between a threshold and a gate. A threshold suggests the place or moment where transformational work, learning, or integration occurs. The gate suggests protecting and testing that must occur before we are allowed entry and permitted to do work at the threshold. Gates are often considered places of initiation or entryways into holy places, sacred grounds, or spiritually significant transitions. Deep archetypal feelings may surface when we are “at the gate.” Instinctively we recognize that we are required to let go of what is familiar, and prepare to enter and open ourselves to the unknown. Our passage through the gate is irreversible. We

cannot go back. After we open the gate and stand upon the threshold, we must do the work of transformation.

To thresh literally means to pound cereal grain to remove the husks and separate out the seeds. Figuratively, the threshing floor is where we tread, turn, twist, or flail as we do inner work. In our later years, it is the place of the soul's own threshing, where what is no longer necessary or aligned with our essential nature is released and discarded. Throughout our passage during the second half of life, we repeatedly come to the threshing floor to deliver ourselves to our final and holy excursion, in which we approach the opening to a hidden existence and discover a second grace.

10 |

In *The Sacred and the Profane* Mircea Eliade tells us, “The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time, is the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.” In our later years, the capacity to comprehend and contain this paradox prepares us to do the threshing work required to sort through what has been most important to us in our journey.

Because we live in a society that has lost many traditional initiation rituals, we have lost the ability to recognize the signs that foreshadow transition—our modern term for initiation. We may realize that we are going through a transition, or that we are changing. But because we are unfamiliar with initiatory rites, we do not perceive that we stand

at the gate. We do not comprehend that we need to open it and do the threshing and integrative work that are required.

But now, as we approach the eight gates of initiation into the second half of life, we have a new opportunity to learn to recognize the signs, do the threshold work required, and move forward truly changed.

Threshold Into the Mystery

... the actual task is to integrate the two threads of one's life

... the within and the without.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

11

Throughout our lives, transitions require that we ask for help and allow ourselves to yield to forces stronger than our will or our ego's desires. As transitions take place during our later years, a fundamental and primal shift from ambition to meaning occurs.

This shift often takes the form of abrupt, unexpected changes in our lives—such as a surprising new interest, a career change, a significant loss, divorce, or a move to a new location—in order to align with what truly touches our hearts and has meaning for us. With this shift comes an initial restlessness, irritability, anxiety, or discontent with our situation, and a deep questioning of the motivation surrounding our choices in career

and relationships. Everything comes up for review. Previous desires and choices to attain status, power, money, fame, or strategic relationships lose meaning and become unsatisfying. Any one of these once-valued egoic needs may be radically diminished, as deep congruence and authentic fulfillment emerge to be expressed.

The shift from ambition to meaning delivers us to our threshold work at the eight gates of initiation. Here we must simultaneously integrate two internal journeys. One is the archetypal vertical journey of descent and ascent in which we reclaim the authentic self and release the false self. The other journey is horizontal, twining the two threads of our internal and external experiences. These two journeys—descending and ascending, and integrating the internal and external—are essential tasks. We must undertake them if we are to develop character, acquire wisdom, and cultivate spiritual maturity.

The Journey of Descent and Ascent

The day you were born,
a ladder was set up to help you
escape from this world.

Rumi

The descent into darkness—the unknown or undeveloped aspects of our nature—and the ascent into greater awareness, authenticity, and faith lead us to a discovery of our essential self beyond ego and personal desires. In both directions, we encounter our shadows, the unclaimed, undesired, and un-befriended aspects of our nature. To become fully developed human beings, we must confront both our demons and our angels. If we can do this successfully, we free ourselves from the illusion of who we think we are. We are delivered into the mystery of our true, essential being and are able to generate a new domain of freedom that is anchored in wisdom, love, and faith.

In his book *Transformation: Growth and Change in Adult Life*, Roger Gould explains that this freedom is hard won, especially in the experience of descent, which requires us to realistically and honestly look at our lives without denial, indulgence, or embellishment. To achieve an adult sense of freedom, we must come to terms with unresolved anger, disappointment, despair, fear, and feelings of repugnance concerning death. We can no longer harbor our illusions, aversions, or attachments. Recognizing these feelings is only the first step. We have to act, to descend into our inner terrain and dispel all that is false and at odds with our essential being. The raw experience of descent prepares the way for increased self-knowledge and self-acceptance that are honest and true, anchored in a kind of self-confidence that is neither inflated nor deflated. The descent allows us to experience the ascent with genuine hopefulness, curiosity, and an ennobled spirit. If we have done

the rigorous work of descending to face our false self, we may then ascend to experience the joy of our essential self without pretense or judgment.

Throughout our lives, we witness cycles within ourselves and others as we descend and ascend. This journey carries stories of descent into betrayal, temptation, depression, and injustice: ruthless actions that derive from insecurity, pride, or desire for revenge. It also carries the heart of all the universal stories surrounding redemption, grace, generosity, and forgiveness—ascend. A contemporary example of the journey from descent to ascent can be found in the Delancey Street Program in San Francisco created by Mimi Siebert, who has the best success rate of prisoner rehabilitation in the country. This program is committed to sustaining the personal success of former prisoners in re-entering life without becoming repeat offenders, without flirting with the journey of descent again. In our own lives we move from descent to ascent when we face our serious mistakes and learn from them.

This journey of descent and ascent is found within all major spiritual traditions. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and other faiths have specific terms to describe the journey and may refer to it as Hell (descent) or Heaven (ascend). For example, in the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder, Jacob encounters ascending and descending angels—one of which he wrestles with for hours. In Buddhism, the Buddha ascends to the realm of the gods, where he sees that his recently deceased mother has not achieved final liberation, or *nirvana*. There he imparts the *Abhidharma* teachings on the true nature of reality

and liberates his mother and all the deities trapped in the realm of cyclical existence. In the journey of descent, a Buddhist might face a myriad of sentient beings who suffer in the Hell realms, which mirror our own internal states of suffering and reflect our need to practice deep compassion.

Many traditional and indigenous societies regard the Upper World as the place to receive guidance, blessings, and ecstatic experiences, and view the Lower World as the place to which one journeys to retrieve one's lost soul and bring it back for re-integration in the Middle World—this world. The process of descending and ascending is a universal human experience, where the heavens and hells in our nature are completely revealed. In our later years, they must be integrated to aid character development and enhanced spiritual maturity.

Each of the eight gates challenges us to face both our weaknesses and strengths. There will be times as we progress through the gates when we will descend into our own lower worlds to confront our inauthentic selves, unresolved feelings, and attachments. Each descent prepares us for the ascent, the magnificent climb that integrates more of our essential being.

Integration of the External and Internal: Two Pathways of Meaning

Just as we must be ready to face the challenge of exploring descent and ascent on our journey through the gates, we must also come to understand two distinct kinds of