

A LIFE
of
MEANING

RELOCATING
YOUR CENTER OF
SPIRITUAL GRAVITY

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Discerning the Formative Influences of the Early Days

In this chapter, we're going to be considering this journey we call our life and discerning some of the formative influences of our early days, particularly those that linger with us and continue to influence our decisions, perhaps forcing us into some decisions and choices and keeping us from others. Carl Jung believed that this life is a short pause between two mysteries. That's a pretty good definition of life, and to which I might add that our summons is to make this short pause as luminous as we can. And how do we do that?

ASKING QUESTIONS THAT MATTER

The path of personal growth and development is not found so much in finding the answers, which we all certainly wished for as youths, because the answers we do find at best serve only for a little while or are someone else's answers. Life is forever evolving, and yesterday's truth is tomorrow's prison. You may recall the old folk wisdom that no prisons are more confining than "those we know not we're in." Rather, I believe we get a larger life by asking larger questions and keeping those questions before us—not from settling for the available answers, which ultimately prove limiting.

Answers tell us where we've been. Questions get us on our journey, and I've often said to people in psychoanalysis, "This is not about curing you because you're not a disease, you're a process. This is about making your life more interesting to you—a life full of adventure, a life full of daily choices that create and express your values."

When we were toddlers, given our dependency, our questions were understandably survival based: Who's going to take care of me? What do I need to do

to keep your approval? How do I stay out of trouble with you? Can you teach me what the world is about? While those questions might remain germane to our well-being, if they're still governing our lives today, then we are unwittingly in service to infantilizing agendas and perpetuating that initial dependency instead of gaining a measure of sovereignty in our lives.

So in this book we will be asking different questions—questions designed to help us find those pockets of dependency that persist and perhaps better deal with our resistances and stuck places. This exploration of questions will certainly be followed by some ideas about finding your answers, and I hope they will help you do so. But if you use my answers, they may not apply to your own life. So be sure to find your own answers.

So much of what we do today is driven by, or at least influenced by, our internalized stories—those fragmentary personal narratives and “splinter scripts” that define who we are, who “others” are, and how we are expected to relate to one another. Some of those stories are quite overt and conscious as we were specifically taught to think, feel, and behave by our elders, our teachers, and our societies. Other narratives were quietly assembled by us day in and day out until invisibly they became who we are, or at least who we think we are.

If we're going to understand ourselves, make choices from a deeper place, and make authentic choices rather than serve predetermined behaviors, we have to become conscious of how those stories operate in our daily lives. Now, as you know, the problem with the unconscious is that it is unconscious. In fact, we can't even say for certain it exists, and yet aspects of our choices, our hidden lives, keep spilling into the world. We leave a trail of choices and their consequences behind every day. Who or what agencies within are making those choices?

Something is running the show, monitoring our breathing process, our digestive process, our emotional process. Something brings dreams to us every night. Something is going on in there. So we have to try to address what's happening in the unconscious. How can we work with it in a more deliberate and thoughtful way? Of course, we can only make something conscious when it has entered the world as a behavior pattern, a dream image, a somatic complaint, or a projection.

DREAMS AND THE REALM OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

A common question I hear from new clients is, “So where do I start in this analysis of my journey?” I always say, “Well, start with your patterns.”

You don't wake up in the morning and while brushing your teeth and looking in the mirror, say, “Today I'm going to do the same stupid things I've done for

decades.” But chances are you will. By the end of the day, you will have replicated some of those choices and some of those values, and the consequences pile up.

Eventually, we begin to realize that what we do is “logical” based on the premise from which it comes. We don’t do crazy things; we do logical things. Many of our premises, many of our early stories, are fictions. There may have been a time when they were useful, constructive, or protective fictions. But even so, they bind us to a disabling, disempowered past. When we look at our patterns, we have an invitation to work backward into the realm of the unconscious, that realm wherein so many of our choices are actually made.

Sometimes it’s important to listen to what others tell us about our behaviors and our patterns, if we can bear listening, bear taking seriously the critique of others. It takes a certain amount of strength to be able to hear someone else’s critique of us. Then as that old Eastern proverb stated it, “Bless those who curse and revile you, for they shall prove your greatest teachers.” Well, talk is cheap. That’s difficult at times, but we do learn from those who offer critiques of our behaviors.

Along with our patterns we also have dreams that offer us correctives, challenges, contradictions. Sleep research tells us that in an ordinary sleep cycle, we average about six dreams per night. You might say, “Well, I don’t remember that many dreams,” “I don’t dream,” or “I never remember my dreams.” And that may be true for you. But it’s also true that nature does not waste energy. It has a purpose in this dream formation, and I think that purpose is to help us work through the magnitude of stimuli that bombard us on a daily basis, to help us assimilate and metabolize our experiences, even if we don’t work with what the meaning might be.

But if we do begin to pay attention to our dreams, we realize there is a profound myth-making work afoot there, a mythopoeic process that is not only forming impressions but actually commenting on our lives. Most radically, there’s some kind of informing intelligence that is looking at our lives, offering its perspective, and wishing to communicate with us. Would it not make sense from time to time to stop and pay attention and listen to what dreams are trying to tell us?

In addition to our patterns and dreams, we have to learn to respect and to read our symptoms. Symptoms are autonomous intrusions into the flow of daily life, and they’re important clues—clues that point to the astonishing fact that our psyche is observing, evaluating, and critiquing how our harried executives upstairs on the floor called consciousness are managing our lives. Symptoms often are, in a sense, indications that our psyche is not amused by our choices and so it offers alternatives.

Finally, in looking backward into the realm of the unconscious, we have to pay attention to what we project onto others. A projection is an unconscious mechanism. We don't know that we've done it. A projection is where our intrapsychic material—an agenda, a set of expectations, or perhaps a fear-based response—is triggered. Maybe we want that person to do something, then when they cease to do that, or they fail to live up to our expectations, we often feel confusion and dismay, maybe even anger toward the other for not living up to our expectations. In that case, we have to say to ourselves, *All right, what is it I put out on that person that has now come back to me? I'm accountable for that. What do I need to learn? What unfinished business does my eroded projection now ask of me?*

For example, often in intimate relationships we expect the other to fix things for us, take care of us, or make us feel good about ourselves. If we really examine those projections, that myriad agenda of expectations, we begin to realize, if we are honest, mature, and accountable, *Oh, that's my job. I have to do that.* Lifting our unfinished business off of someone else is truly a heroic and loving thing to do.

We need also to remember the distinction between the Self with a capital *S* and our “sense of self.” Our sense of self is essentially the accumulation of all the stories that evolved as we tried to make sense of our lives. So, for example, if a person experienced emotional invasion from others, challenging socioeconomic circumstances, or other factors over which they had no control, they concluded that they are essentially powerlessness in the face of the large challenges of life. Given that internalized narrative, they reflexively project such power discrepancies onto others and thereby serve the old narrative, which, again, produces patterns. While we live these patterns every day, when we step outside them and take a look, we often rationalize, *That is just who I am* or *That is how life is.* Little do we realize, until perhaps the consequences pile high, that we are still captive to early formative experiences and are not exercising the powers of the emergent adulthood we in fact possess.

From the ego's limited purview, the Self is a kind of natural, organic autonomous other. It's the totality of our nature seeking to express itself. But our sense of self is conditional, acculturated, and very, very provisional. It's influenced by our time and place, religious and educational backgrounds, family-of-origin dynamics, and so often is limited by the child's perspective rather than the adult's far more capacious possibilities of choice.

While our sense of self makes many of our choices for us, the Self is always seeking its expression through us. When it is violated, as it so often is, it pathologizes and creates symptoms. But more about that later.

Our sense of self is slowly built from our earliest life and our earliest encounters, repeated and reinforced, corrected and altered and ratified by our environmental pressures. Over time, it takes on the status of an operational personality—semiautonomous, reflexively triggered, and driven by the adaptive strategies of the past. But is it our life? The one intended for us by the gods?

RELATIONAL PATTERNS OF OUR EARLIEST STORIES

Let's ask some of the questions that begin to probe our sense of self and lift some of the layers to glimpse the mechanisms that lie within each of us. Perhaps the most obvious questions are: How do we come to know ourselves, and how do we come to know others?

From the first moment of our lives, profound questions are urgent: Who are you? Who am I? Are you safe, reliable, absent, punitive, invasive, abandoning? What sense can I make of what I'm experiencing? Because our well-being is tied to understanding, we began to "story" our world. (Yes, you read that right; I just converted a noun into a verb.) We make a story out of an active process in service to constructing a predictable world for ourselves.

Our stories are our provisional interpretations of what is going on and what it might mean to us. These provisional narratives are fueled with emotion within us and embodied in a somatic registry that never forgets. Thus, we all grow attached to a partial script—a script that may keep showing up in our later lives or might slip into oblivion to be replaced by other, more powerful scripts. No matter how competent we are in the outer world, how "successful" we are in the eyes of the world, most of us, most of the time, are on automatic pilot. In other words, we're in service to reflexive strategies that are designed to meet our needs, manage anxiety, and stay out of harm's way as best we can.

Our systemic relational patterns arise from our earliest stories—stories with which we have lived so long that we consider them reality rather than provisional fictions, stories in which we are locked until we recognize them. For example, we all know of people who change partners, jobs, or locations and then unwittingly repeat their patterns of choice. Then they are surprised to encounter the same dreary outcomes. Seldom do we recognize that we ourselves are the common factor in our catalog of relational and professional choices. What we encounter daily is radically new and yet is seen through the lens of history—a lens whose refraction was ground by the earliest stories of trust, betrayal, expectation, disappointment, controller-compliant behaviors, and so on. Perhaps you've lived a similar scenario yourself. We all have, somewhere on this journey.

In such cases, our formative stories reframe our present moment in service to the old expectations, even scanning for certain kinds of people with whom to reenact, and the new possibilities are subordinated to familiar repetitive strategies. Then we find, to our surprise and dismay, that we are back in the same place as before.

For a long time, psychologists have noted that our repetitive tendency is enacted through powerfully functional mechanisms, which we carry with us as tools to make possible sense of the utterly unique, utterly foreign world that confronts us in every new moment of choice. They're called *projection* and *transference*.

Projection happens when the psyche has been triggered by something. For example, whenever I meet a person, a whole field of history is activated. Different aspects of my history will be triggered based on the context, the appearance of that person, and the general expectations of the situation. And, whether I know it or not, up comes a story from the past. That story is unconsciously projected onto that person. Unknowingly I flood that person with my own psychological material. Because this transaction is unconscious, I have no way of knowing how I have distorted the other and constructed a provisional script. While that framing of reality, that story, may have helped me make sense of the world, today it prejudices the new reality and brings about the same old, same old. Even if I wish to understand why I might cling to my old story, its reappearance prejudices the new situation and imposes upon it the data and worldviews of the old.

Shortly after the projection has occurred, it is followed by transference. Transference happens when I respond to that person in an old familiar way: How did I act in the past that may have seemed productive or protective or helpful in some way? Transference points to our tendencies to employ the old stratagems of the old stories because they are what we bring to the table. Projection and transference, on one hand, help us build on our experience and provide continuity to our days. On the other hand, they condition and prejudice our reactions in our relational patterns with people. In short, they are the architects of our patterns, the repetitive responses that may or may not have once served but today bind us to our less capacious past.

So when we ask: What stories do we carry into our relationships? What stories do we serve over and over? It's very hard to get at those answers because the stories are often operating out of very early moments in our development, long before we had the capacity to step outside ourselves and see our choices objectively. In fact, we're more than one story or one strategy for adaptation and survival; we are many. In changing circumstances and provocations, we will

employ various forms of coping skills, whether consciously or not. The most pervasive, often the most damaging, are those we know not we're serving, for then their autonomy is reinforced.

THE EXISTENTIAL THREATS OF OVERWHELMENT AND ABANDONMENT

Our stories are the result of two core existential threats to our survival and well-being: overwhelm and abandonment. Over time, these patterns, acquired in our formative years, often get locked in as reflexive responses. Each pattern then has the potential of becoming a “way of life.” You will probably be able to find all of them at work in your life. They will vary according to our age, maturation, and situation, but all of them have been utilized as means of adapting to the world, protecting ourselves, and getting our needs met as best we can with the limited powers at our disposal.

The smaller we are, the more often we experience encounters with situations and people as overwhelming. All of us at some time felt pretty powerless in a powerful, autonomous world around us.

Out of that encounter with the magnitude of the “other,” there are basically three patterns of coping, adapting, and making do the best we can in response to that overwhelm. These responses are very logical responses to the large powerful “other” (the world). First is avoidance. Second is the search for power to contend with the powerful “other.” The third is giving the other what it wants or seems to demand.

There are several subcategories of avoidance. First there is simple avoidance, where we just don't deal with things and routinely avoid difficult and conflictual encounters. Second is procrastination, where we deliberately postpone or delay the troubling encounter. Third, we employ suppression, where we put things aside consciously and deliberately, and imagine that we will deal with them in the future, but we may not. Then, as Freud pointed out, there is repression, where to protect the fragility of ego consciousness, the psyche reflexively pushes things into the unconscious. Then we sometimes get caught in projections onto others in which we might relate to them in disempowered ways. Further, we have various forms of numbing—from drugs and alcohol to exhaustion. We live in a world that offers us distraction from what troubles us. We can even disassociate, where we find alternative modes of reality to live in as a form of protecting us from the imminent pressures of the present moment. These protective mechanisms are patterns of avoidance, all logical responses to the experience of, or expectation of, the large powerful other.

Second in our response to overwhelm, we may slip into the power complex. Power itself is neutral. Power is the energy to address life's tasks. But when caught in an old story—a complex—the story can often have a life of its own, an autonomy that produces all kinds of problematic patterns. The power complex sometimes expresses itself by seeking overt power over the other. You see it in brute force, controlling behaviors, manipulation, and passive-aggressive behaviors in a relationship. The benign form of that power need expresses itself through learning and growth, and greater management of one's life. That's why we read books such as this one—in an effort to get greater understanding of our life, to have potentially more power over its management.

The third adaptive pattern to the threat of overwhelm by the “other” is essentially to give the world what it wants—to get along, you go along. Most of us were conditioned and taught to be good children, which meant to be adaptive and cooperative. Of course, society depends upon a certain measure of give-and-take; we all know that. But it gets pretty sticky if we realize that we are continuously compromising our values in order to fit in, to be safe, to stay out of harm's way. *Codependent* is what we call people who reflexively transfer power to others and find themselves in compliant patterns, even as they lament their familiar position of subordination. Sooner or later, they experience great chagrin at their repetitive choice to once again ratify their sense of powerlessness, but they remain locked in a story that once seemed protective but later becomes constrictive.

The other existential threat is abandonment: there's never enough to fill our archaic needs. Our needs and desires are infinite, and the capacity of our parents and the world is finite. There's always a gap there. But if there's been a large enough gap, we will often have some kind of childhood identification with those deficits, leading to a substantial wound to our self-esteem. In other words, every child tends to think, *I am what happened to me* or *I am my atmosphere* or *I am what my world seems to be saying to me*.

Children are deeply shaped by the dynamics of their family. They're defined by poverty, racism, sexism, and so forth—all of which are outside them, of course. But the child experiences them as *These are somehow about me and are an expression of me*. These wounds to self-esteem—and we all have them—show up most commonly in forms of self-sabotage or the avoidance of real choices in life; taking life on and fighting for what we want; self-denying, self-defeating behaviors; or over-compensation via grandiosity—“Look how wealthy I am. Look at how achieved my children are.” All are compensatory for inner feeling of inadequacy.

The second adaptive pattern to the abandonment threat is the power complex, but this time in a quite different form from the overwhelm pattern.

The power complex shows up here when, operating out of our narcissistic wounds, we seek control over others. It's most insidiously found in a parent's manipulation of children. Parents will often want their children to grow up and be very much like them, endorsing their religious values, their cultural preferences, and so forth, not realizing how invasive and destructive this is. We all have narcissistic wounds, but the question is, to what degree do we impose them upon other people in the expectation of their taking care of it for us?

The third threat response pattern is an inordinate need for self-assurance, an excessive neediness. We all have needs. That's normal, that's human, but urgent neediness as we know tends to drive people away.

So when we look at those six patterns in response to witnessing the magnitude of the world into which we have been thrust, of overwhelm and abandonment (avoidance, search for power, compromising our values, diminished self-worth, the power complex, excessive neediness), we have to also start seeing how many of our patterns of avoidance keep piling up.

Avoidance always has consequences. To find out what those consequences are, ask: Where do my power issues show up in dealing with others? Or where do I become overly compliant?

I've often said I should start a new 12-step program called Recovering Nice Persons Anonymous. We would get together periodically and talk about how reflexively we compromise our values in order to be acceptable, to fit in.

In the face of abandonment, we frequently internalize deficiencies as wounds to self-esteem. How do they show up? Do they lead to self-defeating patterns? Or do we find ourselves having to somehow pump up and promote our sense of importance? I think about that every time I fly. There are these lines and classes of elite passengers who get to get on first. I think, *Well, we're all in the same plane, we're all arriving at the same time, we hope.* What does all this airline ritual serve except treating that sense of psychological deficit? Or the power complex, where we use others for narcissistic needs; or our needs are such that they are demanding and controlling, and ultimately, of course, push people away, achieving exactly the opposite of what we wanted. The needier the person, the likelier the pressure on those around them to meet those needs. Over time, this extra burden tends to push people away, leaving the individual with even less affirmation and support.

INVISIBLE POWERS AND PRESENCES

Of course, just as there are wounding trauma-based strategies, we may have experienced supportive parents or relatives or a teacher or coach. So we also have to ask: What supported me during childhood? What gave me a sense of inherent value or

legitimacy, or where I didn't feel I had to earn love, approval, validation? What informed me or confirmed my right to be here, to feel what I feel and desire what I desire? What gave me permission to go seek for what I want in this life? Do I remember to draw upon those assets when I meet difficulties in life, as inevitably we do? If I don't feel legitimate as a person, inherently worthy, why not? Is that the old archaic story at work again? If not that, what later assumption did I make whereby I construed life's setbacks and disappointments as being a demeaning message about me?

I often find people don't feel legitimate or inherently worthy. They frequently feel provisionally tentative and at the mercy of their environment. Gaining a sense of worth and recovering personal authority thus becomes the single most important task of the second half of life. From our personal authority, or lack thereof, our choices rise, our consequences multiply, and our lives course onward in their uncertain ways. Too often we identify who we are by what happened to us.

As I mentioned, children are often defined or limited directly by poverty, racism, sexism, and a thousand other events or contexts that have nothing to do with a child's soul or its potential for the expression of life force. Often the desired outcome of therapy is the discovery that we are not what happened to us but what we chose to become. This transformation of consciousness makes a huge difference in our sense of permission to live the life we wish and to take the risks necessary to fulfill our potential. Another way of putting it is, "I am what is wanting expression through me, not what happened to me."

As a Jungian analyst, I've often tried to put a wedge between what happened to a person and who they think they are—their old reductive and restrictive stories. It seems impossible at times to believe, but it is true that what happened to us was what happened "out there." What happened "out there" is not who we are. What happened was seldom about us. It was about someone else's problems, someone else's limitations. Your life is and always has been a separate journey. Separating your journey from your history is difficult but essential to a free and fuller life.

Another question to ask of yourself is this: *Who did I think I was then, at that stage of my maturation? And what did I think I needed to do with my life or that life was going to ask of me?* Often we watch those around us, family members in particular, for clues as to how we are to behave and what is expected of us. Additionally, other cultural influences, ethnicity, religious instruction, the zeitgeist, and so on gave us powerful messages. These collective messages often separate a person from their guiding instincts and become a by-product of one's environment, the carrier of the germ of the un-lived life.