

OUR SPIRITUAL PATH

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by

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Our spiritual pathways are colored by our perceptions of reality. The path itself and the spiritual experiences we have are, therefore, greatly influenced by those perceptions. Our perceptions are like filters and are created by our past experiences and the ego, in its quest to develop and maintain ways to help us survive those experiences. The problem here, however, is that by the very process of protecting us, the ego may also block experience which will help us grow and move into expanded perceptions of reality. A spiritual calling always requires the proper use of the ego so that we may enter spiritual experience free of preconceived ideas and behaviors.

So our challenge, if we are to move forward on our paths of spiritual evolvment, is to release our passionate hold on our past history, and begin to develop a healthy ego - an ego that supports our growth, rather than inhibits it. This is a process of "cleaning" the filters, becoming aware of how they operate, and ultimately releasing them altogether. When this happens, we are enabled to see and experience clearly that which Spirit offers us.

My own process of spiritual growth has been a lifelong experience. As a child, my home environment lacked the inspiration, nurturing, support, and safety I needed, so I sought what I needed in nature and in intellectual and creative pursuits. For many years, I grieved about my isolation, not fully appreciating the gift of unique perception that being alone offers. Thomas Moore, in his audiotape on creativity, believes that creative people often experience deep loneliness and as a result of their fervent desire to attain deep, spiritually-inspired expression. The pain comes, I believe, because the process of diving down into the dark, many times terrifying recesses of consciousness is actually the creative, spiritual process itself! This is exactly the approach I mentioned earlier on releasing whatever stands in the way of our spiritual evolvment.

An example of this was when I was about sixteen years old and had been terribly depressed for a while. I was walking home from school, feeling that my life would never improve, when a grove of trees caught my attention. I was mesmerized as they began to sway rhythmically, their colors changing to ones I'd never seen before. The whole scene became psychedelic, but incredibly serene. I felt such a sense of the greatness of a universal presence that my troubles shifted and I continued my walk with a renewed determination to keep going in my life.

In that moment, I was lifted out of my ordinary perceptions of my personal

reality as one of despair to one in which my ego was strengthened. I'll never know whether the spiritual experience or the change of my perceptions came first, but I am firmly convinced that each supported the other.

Many years ago, I was in relationship with a man who believed, as I did, that enlightenment was the most important goal in life. We spent years attending workshops, studying, and seeking spiritual illumination. Although our intentions were sincere, we lacked the ego strength and willingness to release our old behaviors, so necessary in the process of awakening consciousness. Our egos battled for dominance over one another, our inner children reacted in terror, our inner critics convinced us we were right and each other was wrong, and our home was like an emotional war zone. Both of us had unresolved issues that could not be addressed or healed in such an environment. We had each so successfully built emotional fortresses that we kept the very experience we were seeking away. When the relationship finally ended, I went immediately into another equally dysfunctional one with a man who would, without even knowing it, be the key I had sought so long.

This man, whose last name was "Black," had black hair, drove a black sports car, loved the color black, and was a manic-depressive. He did wild and crazy things that, at first, charmed me and charged me with the kind of energy that had been drained by the previous relationship. I fooled myself into believing that this was an indication that this man was right for me. This relationship ended quickly because I finally saw how harmful it was, but I fell into seven months' severe depression. I sat in the dark, did nothing, said nothing, and stared at the wall. The only book I read was St. John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul, which appealed to me because he described how he cursed God for abandoning him. That was exactly how I felt. Because of my despairing perception, I could only remember one part of an experience I'd had several months before, when I attended a gathering with Swami Muktenanda. I had strong expectations that he would perform "shaktipat" (spiritual awakening through the touch of an enlightened being) on me and I would gain my much-desired illumination. When he appeared behind me, I was ecstatic, but when he drove his thumbs deeply and painfully into my eyes, my reaction a belief that God, too, had abandoned me. I went home terribly depressed. The part of this experience that I refused to remember in my dark state after the relationship breakup, however, was that I had spent the following day after the guru's initiation in a state of pure bliss, experiencing everything as I never had before.

I now find it intriguing that, even though I'd been given exactly what I had wanted, I lacked the ego strength and emotional maturity to fully contain and therefore keep an illumined consciousness. I believe we are all given wonderful gifts at times we may not be completely ready for them. I think this serves as a sort of "wake-up call," a motivation, and as a state of pure grace, and is therefore never wasted. Even if we can't appreciate or embody the experience at the time,

the mold has been made for a future time when we can.

At the end of the seven-month depression, I arose from the ashes of my former self by acknowledging the rage that I had repressed underneath the depression. I beat on a pillow and screamed until I had it all out. I felt free and danced around the room wildly, singing affirmations as I watched myself in a mirror. I vowed to pull myself out of the darkness but to also find a way to learn from it. I decided to enter a doctoral program and write my dissertation on the gifts within the darkness. This was the beginning of my change of perception regarding spiritual experience. I had always, as so many of us do, believed the goal was to eliminate the unpleasant, uncomfortable, dark, and "bad" feelings and ideas. I began to understand that we need the entire range of our emotions in order to be whole, even the discomfoting ones. I learned the importance of developing a strong, healthy ego that would help me be in control of those emotions while giving them free, but appropriate expression.

What I found to be the most helpful tool in this process was to follow the tenets given by my teacher, Brugh Joy. He always taught us to give up judgement, comparison, and the need to understand. I later added a fourth, which is to release cherished beliefs. All of these are roadblocks on our spiritual pathway because they hold us in past patterns, which may have previously served us but are no longer appropriate. As I began accepting myself in everything I did, felt, thought, or said, I was able to stop criticizing and judging myself. My ego became healthier as a result, and with this came a renewed desire and ability to accept others just as they were. It was not a simple or easy process, however, because I had to face all of my fears as they arose. One such fear was that of not being accepted by others, and in particular, by people of other cultural backgrounds. This revelation that I could be a racist was shocking to my ego's beliefs about myself. I began to understand that the "racist" within me was a character created by my ego in order to cope with my habit of rejecting my darker feelings. I had hidden my fears behind my projection onto others that they were somehow inferior to me, and that my "superiority" would somehow make me acceptable. Of course, it did just the opposite. It kept me from dealing consciously with my feelings and I was therefore held prisoner by my own fears.

The Science of Mind philosophy teaches us that our problems are caused by our beliefs in separation from Spirit. Since everything and everyone is a creation of Spirit, when we reject ourselves and others, we are rejecting our spiritual natures. Racism, narrow and rigid beliefs, limited thinking, and insistence upon holding to old ways create separation from Spirit and experiences of pain and despair. The biblical fall from grace is what we create in our lives daily each time we allow rigid beliefs to define our perception of reality.

I believe reality is an ever-flowing, ever-changing thing, and it requires the same of us. We have been taught to be just the opposite, however. Throughout the ages, due to acceptance of political and religious influence, our beliefs and way

of life have been severely limited. If, as individuals and as a culture, we are to survive global dysfunction, we must look at history as a teaching tool, not as something we must accept as constant reality. And it teaches us more than how to avoid war or conflict. Seen from a standpoint of spiritual evolution, history can be approached as an epic myth, replete with archetypal symbols and answers within all of our questions about our past actions.

Joseph Campbell provided us with a profound, yet simple, understanding of the power of myth in our lives, particularly important at this point in time. He described for us the transformational journey, which applies to individuals as well as to societies. In his "Hero's Journey" paradigm, we see that each life challenge, in order to be resolved, must include certain key elements. They begin with our separation from the problem itself, oftentimes being stimulated by crisis. Then we move into an exploration of the the dark, where we meet previously denied or subconscious aspects of the challenge. Within this region of consciousness, we discover the power hidden within the darkness and are presented with the opportunity to transform the monsters of our psyches into formidable allies. It is not a process of getting rid of or further rejecting these aspects. It is, rather, one of integrating them. In the Hero's Journey, this is called the "gathering of allies".

I like to use the example presented in the Star Wars films, of the character, "Chewbacca," the huge and powerful Wookiee friend of Han Solo. It is clearly inferred that "Chewie" was formerly quite wild and destructive, but later came under Han's control as his ally. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that Chewie never lost his power or potential, but his wildness was channeled for productive purposes. This is exactly what we must do in the integration of our dark sides. They can indeed be frightening, but as we work to understand and integrate them, they become forces for good in our lives. The metaphysical principle of "change your thinking, change your life," is what we are doing here by expanding our perceptions about ourselves.

(*Sandra - I'm not sure about this section - we need to talk about it.) Many years ago, I felt I had to leave my position at the Ernest Holmes College School of Ministry because I needed to go deeper into this process of the integration of the dark. I perceived the Science of Mind philosophy, as it was being interpreted at that time, as excluding this essential and balancing aspect of beingness. Personally, I knew how difficult it was to face the uncomfortable aspects of life, particularly in regard to relating to others, so I understood why the goal within the church was to praise only the light.

So I left, like a prodigal daughter, to seek a healing within myself. I taught workshops whose theme was the balance of dark and light, I pulled forth my background in Shamanism in order to bring a sense of groundedness to the process I was immersed in, and I believed I would never return to any type of organized religion.

But, as my experience of balance grew, and my ability to respond in a centered way to others expanded, I began to have a series of dreams, whose purpose was to lead me back into the Religious Science organization. So once again, I became the prodigal and returned, carrying with me the riches of my travels in consciousness, but not without trepidation. I feared that only I had changed and that I would be, as I had been so much of my life, an outcast.

I had learned to trust Spirit's messages to me through my dreams, so I went forth. What presented itself to me I could not have predicted. The church had changed as I had. People were talking openly about having worked with their subconscious aspects, their inner children, their darkness, their fears. They shared with me their journeys and how they had grown as a result of facing their previously denied experiences. I was amazed, delighted, and determined to dive fully into this gift Spirit had given me. Not only did I have yet another place to share my professional skills, but I had "come home" to so many people who meant so much to me.

The next step in the Hero's Journey is the acquisition of a "boon," or gift, within our trials and challenges. We conclude as we bring the boon home (referring to both our physical environment and our internal one). But at this point, we find yet another challenge. And that is to understand that the return home may not be easy, and therefore we must go home with no expectations. We must return renewed yet strong enough to accept what appears to be not renewed. We must allow ourselves "human time" to integrate the gifts from our journeys. It is naive and childish to believe that just because we've awakened in one way, everything and everyone else will be also. Many times, our families and friends are taken aback or even threatened by the changes we've made. They may try to draw us back into the old ways in order to feel more comfortable. Our new challenge then is to resist this, even if it means a change in our relationships.

In my many journeys toward wholeness, it became increasingly clear that my biological family could never accept me as I was, and I was beyond the point where I could anymore try to fit myself into their expectations of me. So I had to make a break with them. It took time because it was painful, but far less painful than continuing a harmful relationship. I've come to believe that when we make changes that are right for us but are not accepted by others, then those others just naturally must drop out of our lives. It is part of the process of transformation to release whatever stands in the way of our perfect pathway in order to make space for a more whole and perfect expression of ourselves to emerge.

I have seen this happening more frequently in all areas of life - individuals, societies, organizations are releasing those things that no longer work for the good of the whole. We are experiencing a global phenomenon of vast proportions and of ineffable spiritual implications. It means that our spiritual pathways are beginning to merge into one great spiritual highway, with room enough on it for everyone.