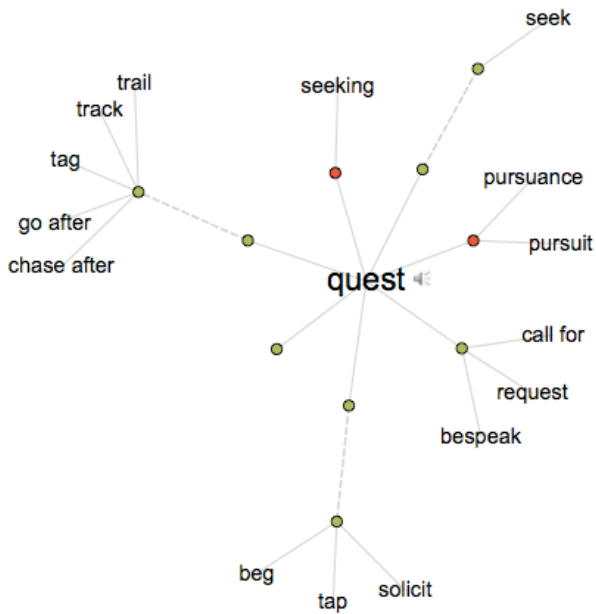


Month Three

Healing As Quest?



A Consultation

I had a dream some years ago now that a patient came to me and she asked me if I thought that it would be a good idea to bring her illness to the Wizard of Oz and ask him what to do. Inside the dream I thought about it for a while, and then I said, yes, I do think that's a good idea, but I need you to tell me more about what that would be like for you.

What would it be like?

Say, that you were the one caught up in the tornado, landing in an entirely new and strange place, and you told a good witch in a lovely dress that you had just been diagnosed with an illness—or that you were experiencing stress—or loss—a displacement of one kind or another—and say that you told her that what you really wanted was to get back home. As if maybe you suspected that if you only got home you could deal with this—you could figure out what to do next. And what if the good witch said, well, the smartest one in these parts is the wizard, and I would suggest you follow this road here. . .

What might happen next?

(And, let's say, for the sake of the argument, that if this were an illness of some sort you'd already done the usual things—consulted a doctor, seen a specialist if need be, begun treatment. Say that you were looking for something else—figuring out what else you could do, in addition to medical treatment, that might augment the healing inside your body. As if medical treatment were only the beginning

of the quest—say, the crossing of the first threshold—and not its end.)

What might the road be like on the way? Would there be helpers? Someone as kind and bumbly as that scarecrow? As innocent as the tin man? And what about obstacles? Would the road become a road of trials? Would terror be part of the story at some point? Angry trees? Flying monkeys? And say you were finally granted your audience with the wizard? What would you find when you got there? What would you see behind the curtain? Would you still ask your question about getting back home? What would the man behind the curtain say? And then what would happen next?

Kinds of Stories

There are certain books that I can remember where I was when I first began to read them. Perhaps something like this has happened for you. I found *The Wounded Storyteller* in the Wake Forest Library (drawn to the book because of its title) and I checked out the book and began reading it on a low stone wall near a creek not far from the library. This was over ten years ago now, and I still remember it. A sense that hundreds of stories inside my head, many of these told to me by patients, were literally rearranging themselves and falling into new patterns.

Arthur Frank is a medical sociologist and a survivor of testicular cancer. He opens his book by quoting a woman, Judith Zaruches, with chronic fatigue syndrome. He quotes from a letter that she wrote to him: *The destination and map I had used before were no longer useful.*

The Wounded Storyteller speaks to the kinds of stories people tell (and write) when the old map—the one used prior to illness or loss—no longer suffices. For me, reading the book was a kind of extended light bulb moment. I came to understand in a new way that part of the work of healing, and perhaps even a large part, is being able to tell a story that makes sense of things. A story capable of handling new and difficult plot points. For most of us, successful plot points (or those points considered successful by much of the world) are easy to fold into our stories. A new marriage. A new house. A welcome child. A new job. Most of us are adept at wrapping our life stories around these plot points. But what about the unexpected diagnoses? The unexpected

loss? The unanticipated failure? What stories do we tell in the wake of illness and suffering?

Frank names three primary kinds of stories people tend to tell in the wake of disruption. The first is one he calls the restitution narrative. The second is the chaos narrative—a kind of anti-narrative. The third is a story of quest. These stories are fluid. People move back and forth among them—they intersect and overlap. And each of these stories is potentially valuable. Each has its place. The problem usually arises when the story we're living with has become outmoded—it no longer works. This is where I think Frank's book holds a kind of radical brilliance. What he's suggesting is so simple—though not at all easy. He's suggesting we can change the kind of story we tell. And we can do this, at least in part, by first becoming more aware of the kind of story we're already telling.

Restitution

The restoration of something to its original state.

At its simplest the restitution narrative goes like this: I was sick and then I recovered and now I am my old self again. Or, perhaps: I am having a problem now but I will recover from this and then I know I will be my old self. This is the narrative, Frank suggests, that arises most naturally in the wake of an acute illness—after the flu, or ordinary pneumonia, or a broken bone. It can occur in the wake of certain kinds of cancer, when, for instance, the surgeon comes back with the report that he got it all, the margins are clear. It can also occur in the wake of a replaceable loss. A tree falls on a house and the roof is crushed—but then the roof gets fixed.

I tend to picture this narrative like a simple algebraic equation. If I was X before my illness or problem, then I know the story has come to an end—and a good end—when I am recovered to X again. I am back at work. I'm running again, or swimming, or driving, or dancing, or whatever it is that makes me feel like I am my old and familiar self.

X = X.

Restored.

This is such a useful narrative. It's so comforting when it works. And often it does work. It's worked beautifully for Lance Armstrong. At one time or another it's probably worked well for every single one of us. But sometimes it doesn't work.

Chaos

1. Any condition or place of total disorder or confusion.
2. Often capital C. The disordered state of unformed matter and infinite space supposed by some religious cosmological views to have existed prior to the ordered universe.

Chaos

The second kind of narrative Arthur Frank writes about is the chaos narrative. It results, often, when the restitution narrative breaks down. A person is trying to get back to the way things used to be—and it's just not happening.

Frank writes:

Chaos is the opposite of restitution: its plot imagines life never getting better.

An example he offers is that of a woman with chronic illness trying to take care of her mother who has Alzheimer's. The woman describes what it's like inside her house in the early evening:

And if I'm trying to get dinner ready and I'm already feeling bad, she's in front of the refrigerator. Then she goes to put her hand on the stove and I got the fire on. And then she's in front of the microwave and then she's in front of the silverware drawer. And—and if I send her out she gets mad at me. And then it's awful. That's when I have a really, really bad time.

Chaos stories can feel really, really bad. They're hard to experience. They're hard to tell. They can also be hard to hear.

Frank argues, though—and he's adamant here—that it's necessary that they be heard. He's not interested in skipping over this kind of story to get to a better or more comfortable one. He writes:

The need to honor chaos stories is both moral and clinical. Until the chaos narrative can be honored, the world in all its possibilities is being denied. To deny a chaos story is to deny the person telling this story, and people who are being denied cannot be cared for. People whose reality is denied can remain recipients of treatments and services, but they cannot be participants in empathic relations of care.

I think he's onto something. He's honoring how messy stories can be sometimes. And how uncomfortable. I don't think this honoring happens nearly often enough.

He continues:

Those living chaotic stories certainly need help, but the immediate impulse of most would-be helpers is first to drag the teller out of this story, that dragging called some version of 'therapy'. Getting out of chaos is to be desired, but people can only be helped out when those who care are first willing to become witnesses to the story. Chaos is never transcended but must be accepted before new lives can be built and new stories told. Those who care for lives emerging from chaos have to accept that chaos always remains the story's background and will continually fade into the foreground.

He's walking, I think, a delicate balance here. Getting out of chaos is desirable. But you can't get out without first honoring it somehow.

So how in the world do we honor chaos? And how does a person eventually find a way out?

Finding an empathetic ear can play, I think, an enormous role. A friend. A sister. A brother. A therapist. Even a near-stranger. The right person at the right time can be everything. But the hard truth is that sometimes that

empathetic ear is not available. Friends get busy. Sisters go on trips. Therapists have their limits. (And they might be tempted to do some of that dragging that Frank is referring to. *Enough already*, one can hear them saying.)

There are some stories that nobody really wants to hear. Or maybe they might be willing to hear them once, or twice, but what about the seventh time? Or the ninth? Or the eleventh?

Can writing help?

Most notebooks don't mind if you tell a story over and over. They rarely interrupt. They don't get fidgety or remember somewhere they have to be. Notebooks can be infinitely patient.

I've also found it can sometimes help during chaos just to begin to name it as chaos. Oh, I get it, so this is chaos.

A person could write just that:

I think this is the chaos.

Oh, I see.

X is no longer going to be X.

Oh.

Synonyms for Chaos

Disorder
Disarray
Confusion
Mayhem
Bedlam
Pandemonium
Havoc
Turmoil
Tumult
Commotion
Disruption
Upheaval
Uproar
Maelstrom
Muddle
Mess
Shambles
Anarchy
Entropy
All hell broken loose

Holding the Chaos Narrative

Mary Swander is an Iowa writer who I first came across in a fine collection of essays she edited called *Healing Circle*. In the introduction, her co-editor, Patricia Foster, describes the anthology thus:

Our desire was to find essays that illuminated what was not known about the path to recovery, for illness remains a private exile, a disruption from the life of stability and achievement, something we've been taught to be ashamed of as if it's a personal failure.

I think there's something important here. In her own essay in the collection, "The Fifth Chair," Mary Swander writes about this sense of private exile as she struggled with myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord which resulted for her in an extremely painful, relapsing, and at times immobilizing illness.

A huge chasm opened between me and the rest of the world. I looked toward others for support and a cacophony of well-meaning voices rose up to fill the empty spaces. *You're making a joke of everything, taking this too lightly,* some said. *You're making too much of a deal of this,* others said. *You're not asking for enough help. You're asking too much. . . You look good. You look like my grandma. I know what it's like, I had the flu for five days. You must've done something really horrible in your past life to bring this on yourself now. You're such a good person, why's this happening to you? Are you depressed? I'm glad you can be so cheerful. Why don't you move to town? Why don't you go to New York and see your specialist? Why don't you move to New Mexico?*

Swander's grace is in perceiving the voices as essentially well-meaning. Her humor lies in conveying the cacophony the voices make. The incoherence. The voices are all trying to impose their own sense of order and meaning. None of these voices is helping her hold or honor the chaos of what she's experiencing. None of these voices is quite making room for the turmoil and confusion of what she's experiencing. That's at the crux of it.

And then one night a voice does offer an invitation. "Is there anything I can do for you?" a friend asks her on the telephone.

It's the right question. Open-ended. Also risky. Anything could happen, and it does. In response to her friend's question, Mary Swander asks her if she happens to have a pen and paper handy. She asks her if she'll make a call. A call to whom? her friend asks.

'Well, I don't know the number, but you can get it from Pontiac, Michigan, information.'

'Okay. First name?'

'Jack.'

'Jack. . . Last name?'

'It's spelled K-E. . .'

'K-E. . .'

'V-O-R. . .'

'V-O-R. . . No, no, I'm not calling him.'

Jack Kevorkian. Suicide assistant. Swander manages humor again. But humor or not, she's asking her caller—and us—to witness that there are some things—some disruptions—that can hurt so much that you want to die.

She does not gloss over months of physical and emotional pain. She has one loyal friend who comes once a week and makes soup. One day she confides in this friend how much she wishes she had a sister or cousin or aunt who could come and stay. (Who hasn't wished this during a time of illness?) Her friend is blunt. "Nobody has that," she says. "And even if you were married right now, most spouses would leave a mate in your condition."

Swander writes:

The voice of reality. After a few days of squaring myself off with that remark, I finally tried not to think about what could be happening but instead notice what was happening. First the ceiling fan became interesting and I learned to meditate to the tilt and twirl of its blades.

A turning point? Swander writes of beginning, at least for the time being, to embrace her exile rather than resist it.

I stopped answering E-mail and the phone. I stopped playing the radio and the stereo. I let the silence fill my room. I read Thomas Merton, Aldous Huxley, Hildegard of Bingen. I read Meister Eckehart, Thomas a Kempis, and the Rule of St. Benedict. I read Walt Whitman, the Book of Job, Lao-tzu, and Mary Baker Eddy.

Whereas before a cacophony of voices was filling up the empty space, she writes of how instead, now, something new is happening: *I let the silence fill my room.*

I wonder if sometimes that isn't exactly what the chaos narrative needs. A particular kind of healing silence and space in which to be held.

Be still.

Listen to the stones of the wall.

Be silent, they try
to speak your

name.

Listen
to the living walls.

Who are you?

Who
are you? Whose
silence are you?

from "In Silence" by Thomas Merton

Where do you go to experience silence?

What do you hear in the silence?

What are the stones saying?

What about the trees?

What if chaos was simply the hard middle part of a much larger narrative?

Its road of trials.

Its angry trees.

Its flying monkeys.

What if we expected that some amount of chaos was part of the deal?

What if we understood chaos as that moment when the old story is falling apart—in preparation for a new story?

How might that change things?

Odysseus in America:

When Chaos Needs a New Story

Let me begin with a story about Bear.

Bear served one tour in Viet Nam as a sergeant in the infantry. During that single tour he was ordered to slit the throat of a wounded enemy soldier. He followed orders. He saw close friends die, including one particularly horrific incident when his platoon, after a night ambush, discovered two headless bodies of their own men; a ways out they came upon the two heads set up on stakes. His platoon went berserk after the incident, cutting off the heads of enemy soldiers, collecting ears. They became known as the headhunters. Back home, a full thirty years out from military discharge, Bear is afraid he's "losing it". Bear sleeps on the couch, separate from his wife, with a knife under his pillow. He "walks the perimeter" of his land at night, looking for snipers and ambushes. His job at the post office is in jeopardy because of numerous incidents of violence. He attacks people, sometimes without any provocation. More than once, he's had to leave work in order to keep himself from killing someone.

Jonathan Shay, author of *Odysseus in America*, looks at this violent man and sees a deep and resonant connection with the Greek hero, Odysseus.

I teach high school English now. When I was first starting out, two years ago, I found myself looking for ways to take classic works that are taught in high school—works like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and *Oedipus Rex*—and make them relevant for fifteen and sixteen-year-olds. My search yielded more than I'd hoped for. It led me to the work of

Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who works with war veterans in Boston and who has won for this work the prestigious MacArthur award.

Shay was forty years old and conducting research in neuroscience at Massachusetts General Hospital when he suffered a stroke that left him temporarily paralyzed on his left side. While recovering, he decided to read classic works that he'd never gotten around to. He read, among others, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Following his recovery, and with his research stalled, he took a temporary position filling in for a psychiatrist at an outpatient clinic, counseling troubled vets. Connections became apparent—and then multiplied. Shay began to see Achilles in every soldier who'd ever felt betrayed by a commander. He saw Odysseus in every soldier who was having difficulty returning home.

Odysseus, Shay reminds us, is the last soldier to make it home from Troy. It takes him ten full years, and for at least some part of the journey he, like Bear, remains in "combat mode." His first act following combat is a violent one in which he and his men raid the coastal city of Ismarus. Odysseus subsequently travels to Hades, the underworld, where, walking among the dead, he must confront his sense of loss and guilt. He is forced to maneuver between the twin dangers of Scylla and Charbydis.

What Shay came to realize is that this ancient story could make a soldier who was struggling with readjustment to civilian life feel less alone—part of something much larger. Shay speaks to this in an interview. "One of the things they appreciate," he says, "is the sense that they're part of a long historical context—that they are not personally deficient for having become injured in war."

A long historical context. This seems important.

He continues:

There is a cultural river that says, 'Oh, war will only make you better, if you got the right stuff.' Well, that may be true of some people, but it's certainly not true of many who are badly hurt by it.

It strikes me that it's precisely this kind of cultural river that can throw a person who is already suffering into deeper chaos—and can keep a person stuck there for a long time. I'm reminded of Patricia Foster writing in the introduction to *Healing Circle*:

Our desire was to find essays that illuminated what was not known about the path to recovery, for illness remains a private exile, a disruption from the life of stability and achievement, something we've been taught to be ashamed of as if it's a personal failure.

The cultural river Shay refers to can exacerbate chaos by repeating a story in which individual suffering—including the suffering of illness and war injury—is caused by personal failure.

And the right story at the right time can begin to release us from this? The right story can serve as a template for our new story?

In the *Popol Vuh*, the Quiche Maya epic of creation, it is said that the first four human beings had the gift of the gods to see clearly. But the gods were not to make humans their equals and so limited our sight to the obvious—a limitation that can only be overcome with the aid of an *ilbal*, a 'seeing instrument,' a way to see the invisible world. This instrument was not a telescope, not a crystal for gazing, but a book . . .

from *The Fruitful Darkness* by Joan Halifax

The Desert Island Question

5 books you would bring to an island

5 poems

5 songs

5 movies

5 photographs

The Narrative Pattern Question

What kind of story do your desert island selections tell?

Is a Quest Story Useful?

I'm coming around finally to the third kind of story that Arthur Frank says people tend to make out of illness and other disruptions. While the first kind of story is bent on restitution, and the second immersed in chaos, the third kind of story Frank describes is one familiar to us from fairy tales and myths and movies: the quest narrative. He defines the narrative this way: *Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it.*

He draws here on the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell, adapting Campbell's quest stages to that of illness and recovery. You may already be quite familiar with much of this.

The first stage is Departure—the familiar being left behind for something new. In a mythic quest, this inevitably begins with some kind of call. Glenda counseling Dorothy to head off in search of the wizard. Gandalf instructing Frodo to take the ring and flee to the elves for safe haven. In an illness story the body is often the source of the call. A new pain. A new lump. A racing heart. In a loss story the source of the call may be as ordinary as the phone. And nearly everyone—mythic or not—reacts in the same way to this first call: refusal of the call. *No, this can't be. No, I must have heard wrong. No.*

Departure culminates in that moment when we stop refusing. Most often we feel we have no choice. We're Frodo heading out from the shire. Both innocent and reluctant. Sometimes we may suspect—or just hope—that there's something to be gained from all this. I remember as an adolescent hearing a

priest talk once about belief. If you don't believe, he said, it can be a start to want to believe. Or to want to want to believe. Or to want to want to want to believe. You get the idea. Sometimes we may simply want to believe that there's something to be gained.

Or maybe it happens that we don't see any point to the whole deal until we're able to look back and reflect. It strikes me that often quest stories are crafted in hindsight. When we first set out we often don't know what the hell we're getting ourselves into.

The second stage of a quest is Initiation. This is the long middle part of the story. The part where a person may begin to reckon with the fact that this thing—this illness or loss or trouble or adventure—or all of these combined—this thing is going to be something of a big deal. This is not trivial. Something serious is happening. Often a significant part of this stage can be frightening and uncomfortable. Even chaotic. The hero or heroine is tested—and perhaps tempted to despair.

There's a wonderful exchange in *Fellowship of the Ring*, at a moment when Frodo is reluctant to go forward with the ring:

'I wish it need not have happened in my time,' said Frodo.

'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'

A long movie—in this case a trilogy—can be a wonderful thing. We can see how long and complex the process of initiation can be. When movies are too short we may get a false sense that this middle part is easy—or easily solved.

In a long story it's easier to see that an integral part of initiation is change. The hero or heroine is changed in some way. Often humbled. Heroes and heroines learn to ask for help. They learn, often through trial and error, who can be trusted—and who can't be. Something is happening—not just outside the hero or heroine but inside. X is no longer quite X. X is becoming Y.

This second stage of the quest story ends with what Arthur Frank, like Campbell before him, calls a boon. The hero receives something—a blessing of some sort—or treasure—or piece of wisdom. And now is ready for the third stage.

The third and final stage of a quest is the Return. Here the hero or heroine returns from an experience—an adventure—a road of trials—a journey—somehow marked. Dorothy returns to Kansas, but she knows something she didn't know before. She sees all the familiar people in her world, and they're the same—but they're not. Where before she'd seen only rather ordinary farmhands, she now sees their wisdom and courage and heart. She *sees* differently in the wake of her quest.

Here, Frank makes an interesting distinction. In one kind of hero story the hero returns as one who has conquered. And this conquering hero may, on return, boast of his accomplishments. In another kind of story—what he calls a postmodern kind of hero story (no matter when it might have been first told or written)—the hero returns not so much boastful as somewhat humbled.

Frank writes:

The paradigmatic [postmodern] hero is not some Hercules wrestling and slugging his way through opponents, but the

Bodhisattva, the compassionate being who vows to return to earth to share her enlightenment with others.

Compassion as a boon of the quest? And this is how the quest story becomes of use? Not merely for the hero or heroine but for the community they return to?

Mary Swander, in her essay, "The Fifth Chair" writes about what she learned after she turned to those teachers—to Thomas Merton and Hildegard of Bingen and those others—after she let the silence fill her room. She writes:

All these people understood the same basic truth: that suffering can either pull you inward, turning you guarded and bitter, leaving you there forever on the meat hook, or it can push you up out of the underworld to another level of consciousness where, as the Buddhists say, we can find the jewel in the lotus of the heart. At its best, suffering opens the heart to others' suffering and produces love and compassion: what we all long for from each other but find so hard to both give and find.

I suspect this takes us at least one full lifetime to learn.

Not to mention the cost. Frodo comes especially to mind. That wonderful innocence with which he sets out. And then that point he comes to toward the end, near the close of *The Return of the King*. He understands finally his fate—that he will not be returning to his old simple life in the shire—and he tries to explain this to his good friend, Sam.

'But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.'

Coda

I had a writing teacher tell me once that writers are often so afraid to be schmaltzy or sentimental, so afraid of crossing that line, that they shy away from expressing emotion altogether.

I had another writing teacher, many years before this (I was still in high school) tell me that a line from a poem I'd written was sentimental because the emotion was unearned.

I suspect that both teachers are right.

I think Tolkien earned Frodo's speech at the end by everything he placed before it. And I think the film directors earned the hauntingly beautiful song sung by Annie Lennox there near the end of *The Return of the King*, the song with which Frodo is accompanied on his journey as he heads to the Undying Lands or "Into the West." Here is how the song begins:

Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
Night is falling
You've come to journey's end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before
They are calling
From across the distant shore.

Rest as another boon of the quest? Also reunion?