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ADVENTURES & ORDEALS: FINDING THE ONE IN THE OTHER

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Adventures & Ordeals: Finding the One Within the Other – Either Way To The Boon



Adventure – *defined* - an unusual and exciting (typically felt as dangerous) experience or activity; a daring activity calling for enterprise and enthusiasm.

Ordeal – *defined* - a challenging or painful experience, especially a protracted one. Something that has come forth that was not expected, asked for or wanted.



*Security is mostly a superstition.
It does not exist in nature,
Nor do the children of men
As a whole experience it.
Avoiding danger is no safer
In the long run
Than outright exposure.*

*Life is either a daring adventure,
Or nothing.
To keep our faces toward change and
Behave like free spirits
In the presence of fate
Is strength undefeatable.*

- Helen Keller

It is important to form meaningful attachments, in order to feel secure. We also need them to feel loved, accepted and adequately cared for. To feel safe and protected in this world. We all need this important foundation of security woven into the fabric of our being. This essential grounding gives us the internal stability and fortitude necessary to venture forth out into the world.

That being said: security is, indeed, mostly a superstition. Like a fairy tale, it speaks to a young (and culturally reinforced) place within us that wishes for something to be, that cannot really be. Or can only temporarily be. As children, we had to rely on the presence, care and support of significant others in order to feel secure. We were utterly dependent on these external resources to help us feel stable enough on the inside to take meaningful risks and pursue life-giving adventures.



In our cultural milieu, we are influenced and shaped to seek security, sometimes above all else. Our educational and career endeavors are often focused primarily around gaining opportunities for economic security. Getting married – “to have and to hold” - also contributes to the collective ideal of being provided for, of coming together to sustain and be sustained as a family throughout a lifetime.

Security is something we strive for, sometimes obtain, often fail to retain. In actuality, security is not static. It is something that comes and goes from our lives, as life is to be lived on its own terms. IF we accept this as being true, then we will be sobered by what Helen Keller tells us. By living life on life's terms, *avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.*

When we fail (or are failed) at the fundamental developmental tasks of attachment and security in childhood – feeling safe in the world - we tend to become overly focused on securing external measures as a substitute. Things like finances become a primary means for obtaining our security, beyond adequate food, shelter and love.

Money, of course, is that one singular *external resource*, that seems so necessary in almost all parts of the world for an exchange of basic goods, services and supplies for living. But cash is not a valid substitute for *internal resourcefulness*, which is cultivated by our capacity for self-activation and agency, the ability venturing forth into the world, and learning to become resilient in the face of failure – in our language – having adventures.



On the mythic path of the hero's journey, saying yes to the way of adventure means also saying yes to the challenges of the ordeal, and vice versa. You cannot have one without the other. This becomes a fundamental truth once we cross the threshold and go beyond the familiar, and enter the territory of the 'as-yet-unknown'.

Paradoxically, in the worlds of mythic adventure, safety becomes the final danger.

In fact, for many of us living in our current post-modern Western world, we have never had more abundant means. Convenience and ease are immediate goals for a modernized way of life. Precisely because of this cultural backdrop, security in the end becomes our final danger.

By being overfed and over-provided for, security substitutes for the pursuit an actualized life we can call our own. When we are no longer clear or lean enough to realize what it takes to bring forth our own vitality, meaning and purpose, our motivations become dulled, and we become lost to the way of adventure.

The science fiction writer H.G. Wells spoke to this very thing about modern life, quite poignantly and dramatically:

“But in these plethoric times when there is too much coarse stuff for everybody and the struggle for life takes the form of competitive advertisement and the effort to fill your neighbor’s eye, there is no urgent demand either for personal courage, sound nerves or stark beauty, we find ourselves by accident.

Always before these times the bulk of the people did not overeat themselves because they couldn’t, whether they wanted to or not, and all but a very few were kept “fit” by unavoidable exercise and personal danger. Now if only one pitch his or her standard low enough and keep free from pride, almost anyone can achieve a sort of excess.

You can go through contemporary life fudging and evading, indulging and slacking, never really hungry nor frightened nor passionately stirred, your highest moment a mere sentimental orgasm, and your first real contact with primary and elemental necessities the sweat of your death bed.”



Those who work in the field of hospice care have learned deep wisdom from listening to those who time on earth is about to end. When one looks back over the span of a life, *one’s deepest regrets will most often be for the venture that failed to be undertaken*, and not for the failed undertaking of the venture.

Those who cannot and do not say ‘yes’ to the adventure of living may do so in order to avoid certain ordeals. But they create other, more pervasive ordeals in the process of avoiding. When we live life by trying to avoid life, we become live out the smallness of life, and we become fated to ‘sameness’. By playing it too safe, we are cast only for the management of the mundane. We become pre-occupied with tending to the necessary daily chores and tasks of life, all those matters of minutae that maintain and preserve a narrow, flattened existence.

This is why we need to understand the dangers of playing it too safe. By allowing our lives to be lived out in the uncertainty and the complexity that a journey will bring to us, we create the potential for a vibrant life. We receive opportunities to experience struggles, that can elicit spontaneity, surprise and wonder, and we live into experiences that can only be joined with, and not controlled.



The Adventure Brings Forth the Inevitable Ordeal

The adventures of life will also yield ordeals, and vice versa. This is the deal, and we have say ‘yes’ to it. The intertwining of an adventure with an ordeal is the very thing

which can bring forth the exact conditions needed by which we discover many unrealized potentials in ourselves. This creates a sense of largeness in life.

The excitement is in the fear, and the fear is in the excitement. Mostly, it is the lack of oxygen that separates excitement from fear

If we don't identify ourselves as an active player in the mythological field of opportunity, we will tend to project our vitality into our imagined superheroes – *we will perceive them as larger-than-life figures who can do what we can't do - or don't want to do*. We end up disowning and projecting our own hero potential onto those bigger-than-us figures.

When we fail to grow out of this idealization phase, we can avoid what the future has in store for us. We don't have to do the hard work of realizing what we have been born for, and we don't have to face our insecurities when the time comes to contribute what we have to give to the needs of the world.



The Ordeal Brings Forth the Sense of Adventure

Once we move past our initial emotional reactions to life circumstances and interactions that involve our perception of an ordeal, we can find within our authentic 'hero response' to the challenge that has been placed in front of us. We have to awaken to the realization that the exact conditions needed to elicit our true potential from within us have transpired, but in ways that we may not yet be able to understand.

We have to say *yes* to the ordeal, to go with it. The poet Alison Luterman says that if something is in our way, then it must also be going our way, too. When we can perceive challenges in this way, a sense of adventure emerges from within. This works as an internal fire, and we can become ever more motivated and inspired, more able to follow the life force energy emerging from these fires within. This begins the opening to the profound 'discovery of the boon' within the hero, brought forth from the realm of mythic adventure found in the ordeals of daily life.

Joseph Campbell once said that when we say yes to the ordeal, there is a deep sub-conscious recognition and acceptance that there is something about a proper ordeal, when taken up with the dignified posture of adventure, that *"drives the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those human fantasies that tend to tie it back"*.

This is, in essence, an embodiment of the Buddhist sutra of one's *"joyful participation in the sorrows of the world"*, where the ego personality dies a little death, which allows the eternal to shine through from within the trying

circumstance of life's vicissitudes. We can become born anew a little bit more, and one more time, receiving new life, and more able to give new life as well to those who can also partake of life in this way.



From the Ideal to the Real

We also cling to what psychotherapists call our 'infantile fantasy wishes', constructs of our own making that are full of idealized values, beliefs, and views of ourselves or others. We tend use them, as Campbell says in the paragraph above, as something to tie us back to what is old and familiar.

When our idealized wishes and fantasies remain unconscious, they reinforce our reflexive and defensive maneuvers away from the 'the dirty work of living' – of entering the mess of really working something through, moving through raw, undeveloped or unformulated material within us - shadowy things that need a fuller attention, our back and forth-ness, our trial and errors, etc.

It is precisely this mindfulness of attention that can lead us to a new re-organization of our thinking, and the courage to try new behaviors that can forge new life experiences, moving our lives forward through 'the necessary passages of adulthood'.

As uncomfortable and unmanageable as ordeals can be, they also offer us a chance to feel a certain kind of 'realness' within ourselves, and a sense that 'this is it, this is my life, and it is happening right now'. It shifts us from a sense that our lives being lived according to the construct of a 'map', and we now feel thrown into the actual 'territory'. Below is a beautiful passage from an Eastern mystic from the 15th century, Kabir. He speaks with passionate eloquence about this shift from conceptual thinking to the potency of lived experience:

*"There is nothing but water in the holy pools.
I know, I have been swimming there.
All the gods sculpted of wood or ivory can't say a word.
I know, I have been crying out to them.
The sacred books of the East are nothing but words.
I looked through their covers sideways one day.*

*What Kabir speaks of is only what he has lived through.
If you have not lived through something,
It is not true."*



Going From the Map To the Territory

Kabir encourages us to shift our devotion from the 'infantile fantasy' of being rescued by heavenly forces from the trials of life on earth, to the inner strengthening that comes from an adult 'living through' of life's experiences.

We can cling to the conceptual world itself in this very same way as well. We can get caught up in the fascination with abstract and theoretical positions, which can foreclose entering into the uncertainty and complexity of a genuine adventure, where we will be inevitably taken through the twists and turns of fate and destiny that play out in our actual lives.

Kabir is also saying that we learn most when we enter the territory of real life, and experience things for ourselves, and gain our own unique perspectives from what we've lived through, no matter how limited this might be. And ultimately, we must make our own life choices, and experience the consequences of what path is chosen and what path is not, as only we can.

The ability to perceive that we have choices, and the learning that comes from making them - for better and for worse - is what must shape our fate, and create our destiny. Otherwise, we will feel like victims or imposters, living out lives that somehow feel determined by the will of others.

We gain the most from life, we find ourselves most nourished and satisfied, when we learn from own lived experiences, and not from the thoughts we have in our heads. It is important not to confuse the menu with the meal.



The Adventure & Ordeal of the Ascent: Cultivating the Masculine Principle Within

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If You Want to Grow Up, You Must Say 'Yes' to the Effort of the Climb

Opening to the thrust into largeness, into the vast and ascendant possibility of *spirit* within us - connecting us to a universal connecting agent - most often requires effort and work, especially in the beginning. It confronts an 'infantile fantasy wish' that some of us cling to - that there can be reward without effort.

We all have moments where we want a new life to come without our having to contribute anything towards its arrival. Yet what if there is no such thing? What if

we are just relentlessly chasing after an illusion, and have been getting away with it for so long? This type of inevitable reconciliation is disappointing, and perhaps unbearably so, but it is also grounding. It levels us, but leaves us what is actually there in front of us.

There is an old adage that says, 'children wish; adults do'. Only as young children do we have the right to be given to and provided for, without having to give in return. It is natural for a child's heart to desire to be given to. Many of us were adequately provided for as children in certain ways, and in others ways we were not.

Regardless, we have to grow up and become contributors to life. As we do, we learn to what it takes to receive from life, and to become fulfilled within ourselves. From this place, we can grow an authentic desire to give, and to give from our own sense of fullness. Children benefit as a result of life happening. Adults contribute to making life happen. This is how it must be.

There must always be an exchange in life, for life itself to happen. Avoiding the exchange of effort, while trying to receive the outcome or reward that comes by (someone's) effort, conjures an unreality. It also fosters a sense of entitlement that will linger in the background of our mind. Entitlement causes us to make unconscious demands on others, not calling this posture into question. Others upon whom we make demands will eventually lose their desire to give to us, because they can do so only from a growing sense of obligation.

We must be able to bear the effort it takes to grow upwards and to go outwards - to thrust ourselves into life - a life that owes us nothing. The motivation to make this effort must be birthed, time and time again, from within us. We need to have developed a certain resolve within us - which cultivates the necessary courage, daring and sustained focus to exert ourselves. We must become repeatedly self-activating. As we do so, we face both our limits and our unearthed potential as we encounter the tangible world of possibility found in space and time.



how to climb a mountain

*Make no mistake. This will be an exercise in staying vertical.
Yes, there will be a view, later, a wide swath of open sky,
but in the meantime: tree and stone. If you're lucky, a hawk will
coast overhead, scanning the forest floor. If you're lucky,
a set of wildflowers will keep you cheerful. Mostly, though,
a steady sweat, your heart fluttering indelicately, a solid ache
perforating your calves. This is called work, what you will come to know,
eventually and simply, as movement, as all the evidence you need to make*

*your way. Forget where you were. That story is no longer true.
Level your gaze to the trail you're on, and even the dark won't stop you.*

-Maya Stein

In her poem, Maya Stein speaks of what it takes to climb, which I see as a metaphor for growing up. This self-activating yang principle, in the form of outward effort, must be made and cannot be short-changed. Any short cut here, in the end, lengthens the distance towards the boon, the desired goal of the journey.

There will be a view, she says. You will be rewarded. But not immediately, *later*. There is no immediate gratification to be found on a soulful journey. In fact, this will take a lifetime. She is pointing us to the task at hand. *Tree and stone*. Groundedness. Facing what is in front of you. Occasionally, we are rewarded with surprise and wonder – the appearance of a hawk coasting overhead. We can't just feel entitled to these visitors coming into view; we are graced with them.

Revealing insights, a joyful wonder - they come when they come. When they do, hopefully we are not too self-absorbed in our thinking, and we can pay attention enough to be present to what unfolds.

Stein reminds us of is this truth - our own efforts create movement in life. And this is what will move our lives forward. We do not have to do it all by ourselves, and life doesn't happen solely through our own efforts. The universe plays its part, and participates as well. Our efforts are what helps to dissolve what is old and static, and our efforts can go against the grain of what is holding us back.

These next lines are powerful: *Forget where you were. That story is no longer true.*

I can remember the first time I climbed the Via Ferrata course at Nelson Rocks in West Virginia, a site that we use as part of our *Hero's Journey Intensives*. We were led by our guide to dramatic pitches, able to climb without all the technical skill and gear required of typical mountain climbing. As a result, we were granted access to vistas typically only experienced by more skilled and experienced climbers.

I remember the first time I turned my gaze away from the rock right in front of my face, and towards the view that was being offered to me, soon after my initial ascent. It was dizzying. And wondrous. To gaze into a vista opened before me from a precarious resting place. The perspective was far different here than the one I had on the ground, and far beyond anything I could imagine in my mind. Along with this new perspective, a new story was being revealed, unfolding in an embodied encounter, rooted in the here and now.

It took a few years to integrate the realization I had that day, and to more fully understand and appreciate what it takes to shape a new destiny for one's self. I had learned to stay grounded while experiencing an expansive vastness through

dizzying heights. This has allowed me to consider expansive new possibilities for my own life. I am better able to keep my feet on the ground and do the necessary work it takes to fulfill a vision.

Level your gaze to the trail you're on, and even the dark won't stop you. To manage my daily fears, I keep turning back to the effort at hand, to the next step of the climbing, one ladder rung at a time. My footsteps make my way as I go, my own trail being made from where I've been.

It is a profoundly liberating feeling to feel the darkness of fear no longer stopping me. The felt sense that I can take the one next step, to move myself forward, deep in my body, in good relationship to solid rock – this feeling stays with me to this very day, and returns again as I write these words.



The Adventure & Ordeal of the Descent: Cultivating the Feminine Principle Within

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If You Want Depth and Beauty, You Must Say 'Yes' to the Dark Inner & Under Ground

Opening to the pull of inwardness and downwardness, to the life-giving descendent principle of *soul* within us – this is what helps to give birth to uniqueness; to an individuated path; to the one that can only be ours. This descent requires yielding, softening, letting go, and surrendering.

We must develop a tolerance for such a letting go - dissolving into a kind of joining with a larger sense of what is eternal and everlasting. We yield into, then go beyond any knowing – unconcerned about not knowing how. We let go of our own limits and bounds, and we yield over to the peace within the dark 'no-thing-ness', beyond all human understanding.

Paradoxically, only by going through this depth of spacious dark unknowing, can we come to know our unique sense of purpose and meaning. Something of significance becomes born anew only out of the such a dark void.

We all eventually recognize that we need to grow up, even if we don't really want to. There is some acceptance and comprehension that there is something to be obtained from this process, if we can endure the sense of loss of our child-like ways.

Knowing that we need to grow up is one thing. Understanding that we also need to *grow down* is more difficult. Accepting that we need to be taken down, and in, in

order to give birth to new life. To transform our very being, we must learn how to go into our interior, stay there - recognizing value and finding meaning within the inner spaces of life.

On our *Hero's Journey Intensives*, we use both the metaphor as well as the lived encounters in an actual underground cave. If you have never been under the earth in any natural or sustained way, the threshold shift from one reality to another is immediate, stark, and powerful.

You leave one world filled with light and color, where everything is in fluctuation, and has contrast. As you bow down, and transition into underground darkness, the shift is dramatic. The year-round temperature is in the mid-50 degrees Fahrenheit, and damp. Color takes on only shades of grey and black, and the only sound to be heard, if there is any sound at all, is the hollow echoes of dripping or trickling water.

Mostly, what you encounter in a natural, underground cave - when not moving about and navigating with a flashlight - is darkness. Accompanying the dark is coolness, spaciousness, and silence. You feel enveloped by a hollow, captivating sense of timelessness.

It can be quite daunting to be thrust inward in such a profound and literal way. The sense of spacious darkness vacillates between tomb-like and womb-like states. It takes a little time to acclimate not only to the conditions of the cave, but also to the practice of paying mindful attention to your interior in such a direct and undistracted way.

We can feel swallowed by a sense of profound emptiness within the darkness, even haunted by it. One can feel enchanted by a sense of aliveness within such underground cavities as well, enthralled by an ever present sense of mystery and vastness, which is again deeply internal, in both a very personal and impersonal way.

What one has to practice, from a soul perspective, is adapting to a quieting stillness as one descends, as opposed to the sense of movement encountered upon a climb. T.S. Eliot understood the value and purpose of darkness, and the soul's need to descend into the womb-like abyss of the dark void, which gives birth to new life.

But first, we need to work through the tomb-like nature of this cave element, which detaches us completely from the world of light.

*I said to my soul be still
And let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.*

*Wait without hope,
For hope would be hope*

For the wrong thing.

*Wait without love,
For love would be love
for the wrong thing.*

*There is yet faith,
But the faith and the love and the hope
Are all in the waiting.*

*Wait without thought,
For you are not ready for thought.*

*And so the darkness shall become the light,
And the stillness, the dancing.*

- T.S. Eliot

Here we make a transition from any defensive form of movement and activity, which takes us away from growing down. The hero task is to must develop our capacity *to yield* in order to join with something larger than the self. This kind of surrender is very different from (and often confused with) submission. It is a deep giving over, not only to something larger *than* one's self, but ultimately to something larger *within* one's self as well.

This kind of surrender is like the giving over of a water drop to a larger pool of water. As a water drop enters the pool, it joins with the pool, and appears to have disappeared from existence, from a tangible, material perspective.

However, from the mystical point of view, the water drop is now identified with the pool. *The water drop is now the pool.* Rumi says in one of his poems that not only is the water drop within the ocean, but the ocean is within the water drop, as well.

I can easily recall how profoundly altered I eventually become inside of caves. I used to visit unexplored parts of public caves as an adolescent and as a young adult. I was fascinated by what happened when I was swallowed by the dark, completely beyond of the natural light found above ground. Crawling, being on all fours, using arms and legs to traverse - this alters something in the brain chemistry. It activates the reptilian part of the brain, from which we have long ago evolved.

After spending some time being active in a cave, I could begin to rest into the darkness. In this being with silence and stillness, I would begin to dissolve, like a water drop entering a vast pool. No thoughts would come. None at all. Only my senses were active. Sight, smell, taste, touch and sound engaged in the midst of the dark and silent stillness. Forever was right there, outside of time, in a mind-blowing kind of way.

I could be transported to vivid memories of early childhood life. Feelings of grief and awe would spontaneously surface. I would feel on the edge of my seat, wondering what would well up next into awareness from the dark unknown of my unconscious. At times, a sense of the eternal would be almost unbearable.

Years later, again sitting alone in a dark cave, I remembered the first time I understood the last lines of Eliot's poem. *And so the darkness shall become the light. And the stillness, the dancing.* I put my hands in front of my face, feeling exquisitely the feeling of motion through my limbs, while rooted on a sitting pad. Then I realized that I was also clearly seeing my hands move, in complete and total darkness. They were quite darker in appearance than the blackness of empty space. I couldn't believe my eyes. It seems that matter, being more dense, was darker than empty space.

I would move my arms around, watching them move at the same time I was feeling them move. It was exhilarating to experience. Then, I gradually realized I could begin sensing open space in the cave, as opposed to the solidness of the ceiling, walls and floor. I could get up and move around without any light. I was not as blind in the dark as I thought. In fact, I was much more present and mindful. A new sensing awareness was taking place. To this day, I marvel at this awareness of light and movement taking place in the total darkness and silence of underground cave spaces.

But what I have come to appreciate far more than the literal experience of this, is its metaphorical equivalent. As I continue to practice letting go into the unknown void of unconscious internal space, I am endlessly surprised by my recollections of dream states, of spontaneous insights or memories of significance, and of becoming increasingly fascinated by the power of the mythic imagination.



Eternity - All We Need - Is In The Here and Now

Ultimately, embracing the adventure and the ordeal as being one, we enter a state of being that is completely absorbed in the 'now' point. The eternal world is born anew in each moment that consciousness is present. By accepting that the universe has the potential to re-create itself in any given moment, or in any given conscious encounter and exchange, we have more motivation and incentive to stay present to the here and now, and witness its unfolding.

Gradually, we come to see for ourselves that all we need can be found in the here and now – and in fact, will be found in no other place.

It is a profound realization to recognize that our own capacity for being aware actually shapes the unfolding of reality around us. It is an ongoing process of awakening to the fact that the ocean of divinity is indeed active and abiding within the little water drop of humanity that I am.

Wendell Berry, the clear-eyed, plain speaking Kentucky tobacco farmer, and a brilliant thinker, essayist and poet, conveys this recognition. As always, he gives us the experience of nature as a simple and profound reflecting mirror into our truest self:

*Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.*

When we awaken to the realization that we don't need the world to change, but in fact can change within ourselves to be in better relation to the world we live in, we are embracing the ultimate hero task of a mythic adventurer. What we need is already within us, waiting to be birthed. The universe itself, Campbell said, is conspiring towards this very aim. The intangible world wants and needs more soul to come forth on this earth to be of service, as it wants to know itself, too, here on the earth.

This is the evolutionary call to adventure that we must eventually come to understand, appreciate and become actively devoted to.



The adventure is in the ordeal, and the ordeal in is the adventure. That's the deal.

There is eternity to be discovered while we are here, on earth. What we need to undertake is the journey that is waiting for us, which will take us to our eternal worlds within. Let's not have regret on our deathbeds for what we failed to pursue.

What we need to take us towards the everlasting is waiting for us here and now, in this world. Let us all keep moving toward the light; let us all grow more capable of going through whatever darkness it requires of us to arrive there.

- Michael Mervosh



