



**Navigating the Unknown:
An Ensemble Hero's Journey**

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Taken from Bill Cornell's book**

**SELF EXAMINATION IN PSYCHOANALYSIS & PSYCHOTHERAPY
COUNTERTRANSFERENCE & SUBJECTIVITY IN CLINICAL PRACTICE**

Calling One's Self Into Question

During your Hero's Journey, a part of what you are getting yourself into is a process of learning to call yourself into question. At a certain point along the way, you start to realize that how you have always thought about the world, or thought about yourself, is no longer valid – or was never valid to begin with.

A good and meaningful journey involves questioning many of our ways of thinking and ways of being that have shaped our ways of living over the course of a lifetime.

- Calling one's self into question is one of the most difficult and one of the most important psychological capacities that develops over the course of an in-depth process – and it holds the potential to gradually and radically reshape the course of one's life.

For our skills to develop along the journey, we must be willing to make mistakes. These mistakes involve and affect our sense of self – and we must learn to re-interpret them as a necessary and important part of moving our lives forward in new directions, and not simply reduce our mistakes into failures.

- An essential practice during our journey is to reduce the impulse and the tendencies for self-judgment and self-harm, and indulging self-defeating and self-destructive patterns that can come from making mistakes along the way.

When we give our lives over to the soul's journey, it involves a commitment to lifelong questioning that is a part of life-long learning. It is an essential capacity for the journeyer and the seeker to call themselves into question.

One of the areas in which the journeyer may be the most vulnerable to making mistakes is in being overly invested in a particular outcome for their journey – and to even plan for that

outcome in advance. There are very powerful and unconscious motivations for the choice of the outcome that each of us most wishes for, and chooses to pursue. These outcomes can be most worthwhile, and quite valid and worth pursuing – but it can also create a restriction, and limit our pathways, and as well, the potential for an enriching outcome.

It can all too often be that the initial motivations that lead us to answer a call to adventure end up in the long run, reinforcing our personal defenses and fixed positions. When this starts to happen, the journey itself can be used as a way to manage our own anxieties and uncertainties – instead of taking us *into and through* them, again and again.



Jim McLaughlin's Model Of Understanding & Addressing Personal Limitations

Dumb Spots – those areas in which we do not have enough life experience or knowledge to work adequately with the situation encountered on our journey – the adventure or the ordeal - that we are currently facing.

Blind Spots – those areas where our personal history and our ongoing difficulties interfere with our ability to think clearly about ourselves in the present day circumstance - and about our current journey that is soul based, and not just ego based. Our past then works against our capacity to work through our obstacles and ordeals more effectively.

Hard Spots – those areas where our identity is too rigidly identified with an aspect of our lives – a role we play, a position we hold – any reference that limits our flexibility and thus, our availability – to the new situation, circumstance or challenge at hand.

Hard spots are the one most difficult ones for us to change, and they are often the cause of many failed efforts along the way. They cause us to bring old ways to new experiences, that therefore end up producing the same unwanted outcomes. This is like pouring new wine into old wineskins.



Consulting With Your Deeper Self

We would essentially be asking of ourselves one question, and this one question only, in infinite variations, right at the edge of our chronic area of difficulty:

- “*Why did you say or do something just right then and there?*”

This question brings the focus of our attention to the moment right before things began to go wrong in our interaction, or in our approach, or in our exchange with the world around us.

We would, of course, initially have no idea why we offered whatever we said or did, *just then and there*. But we would begin to gradually grow our awareness at this edge, and begin to learn in a new way.

We might learn that often, whenever we intervened with the world, no matter the nature of the intervention, we were responding to some sort of anxiety within ourselves.

We would begin to see more deeply, and would begin to realize more clearly, that we are often driven by an underlying, chronic (and perhaps subtle) defensive anxiety.

We would then begin to further explore and examine more closely the central theme of this anxiety, and see how it tends to propel us into pre-mature action, or into over-functioning, or the opposite - into repetitive patterns of self-defeat, self-abandonment, or self-resignation.

- *An essential aspect of this consulting question is to help us recognize the nature of our own contribution to the struggles in our lives – be it ‘a dumb spot, a blind spot or a hard spot’.*

Eventually, we all will have to call into question the fundamental and reflexive ways we tend to position ourselves with others, and examine more closely how this is useful or *not* useful, and understand the underlying motivations for our most habitual relational postures.

Such realizations are often not pleasant, but they are essential. They can help us to gain healthy ego strength, and to feel more empowered, by showing ourselves that we can face our struggles, and we can stand in the face of their forcefulness.



Questions That Call Into Question

- *“What is it that we are avoiding? What is it that we are refusing to look at?”*

In any mythic journey of consequence, there are important moments for asking ourselves these types of questions. But we have to hold ourselves in enough regard in order to do so.

- In order to usefully and authentically call our own way of being into question, we must also have a reliable and steady respect for our own authentic struggle as human beings.
- As we move deeper and deeper into our journey, and as we take a more soulful approach to what lies ahead, it is our job not to confuse who we are with our symptoms and issues.
- Self-respect is what enables us to call ourselves into question.

'*Calling into question*' cannot be done from a place of judgment if it is to be useful, and to be effective in helping us to go forward with our lives, into the possibility of 'a future worth having'. It must be done in service of whatever is in the best interests of moving one's life forward.

Typically, the experience of calling one's self into question is often a quieter and more ongoing part of an inner examination. It is best done without emotional drama, and it is most effective done with genuine curiosity, and in the interest in learning. It is *not* about reinforcing any idealizations one has about themselves.

In addition to self-respect and self-regard, it requires us to give ourselves three fundamental things - *time, space and patience* – as we enter into territories that hold potential for meaningful and authentic transformation and change.



A patient in psychotherapy does not literally return to childhood to unlearn the self-destructive pattern he evolved in growing up, although he might engage in much regressive experimentation in order to undo that negative learning. What is essential is that he be able to relinquish his attachment to his pathway – be able to say to himself, “I have wasted X years in a painful and useless pursuit; this is sad, but I know have an opportunity to try another approach.”

This is hard for people to do. There is a strong temptation to rationalize our wrong turnings as a necessary part of development (“it taught me discipline”), or to deny that we participated fully in them (“that was before I became enlightened”).

Giving up these two evasions always leads to despair, but as Alexander Lowen points out, despair is the only cure for illusion. Without despair we cannot transfer our allegiance to reality – it is a kind of mourning period for our fantasies. Some people do not survive this despair, but no major change within a person can occur without it.

- Philip Slater, *Earthwalk*