

Cooperating with Grace during Major Life Passages

In all beginnings dwells a magic force
For guarding us and helping us to live.

Serenely let us move to distant places
And let no sentiments of home detain us.
The Cosmic Spirit seeks not to restrain us
But lifts us stage by stage to wider spaces.

— Herman Hesse, from *Master Ludi*

A few months ago, a reader who was swimming in the currents of my new book, *Nature and the Human Soul*, asked me to say a bit more about my belief that consciously cooperating with grace is essential in personal development. "Apart from simply being open and willing," he asked, "how does one consciously cooperate with grace?"

His question evoked the recognition that this point about grace could use more flesh on its bones.

First of all, by "grace" I'm referring to the Mystery, the deep imagination of the Universe, or what Hesse refers to as the "Cosmic Spirit" in his poem fragment above.

Second, *Nature and the Human Soul* introduces an ecocentric model of human development. It describes the eight stages of life we are born to progress through and the major life passages between them. In the Western world today, most people never mature beyond the third stage due to contemporary parenting approaches, educational methods and subjects, prevailing cultural values, worldviews, and stories, and the erosion of the skills and rituals of passages.

Within the realm of personal development, consciously cooperating with grace is particularly important during life's major passages, especially starting with what I call Confirmation - the passage from the Oasis (stage 3) to the Cocoon (stage 4). Confirmation is the moment we first consciously dive into the grand existential questions of life's meanings, when we initiate our quest for soul, for "the one life we can call our own" - in poet David Whyte's image.

The Mystery is the primary agent in shifting our psychospiritual center of gravity from one stage to the next - merely getting older cannot do this, nor can elders alone, or initiators, initiation ceremonies, or rites of passage. (See pages 64 - 67 of *Nature and the Human Soul* for an elaboration.) To cooperate with grace at these times is to say YES to a shift that we in no way control - saying YES despite the fact that such life passages are as terrifying as they are alluring.

I recall when I made my passage from the Cocoon to the Wellspring (stage 4 to 5), at age 30. I had been in the Cocoon through college, grad school, and beyond, from the late 60's through the 70's. Like many of my contemporaries, I explored the mysteries of nature and psyche (the developmental task of the Cocoon) through music, meditation, yoga, Sufism, dance, sex, wilderness adventures, high-risk sports, psychedelics, travel, hypnosis, dreams, and wilderness fasting. Through these explorations, I came to recognize that my true life was not about research psychology per se, or psychotherapy in and of itself, or about anything else I could tag with a cultural definition. Rather, it was about living into the world a certain mysterious image or story, one that was peculiar to me in this lifetime and that I was slowly coming to identify in its particulars. When this realization finally gelled, I found myself faced with a radical decision, a decision we all encounter upon reaching the threshold of a major life passage: Will I surrender to the lurching of the tectonic plates of my life, to the strong new current in my psyche's underground stream, to the wall of flame suddenly appearing between me and my destiny? My old way of belonging to the world - as scholar, student, and explorer with no felt obligation to be the change I sought in the world - was slipping away, like the shedding of a skin, the end of a story, or the passing of an era. Would I insist on carrying on with the familiar routine nonetheless? (This option is always in fact available, and "merely" requires a sustained, willful act of refusal that we humans are, sadly, quite capable of.) Or would I allow the world to masticate, digest, and transform "whatever solidness it was I called my life" (poet Anita Barrows' image)? Would I resist the Mystery - or cooperate?

Cooperating means saying YES to the dying without knowing what or who might be born on the other side - if anything or anybody - or the viability of any new, emerging conversation with the world. The new conversation is never anything we (our egos) can figure out, generate, or design. Cooperating, for me at age 30, meant abdicating my young, successful career as a university-based professor and researcher. It meant moving to

a geographical region I felt strongly called to but knew little about - the American Southwest - and finding a way to subsist there without depending on the skills in which I had trained for over a decade. It meant attending reverently to the signs of where to go, whom to meet, what to do that might enable me to live the mysterious image revealed to me. It meant proceeding without guidance from elders who, if I had known where to find them, might have instructed me in the ways of saying YES to grace.

Consequently, my passage into the Wellspring (stage 5) was rough, drawn-out, chaotic, uncertain, rambling, bumbling, and tentative - more so than it might have been if I had possessed a deeper understanding of how to cooperate with grace. (But let's pause here a moment to note that the struggle, pain, challenge, and chaos of a life passage are not themselves regrettable. Indeed these features are probably both unavoidable and invaluable to the potential transformation.)

What follows are some of the ways I've since learned we can say YES to grace in the midst of major life passages:

- Open as fully as we can to all our emotions, especially the grief that is inevitably evoked (because we're about to, or are in the midst of, leaving the "place" that has been our psychospiritual home for several years or more). We can say YES to experiencing those emotions fully. We can allow the emotions to make their own way through our bodies and our consciousness, without trying to control them, limit them, define them. We can let what poet Rainer Maria Rilke called our grief cry happen to us - and to the world.
- Grief rituals can help: intimate, small-group ceremonies that create a strong, safe-enough container to surrender to the experience of loss, allowing the grief to fully have its way with our bodies and psyches. Nature-based, group practices help us access and surrender to our grief and other emotions (and to our ancient human intuition of how much we are not in control in our lives, and how much greater are the forces of life, psyche, and cosmos).
- Acknowledge and bodily express our fear of the passage between life stages - through sound, movement, dance, poetry, art, or music. By acknowledging our fear, we summon our courage and other necessary resources, thereby enabling us to move closer to the threshold of the next stage.
- Cultivate our capacity to hear the voice of Mystery. (In *Nature and the Human Soul* as well as in my first book, *Soulcraft*, I describe over two

- dozen practices that help tune our awareness to Mystery and that cultivate a soulful relationship to life.)
- Design and enact ceremonies in which we vow to cooperate with the life passage, despite our fears.
 - Perform expressions of gratitude, ceremonial or otherwise, for the Mystery and its foundation-shaking agency at times of major life change.
 - Enact self-designed ceremonies of surrender to the Mystery and its desires.
 - On a regular basis, we might assume bodily postures - symbolically rich to us - of surrendering to grace as one might surrender to a lover. (We might imagine the world as our lover).
 - Perform expressions of gratitude for the gifts we can begin to feel, or at least imagine might be bestowed, from the shift.
 - Sacrifice symbols, possessions, and/or clothing emblematic of the previous stage. (Sacrifice can be done by way of fire, burial, bestowal to others, or surrender to water - in an environmentally valid manner.)
 - Co-create family or community ceremonies embodying the collective acquiescence to life passage, including both the positive and negative ramifications for the community itself.

These and other practices can help us surrender to Mystery when in the midst of major life passages, supporting us to traverse those terrifyingly ecstatic thresholds of death-rebirth on the way to Hesse's "wider spaces."