

ALSO BY JAMES HOLLIS, PH.D.

*Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*  
*Why Good People Do Bad Things*

"Must We Step Into  
Labyrinths?"

# WHAT MATTERS MOST

*Living a More Considered Life*

JAMES HOLLIS, PH.D.



*Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.*

*Death closes all; but something ere the end,*

*Some work of noble note, may yet be done,*

*Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.*

... Come, my friends,

*'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.\**

Yes, it is clear, disasters of one kind or another will finally overthrow our constructed worlds, but the journey is interesting, you have to admit. And so, called or not, this protean god Eros presides over all, and perversely calls us into life through the permutations of desire. We may forget Eros, but whether to trial, tragedy, or triumph, Eros does not forget us.

♦ ♦ ♦

Do you recall Angela in the first paragraph of this chapter? In our last analytic hour she said, "I sacrificed my marriage to love. I knew I did not love my husband, and he deserved someone who did. And I deserved someone whom I could love. My mother screamed at me for this decision, that it was against our religion." We know, however, that Angela enacted a difficult but religious sacrifice to a god whose name is Eros.

*Chapter Five*

## THAT WE STEP INTO LARGENESS

**J**ung's homey proverb that most of the time, "we walk in shoes too small for us," reminds us that the necessity of adaptation to the voices around us, the demands of our environment, require that we mostly live through adaptive psychologies rather than being guided by an instinctually driven center that wishes embodiment through us into the world. Additionally, his metaphor suggests that on most days we suffer a failure of nerve. Living "small" is easier than living large. Living "large" is not narcissistic inflation,\* but rather encountered in the daily summons to risk being who we are.

Recently I worked with a man who is seventy and retiring from his profession. What beckoned him—promising peace, stepping down from the pressures, offering freedom to pursue his interests—has proved to be rather problematic after all. It seems that in the decades of faithfully serving the expectations of his family, his church, his profession, he has essentially lost contact with his own needs, his own instinctual reality. Like so many people I meet, he does not feel an essential permission to be who he is, desire what he wants,

\* Tenyson, "Ulysses," ll. 50ff.

\* As American "philosopher" Pearl Bailey once said, "Thems what thinks they is, ain't."

and pursue what the soul wants. How incredible is this fact that a person can live a productive life, be approved of by family and culture, and have achieved every conscious goal, and still have no "permission."

Is not this issue pretty general among us? When we are young we are fully persuaded that we are in charge of our lives, and plunging toward our appointed destiny. We cannot afford to have too many doubts; therefore, forward always! Concomitantly, we grow identified with our roles—as partner, parent, and provider. Later, we may question why, if we have served those roles faithfully, they may not have reciprocally served us. Later, we may gain enough strength, or feel desperate enough, to question, to look back and to ask, "Just who am I apart from those roles?" "Who am I apart from my history and my assigned script?" Or we may ask, "Why am I here, really?" Then we are often disconcerted to realize that we do not know the answer to those deepest questions. Frequently, we do not know who we are, what we are doing, or in service to what. Only rarely do we realize that somewhere along the way we lost psychological "permission" to be who we really are.

The issue of "permission" tracks back to an elemental fact of our journey's origin. Our experience of the world is conditional. We are subject to the conditions fate presents to us—our genetics, our family of origins and its core dynamics, and our zeitgeist. All of these social settings embody messages, and demand a measure of compliance. The one message all of us received is this: "The world is big, and you are not. The world is powerful, and you are not. Now, spend the next few decades coping with that fact, buster."

We are necessarily obliged to adapt, even as we absorb

those messages as "ours," as the apparently irrefutable nature of the world, as the fundamental construct and conditions of reality. These necessary internalizations of messages, these adaptations to their demands, these scripts, mean that we progressively lose contact with our own instinctual guidance. Thus, for most of us, the issue of "permission" to be who we are—separate, distinct, individual sojourners with differing goals—remains denied within. No matter how much we have attained in the world, we are often stunned to realize that we may have lost contact totally with who we are, that is, whom ever the gods intended.

We find, perhaps to our dismay, that we are instead *who* or *what* we became in our adaptations. Recently, a well-known teen idol sheared her hair in public. Over and over, in radio interviews for a previous book, I was asked how a person could do such a "crazy" thing, when she was obviously living a privileged life, a life much covered by many others. (Why so many intelligent people would even be interested in *anything* she did is another question.) So, let us ask what the psyche is saying in this "craziness."

Surely she is testifying to the horror of being the "project" of so many projections, which celebrity demands.\* Surely she is unwittingly "confessing" to herself and to the world that some resistant part of her realizes that she is not who she is construed by others to be, that she is so encapsulated by celebrity that she now lacks vital linkage to herself. Perhaps this early meltdown, this early recognition of inter-

\* When, in *No Exit*, Jean-Paul Sartre exclaims that "Hell is other people," he elsewhere explains that one's humanity is often constricted and delimited by being "the project" of other people's projections. T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock" similarly complains of being fixated by other people's opinions like an insect upon a wall.

nal discrepancy will provide her with the ample space and time to walk away from stardom and reclaim the girl she was, and become the woman she can be. It is much more likely that the seduction of "success," and the self-interest of an entourage who suck off of her, will pull her back into an identification with her celebrity. What Jung called "the regressive restoration of the persona" will likely oblige her psyche to pathologize in ever more compelling rebellions. Her dilemma is simply a caricature of the dilemma we all have encountered, an identification with our adaptations, a confusion of the Self with our persona. Sooner or later, a great distress will rise from our soul to trouble us, perplex us, dismay us, but which, if we can possibly query it to find what it wants from us, will prove to be our best friend.

While so many have laughed at her act, ridiculed her, or sought some pathological category in which to place her,\* it may well be that her psyche has mobilized to save her from her glass-bubble existence. Ask yourself, why might *you* voluntarily cut off your hair, and in public no less? And ask yourself, what might it mean if you did? Is it to garner more publicity? She already has too much. Is it a sign of "mental breakdown"? Or is such self-destructive behavior her psyche's way of buying out of the Devil's bargain?

Many teenage girls would trade their lives in a heartbeat for the life of a celebrity. They wish, after all, to be seen, to feel special, to be valued by others. They wish to be the eyesore of the attentiveness of others, even though they

\* By judgmental pathologizing, one may thereby distance oneself from a recognition of one's own madness. As Dostoyevsky once observed in *A Writer's Diary*, "Is it not by locking up one's neighbor that one convinces oneself of one's own good sense?"

already resent the hovering scrutiny of their parents and their teachers. How would they then feel, after the original rush of excitement, the high of adulation, to be watched constantly, especially by those looking for any screw-up? How would they then feel if they knew that they were locked in that role, and guaranteed no success, privacy, or ability to change their minds? They would grow to hate their roles, their celebrity, although they might be loathe to let go of its perks. Then their psyches would have to take over where consciousness faltered. They would suffer anxiety attacks, depressions; they would medicate their dis-ease with booze and pills; they would escalate the razzmatazz values of their plastic world further to get some ever larger buzz. And so the psyche will have to counter-escalate in return. Just think of the obvious examples—Marilyn, Elvis, Anna Nicole, and hosts of others—to see the burnout, the self-destruction, the breakdowns of the false self. Psyche knows, and will not forever tolerate our abuse of it.

Underneath this child's symbolic act is a profound desire for an authentic life. To shear her womanly pride, her hair, to shed her corona, is to say to all of us that she can no longer bear this constructive definition of her soul, no longer prop up this constructed self, and must radically deconstruct it in order to break free. Still, the day I write these sentences she has checked herself in and out of the second, perhaps third, rehab, having stayed in each for less than one day.

She is understandably clinging to the false self, as we all have, and do, seduced still by its glitter; so, psyche must now surely escalate further, and meet her again in some other garden. One is reminded of the Iranian parable of the man who meets Death while working in his master's vineyard. He

asks his master for the loan of a fast horse to flee to Samara.

The wish is granted. Later, while walking the fields, the master happens upon Death and expresses his dismay that His Spectral Eminence had frightened his servant. To this, Death replies, "I did not mean to frighten him. I only expressed my astonishment at finding him still here when we have an appointment later tonight in Samara." So, psyche waits for us, and meets us somewhere else. Even if we try to forget that appointment, psyche will not.

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Still another way in which we refuse to step into largeness is by way of holding on to the past, especially the limiting past. We hold on to grudges, slights, injuries, past wounding and allow them to dominate our present. I once saw a woman for one hour, if that long. She came to complain that her two married, adult sons never came around, never honored her holidays or her anniversaries. She vehemently denigrated them and her former husband—their father—blamed their wives for this turn of events, and in general whined about her life. It was not hard to see why they would not want to visit. When, delicately, I suggested as much to her, that she might consider acting in a more accepting, less punitive way with them, she launched into an attack on me as well. Then she got up and left . . . to my relief.

Similarly, when we find people grinding away decades after their bitter divorce, or when they are continuously complaining that no one is taking care of them, then we realize that such a person has not stepped into a larger life. They have, consciously or unconsciously, presumed that someone

was going to take care of them, make sense of life for them, rescue them from the ambiguities and sufferings of ordinary life, and, in general, shield them from having to grow up. How many move back into their adult children's neighborhood—in the name of parental devotion, of course—but covertly expect the child to take care of their emotional needs now? Because they have not accepted the challenge of their own life, they refuse to grow up, refuse to step into larger shoes. They will likely die this way, unloved and unloving, because their outraged narcissism refuses to look inward and accept responsibility for what they find there. As children, we have a right to look to others to take care of us, protect us, nurture us, show us the way. Sometimes we get that; sometimes we do not. Either way, we all have to grow up, become wholly responsible for our lives, relinquish the search for the good parent in others, and stop whining.

Members of a civic organization I know once lived in mutual dependency and self-congratulatory fusion. When their organization took steps to modernize, they berated the board for no longer providing "community." But their community was the collusion of the dependent, and few if any grew, were empowered, or enlarged beyond their neediness. This was quite satisfactory to them for decades. It was much easier to blame others, to host pity parties, and to stay struck. No one—the person, their partners, their children, their society—were served by this dependency, this neediness, or this refusal to grow up.

Still, we must admit that there is a part of each of us that is needy, frightened, intimidated, and dependent. Thinking that such an archaic, and therefore autonomous, part is not there and waiting to enlist others in its demands, is simply

naive and unconscious. Trying to not let that part dominate our life is a perpetual challenge, but it remains our chief contribution to others to lift this task off of them and take it on for ourselves.

This neediness sabotages our relationships, shows up in simplistic theologies and politics, and infantilizes our culture. I live near two of the American mega-churches, and weekly I see the thousands trudging into sanctuaries to hear their guru speak. I wonder if any that day will have an enlarging experience. I wonder if any will be called to grow in the face of their fears—make that our common fears—or reclaim personal authority, spiritual maturity, when it might result in estrangement and loneliness. I wonder if any will be summoned to a truly larger life, or will they consign themselves to someone else telling them what to think, how to live, and what to value. When their presumptive contract with life betrays them, which is to say, asks something really large from them, will they then blame “God,” or castigate themselves for the weakness of their applied will? Too often the fundamentalist factions of our culture either terrify people into compliance—and I will never forgive them for that spiritual violence—or seduce people into the ratification of their complexes by validating the easy materialism and narcissism in which we all swim.

A culture driven by the trivial has seldom matured sufficiently to look at itself. How can we expect to find and elect leaders who will in fact provide vision, summon us to the realistic costs of growth and interaction in the world community, and effectively deal with the reality that all important issues have nuances and ambiguities? Why do we not have leadership that says to us, respectfully and candidly,

that the problems we face, at home and abroad, are complex, that no choice is without its costs, and that patience, humility, dialogue, and a larger grasp of complexity will be required of all of us? Are we so immature that we need someone to protect us from ourselves, to lie to us, to collude with our lack of intellectual discipline, our difficulty in handling complexity, our immaturity? Why do we not have more theologians, or preachers, who confirm that life involves suffering, and that our deepest questions will never fully be answered? Why do we have psychologists in the media who conventionally fail to verify the contradictions with which we all daily live, the necessary suffering that is a by-product of real life, rather than suggest that three easy steps will bring us happiness and material affluence? Until we grow up and step into the large challenge of living our journey as individuals and as a society, we will get the demagogic leaders and the infantilizing culture we deserve. These external artifacts reflect what we have not addressed within.

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All of us have to ask this simple but piercing question of our relationships, our affiliations, our professions, our politics, and our theology: “Does this path, this choice, make me larger or smaller?” Usually we know the answer immediately because we always intuitively know, and yet are afraid of what we know, and even more afraid of what it may ask of us. If we do not sincerely know, then we need to continue asking the question until it reveals itself to us, as it inevitably will. Then the real task begins. (Jung once said that every therapist should ask the question, “What task is this person’s

neurosis helping him or her avoid?") We recognize in those moments of revelation what life is asking us to do, where we need to grow up. And what then are we going to do about it? Are we going to deny, repress, blame others, shuffle about a bit, dance some dilatory doo-dah until we die, or finally grow up, step into largeness, become an adult?

Allied with this intimidation by the large is a phenomenon I have seen that, at the outset, seems improbable. Time and time again I encounter people who have achieved notable work—raised their families, supported themselves, contributed to the world—yet who do not inwardly feel legitimate, or consider themselves in the ranks of "real" persons who are entitled to truly feel what they feel, desire what they desire, pursue what summons them. While all of us are creatures of adaptation, these folks in particular early on "read" their environment for messages about who they are, what they are to do and not do, and what they are to value. Our provisional selves, our counterfeit identities, are essentially anxiety-management systems. These systems have so much power, so much autonomy, are so deeply buried in our psyches that we seldom know their presence, understand the delegated authority they carry, and the extent to which they govern our lives. Only when we pay attention to our symptoms, our patterns, our painful encounters with ourselves may we begin to discern these alien, implanted "ideas" to which our history has so long been in service. Only when we look at the patterns of our personal history do we see the autonomy granted to those invisible systems, complexes, that create the recurrent motifs, outcomes, and hierarchies of values that constitute our outer, visible histories.

Daily I sit with individuals, usually in their fifties or six-

ties, who have acquired enough emotional maturity, enough history upon which to reflect, and enough ego strength to bear unpleasant truths. One man discovered that his life of outer, driven accomplishment had been, covertly, to prove to his mother that *her* life was worth something. A woman who suffered profound emotional neglect lived a life of self-sabotage because she, having never been mirrored by her parents, could never see the good soul she was. When she looked in her own mirror, no one stared back. Accordingly, her life partners all proved narcissists, whom she chose, precisely, albeit unconsciously, because they would reconfirm this archaic portrait of herself. Another woman was chronically depressed. Fate had chosen to bring a sibling with cerebral palsy into her family. Watching her little brother with such a catastrophic handicap, such legitimate need, watching her parents understandably devoting their lives to his care, she acquired the message that she was not entitled to ask anything for herself. This was not an inaccurate reading of the family dynamics, but as a plan for her subsequent, adult life, it proved reductive, repetitive, and depression-generating.

Additionally, a significant percentage of my practice over the last twenty years has been with other therapists as clients,\* and with therapist groups as a speaker, from which, inevitably, the theme of "the wounded healer" emerges. The preponderant number of people in the care-giving professions—nurses,

\* As one psychologist said to me in our first hour, "We all know that when it comes time to do our own work, we go to a psychodynamic therapist." He was a trained behaviorist who also partnered with a psychiatrist, and both were into a great deal of pharmacology. I always wondered what would happen if the public knew what professional therapists know, that the real work of growth and healing is time consuming, and requires a depth of exploration not provided by most therapeutic modalities, not to mention the "managed care" fantasy contrived to benefit insurance companies.

social workers, clergy, therapists—come from troubled families of origin. As children they learned to subordinate their needs, to hone, bevel, truncate their spontaneous personalities in service to stabilizing their family dynamics, or to be enlisted as scapegoats for unresolved adult issues, and all ardently sought to heal their parents in whatever way possible. This impossible but compelling task is so deeply imprinted in their lives that as adults they remain identified with this role. While many *can* do very good work because of their insights and empathy, almost all continue to suffer intrapsychic turbulence as their own troubled family dynamics are re-created through their clients.

Their family of origin could not be healed, for that was beyond the powers of the child; and now the world cannot be healed, for another and another wounded soul is lined up just after the one they just treated. Thus, symbiotically, they are wed to this endless task, and are hourly subjected to stress that activates their own archaic field of anxieties, depressions, and yet compulsive commitments. When they seek to leave this agitated environment, this task, they are afflicted with crippling "guilt." Their guilt is not real guilt, for they are doing nothing wrong when they seek to take care of themselves, to save the only person they can save; it is rather an anxiety that is activated by stepping out from under their archaic assignment. (My rough guess is that perhaps 50 percent of professional caregivers should be in the field, and 50 percent should not. This latter group will inevitably bring harm to *someone*—if not the client, parishioner, patient, then themselves—when their own archaic wounds are activated, as they are daily. And from outside, one cannot tell to which half each person belongs.)

This special category of professional caregivers who typically do not have permission to have their own lives, with an agenda driven by the soul rather than the adaptations obliged by fate, is definitive and identifiable. But it is generally true that most of us have neither permission nor feelings of authenticity. Coming from a working-class family, where work was synonymous with survival, worth, and integrity, I have always found it difficult not to work. This family ethic was reinforced by early religious training that emphasized the primacy of "good works" as a spiritual path. Even on vacation I find it difficult, as Walt Whitman put it, to invite the soul to loaf. I have always needed to be doing something to keep the wolf from the door, or to be doing something constructive or contributive to the world. Being "lazy" was the worst thing I could imagine. The legacy of our Puritan past, with its implicit equation of work with the blessings of divinity, are enmeshed with the idea of productivity as a gender value and as a measure of psychological worth. The problem with this formula, however, is that the judgment of "lazy" is prejudicial and reductive. Doing what the soul wants rather than what the complexes want is not being lazy. It is serving a larger agenda than our archaic biographies permit. So, pun intended, I am still "working" on this issue. At least I know where I need to work.

As we get to this point in our life we see that stepping into a larger life is intimidating because it requires that we risk being who we really are, that is, what wants to come to the world through us, rather than serving our ego comforts or whatever instructions came our way. We cannot expect someone else to give us permission. The parent complexes, or the culture complexes, are embedded in history, and never



will stop saying what they always said. (They possess a stunted imagination.) So, it is up to us at this later point, when we have served those voices so long, to realize that our own psyches have a unique point of view, that each of us is different, and are bound for different destinies. Even siblings are bound for separate journeys, and all of us, at the end of our life, will have to answer as to what we did with our summons.

Stepping into largeness will require that we discern our personal authority—rather than the authority of others or the authority of our internalized admonitions—and live this inner authority with risk and boldness. A colleague has been leading a women's group in her church and over and over she has heard, "And what is it we believe on this matter?" Is it not sad that people of a certain age have not thought for themselves on issues of such importance to them and need to ask, "What is it we believe?" Do they ask advertisers, "What is it I should buy?" Perhaps they do.

Fear is the enemy—most of all, fear of largeness. The largeness of our own soul is most intimidating, which is why we defer so often to the instructions of others. When I see those hoards trooping into auditoriums and houses of worship to be told by coiffed gurus with limousines, even helicopters, what their values should be, and how they are to live their lives, I do not consider this "religion." I do not see a summons to the large risk of the soul or an enlarging encounter with mystery. I do not see such banalities honoring the gods and their terrible powers. I see it as an infantilizing repetition of the obligation of childhood to serve voices of outer authority, and it reinforces the recrudescence message that one's well-being derives from obeying the powerful

Other. The "Other" that also lies within us, the voice of our soul, seems, then, so impossibly far away.

Friedrich Nietzsche asserted in one of his oxymoronic aphorisms that we are an abyss, *and* we are the tightrope across the abyss. Tangentially, Martin Heidegger further observed that "the abyss is the openness of Being." When we bring these prophetic and provocative ideas together, we see that we are afraid of the largeness, the immense possibilities within ourselves. We all learned to run from the idea that the gods brought us here to carry out their will, whatever it may be, rather than serve the troubled timidity of our mutually neurotic communities. Yet, when we spin out our journey from our own deepest places, we find a continuity of intention, a steady feeling of support that allows us to cross over the abyss of our existential angst. Then we discover that what we feared most was our own terrible and insistent freedom.

Recently I wrote the following e-mail to an analyst who has gone through a difficult marital decision, experienced the abandonment of her religious community, the misunderstanding of her friends, and, despairing, is feeling horribly alone.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

*This is the famous "dark night of the soul" described by St. John of the Cross centuries ago. Going through it is one requirement of an election in which suffering is the price of the ticket to rebirth. The collapse of the "false self" is painful indeed, but it is also how the Self begins to emerge from underneath all the attitudes and adaptations required in the past. This death/rebirth, and this difficult "in-between," is how you get yourself*

*back again, how you begin to bring who you are, really are, into this world. The former is in service to fear management, understandably; the latter is in service to Divinity.*

*You are a loving and lovable human being, and a great soul. Please try not to view your life through the caboose window of this rapidly moving train. You need to walk forward, enter the engine room, look out the window, and steer the thing ahead. The past is past, and is trailing behind us. The future, with new friends, relationships, and challenges, is rushing toward you, asking that you be ready for it. It will ask much of all of us, and we are summoned to be willing participants in the making of this future.*

Choosing to risk one's own authority, to step into this fearful place, to realize through experience that one will be supported by something deep within each of us, is what brings us home to ourselves. After all, fear of largeness begins by fearing the resident largeness that is our own souls. If we can abide that fear of our ourselves, we will not be afraid of others. When I once expressed some apprehension before beginning an internship in a locked ward of a psychiatric hospital, my Zürich analyst said to me with Zen-like clarity, "When you have faced your own demons, the demons of others will not frighten you." I found that what he said was true. Within a few weeks there I was asked to do a workshop for the psychiatric staff. I organized the half day around the theme: "How are you different from your patients here?" I found that most of the staff said, in some version, "Well, they are crazy and I am not." I quickly learned that one of the ways that folks there defended themselves against the depth, complex-

ity, and yes, craziness in themselves, was to split it off and deposit craziness only in the other. Facing our own abyss opens us to acceptance of the magnitude of the other as well, whether found in relationship, nature, or in the mysterious movement of the gods themselves.

Every day that we can call out those demons of fear and reductionism and step into the large journey intended by the soul, we actually serve the world better by bringing to it the unique gift that each of us represents. How could denying our gift to the world ever really serve it? Stepping into our largeness is not narcissism—it ultimately proves our greatest contribution to others. All it requires is the resolve to stand humbly but responsibly before our own largeness, and then to step into it.