The Odysseus Myth, Transitions, William Bridges - extract (1979 / 2019)

Homecoming' and The Odysseus Myth, 'Transitions', William Bridges (1979)

There exists a great myth that portrays the shift from life's morning to its afternoon, the change from two-leggedness to three. That's the myth of Odysseus, the Greek hero of the Trojan War. He is older than many of the other warriors, a middle-aged married man and the father of a nearly grown son back on the island of Ithaca. On a literal level, the tale that bears his name tells about the mysterious setbacks that causes the three-week homeward voyage to become a 10 year journey, but on a deeper level, it tells about another kind of journey. This is no simple trip, but rather the journey of personal transformation that becomes possible after you've done the world's business for long enough. Because The Odyssey tells so memorably about this homing process, it is worth reviewing.

The story begins with difficulties. As Odysseus explains to anyone who will listen, the problems involve a terrible and unexpected defeat right after the enormous victory at Troy. Odysseus and twelve shiploads of men had put ashore at the village of Ismaros. They wanted just a little more loot and some fine wine for the trip home. To these brave victors from the plains of Troy, Ismaros looked like a pushover. But something happened. The soldiers took too long and drank too much; a neighbouring tribe rode out of the hills and caught them unawares, and these great warriors were sent limping back to their ships, beaten and wounded.

What had happened? What had gone wrong? This was the sort of thing that Odysseus had become famous for doing well - but now the strategy had failed. The incident at Ismaros sets the tone for The Odyssey: throughout the tale Odysseus discovers in one way and then another that ***he has crossed some mysterious line in his life*** and that everything that once worked for him now works against him. Like most of us, Odysseus is a slow learner - or unlearner, for it turns out that his most difficult tasks are those of unlearning much that brought him to life's middle years and to the height of his renown.

Consider Odysseus's attempt to sail safely between Scylla and Charybdis, the monster in the Whirlpool that have come to stand in the western imagination for the impossible choices in life. The sorceress Circe explains to him that he can negotiate the narrows only if he does not resist the dangers there.

The Odysseus Myth, (Cont)

Odysseus demurs, announcing that he, Odysseus, I will never turn away from combat. “You rash man,” she replies. “Do the works of war concern you still, and toil? Will you not yield to the immortal gods?” But when he arrives at the narrow place in the journey, he “forgot the hard injunction of Circe, when she ordered me in no way to arm myself. I put on my famous armour, took two long spears in my hands, and went up on the deck of the ship at the prow.” The little man standing on the deck of a fragile vessel, playing the hero and the time for heroism had passed!

It is significant that, here, as elsewhere in the epic, Odysseus’s help and insights come from women. In The Iliad, of course, everything had been male, but in The Odyssey it is to women's wisdom that our hero must turn to find the way. It is no accident, of course, that Odysseus’s journey home is toward his feminine counterpart, Penelope. In symbolic terms, he is coming home to his own feminine side.

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The point is that in life’s second-half task of “homecoming,” your encounters with masculine or feminine powers are symbolic in a way that is different from life's first half. Carl Jung emphasised the same point:

We might compare masculinity and femininity to a particular store of substances of which, in the first half of life, unequal use is made. A man consumes his large supply of masculine substance and has left over only the smaller amount of feminine substance, which he must now put to use. It is the other way round with a woman; she allows her unused supply of masculinity to become active.”

Odysseus literally goes through hell on his way home - as most of us do. His visit is made in a different spirit from those underworld journeys taken by younger mythic heroes. ***His is not an exploit or a test of his manhood, for he journeys into hell humbly and because it is a necessary part of his homecoming.*** We all go through hell to learn what we need to learn to complete our life’s journey.

By the time of his hell visit, Odysseus has lost much of his brittle pride. His homeward journey has been marked by a process of constant attrition. He started with twelve ships, then six were destroyed, and later three more.

The Odysseus Myth, (Cont)

Finally, he is down to one, manned by the few men who are left with him. And at the end he is alone, his last boat sucked down and ripped apart in the great whirlpool of Charybdis. Metaphorically, he is stripped of the various supports on which he had earlier relied. ***As grievous as that loss is, it also leaves him able to know himself in a new sense.***

In suffering this attrition, Odysseus discovers a kind of courage that is different from the cunning and the aggressiveness of the battlefield. That courage is manifested when his boat is caught in the whirlpool. Just as it is being sucked down to destruction, he reaches up and grabs the branch of a fig tree that hangs over the water. With a new kind of bravery, he holds on, not knowing whether it will really matter, until suddenly the whirlpool regurgitates all that is left of his ship: the naked keel and the bare mast. Letting go at last of his painful hold, Odysseus drops across the keel and paddles with his hands out to sea. This king and hero, who began with a fleet of ships, leaves the scene like a child astride a log.

This same stripping down process characterises Odysseus's earlier encounter with the giant Polyphemus, who returns unexpectedly to find Odysseus and his men exploring the cave where he lives. Blocking the entrance with immense boulders, Polyphemus traps the warriors and begins eating them, two at a meal. Nevertheless, through ingenuity, Odysseus and his remaining troops soon manage to get free.

When Polyphemus discovers their escape, he calls to his neighbouring giants for help, shouting that "Oudeis" has escaped. Oudeis, which is what Odysseus had called himself when he met the giant, is the Greek word for "nobody." So when Polyphemus shouts that nobody has injured him and that nobody is escaping, the other giants simply shake their heads and wonder what is wrong with their friend.

In the world of Greek heroes, Odysseus has just done a unique thing: ***he has given up his identity.*** Identities meant fame, and fame meant power. Great heroes sometimes won combats simply by scaring off their opponents."I am Heracles... Achilles... the great Theseus." To say, "I am Nobody," and to find in that new non-identity a source of power is significant, and it marks a stage of development going beyond the reliance on roles and the "standing-on-my-own-two-feet" stance that is natural to life's midday.

The Odysseus Myth, (Cont)

It is also no accident that the giant who opposes Odysseus in this initiatory struggle carries the name Polyphemus, meaning “famous” in Greek.). For Odysseus has reached the point in his development where he must begin to turn back on himself those forces he has been directing outward at the world. ***It is the point at which the hero must stop slaying dragons and begin slaying the dragon slayer.***

Throughout Odysseus’s long journey home, he is confronted by one distraction after another, each of which has its meaning in the context of life’s second half. There is the song of the Sirens, which symbolises the self-destruction lurking beneath the beguiling surface of all that calls upon us to turn aside. There is the lotus fruit, which stands for all that makes us forget the journey itself and our real destination. There is Calypso’s promise: “Stay with me and you need never grow old.” That fantasy – that we can stop the ongoing process of life transitions – represents the most tempting and illusory promise of all. In spite of lapses, Odysseus somehow struggles past each blandishment as he struggled through the batterings.

Odysseus has not overcome all the difficulties when he finally lands in Ithica. Things are a mess at home. The rival princes are overrunning his palace, living off his riches, and usurping his rightful place. At the mythic level, these interlopers correspond to all the inner confusions and distractions that block our inner homecomings – all those usurpers that move in to run things whenever our awareness absents itself. ***Just as we are about to reclaim the inner kingdom of selfhood***, home at last form the long journey, we discover not only that there is no welcoming committee on the dock to meet us but that we must fight our way into our own rightful place. So in the end, the homeward journey of life’s second half demands three things:

- First, that we unlearn the style of mastering the world that we used to take us through the first half of life;
- Second, that we resist our own longings to abandon the developmental journey and refuse the invitations to stay forever at some attractive stopping place;
- And third, that we recognise that it will take real effort to regain the inner “home.”

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Questions to consider:

1. What might be thought of as my famous armour?
2. How might life be inviting me to know myself in a new way?
3. Do I find the lenses of masculine and feminine useful? If so, how? If not, why not?