

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage
Unitarian Universalist
Theology and Spirituality

Copyright © 1991 Thomas W. Christopher, 463 Valley Dr. #304, Naperville IL 60563



Spirituality As Growth

Readers with a naturalistic bent may question what "spirituality" is all about. There are naturalistic explanations for spirituality. One is that spirituality deals with psychological growth. Here is a version of the "growth" theory, based loosely on Robert Kegan's *The Evolving Self*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1982:

Preteens have figured out that they have needs and that other people have needs and that life involves getting your needs met. Having to satisfy their long term needs helps keep their impulses in control (which is a great improvement over younger children). But preteens do have a lot of trouble knowing how other people are going to react to things.

Teens suddenly can feel other people's feelings within themselves. They no longer have so much trouble guessing other people's reactions. But they themselves have changed. Now

You may copy material from this viewsletter, but not for direct commercial advantage, in one of two ways: (1) You may copy the viewsletter in its entirety. (2) You may copy only text (but not the art) if you include the copyright notice and state it is "used by permission."

their relationships are the most important thing in their lives. They can control their needs by the requirements of mutuality, but they now have trouble with being pulled in contradictory directions, or in unwise directions, by their friends.

Young adults typically find a way to control their relationships by adhering to higher principles, to an ideology, or to an institution. They have a self that is independent of their relationships, but they have difficulty limiting the demands of the institution or the ideology. Now the sacrifice is not for friends, but for higher principles, but sacrifice it may nonetheless be.

There is a higher stage still, where world views may be compared and judged, where there is no longer just one set of principles, and where contradictions may be kept in mind together. The self now stands apart from the needs, relationships, and ideologies in which it was earlier embedded.

Every stage brings new abilities which cure the problems of the previous stage, but every stage is also a different organization of the personality. Every stage is a different person.

The problem is that in going from one stage to the next, the old organization of the personality must be replaced. This is not comfortable, not easy, and not pretty. The subjective experience may symbolically be described as death and rebirth, because the old personality loses its grip before

the new one takes over.

Much of spirituality deals with growth, with change, with transformation, with the transition between stages. It deals with the unknown because it deals with the very structure of the personality - not with the contents of the mind, but the way the contents are used. Or worse, it deals with the way the personality will someday be organized but isn't yet. Growth requires we break away from our conscious egos. They represent the old balance, the old self, which must make way for the new.

The Labors of Theseus, part

(We continue our view of the myths of Theseus as a boy's growing up.)

On the road to Athens, the first outlaw Theseus met was Periphetes, who would bludgeon travelers to death with a great bronze club. Theseus side-stepped the blow, wrested away the club, and dispatched Periphetes with it.

The blows of Life can beat us down. The first thing the boy must learn is to side-step the blows and not let life defeat him.

The second outlaw he encountered was Sinis, who would force travelers to help him bend pine trees to the ground. He would then force the

Theseus, from page 1

traveler to sit on the top of a tree and send him flying, or would tie the traveler to two trees and let them tear him apart. Theseus tied Sinis to the two trees and released them. Sinis had a daughter, Perigune, whom he had treated more as a slave. Theseus gently called her from the bushes where she had hidden, and she gave herself to him freely.

It is not by accident that the Pine Bender is associated with sex. Sex involves great tension and is the thing most likely to send the boy flying off or tear him apart. The boy must learn to call out the gentleness that is overshadowed by that tension.

The next outlaw he met was Sciron, who sat on a ledge where the pathway narrowed. Sciron would force travelers to wash his feet, and when they finished, he would kick them off the ledge into the sea below. When Theseus felt Sciron's muscles tense, he used his leverage so Sciron kick took Sciron himself over the cliff.

There are people and causes (even "good" causes) that use us and then, when they don't need us any more, cast us aside. The boy must learn not to be used and thrown away.

There is a significance in the sequence of dangers Theseus faces. They correspond, in Maslow's hierarchy of motivations, to the ascending sequence of safety orientation, love, affection, and belonging orientation, and esteem and self-esteem orientation. Moreover, the preteen boy learns to avoid the blows of life; the teenager finds love, affection, and belonging most important; the young man dedicates himself to a cause or institution. The sequence of outlaws corresponds to the stages of development a boy goes through on the way to young adulthood.

Next issue, Theseus meets the last two outlaws.

For Reflection

Tantalus was a close friend of Zeus and even dined with the gods. He stole nectar and ambrosia from Olympus to share with mortal friends. Worse, he invited the Olympians to a banquet and, finding himself short of food, had his son Pelops cut up and added to the stew. The gods knew, recoiling in horror, and punished Tantalus by suspending him from the bough of a fruit tree over a lake. When he reaches for fruit, the wind blows the bough beyond his grasp; when he bends to drink, the water slips away.

View this as a story of spiritual growth gone bad. What went wrong? Why is the punishment the logical consequence? Hints: (1) Let all eating refer to spiritual nourishment. (2) The child is a symbol of the future, of newness, of change, of creativity, of successful transformation.

Spiritual Intensive Q&A

Here are some ideas on spiritual intensives taken in part from a study by Jone Johnson:

Q: How many members should be in an intensive?

A: Ten to twelve seems about right. Over 14 becomes unwieldy. Below seven lacks sufficient diversity.

Q: What should the leadership be like?

A: Spiritual intensives are lay led. It is best to have a core of four leaders

so three will be at any meeting; they can share the responsibility of keeping the process running smoothly without appearing heavy handed. Participation in the meetings needs to be radically democratic; everyone contributes.

Q: How long do spiritual intensives last?

A: Either the group doesn't jell and so doesn't last past a few meetings, or it lasts maybe three years until too many of its core group have moved on.

Q: How is membership determined?

A: The majority of spiritual intensives start out with open membership and then soon close. After a couple of years they then reopen membership to replace those who have dropped out and to add the excitement of new blood. Less frequently they start out with membership by invitation.

Q: Why have closed membership at all?

A: Because confidentiality and trust are essential to group functioning. As new people arrive, members must evaluate whether they can trust them. Such a disruption on a continuing basis would prevent group functioning.

Q: Aren't spiritual intensives just therapy groups?

A: No, they are not, and they must never become therapy groups. Spiritual intensives are lay led, and a therapy group requires professional leadership.

