



Drinking the Dragon: Stories of The Dark Nights of Soul

by

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Excerpt from Chapter One: AT THE GATES: Entering the Dark Night of Soul

The cure for pain is in the pain. Good and bad are mixed. If you don't have both, you don't belong with us.

Jalal Al-Din Rumi, "There's Nothing Ahead"

Every part of the body has a story to tell.

Anna Halprin

Symptoms as Signs

If the call to greater consciousness through the dark night is steadily denied, or simply, if the Soul-plan of the individual requires it, the urge to soul growth may occur through neurosis, physical illness, or addiction. Then the call is no longer a vague feeling of discomfort or restlessness but a symptom. In this sense, "A terrifying symptom is usually your greatest dream trying to come true."¹ Many begin to finally heed this call when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the fear of change.

From out the depths of his addiction to alcohol, Bill Wilson underwent deeply transformational processes, which led him to co-found *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the twelve-step program that reports 2,000,000 recovered alcoholics worldwide. Taylor Hay, a dedicated fitness adherent and expert, became disabled by a lifetime of strenuous exercise. During his lonely reflective efforts to heal, he developed *Synergetics*, a system of exercise practiced today by thousands. Diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder as a child, the psycho-biologist Joan Borysenko believes that she was guided to a dramatic and sudden cure by the intervention of her Higher Self. Today she writes books and presents numerous seminars on the interrelationships of mind, body, and spirit.

Caroline Myss, author and medical intuitive, uses the Hindu chakras, the Christian sacraments, and the Kabbalah's Tree of Life as models to demonstrate that every illness corresponds to a particular pattern of emotional and psychological stresses, attitudes and beliefs. Carolyn's work instructs that "our biography becomes our biology," and that our spirit is very much a part of our daily lives, interwoven into every emotion, thought, and action. Carolyn teaches people how to understand the connection between disease, healing and personal power. At times she advises persons "to retreat for

¹ Arnold Mindell. "The Body is Dreaming," *Dreams are Wiser Than Men*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1987, p. 177.

a while, to pull their spirits back” and to realign themselves to their true natures. In this sense, Carolyn agrees with Jung, who states, “Only that which is truly yourself can heal.”

Carolyn set out to be a newspaper reporter, but when this dream failed to materialize, she descended into a “poisonous, gluey depression,”² or dark night. In her despair, she began a routine of sleeping late and then “sitting on the floor of her office staring at half-written magazine articles.” While half-asleep one morning, Carolyn had the overwhelming impression of remembering her current life as if she had died. When fully awake, she reacted to the fact that she was still alive with vomiting and exhausted disappointment. Later, while working both as a publisher and a medical intuitive, Carolyn had an accident during which she nearly bled to death. Leaving her body, she began to drift away from earth when she suddenly had an image of a collaborator in her medical intuitive work, who prompted her to remember the unfinished work she would leave behind if she chose to die. When she returned to her physical body, Carolyn made the decision to leave publishing to become a full-time medical intuitive. Both experiences compelled Carolyn to commit to her life mission of helping people understand the emotional, psychological, and spiritual energy that lie at the root of their illness or life crisis.

After half a century in psychiatric practice, I know without a doubt that the source of addiction is spiritual deficiency. Irrespective of whether we are religious or atheist, all human beings are spiritual by nature and spirituality is the cornerstone of our recovery.

Abraham Twerski

Addiction

Like Bill Wilson, Heather King underwent the “deep ego collapse”³ sometimes faced by addicts who descend to The Abyss, the deepest nadir of the dark night. Often it is at the deepest moment of despair that the divinity in the darkness reveals itself, that the “divine spark” of illumination shines out of the night. Joseph Campbell wrote:

One thing that comes out in myths...is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.⁴

Today a writer, lawyer, and National Public Radio commentator, Heather spent nearly two decades in an ever-downward spiral, eking out a dim existence in varied states of drunkenness and self-hatred. Living in cockroach-infested apartments, engaging in promiscuous sex, waitressing at grubby restaurants, becoming a regular at a wet-brain drunks’ bar at the start of each day, Heather comments in her book, *Parched*, that during this time, “My own life was a secret to me.”⁵ She acknowledged that it was largely the fear of taking a “good, hard look at herself” that kept her lost in an alcoholic fog. Despite the sub-standard and shoddy state of her surroundings and her semi-anesthetized condition, Heather read the collected letters of Flannery O’Connor, memorized poetry by Emily Dickinson and, at thirty, earned a law degree from Suffolk Law School in Boston. It was *after* earning the law degree that she hit bottom: fired from a string of waitressing jobs, she began drinking as soon as she was up until she passed out. No longer able to function, she lay immobilized in her bed, with “everything hurting--my eyelashes, the soles of my feet.”⁶

² Carolyn Myss. *Anatomy of the Spirit*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996, p. 13.

³ Linda Leonard. “The Dark Night of Soul,” *Sacred Sorrows*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, 1996; p. 51.

⁴ Joseph Campbell. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1988, p. 39.

⁵ Heather King. *Parched*. New York: American Library, 2005, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 227.

Fiercely intelligent and perceptive, Heather described herself as a girl in New Hampshire as “morbidly sensitive” with an exaggerated fear of life, willing to go to any lengths for the approval of others, practiced at hiding emotional and physical pain, and often alone and lonely. She remembers that as a teen, halfway through her first bottle of beer, she was “transformed”: she writes that her “sense of connection, of being one with the universe, was so sublime” that she was “prepared to make any sacrifice, overlook any amount of pain” to re-experience it. Unknowingly, by taking that first drink, she was “hardwired” emotionally and physically “to want a second, a third, and on to infinity.”

⁷ The desire to merge and disappear into drink or a relationship became a compulsory attempt to fill the void inside of herself, to experience the fleeting comfort of chemical wholeness. In a letter to Bill W., Jung commented that the craving of an addict (referring to a former patient) is equivalent to a spiritual thirst for psychological wholeness, as “alcohol” in Latin is *spiritus*, a word used to express both “the highest religious experience” and the “most depressing poison.” Alcohol, or “burnt water,” is poison, but “fire-water” to the alchemists symbolized the tribulations of spiritual transformation.

Trapped in a world of “illusion, procrastination and paralysis,” Heather was aching with loneliness, stating that, “I didn’t know that I was partly lonely for my own self.” She wrote that she “sensed without being able to articulate it that my malady was spiritual...”⁸ One day, while visiting her parents, she wandered outside to a stand of trees, and kneeling, rested her head against the bark of a pine. At the moment she admitted to herself that if she did not stop drinking, she would die, she experienced a spiritual revelation of how her soul was being lost to drink. She began to pray. Shortly after, Heather’s family confronted her in an intervention that would send her to a Minnesota rehabilitation clinic. With a small black volume of daily meditations, many prayers, and a newly discovered sense of fellowship, Heather began to heal. To bond with other human beings; to relate to a deeper, more vulnerable self; and to connect to God in some true yet inexplicable way—these were the experiences in a dynamic feedback loop that facilitated her road to recovery and also emerged as the gifts of her sobriety. These connections began to slake her thirsty cravings to merge and to feed her hollow emptiness. The hard work of conscious transformation began when she became sober. Yet, Heather King acknowledged, “...anything worthwhile about me arose, in one way or another, from the suffering of those twenty years of drinking.”⁹

⁷ Ibid, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 163-164.

⁹ Ibid, p. 276. In her follow-up book, *Redeemed*, Heather writes about sobriety, marriage, and an unfulfilling career in a Beverly Hills law firm. She deals with breast cancer, the death of her father, the dissolution of her marriage, a mystical experience with the Virgin Mary, and her conversion to Catholicism.