



Wrestling With Life's Deeper Questions

I love beautiful ideas. Especially ones that shine a new light on the mysteries of life and its fundamental spiritual aspects.

James Hollis, a brilliant Jungian analyst and writer, is being interviewed below about some of the ideas and spiritual insights contained in his new book *What Matters Most*. I immediately felt benefited by them. I hope they contribute to you too.

In the preface to *What Matters Most*, you write that this book is written for "those who suspect that they are in fact exiles." Can you please describe for us these "exiles" — who they are and what are they in exile from? And are we all exiles in one form or another?

JH: I think to some degree we are all exiles. We are tiny creatures and vulnerable when we began, and we are obliged to turn over our instinctual truth to our socialization process, some of which is necessary and some of which is pathologizing. Each of us in our adaptations has the potential to get further and further separated from our core instinctual truth and ourselves, and so as a result of this we get estranged from ourselves and we get estranged from our centers. So in that regard we become exiles from our own path and our own journey frequently. Or many times when we find that we do adapt ourselves to the ideologies and the expectations of the world around us, it never quite feels right. One of the issues of midlife that rises for so many of us is "Well I've done all the things I've supposed to do and why does it not feel ok inside?" Or "I've followed the roadmap and it continuously seems to be troubling and difficult and contradictory for me?" In that regard, I think so often because we are out-voted by the consensus around us we tend to assume "Well, there's something wrong with me. I don't fit in or I'm inadequate in some way," rather than "I'm supposed to be different, each of us is meant to live a different path," as a result of which we tend to judge ourselves, internalize a lot of self-doubt. And I've heard many people say when they start therapy themselves, "Well I always thought there was something wrong with me but I realize it's rather a question of where I got off my own center here." And therefore the whole task is to try to find a way to embrace our centers and our separate journeys, and realize that

paradoxically it is what we have the most to bring to the world. We recognize that our exile is a statement of our authenticity and our worth, and that there are many others like us and therefore there is a kind of community of exiles, albeit individualized and quite silent most of the time. We don't know that there are others struggling as we are and carrying some of the same yearnings and hurts that we do as well.

PZ: So it's not only okay to be different, it's almost necessary to be different?

JH: I think nature or divinity has invested in each of us a different project...that's what Jung meant by individuation. It's not so much individualism; it's more a question of what is the project or what is the embodiment of values that I'm to bring into the world, and that ultimately is what our greatest gift to our families, our children, our society will prove to be.

PZ: Your opening mantra in Chapter 1 — that *Life Not Be Governed by Fear* — is very resonant for me personally and professionally. What do you think it is that we all fear, and how did we become so fearful?

JH: Well, again, harkening back to the fact that our existential condition is that of total vulnerability, and the world is lethal, and we live our journey and then we die. So it's a rather perilous condition to start with, and all of it is at the mercy of forces that we feel are overwhelming, and in the face of that the core message is "The world is big and powerful and I'm not and I'd better figure out a way to adapt to that." So we develop patterns of avoidance, patterns of getting caught in power complexes, or patterns of compliance with whatever is being demanded around us. Or we experience the abandonment of the world, the insufficiency of its meeting us halfway, and so we tend to internalize that as poor self-esteem and we end up sabotaging ourselves or getting caught in circles of grandiosity as a compensation. Or we fall into manipulative patterns of others whereby we are trying to arrange them so they will be the source of nurturance and protection and security that we missed earlier on. Or we end up in inordinate searches for reassurance in connection with others, which can be the birth of addictions in the outer world or dependency in relationships as well.

PZ: So how do we healthily manage this huge fear?

JH: In the end, I think none of us wants to be on our death beds, the proverbial last moment, and say, "Well, was I here? Did I show up? Did it matter? Did it count?" And I don't mean in terms of some sort of grandiose contribution to the world. I'm thinking more about feeling that we lived our journey, we were true to what was real for us, and we found values that worked for us, and again in the end that's the best service that we can bring to other people. If we realize that our biggest enemy is fear and what it does to us, and how much it launches these automatic protective programs then we realize that there's a kind of daily summons to stand up in the face of our fears, and risk being who we are and risk potential loss of the comfort zones and consensual approval that every child needs but which becomes a kind of constrictive burden for the adult.

PZ: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. You say that ambiguity is a path that leads us to discovery, complexity and growth, and that not only the magnitude of our personal journeys but also the health of our larger culture depend on being able to tolerate that. Can you comment on how that comes about, how ambiguity leads to personal growth and a healthy culture?

JH: The human ego, which is who we think we are at any given moment, is actually a very fragile wafer on a very large sea; it protects itself by trying to establish security zones and that's understandable. It tries to find places of security and predictability. And the problem is [that] real life is ambiguous, it's uncertain; the most important questions in life about love and relationships, and "what is it I'm to do with my journey?" — are profoundly mysterious and they are ambiguous in character and the more I invest in the need for security, often the more limited my world will

be. Our contemporary cultural situation is one of great division in the world, and within societies, within religious and ethnic groups and so forth, and that animosity comes primarily out of our fear of *the otherness* of the other. The paradox is that the greatest gift that relationship can bring is the otherness of the other, and yet it's that which occasions ambiguity in us. We want the other to think, feel, believe and act as we do. When they don't, it feels, rather than an invitation to enlargement, it's an anxiety-provoking situation. So that's what leads to fundamentalism in religions, that's what leads to rigidity in our personality structures. The embrace of ambiguity is really what gives us our journey. It's what opens us to enlargement. We live really qualitative lives based on the magnitude of the questions we live, and *easy answers are going to be available only for easy questions*. The most important ones are going to have an enormous amount of ambiguity to them.

PZ: So what can happen within persons and between persons can then happen between groups and cultures and nations then?

JH: Absolutely. After all, the group is the individual magnified and so we all bring our fears and we try to find the people who share the same fears. We band with them and we oppose others and that's been the source of so much of the world's suffering and destruction.

PZ: Why do you think we should choose or risk growth over security? Why can't we have both?

JH: I think security is an illusion. I think it's understandable why we prefer it. I certainly prefer it, but I also realize that the most important stages of my life that were growth stages were ones where I was pulled out of that security zone and led to larger and larger engagements with the world. If we stopped with security as a primary goal we wouldn't leave home, we wouldn't grow up, we wouldn't explore the world. To be able to step into a larger world is to have the ability to say, "I'm going to have the resources and capacities to take on the challenges of this world even if it's scary for me." There's a wonderful quote from the Prague-born poet Rilke who said, "*Our task is to be defeated by ever larger things.*" Well, my ego says, "What's this defeat business? I want to be victorious; I want to be in control of my life". What Rilke is suggesting here is if we are forever taking on larger things that means we're growing, we're developing and we have a much richer and more interesting life as a result of that.



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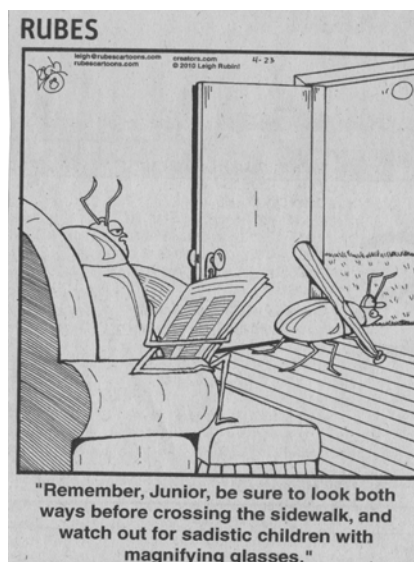
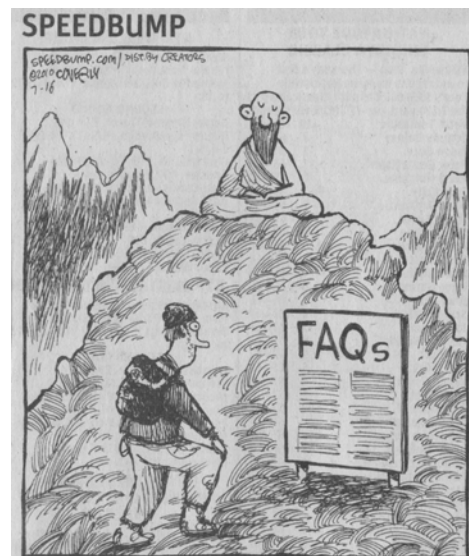
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Seminar: Healing the Original Pain of Your Life: The Inner Child Seminar
Dates: Saturday / Sunday, October 23 / 24, 2010

Seminar: Relationships: The Work Of Love
Dates: Saturday / Sunday, December 4 / 5, 2010

Location: Pacific Mountain Centre, 3306 Dunbar St., Vancouver, BC

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