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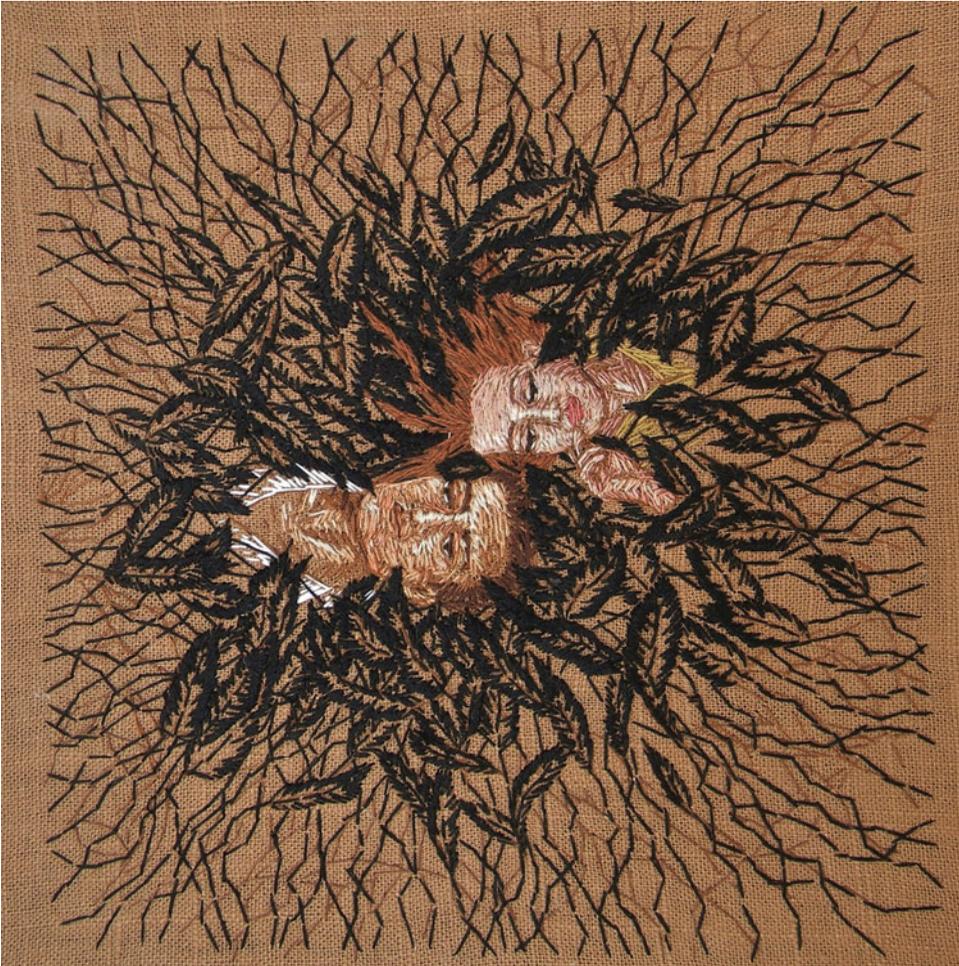
Death and Birth: An Initiation into Midlife

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Throughout history people have created rituals and myths in an attempt to make sense of their existence and to provide life with structure and meaning. In postmodern societies, though, these traditional rituals have largely lost their meaning. Transitional turning points such as the highly charged threshold from adolescence into young adulthood are still celebrated but, they have mostly been diminished to social events and photo opportunities. Subsequently they have lost their power to break open the ego structure, which would allow for a new perspective and an opportunity for growth, propelling the youngster into adulthood. There is a growing understanding, though, that the psyche needs transformational experiences during times of transitions to channel the energies inherent in each stage of life. For most people living in Westernized societies, however, initiations happen spontaneously, when life suddenly rubs up so intensely that a person's only choice is to shed his or her skin and to emerge as a changed human being. The author explores the death of her father and the ensuing period of profound grief as an initiation from young adulthood into the more mature life as a mother and wife.

Throughout human history, people have created myths and rituals to provide life with structure and meaning. Tribal cultures, with their intense initiation rites, have always recognized the need for transformational experiences, particularly during times of transition. As psychiatrist C. G. Jung (1933/1955) noted, for modern people living in contemporary Western societies, traditional myths and rituals have largely lost their meaning. They have been replaced by the prevalent belief systems of our time: science, technology, and unlimited growth. There is an increased understanding, though, that the psyche needs “formal markers” at certain transitional points to release and channel the energies inherent to each stage in life (Frankel, 1998, p. 65). Psychologist Ernest Wolf (1988) concluded that at “developmental turning points, such as the oedipal phase, early adolescence, marriage, parenthood, midlife or upon entering old age—the so-called life crises—there appears to be a heightened vulnerability of the self being injured by inappropriate self-object experiences” (p. 65). Modern society still has some rites of passage left, particularly around the highly charged threshold from adolescence into young adulthood: the right to vote, hazing rituals upon entering college, and religious rites such as the bar mitzvah for the Jewish community and confirmation for Catholics. But these rituals have

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Michelle Kingdom, *Almost whole now*, 2015,
hand embroidery on linen, 11 × 11 inches.

largely been diminished to social events and photo opportunities. They have lost their power to break open the ego structure—an opening that would allow for a new perspective and an opportunity for growth.

For most people living today in Western society, initiations happen spontaneously, when life suddenly bubbles up so intensely that a person's only choice is to shed the old skin and emerge with a new one. Often these initiatory experiences seep up through the cracks in society's floor in a highly unregulated form, such as when young people try to emulate initiatory experiences. They search for heightened sensations by using drugs, cutting themselves, or by engaging in other thrill-seeking endeavors. Video games are a new variation of this old theme. They provide a seemingly safe outlet for this need by allowing the players to embark onto a virtual hero's quest, except that it never truly satisfies the need for an authentic experience, making the gamer come back to try it over and over again. Still the video game remains a secondhand experience, pre-chewed and pre-digested, keeping the adolescent infantilized on the couch of the parental home. Psychologist Richard Frankel (1961) concluded that the need for initiation is archetypal, that "if the archetype of initiation is a structural component of the psyche, then it is going to occur whether or not a given culture formally invests in such rites" (p. 55).

Looking at my own life through the lens of what might have been initiatory experiences, some events jump out with new meaning and different perspectives. The event that very decisively pushed me out of young adulthood toward a more mature and integrated self was the death of my father. I was in my early 30s and 8 months pregnant with my first child when the call came on a Sunday morning. I was reading the paper in our sun-flooded living room in Los Angeles, when my sister called saying that our father had had an accident and had died. The mind's first reaction to this type of news seems to be always disbelief and an inability to grasp what had happened. The suddenness of his death added to the feeling of its not being real. It was quickly determined that I would not be able to fly home. Airlines generally do not permit women in their last trimester on airplanes, particularly not on long transatlantic flights. And so, strangely, the day continued as if nothing had changed. I was not able to go and see the body of my father, nor did I need to make funeral or travel arrangements. There was also no sudden gaping hole in my daily life because he had lived so far away, and we saw each other rarely. I was still in sunny California, sitting on the couch. And I fell apart. It was the first time somebody this close to me had died. I had no reference or model of how to grieve. I also grieved much more than just his death. I grieved that I never really got to know him; I grieved the relationship we never had. And most importantly, I grieved my father's life, which I perceived as a life not lived to its potential.

My father was born during the Second World War in a small remote alpine village in Austria. He was the oldest of eight children, and his mother died under very painful and dramatic circumstances when he was 14. At the time, he was poised to leave the village on a scholarship to attend a school in a city some distance away. He had wanted to become a teacher, but instead, after his mother's death, he had to stay to help his father with his younger siblings and with work on the farm. He did not like being a farmer; years later he attended the police academy in Vienna to become a police officer. It was an education paid for by the state—and an opportunity to get out. He always felt a bit out of place. Although he never talked about it, it never seemed as though he had any affinity for this line of work either. He also struggled throughout his life with alcoholism, and his marriage with my mother was very unhappy.

Two days after I got the news of his death, on Tuesday evening, I asked my husband to help me find a therapist the next morning. I felt as if I was physically breaking apart,

and I was at a complete loss at how to keep going. This was probably the first time in my life that I openly and straightforwardly acknowledged that I needed help, and that I truly did not know what to do. I went to bed, somewhat appeased by the prospect of getting help the next day. By the next morning, everything had changed: I woke up with a deep sense of joy and with an utmost certainty that my father was there with me in the room. It was as if my soul and body knew even before my mind could grasp it. Then came a cognitive realization of feeling his presence. He was there. He had come to help me! This was particularly meaningful because in life, he was not the father who would be able to help me. It was not because he did not want to, but more because he himself was so deeply wounded that he had trouble just taking care of himself. My sister and I had slipped early on into the role of emotional caretakers of our parents. My father became the scapegoat, who was held responsible for the many hardships that befell the family. As a result he had always been pushed to the periphery of family life.

That morning I never called a therapist. I stayed home, deeply engaged with the figure of my father in a dialogue of active imagination. What at first had seemed cruel timing—that I was not able to go to his funeral—began to look like a gift. I was not distracted by the external events and administrative tasks that come with the death of a family member and was therefore able to engage with the incoming energy of my father. (I would like to add at this point that this a deeply personal and subjective account, and is in no way meant to generalize how others might experience death.)

My father communicated three things to me that morning: firstly, that he was doing well where he was; secondly, he expressed his joy over seeing me pregnant (I had not seen him during my pregnancy); and, thirdly, he told me in no uncertain terms that it was not my responsibility to grieve his life. This communication unfolded on several levels. The most pronounced was on a feeling, sensing level. I experienced not just his presence, but also how he felt in his current state. I sensed how liberated and joyous he felt without his body, which had become such a burden to him. He appeared to look back at his life with a sense of surprise, wondering how he could have gotten so stuck in certain belief systems—but at the same time also recognizing how easy it was to get stuck. He had quite a sense of humor about it, which was very much in line with his personality. It was as if he was good-humoredly shaking his head at the whole business of life.

Another form of communication was via images. I perceived snippets of his life that had been meaningful and positive for him, which showed me how judgmentally and narrow-mindedly I had seen him. And the last layer of communication was in the form of an internal dialogue. I had never experienced anything like this before, and I was surprised at how normal and easy it felt.

Due to the pregnancy I had stopped working a few weeks earlier, and I spent the following four weeks, until the birth of my child, mostly alone, withdrawn from the world in deep engagement with my father. This pronounced disconnection from the world was in stark contrast to how my life had been until then. It had been very externally oriented, right in line with what Jung had described as the outward expansion of the first half of life. But the importance of my busy work and social life just dropped away. I craved solitude. The need to look at myself became bigger than the fear of taking a closer look.

Aided by the heat of the summer and the increasing heaviness of my body, time slowed down. I moved more and more away from a rationalistic, dualistic Apollonian world, where values centered on good and evil, and I sank deeper into a physical, nature-oriented Dionysian world. Belief systems softened, broken open by grief and solitude. I began to recognize and accept that I had to go through this on my own and that nobody

could do it for me. Or could save me. As is the propensity of a young mind, I had tended until then to look outside for a savior.

Joseph Henderson (1967) differentiated the experience of initiation into three phases: the rite of separation, the rite of transition, and the rite of incorporation (p. 81). The death of my father, in conjunction with the impending birth of my first child, was the first stage of the initiation: the separation from ordinary life, when one plunges into the unknown. The grief in solitude was the transition period, the time of reflection, wherein one tries to reassemble the pieces of what was shattered by the initial, destabilizing experience. Hollis (2000) described this phase as follows: “Whenever one goes through the deconstruction of the self, one normally suffers a considerable period of disorientation, of wandering the wasteland” (p. 96). The birth of my child signaled the beginning of the third phase: the period of incorporation, when the person reenters ordinary life, bringing the gift of a more mature self back into the world. “We become persons through dangerous experiences of darkness; we can survive these difficult initiations. Any real initiation is always a movement from death to new life” (Moore, 1992, p. 47).

On a metaphysical level, I do not believe that the timing of my father’s death was accidental. It felt as if he had left in order to make space for his grandchild. The marriage of my parents had reached, by that point, a new level of despair. My mother’s unhappiness was shrill and pervasive, and my father’s struggle with alcoholism had a hopeless quality to it. It was as if he wanted to liberate me from my worries over my parents in order to focus on the new life that was about to come in. His death also prepared me for parenthood. At the time of my father’s death, I was still very much in the mind frame of what Henderson (1967) called the *puella aeterna*. Although I was married, pregnant, and my husband and I had just bought a house, which we spent a lot of time fixing up, I was still clinging to the idea that eventually I would go back to my gypsy life, children in tow. It was time to break the *puella aeterna* pattern, which had served me well by rocketing me out of my dysfunctional home and small town, but it was now at odds with this new phase in life.

Henderson compared the *puer aeternus* archetype to the image of Icarus, which resonated strongly with me (p. 24). In my rebellion, I was soaring too high, but my father’s death and my son’s birth grounded me. I was more willing to accept and appreciate that life also consists of the banalities of daily existence, and that it requires a commitment. I came out of this experience with a deeper understanding that each of us has to take responsibility for our life and our actions—which also means that ultimately we cannot be responsible for somebody else’s life. We are meant to help and support each other, but we cannot change or fix another person. What bigger gift of learning can one receive before giving birth to a new life?

An unexpected outcome of my father’s death and the consequential mourning period was how much healing it brought to my relationship with my father. The search to somehow fill the void of the missing father of my childhood stopped being one of the driving forces of my life. It took a more appropriate place next to other elements and aspects of what my life so far had consisted of, still influencing me but with much less of a charge. This process was reflected in the shift of the quality of the grief itself. At first, it was the uncontained pain of breaking apart with no safety net. I had tapped into the suffering accumulated over decades by our family dynamic. But more importantly, I had to come to terms with my failure in my self-imposed role of savior—and that failure was the only possible outcome. I grieved so many things other than his actual death that, if not for my father’s visitation on that Wednesday morning, I believe I would have stayed in the hell of this misguided grief for a long time. The realization and acceptance that I do not need to grieve his life—in fact, that it is a preposterous notion to judge somebody’s life (and have

it come up so short)— allowed me to begin the process of grieving his death. It was still deeply painful, but it felt like a healthy and necessary process with a known outcome.

As is probably true for many contemporary people who have grown up in the relative safety and stability of Western society, there have been very few events in my life that suddenly plunged me into what psychoanalyst Robert Moore (2001) described as “the entry into hell” (p. 85). When it happens, there is no mistaking it. One has entered uncharted territory, where one does not know the outcome or the way back. And some do not find the way back, frozen in their grief or anger. Finding the way back requires the ability to change. If the fear of change is too big and the defenses erected over the years are too rigid, one can get stuck. Anyone who talks of initiation lightly has not experienced it.

Anja Stadelmann Wright was born in a small alpine village in Austria and attended the University of Vienna. After arriving in the United States, she went on to work in the entertainment business as a writer and producer. In recent years she decided to follow a lifelong interest in the human psyche and returned to school to study depth psychology. Currently, she works as a marriage and family intern at the C. G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles.

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