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Carl Jung's "Stages Of Life"

"Something in us wishes to remain a child, to be unconscious or, at most, conscious only of the ego; to reject everything strange, or else subject it to our will; to do nothing, or else indulge our own craving for pleasure or power."

-- Carl Jung, *The Structures & Dynamics of the Psyche*

According to Carl Jung, what prevents people from becoming autonomous, fulfilled and ultimately happy is their refusal to open themselves to experiences that are new and unfamiliar, and thus potentially threatening to their sense of self. When we have passed from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, nature abandons us to the world of consciousness, which is to say, to culture. We are thus forced to say "goodbye to childlike unconsciousness and trust in nature." The question then arises, "What kind of person shall I then become in this strange new world?" Each of us must confront it.

He likens this dilemma to the biblical fall of Adam. Before the fall, life in the Garden was safe, innocent, pure, uncomplicated, blissful. But with the hearty bite into the forbidden fruit came consciousness of good and evil, and with it the descent into a world that was precarious rather than safe, conscious rather than unconscious, doubtful rather than certain, impure rather than pure. "The biblical fall of man presents the dawn of consciousness as a curse," Jung wrote.

As Jung sees it, people desire a life that is safe, uncomplicated, familiar and in many respects unchanging. But such a life is ultimately constricting: it forecloses the possibility of learning and evolving, and thus, of developing a "wider and higher consciousness."

What's interesting is that "nature cares nothing whatsoever about a higher level of consciousness," and society "does not value these feats of the psyche very highly; its prizes are always given for achievement and not for personality, the latter being rewarded for the most part posthumously." And so the individual is left all alone to decide what kind of an existence she will have, and whether she will willingly dive deeper and deeper into the unsure waters of life to gain a richer perspective of it all.

The passages below develop these points. They have been excerpted from Jung's article "Stages of Life," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. by Joseph Campbell (1976), pp. 4-5, 9-12. -- Tim Ruggiero

"If psychic life consisted only of self-evident matters of fact -- which on a primitive level is still the case -- we could content ourselves with a sturdy empiricism. The psychic life of civilized man, however, is full of problems; we cannot even think of it except in terms of problems. Our psychic processes are made up to a large extent of reflections, doubts, experiments, all of which are almost completely foreign to the unconscious instinctive mind of primitive man. It is the growth of consciousness which we must thank for the existence of problems...It is just man's turning away from instinct -- his opposing himself to instinct -- that creates consciousness. Instinct is nature and seeks to perpetuate nature, whereas consciousness can only seek culture or its denial. Even when we turn back to nature, inspired by a Rousseauesque longing, we 'cultivate' nature. As long as we are still submerged in nature we are unconscious, and we live in the security of instinct which knows no problems. Everything in us that still belongs to nature shrinks away from a problem, for its name is doubt, and wherever doubt holds sway there is uncertainty and the possibility of divergent ways. And where several ways seem possible, there we have turned away from the certain guidance of instinct and are handed over to fear. For consciousness is now called upon to do that which nature has always done for her children -- namely, to give a certain, unquestionable, and unequivocal decision. And here we are beset by an all-too-human fear that consciousness -- our Promethean conquest -- may in the end not be able to serve us as well as nature.

"Problems thus draw us into an orphaned and isolated state where we are abandoned by nature and are driven to consciousness. There is no other way open to us; we are forced to resort to conscious decisions and solutions where formerly we trusted ourselves to natural happenings. Every problem, therefore, brings the possibility of a widening of consciousness, but also the necessity of saying goodbye to childlike unconsciousness and trust in nature. This necessity is a psychic fact of such importance that it constitutes one of the most essential symbolic teachings of the Christian religion. It is the sacrifice of the merely natural man, of the unconscious, ingenuous

being whose tragic career began with the eating of the apple in Paradise. The biblical fall of man presents the dawn of consciousness as a curse. And as a matter of fact it is in this light that we first look upon every problem that forces us to greater consciousness and separates us even further from the paradise of unconscious childhood. Every one of us gladly turns away from his problems; if possible, they must not be mentioned, or, better still, their existence is denied. We wish to make our lives simple, certain, and smooth, and for that reason problems are taboo. We want to have certainties and no doubts -- results and no experiments -- without even seeing that certainties can arise only through doubt and results only through experiment. The artful denial of a problem will not produce conviction; on the contrary, a wider and higher consciousness is required to give us the certainty and clarity we need...

"When we must deal with problems, we instinctively resist trying the way that leads through obscurity and darkness. We wish to hear only of unequivocal results, and completely forget that these results can only be brought about when we have ventured into and emerged again from the darkness. But to penetrate the darkness we must summon all the powers of enlightenment that consciousness can offer; as I have already said, we must even indulge in speculations...

"We are all familiar with the sources of the problems that arise in the period of youth. For most people it is the demands of life which harshly put an end to the dream of childhood. If the individual is sufficiently well prepared, the transition to a profession or career can take place smoothly. But if he clings to illusions that are contrary to reality, then problems will surely arise. No one can take the step into life without making certain assumptions, and occasionally these assumptions are false -- that is, they do not fit the conditions into which one is thrown. Often it is a question of exaggerated expectations, underestimation of difficulties, unjustified optimism, or a negative attitude. One could compile quite a list of the false assumptions that give rise to the first conscious problems.

"But it is not always the contradiction between subjective assumptions and external facts that gives rise to problems; it may just as often be inner, psychic difficulties. They may exist even when things run smoothly in the outside world. Very often it is the disturbance of psychic equilibrium caused by the sexual instinct; equally often it is the feeling of inferiority which

springs from an unbearable sensitivity. These inner conflicts may exist even when adaptation to the outer world has been achieved without apparent effort. It even seems as if young people who have had a hard struggle for existence are spared inner problems, while those who for some reason or other have no difficulty with adaptation run into problems of sex or conflicts arising from a sense of superiority...

"Something in us wishes to remain a child, to be unconscious or, at most, conscious only of the ego; to reject everything strange, or else subject it to our will; to do nothing, or else indulge our own craving for pleasure or power. In all this there is something of the inertia of matter; it is a persistence in the previous state whose range of consciousness is smaller, narrower, and more egoistic than that of the dualistic phase. For here the individual is faced with the necessity of recognizing and accepting what is different and strange as a part of his own life, as a kind of 'also-I'.

"The essential feature of the dualistic phase is the widening of the horizon of life, and it is this that is so vigorously resisted. To be sure, this expansion -- or diastole, as Goethe called it -- had started long before this. It begins at birth, when the child abandons the narrow confinement of the mother's body; and from then on it steadily increases until it reaches a climax in the problematical state, when the individual begins to struggle against it.

"What would happen to him if he simply changed himself into that foreign-seeming 'also-I' and allowed the earlier ego to vanish into the past? We might suppose this to be a quite practical course. The very aim of religious education, from the exhortation to put off the old Adam right back to the rebirth rituals of primitive races, is to transform the human being into the new, future man, and to allow the old to die away.

"Psychology teaches us that, in a certain sense, there is nothing in the psyche that is old; nothing that can really, finally die away. Even Paul was left with a thorn in the flesh. Whoever protects himself against what is new and strange and regresses to the past falls into the same neurotic condition as the man who identifies himself with the new and runs away from the past. The only difference is that the one has estranged himself from the past and the other from the future. In principle, both are doing the same thing: they are reinforcing their narrow range of

consciousness instead of shattering it in the tension of opposites and building up a state of wider and higher consciousness...

"The serious problems in life...are never fully solved. If ever they should appear to be so it is a sure sign that something has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seem to lie not in its solution but in our working at it incessantly. This alone preserves us from stultification and petrification. So also the solution of the problems of youth by restricting ourselves to the attainable is only temporarily valid and not lasting in a deeper sense. Of course, to win for oneself a place in society and to transform one's nature so that it is more or less fitted to this kind of existence is in all cases a considerable achievement. It is a fight waged within oneself as well as outside, comparable to the struggle of the child for an ego. That struggle is for the most part unobserved because it happens in the dark; but when we see how stubbornly childish illusions and assumptions and egoistic habits are still clung to in later years we can gain some idea of the energies that were needed to form them...

"The nearer we approach to the middle of life, and the better we have succeeded in entrenching ourselves in our personal attitudes and social positions, the more it appears as if we had discovered the right course and the right ideals and principles of behavior. For this reason we suppose them to be eternally valid, and make a virtue of unchangeably clinging to them. We overlook the essential fact that the social goal is attained only at the cost of a diminution of personality. Many -- far too many -- aspects of life which should also have been experienced lie in the lumber-room among dusty memories; but sometimes, too, they are glowing coals under grey ashes."