

November 20, 2016 Readings: **The Three Fold Spiritual Path**

To journey without being changed is to be a nomad.

To change without journeying is to be a chameleon.

To journey and to be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim. Mark Nepo

The Three Fold Spiritual Path from *A Pilgrim in Your Body* by Jim Gilkeson

There is a universal pattern to spiritual process: it carries us out of the world in some sense, into sacred space, and then back into the world again. This pattern could rightly be referred to as the three-fold spiritual path.

One of the best-known ways of describing this universal cycle of initiatory activity is to speak of the Hero's Journey. Part of the work of Joseph Campbell and Paul Rebillot was to articulate the abiding image of the hero embedded deep in our psyche. The hero is the one who responds to what Joseph Campbell liked to call the "call to adventure," forced by necessity, or carried along by his own adventurous spirit into something bigger than himself, to leave his familiar ground in order to go into the unknown on a quest of some kind. Along the way, the hero meets any number of challenges, often in the form of adversity: the misunderstanding of those he leaves behind, the "demons of resistance" in his body, emotions and thoughts. Mentors and allies are at hand as well to teach him new skills and disciplines, and how to consort with forces he has never dreamed of before. The hero's journey takes him out of time and place, away from his former identity – he might adopt a new name while on his journey into the core of his being. Somewhere along the line, he is challenged unto death. He resurrects and is reborn and returns to the world, bearing gifts of wisdom and healing. The Hero's Journey presents a complete picture of the three-fold spiritual path.

What is it that we are "leaving" when we "leave the world," as we take the first step on the ever-cycling three-fold spiritual path? What is it that we leave in order to move into sacred space, after which we return to the world with something to offer? Obviously, it does not mean killing yourself, or getting in a space ship and blasting off (although there are people who have interpreted the idea in this way). As any monk or nun will tell you, simply renouncing the world, donning robes, and climbing up on a mountain or disappearing behind the walls of a cloister do not make you holy. Could spiritual teachers have something else in mind when they say, "leave the world"?

One of the (many) jarring moments in spiritual life is the disconcerting realization that, try as we may, we are deeply conditioned by our upbringing and our culture. It is a jolt to realize that your reality, your connection to your very self and your worldview, are thoroughly influenced by the particular mass culture in which you live. It is as though your culture hands you a prism through which you experience life, and this prism is then reinforced at every turn by the culture.

Mystics speak of a merging of heaven and earth, of spirit and body, and if there is something specific about "the world" that we need to break free of, it is the particular mindsets and beliefs systems that keep this process of merging from happening.

The myth is the public domain and the dream is the private myth. If your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of the society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn't, you've got a long adventure in the dark forest ahead of you. Joseph Campbell

Let's call it the *mass mind*, that inevitable amalgamation of all the unexamined assumptions that make up consensus reality in any group of people. You only need to turn on the television to see an effective conduit for the mass mind at work. Sit in any public place and listen to what people talk about. Most conversation and most of what comes to us via the mass media deals in products of the mass mind and , suffice it to say,

genuine spiritual growth is typically not one of those products. That is why in classical texts the spiritual seeker is told to “leave the world,” which can be translated as *disconnect from the mass mind*.

The three-fold spiritual path begins with “leaving the world” by breaking your identification – if only for a moment at a time in a meditation – with the mass mind. “Leaving,” in this sense, has a great deal to do with releasing what has been holding us, physically, mentally, emotionally. Much of formal spiritual training, especially at the outset, is about breaking this identification, often ruthlessly, as novitiates in spiritual orders can tell you.

If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home, we may miss our star. William Stafford

What happens when you are not in the web of thoughts, assumptions, and feelings that keep you tied to the mass mind? Spiritual practices offer us many ways of taking the second step of the three-fold spiritual path, which has to do with being sacred space. One of the surest signs that you are not in the mass mind is when you are in deep silence. If there are nameable goals in meditation and subtle energy practice, stillness is certainly one of them. Subtle energy practices help you come into stillness, a hallmark of contact with universal consciousness.

Subtle energy practice, by its nature, draws you into finer and finer levels of appreciation for the quality of stillness. Paradoxically, stillness is not the absence of sound; instead, it may be the very heart of sound. Many people who become absorbed in great works of music report that they are drawn into a timeless state filled with *a resounding stillness, or the music of the spheres*.

The Zen Buddhists have a way of communicating the paradox of the return phase of the three-fold spiritual path: “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. You leave the ordinary, encounter what is extraordinary, and return again to the ordinary. Nothing changes, and yet, everything changes because you return a bit more, or a lot more, awake to the nature of your being. Many people on a spiritual path envision an ultimate goal of ascension into heaven, or absorption into the Light, but as a next step in the development of most of us, there is the inevitable question of how we will engage with the world in the light of our big and little extraordinary encounters.

The modern pilgrim seeks a passionate connection to his or her individual gifts, and the grace to use them to better humankind. Lauren Artress

If we think at all about enlightenment, we tend to highlight the big moments of awakening – the impact of the “AHA!” moments of deep insight is indisputable – and yet, this is a process that is also going on continuously in the background of our consciousness, bit by bit. As you learn the ropes of going in and out of the mass mind and cultivation contact with the Divine Source within you, a curious thing starts to happen. Early on, the experience of finally “connecting” in meditation indeed feels like you are completely leaving the world and trekking to some mystic mountain top. At first, spiritual teachings seem vague and metaphorical. Heaven is far away and getting there is a journey of a thousand days and much hardship. By and by, however, as you cultivate your relationship with the Source, it is as if heaven and earth start to approach each other and grow together, and more of your spiritual life seeps through, so to speak, into your body and your everyday life. As you grow spiritually, your gifts also grow. At some point, they turn outward and begin to have an effect on other people. This is the process by which your deep insight turns into action and spiritual gifts connect, through you, with the world.