

Dreaming the Person I was Meant to Be

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When he was an old man, someone asked George Bernard Shaw who he most would have wanted to be. Shaw thought for a moment, then answered, "The George Bernard Shaw I might have been." A statement of deep disappointment, clearly. But who among us has not been disappointed after midlife? Disappointed with the world, yes, but also disappointed with ourselves. Or is disappointment the right word for our situation? Is it rather a feeling that there must be something more to life? Think of the lyrics in Peggy Lee's song "Is That All There Is?" Perhaps the answer to Peggy Lee's question is found in our dreams.

To understand the meaning of our dreams is not like finding some lost item hidden away in the cabinet of the mind. This is the wrong image of what it means to discover "something more" in the second half of life. We do not discover; we create by seeing more deeply. The task is to imagine what was not there before, or better, what was there, but what we did not see. It is an invitation to become the person we were meant to be.

Life planning is a peculiar enterprise. Wendell Berry put it well: "We live the life we are given, not the life we have planned." Berry's comment reminds us that life planning, to be effective, needs to go beyond the level of conscious experience. The "life we are given" includes glimpses of another level in ourselves. Those glimpses come in the dreams that visit us each night. I compare dreams are like to a GPS: that miraculous device giving guidance for how to get where we want to go. Tapping into signals from an unseen world, dreams can give us help we need. Our dreams provide us with a psychological map of our position: not the whole of it, but enough to see where we need to go to take the next step. Dreaming, like the GPS, does tell us where to go-- we have to do that. We cannot look to dreams to give us a destination or a purpose for our lives. But our dreams, if we heed them, can provide a kind of guidance, a psychological map, we might not find anywhere else.

Dreamwork can be especially valuable in the second half of life. We spend the first half of life fashioning a self we present to the world: the persona, or mask that we wear to meet the world: a necessary adaptation, but not necessarily the true self. Our dreams can give us a glimpse of what we do not yet see, what lies beyond the persona or mask that we take ourselves to be.

A dream reflecting this point is that of a forty-year-old woman named Marie, who felt herself to be at a point of midlife transition:

THE GOLDEN MASK

Marie dreamed that she had given birth to twins. Though one of the infants was well-loved and healthy, the other had been forgotten. Not only was the forgotten child hungry and angry but its head had also, somehow, become completely encased in a seamless golden metal mask.

Louis Savary (1990) notes that Marie's dream in itself did not force any clear choice or decision on her part. Rather, by working with her dream, she was able to make choices to nurture parts of herself that had been neglected. It is not unusual to find dreams in which this image of the neglected baby appears. Note that in Marie's dream, the dreamer has given birth to twins: one healthy, and one neglected. This duality is an image of a fundamental duality in adult development: as we mature, we may attain genuine strengths and health, but also neglect other sides of ourselves: "Every stick has two ends."

Marie's dream contains another detail: the golden mask: "Masks portray the human 'life drama' in all its manifold aspects, especially the compelling, ambiguous, sometimes revelatory and often treacherous search for the 'real self' behind our more familiar self-images (Martin, 2010)." The mask can constitute the persona, the "outer self" that we wear throughout our lives. We see this clearly in people whose persona becomes their whole life. For example, Cary Grant, at age 62, retired from the movies. He remarked, "I pretended to be somebody I wanted to be until finally I became that person. Or he became me."

Because it is "golden" the mask of the persona seems very attractive and valuable, as in Cary Grant's case. Yet the mask encases, and conceals, a needy child who cries out to be heard. Savary notes that during the same dream, Marie became resourceful and actually telephoned a goldsmith, who agreed to remove the mask. The goldsmith here represents a healing or therapeutic force—a therapist or a spiritual guide—who can help remove the mask that we wear in our daily lives. Acknowledging the golden mask around the child poses other questions: "How did I forget this other child I had? How did the golden mask get put on the child? Do I sometimes find my mask valuable to me?"

It takes a long time, perhaps a lifetime, to learn how to take off the mask and "become the person we were meant to be." Poet May Sarton (1974) expresses the task beautifully:

Now I become myself
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces...

Discovering our mask, our persona, is one of the chief tasks of the second half of life. Our mask is what mediates our relationship between our subjectivity and the demands of the wider world. We live much of our lives in a masquerade, as Proust suggested, in the last part of *In Search of Lost Time*, when the hero finds himself again with his old friends and comrades, this time at a masquerade party. So much of our lives is lived in this sort of masquerade party, pressured by conformity in all kinds of ways. In later life, we have an opportunity to discover what is true of ourselves, and this is the task of individuation (Psychological Perspectives, 2013). Authentic life planning is a response to this challenge, to the life we are given.

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This article is part of my book-in-progress, *Dreams for the Second Half of Life*. To learn more about my project on dreamwork and aging, contact me at: hrmoody@yahoo.com

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