
Chapter 5 (excerpt)

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LIFE

She saw now that the strong impulses which had once wrecked
her happiness were the forces that had enabled her
to rebuild her life out of the ruins.

—ELLEN GLASGOW, BARREN GROUND

The above quotation from Ellen Glasgow reminds us that as the Self guides and energizes our journey of transformation, we will repeatedly experience life as a paradox. As Glasgow points out, the desires that seem to be wrecking our life in the present may be the Self at work, serving our soul and creating the foundation of our future.

I left my business and began to study psychology because I liked the idea of helping people learn more about how to transform themselves and their lives. I soon discovered that this big change in direction, which I had struggled so hard to make, was merely a beginning, the first step on a much longer journey. How well this journey was to continue depended upon how much more I was willing to learn about myself. I also had to accept that while this change put me on a road to being more authentic and fulfilled, it didn't mean I would easily find happiness and contentment. Life is wonderful and life is difficult. That's the contradictory reality of the soul.

Our most challenging task is to not deaden joy, wonder and passion in our efforts to cope with the contradictions that life creates. None of us can escape pain, loss, frustration or loneliness. The belief that we can somehow evade or transcend the human

condition is a lie. We would be mistaken to believe we are doing something wrong when we find ourselves battered by the experiences of being alive. This is simply the condition of being human.

As I have said, in addition to being difficult, life is also paradoxical. Sometimes doing what appears to be the wrong thing brings the right result. In these cases, the Self is still directing us toward growth and wholeness. When I sold my business and went back to school, even though I had a young family to support, I violated the conventional wisdom of that era. Many members of my family and some friends considered me selfish and even wondered about my sanity. I appeared to be doing the “wrong” thing, yet knew I was being guided by a deeper source.

When a young man, Gary, came to see me he had discovered that his wife, Robin, was having an affair. Gary was shattered. Over time, however, he began to realize that he had wanted Robin as his wife with no cost to himself. He didn’t want to risk letting himself be known. He had stayed quiet, uncommunicative and controlled, while always needing to be bolstered by her admiration. Eventually Robin became attracted to a man who was willing to take risks by being more personally open, revealing more of himself, listening and showing interest in her.

Robin’s infidelity caused Gary to open his eyes to his own failure as a partner. Paradoxically, it enabled him to access the emotional side of himself so necessary in relationships. His suffering touched the heart of his wife, who had grown cold toward him. Gary was courageous because he was willing to look into the situation for understanding, without taking the way out of thinking of himself as a victim and simply rejecting the person he loved. As a result of his courage, both he and Robin found their personalities and their humanity enlarged by these experiences.

Another woman I worked with had considered herself both a good wife and a successful schoolteacher, and was just as devastated as Gary when she found out her husband was leaving her for another man. After some serious soul-searching Kathleen began to see how she had covered her thoughts and fears about his coolness, and her intuition that he was not fully present in their relationship,

with years of keeping busy. In this case her husband's transgression was the needle that punctured the illusion of a good life that she, as well as he, had been sacrificing to maintain. Our illusions and our false images of ourselves die hard. Yet, once they are dead, we feel a new sense of freedom and inner stability. Kathleen realized that she no longer had to secretly fear an unacknowledged reality and could now pursue a more honest relationship.

While I've learned a lot from my work with people, I first began to notice how often doing the wrong thing transforms life for the better as I was studying fairy tales, legends and religious stories. Many of our best-known stories are filled with characters who change everything with an act of disobedience or even impulsive rage. It seems as if they are urged on by an inner compulsion to act, to assert themselves, even in the face of punishment and disgrace. In fact, if they didn't break the rules of common sense, good manners or ethical behavior, in many cases there would be no heroic adventure and no story to tell. In the legends of King Arthur, the knight Parsifal failed in his first few attempts to find the Holy Grail because he didn't ask the right question. But he didn't ask the question because he had been taught it was impolite to question one's host.

In the fairy tale "The Frog King," a spoiled princess loses her golden ball when it bounces into a nearby well. A frog who lives in the well offers to retrieve the ball if she will become his friend. The princess happily agrees at the prospect of getting her ball back. But as days go by she becomes disgusted with the frog's persistent companionship. Finally she is so sick of him that she snatches him up and smashes him against the wall. Astonishingly, her selfish, violent act transforms the frog into a prince, and the prince and princess fall in love and marry.

Another well-known story tells us about the country woman who has what seems like the good fortune to marry a rich nobleman named Bluebeard. While she enjoys a life of prestige and wealth, her husband gives her the responsibility of taking care of their mansion, with the exception of one room that she is forbidden to enter. She enters it anyway and discovers the mutilated bodies of Bluebeard's six former wives. Her disobedience almost costs her

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life when her husband detects her infraction. But it also saves her from the fate of the wives that preceded her. When her brother kills her husband, she inherits his fortune.

In story after story we find forbidden acts and irrational behaviors. There are doors that shouldn't be opened, forests that must not be entered, flowers not to be picked, people and creatures that are hideous, and rewards for people who act in disgraceful ways. These tales are meant to remind us how the Self often works to violate practicality or morality and lead us to a new and better life.

Sex and Love

Discussing sexuality means discussing love, which is just as problematic for us as sex. When we are children, the love of our parents provides the psychological foundation upon which our lives and sense of stability and well-being will be based. As we grow beyond childhood, love in its many forms, or the absence of love, is the essential feature of many patterns and turning points of our life. I believe that when we are old and reflecting back on our life, we may find ourselves asking, “Who loves me?” “Whom do I love?” and “What has love meant to me?”

Jung reminds us in his essay, “The Love Problem of a Student,” that “love is a force of destiny whose power reaches from heaven to hell.” From what I see in the media and observe in my professional experience, I have to reluctantly conclude that love and sexuality seem to be spending more time in hell than heaven. Because of the power of these forces within our culture, however, we can no longer afford to leave them to fate, for we and those for whom we care can easily be injured and often devastated by them.

Jung continued his discussion on love by urging us to appreciate its profound complexity in order to understand its problems. We know, for instance, that love, in its breadth, touches every aspect of our lives. Intellectually, we recognize that love’s problems can be ethical, philosophical, practical, social, psychological, religious, physiological, aesthetic, and much more. We may use common terms like puppy love, infatuation, or romantic love; psychological terms like

projection or need-driven; or spiritual terms such as eros or agape. But love itself is a deeply personal experience that we are in danger of diluting whenever we try to label it. And our labeling may instead distance us from the experience and its real impact on us.

Like love, sexuality is also an intensely personal experience and therefore leads to intense personal problems. Even if we try to consider sexuality impersonally (whether from a clinical standpoint or a recreational one), at the moment “relationship” enters the picture so does spirituality—and we are instantly in the realm of archetypal and transcendent forces, the dimensions of sex and spirit, our two most profound instincts.

Whenever sexuality and love join together in our lives, the result is stormy emotions, uncontrollable longings, deep despair and ecstasy, secret terrors, and other feelings that can be as painful as they are blissful. No wonder Freudian theory reduced all of our problems to issues of sexuality! However, in spite of the raw power of sexuality, the way we deal with it is what is truly important, as it reflects our spiritual view of ourselves. Psychologically, how we deal with sexuality reflects to what extent we love or hate ourselves, and to what extent we are alienated from our soul—and therefore from all life.