

“A Heart Filled with the Color of Light”
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How many of you have heard of the character in Greek mythology called Icarus? For those who haven't, he donned wings made of wax and feathers and flew too close to the sun, which melted the wax and sent him plummeting into the sea. Icarus is with us today -- in popular songs by artists as varied as Joni Mitchell, Counting Crows, Iron Maiden, Third Eye Blind, and the gifted singer-songwriter in our midst this morning. Also in video games, poetry by giants like W. H. Auden and William Carlos Williams, and movies like Planet of the Apes and the James Bond thriller, “Die Another Day.”

The word “myth” is often used to mean an untrue tale. Its real meaning, though, is a story so true that it happens over and over again. What is the enduring truth in the myth of Icarus?

He is a character in the complex and disturbing tale of the Minotaur. King Minos of Crete was embroiled in a power struggle with his brothers. He asked Poseidon, god of the sea, for a white bull as a sign of divine approval. Poseidon obliged, but directed Minos to sacrifice the bull in his honor. But once he saw the white bull, Minos was overcome by a desire to possess rather than sacrifice it. His wife, Pasiphae, fell victim to similar passions, but they took the form of sexual congress with this symbol of divinity. . . . (These things happen in Greek mythology.) The result was a ferocious misbegotten monster, half-man and half-bull – the Minotaur.

Fearful that he had already angered Poseidon, Minos hesitated to kill it. He turned to Daedalus, the most skilled of all craftsmen, to build a confinement for the monster – a labyrinth so complex that even Daedalus himself could barely find his way in and out of it. Daedalus had already built a very different labyrinth for Minos' daughter, Ariadne – a wide-open plaza for dancing.

Minos began to worry that Daedalus would share his knowledge with someone who would either kill the Minotaur or turn it loose. So he shut Daedalus up in a guarded tower, along with his son, a young man named Icarus. Daedalus immediately began plotting an escape. Minos controlled all the access routes by land and sea, but Daedalus fashioned wings of feathers and wax. As he and Icarus took flight, Daedalus told his son not to fly too low, near the water, or too high, near the sun. But Icarus became delirious with the joy of flying and suffered the fate that made him a legend.

King Minos' brothers weren't his only enemies. His son, Androgeus, was killed by the Athenians. Minos waged a war of vengeance on Athens. To make peace, the Athenians agreed to send seven young men and seven young women to Crete every seventh year, to be fed to the voracious Minotaur as an appeasement.

In the third cycle of this ghastly program of atonement, the Athenian hero Theseus volunteered to go to Crete in the place of one of the young men, in order to slay the Minotaur. He set out in a ship masted with a black sail, telling his father, Aegeus, that if he was successful, he would return flying a white sail instead.

When Theseus arrived in Crete, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, immediately fell in love with him. She drew on what she had learned from Daedalus about the labyrinth, telling Theseus how to find his way to the center, and giving him a ball of yarn to enable him to find his way back.

Theseus killed the minotaur and escaped with Ariadne; but he abandoned her on a nearby island. Enraged, she cast a spell on him, causing him to forget to change the sail from black to white. Distraught at seeing the black sail of his son's approaching ship, Theseus's father, Aegeus, threw himself into the water that would later bear his name -- the Aegean sea -- and drowned.

The unifying thread in this story is the steadfastly outward gaze of everyone in it. Minos is focused on power struggles. He reaches out to a god, not by seeking the divine within himself, but rather, by reducing divinity to an instrument of political strategy. The bull was a sacred symbol of the sun in his culture. What a great political endorsement it would make. But he could not resist keeping it as a glorification of himself -- a self he plainly did not see as shining brightly enough on its own.

His wife, Pasiphae, was overpowered by a similar urge to attach herself to a physical symbol of divinity. Her estimation of her own self-worth must have been as dim as her husband's sense of his.

Daedalus trained his gaze on the external objects of his craft. He had no sense of himself as anything nobler than a supple tool of power. Had it been awake, surely his spiritual self would have seen something terribly wrong about building a labyrinth to confine the minotaur, rather than urging everyone to address the wounds and animosities that created the monster to begin with.

Theseus and his father Aegeus also focused their attention outwardly. Rather than confront what caused their community to kill Minos's son, they schemed over how to escape from the unholy bargain they struck to make peace with Crete. Theseus's descent into the labyrinth may look like an inner journey, but it was in someone else's inner territory. Theseus's killing of the minotaur was the mirror image of what King Minos and his wife were doing in worshipping the white bull. They all looked to material objects to resolve spiritual conflicts.

All of these characters looked outwardly to find themselves. They confirmed the wisdom of Rumi's declaration that those who focus on the transient fall on their faces wherever they go. This focus assured that they would not develop the vision that could come only from looking into their own hearts -- confronting the wounds and demons waiting there.

No one can experience himself as whole and worthy without confronting his shadow side. The minotaur is a symbol of that universal shadow side, found deep within the labyrinth of our inner selves. The inner journey is the only way to transform the self from a maze-like prison into a true labyrinth, with a clear path from the outside to the center. The two labyrinths build by Daedalus – the containment structure for the minotaur and the wide-open dancing plaza for Ariadne – represent the polarities of this transformative possibility.

Avoiding the inner journey, these characters multiplied their tragedies -- and left their children to pay the price. Ariadne fell in love with Theseus “at first sight.” In that first moment, can another person be anything but a symbol of something we need? For her, Theseus must have personified escape from the labyrinth that her father, Minos, was making of his country.

Icarus was too young to do anything but follow his father, who saw their escape as just another engineering project. Blind to the spiritual realities, he thought they could leave behind the unholy misadventures to which he had lent his skills. Daedalus projected his own discipline as a craftsman onto his innocent, exuberant son, with fatal consequences.

When a person fails to address spiritual conflict by looking inward, the conflict will erupt externally as fate. The sacrificial ritual Poseidon expected from Minos did finally happen, in the fateful claiming of both Icarus and Aegeus by the sea.

Now, most of us aren't embroiled in violent and complex tragedies like those that these ancients created for themselves. But our culture does strongly encourage us to fix our gaze outwardly. We may tell ourselves we focus on “better things” than they did; but things are still things. The price we pay, in terms of joy and fulfillment in life, is every bit as dear. To say nothing of the price paid by our children for the unfinished spiritual business we bequeath to them.

I think this is what the sixteenth century Flemish master, Pieter Brueghel, was depicting in the painting shown on our order of service today. The two legs sticking up out of the water in the lower right corner are Icarus. The ploughman is plowing, the shepherd is herding, and the sailors are sailing their ship on by – all preoccupied with their own material concerns, oblivious to something of great spiritual import happening just outside their gaze.

In his poem about this painting, today's poet has the ploughman trying to instruct his son, but the young man is distracted by falling feathers and the sound of a splash in the ocean. “Look,” says his exasperated father, “I couldn't care if you heard the bloody voice of God.” Pointing to the seeds to be sown, he says “This is important.” The ploughman can say such a thing only because he has plowed thousands of miles in the same furrows without ever taking a downward, inward step. Only because in his ceaseless measuring of competing importances, of crops and yields and seeds and weather, he cannot see that the measure of all things is still the heart.

The downward, inward journey doesn't look pleasant. You're entitled to ask, why should we go there and wrestle with demons?

Well, first off, this is not really about wrestling with demons *per se*. In my experience – and I do have quite a bit -- that’s a bad strategy, because demons really love to wrestle. Win or lose, if they’ve got you wrestling with them, they’re delighted. But since we’ve seen the consequences of ignoring them, what’s the alternative? I say, to tell ourselves the plain factual truth about them. To look at the demons and say, “I am that too; and not ADD anything, such as “and I am going to kill them off or die trying.” Once we add any extenuations, the truth isn’t the truth any more.

To tell the truth about my demons, I have to let go of a demonless, perfectionist image of what I am supposed to be. King Minos and his wife had to attach themselves to a white bull symbolizing holiness in order to live up to that kind of self-image. This letting go is a tremendous challenge. We fear that if we are not the luminous, perfect image, we are nothing.

To let go, we need support from those who love us. But this shouldn’t obscure the inescapably solitary aspect of the work. We can return from the inner journeys and ask others to help us make meaning of them. But the downward, inward journey itself requires solitude.

If we can do this, a tremendous shift occurs – one worthy of that overused word, “transformative.” When transformation happens, the individual pieces of our lives do not change, and that includes the demons. The transformation lies in seeing the pieces from a place where we have not stood before. From there, our vision becomes clear, because the spiritual and material realities of human life are each seen for what they are. We can see a way for the demons that are our fate to be included in a life that moves toward the destiny we create.

What name should we give to that transformative place? We might call it deep self, the place within us below all the personal particulars. In our culture, we are trained to think of self as individual; but this is a mistaken projection of the outer reality of objects onto the inner reality of the spirit, which is transpersonal and nonparticular. On the other side of the demons, the same self is waiting for each of us. This is a place of stillness and pure presence, expansive enough to hold the material world within it, instead of being held within the material world, as our personal selves always are.

The mystics and pantheists would call this godliness. In the fourteenth century, the Christian priest and mystic Meister Eckhart got into serious trouble with the Catholic church for saying “God and I are one.” He found God within himself, rather than in some distant heaven. That idea was too frightening for a church that saw God as an external object of perfection to which humans could attach themselves in order to be saved. God as pure presence just wasn’t tactile enough.

We can never make this place of pure presence our permanent abode. We take the inner journey and find it, and then, as if wandering in a labyrinth, we lose and recover our bearings, again and again. Every time we take the inner journey, the way back in is different. And every person’s journey is different, despite the common destination we share. For Greg Greenway, the path is music. For you or me, it is something else. Whatever the path, we can become more accomplished at this kind of travel, so that more and more, we look up from ploughing our fields and sailing our ships and become present to the wonder of being alive.

At last, we see with a vision clear that it is the inner pathways that will take us home -- not to a place ruled by kings and sacred icons, but rather, to a heart filled with the color of light, and a peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.