

Symbols of the Soul: 4 - The soul as a traveller

Chapter 13 of Mysteries and Symbols of the Soul

In every culture there are fairy tales, myths, legends and parables in which people undertake a journey. Many of these travel stories refer to the great inner journey that man can undertake.

They arose from, and align with, a universal desire that is present in man: the unconscious or conscious desire to reach the Source of everything. It is an urge that originates from the spirit-spark, near the heart, in the centre of the microcosm.

An external journey from A to B within a certain timeframe, can be seen as the metaphor for an inner journey, following a path that leads to awareness and renewal. On that journey man develops – as a result of knowledge, experiences, contemplation and inner knowledge – a wider understanding of himself, the world and the source of everything. Because of this awareness he or she becomes receptive to energies with a higher frequency, which transform him or her. The person who arrives is therefore someone different from the person who set out for the journey. This is expressed in many famous classical stories, full of symbolism, on the inner journey that we can undertake ourselves, like:

- the exodus of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea and the desert to the promised land in 40 years, as described in the bible book *Exodus*;
- the life of Jesus according to the biblical gospels in which he went the way from Bethlehem to Calvary in 33 years;
- the legend on the fourth wise man from the East, Artaban, who cannot worship the new born king because he is occupied in helping his suffering fellow men on his journey;
- the *Hymn of the Pearl* in the apocryphal book '*The acts of Thomas*', in which a king's son is sent to Egypt by his parents to obtain a pearl of great price;
- medieval tales about knights on a quest for the holy grail;
- the journey of Dante Alighieri (symbol for the personality-soul) in the divine comedy (*Divina Commedia*) in which he is led through hell to the top of Purgatory by Virgil (symbol of the soul) and from there may enter paradise with his beloved Beatrice (symbol for the spirit-soul);
- the dream-song of the Norwegian king Olav Åsteson in which he falls asleep on Christmas Eve (24th December), sleeps through the whole period of the 13 holy nights and days and has inner experiences somewhat like those of Dante in the *Divine Comedy*;
- the mystery path of seven days that Christian Rosenkreutz (symbol of the personality-soul) goes in order to be present at the alchemical wedding between the queen (symbol of the soul) and the king (symbol of the spirit-soul), as Johann Valentin Andreae describes this in his profoundly symbolic story;
- the hard way that the wooden puppet Pinocchio (symbol of the material man) must go in order to become really human, through challenges and resistances. At the end of the story Pinocchio transforms into a boy.

Anyone who travels much gains much experience, is confronted with himself and may lose certain prejudices. Traveling offers the opportunity to look at yourself against a different background. That does not automatically imply that someone who travels much thereby becomes a wiser and more soulful person.

There are people who spend more time planning and organising their holidays than they do living their lives. Holidays can be very wholesome for a person, because he or she can be temporarily empty of the usual daily worries and so obtain new strength. Traveling can be an escape from a life that is considered dull or stressful. That is why it is sometimes said that the fool seeks his fortune far away but a wise man cultivates it where he happens to be.

The inner journey

When you are young, traveling is part of your education. When you are older, it is part of your experience. There may arrive a moment for a person when there is no great desire anymore for external traveling, but that his or her interest is mainly focused on the inner journey – on discovering and experiencing new regions in the domain of the soul. Great thinkers wrote and spoke about such an inner journey. Five quotes on this subject:

'We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.'
(Stephen R. Covey)

'The longest journey is the inner journey of him who has chosen his destiny.'
(Dag Hammarskjöld)

'The spiritual journey does not consist of arriving at a new destination where a person obtains what he did not have or becomes what he is not. It consists in the dissipation of one's own ignorance concerning oneself and one's life, and the gradual growth of that understanding which begins the spiritual awakening.'
(Aldous Huxley)

'The journey that one undertakes in the inner life is as long as the distance between life and death; it is the longest journey one experiences in life and one must have prepared everything well, so that one does not have to return after having covered a certain distance.'
(Hazrat Inayat Khan)

'Without stepping out the door, you can know the world. Without looking through the window, you can see heaven's way. The longer you travel, the less you know. Therefore: the sage knows without traveling, perceives without looking, completes without acting.'
(Lao Tzu, 47)

If we compare the human soul to a traveller, a good understanding of the subject is important. Man is a very complex being. Hermes Trismegistus characterizes him quite rightly as a great miracle. The human body is a majestic organism and a harmonious developed personality-soul can be regarded as a weak reflection of the divine. But man is potentially much more than that! He is a microcosm and the whole organization of the universe is reflected in his being.

Carriage, horse, coachman and passenger

We can compare the human body and the three grades of the soul with a carriage that is pulled by a horse and driven by a coachman in order to carry out the plans of the traveller, seated in the carriage. The carriage symbolizes the physical body. It is a beautiful vehicle that enables us to move, is subject to wear and tear but may, with timely repairs, remain in reasonable condition but must be discarded at a given time. The horse in front of the carriage is the symbol here of the personality-soul: an intelligent and sensitive animal with its own self-awareness and character with a tendency to follow its own impulses. The horse is what we normally call the 'I'. More

precisely: the many 'I's' in us together denote the horse in this metaphor. The 'I' as such is not essential because it is a social construction that is necessary to function in the material world and the world of our psychological experiences. In our lives we play all sorts of roles that suit a specific context: child, partner, parent, grandparent, citizen, club member, customer, employee, patient, and so on.

All these roles are not essential and can be compared to small vortices in a larger whirlpool that we call 'I'. Although our attitudes and behaviour differ from situation to situation, we are still conscious of the fact that these roles are all played by the same person. That is a good thing, because otherwise we would develop a serious personality disorder. When spiritually oriented people search for their true selves, they often search in the dimension of the horse, of the personality-soul, where it cannot be found. It is not difficult to add a spiritual self to all the other selves, but that has nothing to do with true spirituality, but more with an effort to feel better, which of course is not wrong in itself. True spirituality always focuses on the dimension of the soul, of pure consciousness. Spirituality is about obtaining a different, broader and higher consciousness. In our metaphor, the coachman stands for the soul. It is his task to control the horse, that is the personality-soul, but in practice it often appears that he is sleeping and that the horse has taken over and determines the route. Our problem is that we almost always automatically react to stimuli coming at us from the outside world through a limited, narrow consciousness. We identify ourselves with our material body (the carriage) and our personality-soul (the horse). Some of our selves certainly have a function and are useful, while others are less compatible with a spiritual path.

These selves dissolve automatically after the death of the physical body because they are based on transient forms. Real spirituality aims at eliminating identification with the selves so that the soul may awaken and take up the reins. It is not about mastering them and keeping them under control, but with the correct coordination between coachman and horse. The horse then feels exactly where the coachman wants to go. If the horse would decide where to direct the carriage, the passenger in the carriage will certainly not arrive where he should be. The passenger in the carriage stands for the spirit-soul who has some understanding of the divine plan of creation and has the necessary qualities to cooperate in its execution. When the driver does not, or will not, listen carefully to the wishes of the passenger, the passenger does not accomplish what he wants to achieve because the coachman then determines his own way and destination. It is therefore important that the soul becomes receptive to the impulses emanating from the spiritual-soul. This makes it possible for an immortal soul to develop.

Game of the goose

The spiritual path is a way inward for you are approaching the divine core of the microcosm, the spirit-spark. This is expressed in a special way in the symbolism of a classic board game: the game of the goose. The game of the goose has existed since the fourteenth century and is more than just a children's game. It can be seen as a wisdom game in which the human path of life is depicted through the use of a variety of symbols. The players of the game of the goose actually go a path through life with their travel companion: the goose.

In many cultures, this water bird which can take off and descend as it pleases, symbolises the human soul. Geese are also associated with soul qualities such as vigilance, love and loyalty. In the event of bad news, they immediately start to honk, and a goose pair will stay together for life. The Greeks associated the goose with the gods Hera, Apollo, Eros and Hermes (the messenger of

the gods). In ancient Egypt, the goose was the bird that laid the legendary cosmic egg. With Indian tribes, the goose symbolises the migration that leads to inner change. And in ancient India, the goose represented the desire of the soul to be freed from samsara, from the wheel of birth and death, from reincarnation and karma.³⁹

The basic form of most varieties of the goose game is an oval representation of a coiled spiral that starts in the lower left corner and turns counter clockwise with two or three turns inwards.

The midfield, in which initially the game rules were written, is an open space.

Over the centuries, games of the goose have been depicted in more or less the same form. A board has 63 numbered squares, 62 of which are located in separate squares. Number 63 is the destination: the player who reached it first has won the game. The numbers on the goose board can be seen as a referral to the age or the stature of man, represented by the years of his age. 63 was approximately the age that people reached at that time, and has at the same time a symbolic connotation, as it is the outcome of nine times seven years. Nine is the highest single-digit number, it expresses a fullness. Seven is a sacred number and refers, among other things, to the cycles of 7 years that can be distinguished in the development of the personality-soul.

In the age period of 0 to 7 years, the development of a human child is directed on the development of the physical body. This first life stage ends with teething.

Between the age of 7 -14, the ethereal body, that is associated with life processes, is growing. The child is then more capable of controlling his body and reaches sexual maturity.

From 14 to 21 years the astral body in particular, which relates to feelings and desires, is developed. The growing person is then connected more strongly with the karma of the microcosm that he lives in.

The mental body is developed in the period of 21 to 28 years. According to most present-day laws, people are full-grown at eighteen, but research shows that the brain only fully develops between the 24th and 30th year of our life. Until the brain is full-grown, the so-called executive functions like starting something up, slowing down keeping our impulses in check, organising, planning, focusing and perseverance do not perform optimally in many young adults.



image 13: the game of goose is a game of wisdom about the life journey of man in relation to the soul

Becoming like a child

Based on all we have now discussed, you might think that the last square of the goose board, number 63, stands for death, because death is the definite end of the physical body. The game of the goose, however, concerns the interaction between the personality- soul and the true Soul – the Soul that cannot die, as it is part of eternity. The centre field is not about death, but about victory. In an old-time board of the game of the goose, we see in the midfield a picture of a young girl sitting on her knees with two geese beside her, feeding the foremost goose.

This young girl as the born-again personality-soul, the foremost goose that is fed by her as the Soul with a capital S, and the other goose as the Spirit-soul. In the young girl we recognize the surrender of the personality-soul to the true Soul. We can also make a connection here with the fact that people in whom the soul works powerfully, are like children because they are open, innocent and eager to learn, and can marvel and rejoice over everyday things. This is reminiscent of Jesus' statement: *'If you do not repent and become like children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whoever considers himself small as this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'* (Matthew 18: 4-5).

Repentance implies that as a result of an inner reversal everything within us that does not conform to the spiritual path, shall die. Death is pictured in square 58 in the game of the goose. A player who lands on that number must start all over again. If the old personality-soul has not died during life, it will die soon after the death of the physical body. Due to the law of reincarnation, in the microcosm that we are, must in time be born a new physical body and a new personality-soul. In squares 1 to 62 there is constant interaction between the personality-soul and the true Soul, but it is much less in intensity than is the case in midfield, the field of victory. On the squares denoting a multiple of nine as well as on the squares denoting a multiple of nine

minus four, geese are pictured. Those squares symbolize moments with a fruitful interaction between the personality-soul and the true Soul. A player who enters such a square develops faster and may continue with the same number of squares as dots on the die.

A young child is still in contact with the world of the soul, but round about its sixth year that connection will weaken. That is as it should be because the child has to build its personality.

That is why the bridge is situated on square six. A player who comes on the square of the bridge has grown and may continue to square 12.

The next square with a special meaning is the inn at number 19. The young man or woman disconnects himself from the parental home and enters into new social contacts at the inn. This often creates a fascination with pleasure and diversions, which makes it even more difficult for the soul to express itself in the personality. This situation slows down the inner development and therefore the player who comes into the inn must skip a turn.

Is this all there is?

When someone has passed the age of thirty years, he or she is usually well settled with a life partner, children, a position and property. It is then quite a job to manage everything, especially if, in addition to the crowded life and the stress, there are also emotionally charged conflicts. Important choices have been made and there is at least some understanding of how the outer world works. An uneasy feeling may come up that is strikingly worded in a pop song, by the Dutch band Doe Maar (Just do it).

*Sit down, 'cause I want to talk to you for a moment
I have not been as happy as I used to be a long time ago
No, don't get scared: I don't want to leave you, no. There is something, and I can't do anything about it*

*We have no lack of anything, we have it all
A child, a home, a car and each other
But, you know, darling, what is the matter, ah
I am looking for just a bit more, I only don't know what*

*Is this all
Is this all
Is this all there is?*

That is when soul can begin to make itself known.

Then a thirst for the living water may develop, a yearning for the inspiration of the soul. This thirst can be quenched with the water from the well at number 31.

It is important that the traveller on his way through life shall take his time for this, and that he realizes that he cannot solve his problem by himself and therefore must accept the help of others. That is why he is only allowed to continue when a fellow traveller comes to the well.

Around the age of 42, a new crisis may occur – a crisis that is at the same time also an opportunity. The traveller has the feeling that he has become entangled in a thorn bush or a maze. He now travels paths that have little or no satisfaction for him. It is then advisable to take a few steps back, to find out what his deepest desire is and to pay attention to this. The traveller

who arrives at square 42 with the thorn bush, must therefore return to square 39. Ten years later, on square 52, the distress experienced in outer life can be so great that the traveller longs for deliverance from what he experiences as a prison so that the soul can breathe freely again.

He is now open to external help in the form of, for example, books, lectures, symposiums, courses, reflection groups and online spiritual information.

The traveller on this square can now only continue if he is rescued by fellow traveller.

Overcoming death

From that moment on it is essential that the traveller is constantly aware of his mortality and that he will centre his life on the motto 'memento mori' that is: 'remember to die' in order to win True Life, in accordance with the lines of the mystic Angelus Silesius:

*'And if you do not live in God, this truth to you appears:
you are and will remain for dead, though live a thousand years.*

*I need not answer death, for I die all the time,
that is how True Life conquers me – I live through death sublime.'*

The traveller who has died inwardly and has thus passed square 58 (death) in the game of the goose, can now start the work on the resurrection body – on the weaving of the golden wedding garment. Thus, death is overcome in a spiritual sense.