

A Reflection on the Russian folktale by Aleksandr Afanas'ev

The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life



SCOPE OF THE BOLD KNIGHT REFLECTION

The shamanic world, like the world of the folktale, is a world of imagination, an inner world, a world of the psyche, of Soul. This article introduces the landscape of this 'psycho-shamanic' world by means of a sequence of reflections on a traditional Russian folktale from the collection of Aleksandr Afanas'ev (1945 and 1973), 'The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life'.

These reflections are meant to be chewed over and digested slowly. Hence, they are scattered in bite-sized pieces throughout the article.

The reflections provide a musing, and occasionally mildly amusing, counterpoint to the *Soulfulness* book. 'The Bold Knight' folktale both implicitly reflects the shamanic landscape and has a powerful psychological resonance. For the reader, the Bold Knight's journey can be a journey into the depths of Soul.

Please, keep in mind, these reflections – like folktales, like life – are not in sequential time.



THE INTENTION OF THE JOURNEY

A CERTAIN KING grew very old and his eyes began to fail. He heard that beyond the ninth land, in the tenth kingdom, there was a garden with the apples of youth, and in it a well with the water of life; if an aged man ate one of those apples, he would grow young, and if a blind man's eyes were bathed with that water, he would see. That king had three sons. So he sent his eldest forth on horseback to find that garden and bring him the apples and the water, for he wanted to be young again and to see.



Reflection : Journey Of The Soul

The story is a journey. The journey has a clear intention from the outset. It is to obtain the apples of youth and the water of life for the king. We are told, 'if an aged man ate one of those apples, he would grow young, and if a blind man's eyes were bathed with that water, he would see.' So, the end of the story is where we start from. We are already outside of normal, sequential time. Here, time runs in a circle.

Apples of youth and water of life: the story speaks to the Soul about inner youthfulness and insight, the spiritual qualities of vitality and wisdom.

The story, as we shall see, is for Everyman, male and female. For you the reader and me the writer. It is about kingship in the sense of self-mastery, being master of our own will.

Like the story, a shamanic journey is a voyage of discovery beginning with a clear intention.



DEATH AT THE CROSSROADS

The eldest son set out for the distant kingdom; he rode and rode and came to a pillar. On this pillar three roads were marked: if he followed the first, the marker said, his horse would be sated and he himself would be hungry; if he followed the second, it said, he would lose his own life; if he followed the third, it said, his horse would be hungry and he himself sated. He thought and thought and finally took the road that promised food for himself.



Reflection : The Void or an Adventure

The young knight is at a crossroads. No doubt he has enjoyed the companionship of peers, full of bold idealism and grand plans, convinced of his own immortality. Now, the king has sent him out alone to look the future in the face, only to see there the reality of all those adult pressures, dread responsibilities, struggles. Naïve mistakes, failures, delusions and fantasies. Times of heartbreak and despondency.

It was a simple thing, I dropped a glass onto the kitchen floor and as I swept up the shards I thought of all those future times when I shall smash a glass on the kitchen floor and have to clear it up, and I felt that touch of pure despair.

It's hard for young men and women, faced with such adult pressures before they have gained the wit and wisdom to handle them. It's a critical time. As a psychotherapist I sometimes help young people over the hump from being teenagers to accepting themselves as mature adults walking into an unknown future.

When a young person fails to receive the help they need, tragedy can follow. According to a recent report by The Lancet Commission, self-harm is the largest cause of death among 20-24 year old young people in the UK; in 2013, 329 people in their early twenties died from a self-harm related injury. Part of the problem for young people is the lack of any clear rite of passage in Western society. We need to discover a straightforward shamanic rite of passage.

There at the crossroads, contemplating the options of death, hunger, or fullness, what the young knight sees most of all is the inevitable, overwhelming all-pervading reality of death. He could turn back, into the void of non-being: it is not death but non-being which the suicide desires, giving up on life is giving up on being. Or he could choose a half-life, starved of vitality, withdrawn, avoiding risk, intensity, engagement, adventure.

Or else he could grasp hold of life in all its fullness, with all its pressures, responsibilities, struggles. Its naïve mistakes, failures, delusions and fantasies. Its times of heartbreak and of despondency. Even of death! As well as all its adventures, strivings, successes, insights. Its times of ecstatic joy and love. And to do it with relish. When the young knight chooses to go forward into life, this is when he takes the mantle of Bold Knight.



FALLING DEEP UNDERGROUND

The bold knight approached a beautiful house, opened the gates, and without doffing his cap nor bowing his head galloped into the yard. The owner, a widow who was not very old, called to him: "Welcome, dear guest!" She plied him with viands and heady drinks. He regaled himself and lay down to sleep on the bench. She said: "It is not fitting nor honourable for a gallant man to lie alone! Lie with

my daughter, beautiful Dunia." He was pleased with this proposal. Dunia(said, "Lie closer to me, so that we will be warmer." He moved toward her and fell through the bed. In the cellar into which he fell he was compelled to grind raw rye all day long and he could not climb out.



Reflection : The Dark Mirror

I feel for the lad, he is cocky and cocksure, arrogant and self-centred. He has no respect or regard for others, and is so innocent of the world that he is at the mercy of the worldly-wise widow. It is easy for her to bend his will to hers, to seduce him from his task of bringing the apples of youth and the water of life. When she offers him her beautiful daughter Dunia, he seems to be onto a good thing; 'Dunia' means 'seemingly good' in Russian. He falls prey.

Deep underground, he is 'compelled to grind raw rye all day long', and cannot climb out. These words powerfully evoke the daily grind of being stuck in an interminable, vicious cycle. As Flann O'Brian (1967) put it, "Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable". This is just how I often felt during a long period of feeling depressed and stuck. As long as my ego was immature, I was trapped in a vicious cycle which limited my emotional and psychological growth, narrowed my Soul.

The psychological term for a vicious cycle is a 'maintaining cycle', because it is a stable, self-maintaining structure within the psyche. The shamanic term for a vicious cycle is a 'Dark Mirror'. In *Soulfulness* there is a description of the Dark Mirror and a method for use by a shamanic guide to help a client break the Dark Mirror and realise a self-sustaining and Soulful 'Light Mirror'. The Dark Mirror/Light Mirror model is based on the shamanic Medicine Wheel.



LIFE UNDERGROUND

In vain the king waited and waited for his eldest son to come back. Finally he gave-up waiting. Then he sent his second son to get the apples and the water. This bold knight took the same road and suffered the same fate as his elder brother, falling deep underground where he is compelled to grind raw rye all day long.



Reflection :The Lower World

There are strong parallels between, this underground place, the shamanic 'Lower World', and Assagioli's 'Lower Unconscious' (see figure on the next page).

The Lower Unconscious represents a person's psychological past and their pre-personal struggle to gain a sense of their individuality. It is the place into which we repress the memories of traumas with which our conscious mind is unable to cope. For example, referring to the Chest of Drawers story, when the child says, "Mummy, Mummy, look at my picture of myself," and she repeatedly replies, "Not now, I'm busy," the child's unbearable feelings of rejection, hurt and disappointment are repressed into the Lower Unconscious.

This place where the bold knight resides – deep underground, compelled to grind raw rye – is the past. He is trapped in the past. We infer that the earliest and strongest female impression upon this man's Soul was made by his mother. He carries her image within him, and if he experiences in a woman – or projects onto her – qualities which seem to match what is present in his own Soul, then he sees his object of attraction as his soul-mate, falls subject to her will, and suffers the daily grind of being trapped in a repetitive, maintaining cycle. The wily widow is really a tyrannical part of himself.

Being alone with my mother between the ages of two and six left an enduring impression on my Soul. She was wracked by fears, characterised by my memory of lying in bed with her listening to the engine of a flying bomb. Then, when the engine stopped, we listened to

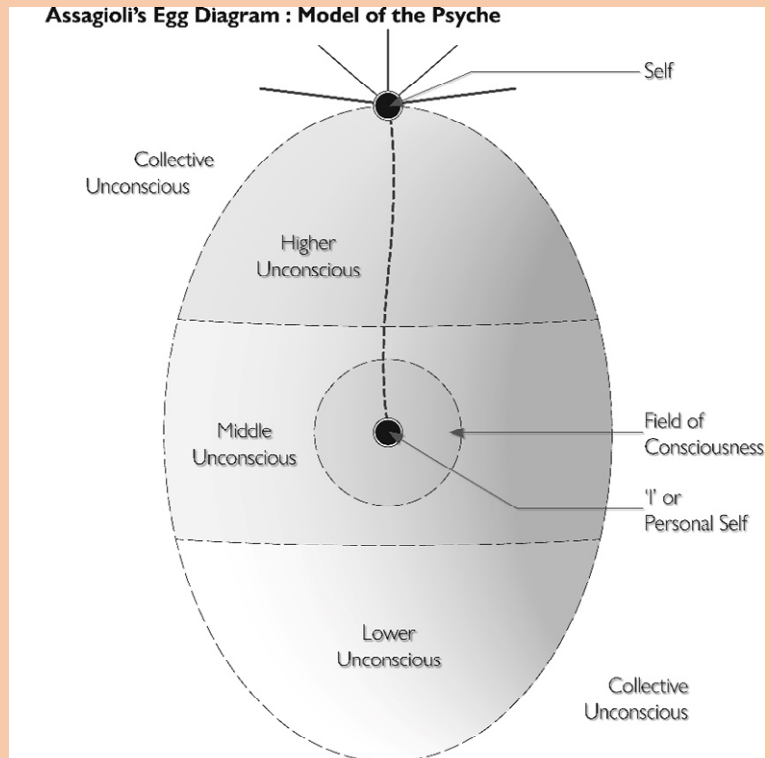
the silence, waiting for the bang. Even now, though I vividly remember the incident and am surprised that my young self knew so much about flying bombs, but I have no recall of the fear I must surely have felt. Even more surprisingly, I have always remembered this incident. Despite many years in therapy, I only realised how I had repressed the fear when I wrote this piece.

Living with my mother in an oppressive atmosphere of fear, I found the closeness between us so unbearable that I was unable to use the word 'we'. The word 'we' implied an intimacy which to my young self was excruciating. I created a barrier against intimacy which persisted into my adult life. This was my maintaining cycle. My young child cut himself off from the insufferable agony of a sustained trauma, and buried it deep 'underground'. However, the trauma still had the power to distort my adult life and to narrow my Soul.

In the tale, a powerful metaphor is offered in that both mother and object of attraction are present together. The mother repeatedly – one brother after another – seeks to initiate sexual intimacy with one who is 'seemingly good', that is, who matches his soul-image. One meaning of 'grind' is 'sexual intercourse': the mother has certainly caught the man in a sexual trap.

Psychotherapists and counsellors may recognise how certain men, carrying their soul-image within them, seem repeatedly to marry their own mothers, and how certain women seem repeatedly to marry their own fathers.

This is life underground, survival at the cost of being subject to the mastery of past traumas and an inner tyrannical mother.



BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

From long waiting for his sons, the king became very sad.

Now the youngest son began to beg his father's permission to go forth to seek the garden. But his father refused to let him go, saying, "A curse is on you, little son! Your older brothers perished on this quest and you, who are still a tender youth, will perish even sooner than they." But the youngest son kept imploring his father and promised him that he would bear himself more bravely for the king's sake than any brave knight. His father thought and thought and finally gave the boy his blessing for the journey.



Reflection : Maturing Ego

In the symbolism of the story, the three sons comprise a composite individual at different stages of maturity, the arrival of each son representing a later psychological stage. Thus, the youngest son, being the latest, is the most psychologically advanced. The story messes around with sequential time.

The king will not let his 'little son' go on the quest because he is 'still a tender youth'. The curse which is upon him, as his brothers have shown, is the lack of psychological maturity to equip him for the task. It takes time, much thought, persistence and courage to overcome the curse of naïveté and make the act of will necessary to win the blessing of his master the king.

We learn more about the king. It is the king who is the initiator of the quest to gain the apples of youth and the water of life. It is the king who is the recipient of these qualities. It is the king who is the seer and overseer of the journey. Psychologically, the king represents the 'Higher Self', 'a deeper source of being beyond the conscious personality' (Firman & Gila 1997), the conscious personality being represented by the bold knight.

In the story, the king's restraining hand prevents the youngest son from starting on the quest too soon, lest he perish. Likewise, as psychotherapists and counsellors know, the Soul in its wisdom prevents us from learning traumatic secrets before we are psychologically ready to contain them in consciousness, lest we be re-traumatised.



A BATH AND A BEATING

When the youngest son reached the widow's house, she said to him, "It is not fitting for a knight nor honourable for a gallant man to lie alone! Lie with my beautiful Dunia." But he answered: "No, little aunt! A visitor must not do that without first making certain preparations. Why don't you heat up a bath for me? And let your daughter lead me to the bathhouse."

So the widow prepared a very, very hot bath and led him to the bathhouse with the beautiful Dunia. Dunia was just as wicked as her mother; she made him go in first, locked the door to the bath, and stood in the hall. But the bold knight pushed open the door and dragged Dunia with him into the bathroom. He had three rods – one of iron, one of lead, and one of cast iron – and with these rods he began to belabour the young girl.

She wept and implored him to stop. But he said: "Tell me, wicked Dunia, what you have done with my brothers!" She said that they were in the cellar grinding raw grain. Then only did he let her go. They came back to the main room, tied one ladder to another, and freed his brothers.

He told them to go home; but they were ashamed to appear before their father, because they had lain down with Dunia and had failed in their mission. So they wandered about in the fields and woods.



Reflection : Masculine And Feminine Split

By the time the third son reaches the widow's house, he has gained enough psychological maturity and sense of self to equip him to deal with her attempts to seduce him from his mission. He is no longer dominated by an image of a tyrannical mother. He distances himself by referring to the widow as 'little aunt'.

The bold knight belabours Dunia with three rods to get the truth out of her. Multiplicity in folktales denotes emphasis, so excessive force is signified by the knight having three rods with him. In my first draft, I was so shocked and appalled by this scene of callous, premeditated brutality by the hero of our tale towards this young woman that I left it out.

However, it would be wrong to ignore the phenomena of violence, oppression, possession, mutilation, injustice, disregard and denial of basic human rights which men worldwide inflict upon women. There seems to be a massive split in the collective psyche of our human species which serves to repress and deny the power, wit, dignity and nobility which women possess.

When I read this passage to my friend Bernadette, she responded, "It sounds to me like you are acting out the split by putting women on a pedestal, to be knocked down." Ah!

The scene is meant to shock: to command our attention and force us to reflect on the split in our own Soul between masculine and feminine. As Bernadette's response reveals, the split is subtle and insidious.

For much of my adult life the masculine held sway, not by using physical force, but by using the force of my ambition, facility with words, leadership ability, and a capacity to take risks. I split off and denied the feminine side of my nature, being thoughtful yet not self-reflective, passionate yet far from feelings, an effective communicator yet unreceptive, intelligent yet without insight.

We shall return to this most important theme of feminine and masculine before this tale is done.

After forcing Dunia to tell him what has happened to his elder brothers, the bold knight releases them by lowering a long ladder deep into the underground cellar. We shall, for the moment, leave the elder brothers to wander about in the fields and woods in shame, while we follow the bold knight on his journey.



THE MAIDEN'S QUESTION

The knight went on; he rode and rode till he came to a farmhouse. He entered; there sat a pretty young girl weaving towels. He said: "God bless you, pretty maiden!" And she answered: "Thank you! What are you doing, good knight? Are you running away from an adventure or are you trying to find one?" "I am trying to carry out a mission, pretty maiden," said the knight "I am going beyond the ninth land, to the

tenth kingdom, to a certain garden, where I hope to find the apples of youth and the water of life for my aged, blind father.” She said to him: “It will be hard, very hard, for you to reach that garden.”



Reflection : The Call To A Life Of Adventure

Beginning the next phase of the story, when the young man meets the first of three sisters, an extraordinary volume and precision of meaning is condensed into a few words.

He greets the pretty young girl who is weaving towels, and she replies with a highly pertinent question, “Are you running away from an adventure or are you trying to find one?”

We are told she is weaving towels: this allusion, to those three powerful maidens who weave the fates of men like him, shows the manner of woman she is. I see her toying with her towel as she asks her astute question, leaving him in no doubt she is a power he must reckon with.

So must we. We may all confront her question at some point in our lives:

“Am I running away from an adventure or am I trying to find one?”

When I feel called to something, there is for me no more challenging question. By holding the question, the powerful maiden holds the fate of my Soul in her hands. Because nothing is predestined, because I have freewill, the choice is mine. It is the *question* which is my destiny. How I *respond* determines the fate of my Soul. This makes the question deeply spiritual: my response to the question is crucial to my Soul, how willing am I to experience myself fully and to engage with the adventure of life?

The young man’s answer to the maiden’s question is to affirm his intention, but with some ambivalence: he is ‘*trying* to carry out a mission’, ‘I *hope* to find the apples of youth and the water of life.’ It means he might still run away from the adventure. Far from encouraging or reassuring him – as friends might easily do – the maiden makes his choice more stark, “It will be hard, very hard, for you.”

Following a calling is not a once-for-all choice. When we find obstacles in our path, our intention is challenged. Then we need to think carefully, to consult our intuition; because our chosen way may not be the right path after all and we may need to allow space for a change of direction. On the other hand, the moment is crucial, because we could so easily betray ourselves and run away. If we have chosen the right path, then we need to affirm our intention clearly, with all the resolution and courage needed to overcome any obstacle. This is soulmaking and the way of Soulfulness.

Responding to a call means we engage more deeply in the adventure of life, in a small way perhaps, or maybe it means our lives are changed beyond recognition. Here are two personal stories:

My father was a head teacher, he was on the education committee, he set up and ran the schools music festival and the teacher’s centre, as well as many other educational endeavours. One of my enduring images is of him doing the National Union of Teachers accounts on the dining table. It left him little time for his sons and it left me determined to have nothing to do with the field of education until some decades later, when I felt the pull to go into schools to tell stories.

I put the call to the test and offered to tell stories for no fee. The children and I enjoyed the storytelling, but in some of the schools I felt so unwelcome and unappreciated by the staff that I thought this work was not for me, I had been right to think that I should have nothing to do with education. Faced with an obstacle, I ran away.

Three years later, I attended a telling workshop with Malcolm White, at the Society for Storytelling Annual Gathering. I had been thinking vaguely about trying telling stories in schools again. At the end of the workshop, I said, "I have a project."

The call was back, marked by other signposts, such as:

Discovering Steve Killick's and Taffy Thomas' (2007) book about storytelling with children, '*Telling Tales: Storytelling as Emotional Literacy*'.

Friend and fellow storyteller Alan Woollard speaking to me about the educational value of his storytelling work in schools.

Hearing of a newly opened Children's Centre and receiving a booking.

Now, as a professional storyteller, storytelling with primary and early years children, and listening to their stories, is both affirming and brings joy to my Soul.

At a time when my working life in information technology felt less and less fulfilling, a friend asked, "What do you really want to do?" I replied without hesitation and with complete conviction, "I want to be a psychologist." It was the first I knew about it. She replied with surprise, "Well, that's interesting, because I'm doing this course in Psychosynthesis." Synchronicity! It was the first time I had heard the word 'Psychosynthesis'. I even had to find out what being a psychologist might mean.

My plan was to sell my company shares to fund the training for my new career. However, before that happened the company was thrust into receivership. I was penniless. I had to rebuild my career in information technology in order to support myself and my family and to fund my seven years of Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy training. Financial ruin was an obstacle, but also provided a challenge to affirm my intention to embark on the adventure of psychotherapy training and practice.

Each time we are faced with the question, "Am I running away from an adventure or am I trying to find one?", it's almost like we have circled back to the crossroads, until we realise we are not looking at a signpost but a milestone. We discover what freewill is really about: going forward down the road or turning back.



RECEIVING THE MAIDEN SISTERS' GUIDANCE

The first sister told the bold knight, "Continue on your way. Soon you will come to the house of my second sister. She knows better than I how to find the garden and will tell you what to do."

He rode and rode till he came to the house of the second sister. He greeted her just as he had the first, and told her who he was and where he was going. She bade him leave his horse with her and ride on her own two-winged horse to the house of her older sister, who would tell him what to do – how to reach the garden and how to get the apples and the water.



Reflection : Interdependency Between Feminine And Masculine

Previously, the young man relied on crude, masculine force to beat the truth out of Dunia and rescue his brothers. Now, he needs to submit to the guidance of the three sisters to enable him to complete the present phase of his journey. There is a recurring motif in powerful Russian folktales like this one, the masculine relying upon the

feminine, the feminine upon the masculine, in the business of soulmaking. Attaining interdependency between feminine and masculine is essential for the young man, for any of us, to become whole.

I remember a time when I felt admiration for what I perceived as ‘strong women’. I saw in them something I thought was lacking in myself. Eventually, I came to realise that what I lacked was connection with the feminine side of my own being. In raising a barrier against my mother, and hence against intimacy with women, I had also cut off from my own feminine side. (I only saw clearly how I had done this as I wrote these words!)

A life crisis caused me emotional turmoil and precipitated change, though lasting psychological change only came about gradually. Firstly, I began to connect with my feelings, to experience them and be able to give them names. These feelings had, of course, been there all along. I realised, when I replayed my mind’s memory tapes of my life, I simply had not been aware of my feelings, and ironically had only experienced feelings as something unbearably painful, full of angst, anger and resentment.

I remember a time when I scoffed at the idea of intuition. Some time after starting to connect with my feelings, I began to know things I didn’t know I knew, and gradually came to acknowledge the reality of intuition as a useful guide. In my work as a psychotherapist, I increasingly found myself saying things which came to me by grace from a deeper part of my being.

In my foundation year, prior to my psychotherapy training, I was introduced to ‘subpersonalities’ and found images for these different facets of my personality, all of them animals: Frog, Bear, Raven, Eagle, and Stag or Herne the Hunter. I was also introduced to shamanism, and found to my surprise that my animal subpersonalities fitted the shamanic Medicine Wheel.

These are my animal allies, as they sit around the Medicine Wheel:

<i>Direction</i>	<i>Element</i>	<i>Element of Personality</i>	<i>Animal Ally</i>
South	Water	Feelings	Frog
West	Earth	Body	Bear
North	Air	Mind	Raven
East	Fire	Spirit	Eagle
Centre	Void	Lifeforce	Stag or Herne the Hunter



THE THIRD SISTER’S WARNING

So he rode and rode till he came to the house of the third sister. She gave him her four-winged horse and told him: “Be careful. In that garden lives our aunt, a terrible witch. When you come to the garden, do not spare my horse. Spur him strongly, so that he clears the wall in one bound; for if he touches the wall, the strings with bells that are tied to it will sing out, the bells will ring, the witch will awaken, and you won’t be able to get away from her! She has a horse with six wings; cut the tendons under his wings so that she cannot overtake you.”



Reflection : The Upper World

At the start of the tale, the king 'heard that beyond the ninth land, in the tenth kingdom, there was a garden with the apples of youth, and in it a well with the water of life.' The words 'beyond the ninth land, in the tenth kingdom' – some tales reach even further, 'beyond thrice-nine lands, in a thrice-tenth country' – provide a common motif in Russian folktales, signifying a fairy tale land far from the world where this tale begins. I see the young man soaring higher and higher, first on a two-winged horse then on a four-winged horse, to reach the garden in the kingdom of the sky.

There are strong parallels between this sky garden, the shamanic 'Upper World', and Assagioli's 'Higher Unconscious' (see Figure above). Where the Lower Unconscious represents a person's psychological past, the Higher Unconscious represents their psychological future. It is the source of intuition and insight, higher values, creative potentiality, moral imperative and call to service, and of wisdom and understanding.

The Higher Unconscious is also the place where we repress the wounding to our sense of self. When the child in the Chest of Drawers story says, "Mummy, Mummy, look at my picture of myself," and she repeatedly replies, "Not now, I'm busy," the child experiences these aspects of his self-expression and creativity as unacceptable to the mother and so they are repressed into the Higher Unconscious, repression of the sublime.

In a workshop which I attended, led by John Firman and Ann Gila, they referred to repression into the Lower and Higher Unconscious respectively as 'opposite sides of the same wound'. The negative aspect of the wounding, the rejection and hurt, are repressed into the Lower Unconscious. The positive aspect, the unacknowledged self-expression, is repressed into the Higher Unconscious. Both constitute soul loss.

So, the garden to which the bold knight ascends is the future. He aspires to spiritual qualities which he does not yet own, wisdom and vitality, insight and inner youthfulness. The boy in the Chest of Drawers story, by cutting himself off from the insufferable agony of trauma and hiding it deep underground, also cut himself off from that bright spiritual quality of creativity, to the impoverishment of his Soul. He consigned his potentiality for creativity to an uncertain future, hidden in the sky garden.

The young man's task in journeying to the sky garden is to retrieve the spiritual qualities of wisdom and vitality, insight and inner youthfulness, and restore his Soul.

Incidentally, there's something about shamanic journeys: while you lie in a relaxed state of consciousness with the drum beating, the journey simply unfolds. People who are used to journeying speak of the different ways they travel between the Worlds. The commonest ways are by ladder and by flying horse, both appearing in the story, or through a vortex. These are representations of the 'World Tree' which connects the three Worlds of the shamanic universe, the Lower World, the Middle World, and the Upper World.



RETRIEVING THE APPLES OF YOUTH AND WATER OF LIFE

He did as she bade him. He flew over the wall on his horse, but his horse lightly touched one string with his tail; all the strings sang and the bells rang, but softly. The witch awoke but did not clearly distinguish the voice of the strings and the bells, so she yawned and fell asleep again. And the bold knight galloped away with the apples of youth and the water of life. He stopped at the houses of the sisters, where he changed horses, and darted off to his own kingdom on his own horse.



Reflection : The Transpersonal Call

Psychologically, where the Lower World represents the pre-personal struggle to individuate, the Upper World represents the transpersonal call, intuitively perceived, to align with higher values of sacrifice and service and to gain spiritual wisdom. Here is an example of a response to a transpersonal call, written by Dag Hammarskjöld (1964), then UN General Secretary:

I don't know who - or what - put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone - or Something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

From that moment I have known what it means 'not to look back', and 'to take no thought for the morrow'.

Dag Hammarskjöld had set his course and knew there could be no looking back.

No wonder there is something implacable about the three sisters. They are open, honest and frank with the young man in his quest for the apples of youth and the water of life – the spiritual qualities of wisdom and vitality, of insight and inner youthfulness – but they demand the same openness, honesty and frankness from him. If he fails to do as they bid and hold to his quest on behalf of the king, then he will awaken their aunt, a 'terrible witch', and he 'won't be able to get away from her'. Implacability is equally true of the aunt, but provided he is open, honest and frank she is willing to overlook a minor infraction. As in other powerful Russian folktales, these goddess-like spiritual beings are uncompromising but also fair.

What this means, is that opening ourselves to spiritual qualities and a transpersonal call is fraught with moral and spiritual hazard. It seems like the terrible witch is forever seeking to lure us from the heights into a pit of self-deception, spiritual pride and ego inflation: she is forever taunting us to embrace the thought, "I am not as other people are." All we can do in the face of this spiritual hazard is: to heed the third sister's warning and remain alert to the danger; to remain open, honest and frank, most of all with ourselves; to stay grounded in our spirituality; to seek to remember that "the only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility" (Elliot, 1944), and that everything we gain is a gift of grace from our Higher Self; to retain our dignity. This is soulmaking and the way of Soulfulness.



RETURNING TO THE BOLD KNIGHT'S OWN KINGDOM

On his way home, the bold knight stopped at the houses of the sisters, where he changed horses, and darted off to his own kingdom on his own horse.

The witch mounted her six-winged horse and pursued the bold knight and almost overtook him, but he had reached his own land and no longer feared her: there she dared not enter. She only looked at him and in a voice hoarse with spite said: "You are a fine little thief! You have succeeded very well in your mission! You got away from me, but nothing will save you from your own brothers." Having thus foretold his fate, she returned home.

Our bold knight went on his way in his own land, and found his vagabond brothers sleeping in a field. After he has freed his brothers, the youngest son had told them to go home, but they were ashamed to

appear before their father, because they had lain down with Dunia and had failed in their mission. So they wandered about in the fields and woods.

The bold knight did not awaken his brothers, but lay down beside them and fell asleep. The brothers awoke, saw that their brother had returned to his own land, softly took the apples of youth out of his breast pocket, and threw him, still sleeping, over a precipice.



Reflection : The Middle World

The young man heeds the third sister's warning and gets out quickly, darting off towards his own kingdom on his own horse.

At the beginning of the story, the king heard that beyond the ninth land, in the tenth kingdom, there was a garden with the apples of youth, and in it a well with the water of life, so he sent his son on horseback to find that garden and bring him the apples and the water. Now, via the underground world and the sky garden, the bold knight has returned to his own kingdom on his own horse. Here he is safe from the witch, because all the action in the story happens in the Upper World or the Lower World. All the action, that is, except 'normal things' which happen in the 'normal world', like being thrown over a precipice.

There are strong parallels between this normal world – called the bright world in the story – the shamanic 'Middle World', and Assagioli's 'Middle Unconscious' (see above Figure). Where the Lower Unconscious represents a person's psychological past, and the Higher Unconscious represents a person's psychological future, the Middle Unconscious represents a person's psychological present, the flow of sensations, images, thoughts, feelings, desires, and impulses which we can observe, the shifting contents of our consciousness, and the personal struggle to attain worldly wisdom and personal power.

The Middle Unconscious represents everything accessible to consciousness, everything we can bring to mind or imagine ourselves doing. So, the Middle Unconscious is not the same as the physical world in which we live, but is analogous to it. Julian Jaynes (1976) speaks of, "The analogue 'I', the metaphor we have of ourselves, which can 'move about' vicariously in our 'imagination', 'doing' things we are not actually doing." Thus, 'I' exist in the physical world, whilst my analogue 'I' exists in the Middle World.

Journeying into the Middle World enables us to wander in imagination throughout the world we inhabit, so as to gain: a greater understanding of the energy surrounding the places and persons which we encounter in our daily life; and a deeper insight into the way we animate our daily life. As Goethe is supposed to have put it so poetically:

Whatever you can do,
or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius,
power and magic in it.

The Middle World abounds with folktales of mortal men and women, bold heroes and heroines, undertaking heroic journeys and impossible tasks, aspiring to become kings and queens imbued with worldly wisdom and power. Often these heroes and heroines are aided by helpful beings, respectively Lower World animal allies and Upper World wise guides.

The two elder brothers, by the way, had been too ashamed to go home. Shame is often one of the baffling symptoms of trauma: we feel ashamed and guilty for what the maternal environment has inflicted upon us, and for what our internal, tyrannical, wily widow continues to inflict.



REVISITING THE LOWER WORLD

The bold knight fell for three days, till he reached the dark kingdom, where a maiden was given to the seven-headed dragon every month. Now it was the turn of the underground king's daughter, Paliusha. When our bold knight heard this, he said to the underground king, "I will save your daughter from the dragon, but later you must do for me whatever I ask of you." The king was overjoyed, promised to do anything for him, and to give the princess to him in marriage. The next day Paliusha was led to a three-walled fortress on the edge of the sea and the knight went with her, bearing an iron rod that weighed about two hundred pounds.

While he and the princess waited for the dragon, he told her about his adventures and said he had the water of life with him. Then the bold knight said to the beautiful princess, "Pick the lice out of my head, and should I fall asleep before the dragon comes, waken me with my rod – otherwise you will not arouse me!" He laid his head in her lap. She looked for lice in his hair. He fell asleep.

The dragon circled above the princess. She tried to shake the knight awake, but did not hit him with his rod for she did not wish to hurt him. She could not waken him and began to weep. A tear dropped on his face and he woke up exclaiming, "Oh, you have burned me with something pleasant!" Meanwhile the dragon had begun to swoop down on them.

The knight took up his two-hundred pound rod, swung it, and at one stroke knocked off five of the dragon's heads. He swung back a second time, and knocked off the remaining two. He gathered up all the heads, put them under the wall, and cast the monster's trunk into the sea.



Reflection : Redeeming And Trusting The Feminine

The bold knight has fallen asleep, a metaphor for going unconscious, falling into the Lower World, that dark kingdom into which he has been thrown. The bold knight may have visited the Upper World, but now he is made to confront unfinished business in the Lower World. He has journeyed in a circle. Or rather, revisiting the Lower World is a turn of the spiral.

While the bold knight has been busy in the Upper World, the wily widow, the inner tyrannical mother, has gained strength and become a seven-headed dragon. Why should this be so? In psychological terms, because the higher and lower unconscious are opposite sides of the same wound, work on one side has the effect of also opening the other.

Thus, the bold knight must journey more deeply into the Lower World – falling for three days – in order to redeem the feminine side of his nature. He faces a difficult task, to decapitate the seven-headed dragon, put the beautiful princess in her rightful place, and bring her out of the dark kingdom into the bright world, into consciousness. His task is to retrieve and redeem the feminine side of his nature and restore his Soul.

At this moment, the image of the bold knight falling asleep in the lap of the princess fills my eyes with sudden tears – burning me with something pleasant – just as hers fill with tears when she cannot waken him. It is such a powerful metaphor: in the face of the seven-headed dragon our bold knight places his trust in the maiden princess and enters even more deeply into the dark kingdom of his unconscious.

The princess attends to him and cares for him gently, not wishing to hurt him, for she is both his lover and the compassionate mother he never had. Yet she was always there, safely hiding in his innermost Soul, until the moment he finds her, when she awakens him with her passionate tears. After this, he deals with the dragon in two strokes.

“So, what about the lice?” I hear you cry. Well, they are parasitic bloodsuckers, they suck the life out of you, devour you, just like the seven-headed dragon would do, like the inner tyrant does. The bold knight needs help from the princess to get the lousy tyrant out of his hair.



THE BOLD KNIGHT DISMEMBERED AND RESTORED

An envious fellow saw all this, stole lightly around the other side of the wall, cut off the knight's head, cast it into the sea, and bade the Paliusha tell her father he had saved her, or else he would strangle her. When she told the king this fellow had saved her he was enormously happy and set about preparing for the wedding feast. Guests arrived from foreign lands, and all of them drank and amused themselves. The princess secretly shed burning tears for her bold knight.

She asked her father to send fishermen to catch fish in the sea. They cast a net and dragged out the head and trunk of the bold knight. Paliusha found a phial with the water of life in his breast pocket, placed the head on the body, wet it with the water from the phial, and he came to life. She told him how she loathed the man who wanted to take her. The knight comforted her and told her he would come and set things right.

The knight asked the king, “Who saved your daughter?” The king pointed out the envious fellow. “Well, king,” said the knight, “let us go to the fortress. If he can find the dragon's heads, I will believe he saved Paliusha.” They all went to the fortress. The fellow could not find even one head. But the knight found them all. Then the princess told the whole truth about who saved her.



Reflection : Spiritual Emergency

What is it about heads? The knight knocked off all seven of the dragon's heads and put them under the fortress wall. Then, the envious fellow stole lightly around the other side of the wall, cut off the knight's head, and cast it into the sea, to join the monster's trunk. I can understand the symbolism of knocking off the dragon's seven heads. Multiplicity in folktales denotes emphasis, and seven heads signifies especial emphasis, so silencing seven internal tyrannical talking heads makes sense.

But what about the knight's head? I suggest, the symbolism has several tangled threads:

What is being enacted here is the ancient ritual of purification by immersion.

The knight once again descends more deeply into the dark kingdom of his unconscious, where work is done.

The knight is brought from the water renewed and reborn, is reassembled and is restored by the water of life. This is a profound act of transformation. The monster's trunk on the other hand has gone forever.

From a slightly different perspective, at a time of spiritual crisis and change it is common for us to suffer a fantasy of sickness, disintegration and death, as the Soul in its expansion bursts through our muscle-bound mental structures. We cannot go back to the way things were, there is “something broken, twisted, hurting, *forcing reflection*” (Hillman, 1983), the work of imagining ourselves and our lives differently. Something does indeed die in us as something new is born, so that we know ourselves anew and see our world in a different light.

At such a time of spiritual crisis, I felt like a man with no bones, a pool of a man, this was my image of myself, and I couldn't bear to see curtains closed or apples still in their paper bag. This fantasy of dismemberment and entombment lasted for three days. Then, standing in my kitchen, I felt a strange, spontaneous, astonishing influx of energy, lasting maybe a second or an hour. A couple of days after this restorative trance, in the ambulatory of Beverley Minster, on a memorial tablet, I read the word 'resurgam', I am risen. I felt thrilled, knew it was true for me. I am risen.

The bold knight is dismembered and thrown into the sea, and is later restored by the water of life. Mircea Eliade (1974) describes the ceremony to determine an initiate shaman's vocation as comprising, symbolically: suffering, death and dismemberment, and then resurrection. The initiate's life transition is only accomplished by experiencing in trance his death and dismemberment and his restoration to a new life.

Just as in the story, the bold knight cannot complete his transformation and life transition – redeeming the feminine by bringing the beautiful princess out of the dark kingdom into the bright world of consciousness – without suffering death, dismemberment, then restoration by the princess herself with the water of life.



RIDING THE SPOONBILLED BIRD

The underground king wanted to marry the bold knight to his daughter. But the knight said: “No, king, I don't need anything from you. Only take me back to our bright world; I have not yet finished my mission for my father – he is still waiting for me to bring him the water of life, for he is blind.” The underground king did not know how to take the knight up to the bright world; and his daughter did not want to part from him, she wanted to go up with him. She told her father that there was a spoonbilled bird that could take them there, provided she had enough to feed it on the way. So Paliusha had an ox killed and took it with her as food for the bird. They said farewell to the underground king, sat on the bird's back, and set out for the bright world.



Reflection : Animal Allies, Instinctive Wisdom

In shamanic journeys, a variety of conveyances is used to travel between Worlds. Ways of travel used in the story are by ladder, by flying horse, by falling, and in this instance by spoonbilled bird.

One of the few Russian spoonbill class of birds is the sacred ibis. The story goes, according to Herodotus:

At the beginning of spring, winged serpents from Arabia fly towards Egypt, and the birds called sacred ibises meet them at the entrance of this country and do not suffer the serpents to go by, but kill them.

After killing the seven-headed dragon, a sacred ibis is thus a worthy mount on which the victorious bold knight and princess journey from the underground world up to the bright world.

In the story the spoonbilled bird is an ‘animal ally’. Animal allies feature strongly in folktales. Equally, animal allies are a significant aspect of shamanic journeying, where they are generally seen as creatures of the Lower World, because they represent our physicality and instinctive wisdom. When we begin to learn to journey, one of our earliest journeys is to go to the Lower World to meet an animal ally and start to get to know them. When we journey frequently we become familiar with our animal allies and learn to rely on them. Sometimes, so that we don’t become too set in our ways, old allies will leave us and new allies will appear.

The underground king wants the bold knight and princess to marry, but the bold knight said, “No, king!” Nevertheless, romance is in the air.



FEEDING THE SPOONBILLED BIRD

When they gave more food to the bird, it flew upward faster; thus they used up the whole ox to feed it. Now they were perplexed and afraid lest the bird should drop them down again. So Paliusha cut off a piece of her thigh and gave it to the spoonbill; the bird straightway brought them up to this world and said, “Throughout our journey you fed me well, but never did I taste anything sweeter than that last morsel.” Paliusha showed the bird her thigh. The bird moaned and spat out the piece, still whole. The knight put it on Paliusha’s thigh, wet it with the water of life, and healed the princess.



Reflection : Masculine, Feminine And The Medicine Wheel

On the face of it, this is a perplexing and rather horrific part of the story, but to my mind it is about the subtle interplay between the masculine and feminine sides of our nature, which we shall now refer to as ‘Prince’ and ‘Princess’, in which the Princess in the tale is a strong and vital player, as we shall see.

Our ‘Prince and Princess’ are sometimes described psychologically, though not in a gender specific sense, as the ‘penetrating masculine’ and the ‘receptive feminine’.

For me, this is far from being the whole story. To explain this I need to bring in the shamanic Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel teaching is about the following four levels:

The four directions	West	South	North	East
relate to the four elements	Earth	Water	Air	Fire
which relate to four levels of the person	Body	Feelings	Mind	Spirit
whose primary roles or functions are	Holding	Giving	Receiving	Transforming

and each of the four levels has the three remaining functions as a secondary role.

We might acknowledge intuitively how astute this formulation is, except that the Western mind has difficulty with Mind Receiving. Our mind sees *itself*, egoistically, rather than our spirit, as assertive and transformative. However, it can be seen that the mind has the ability to input a volume of information, to sort it, process it, analyse it, and produce a coherent conclusion. Hence, our mind’s primary function is to receive information, in order to make sense of it, and its secondary function is to give its evaluation.

We can now put:

‘Mind receives’ alongside ‘penetrating masculine’

‘Feelings give’ alongside ‘receptive feminine’

and thereby gain a clearer picture of the relationship between masculine and feminine aspects of Soul: each gives and each receives in its own way.

The bold knight, who penetrated and forced the truth out of Dunia, briefly seeks to assert himself, bluntly rejecting the underground king’s talk of marriage – “I don’t need anything from you. Only take me back to our bright world.” – because he is focused solely on completing his mission for his father and determined to do it on his own. Which he cannot do, as is plainly apparent to the attentive, receptive Princess, because he doesn’t know how to return to the bright world any more than her father does.

The Princess quietly takes charge. She is strong in the knowledge that the Prince cannot refuse her going with him. Because she is intimately receptive to her intuitive animal nature she is wise to the ways of the spoonbilled bird. She tells her father of this, not willing to humiliate the Prince with her superior wisdom. The Princess has an ox slain to feed the bird on the journey and all is arranged by her.

When the bird’s food runs out and the couple fear the flight will stall, the Princess, being committed and loyal, gives of her sweet self lest the Prince should fail in his mission. He responds by healing her wound. Using the water of life, the Princess had first healed the Prince, restoring his transformed head to his body. The Prince is now able to heal the Princess.

Here again is the recurring motif in powerful Russian folktales, the masculine relying for healing upon the feminine, the feminine upon the masculine. Interdependency between Prince and Princess having been thus attained, they are ready to go home for the final scene of the tale.



HOMECOMING

Then they went home. The father, the king of the land in our own world, met them and was overjoyed to see them. The knight saw that his father had grown younger from having the apples, but that he was still blind.

The knight at once anointed his father’s eyes with the water of life. The king began to see; he embraced his son, the prince, and the princess from the dark kingdom. The prince told how his brothers had taken his apples and thrown him into the nether world. The brothers were so frightened that they jumped into the river.

And the prince married the princess Paliusha and gave a most wonderful feast. .



Reflection : The Sacred Marriage

Now we have the gathered Soul:

The Kingthe Higher Self

The Princethe personal self

The Princess from the dark kingdom.....the feminine side of the personality

The other brothersother parts of the personality

The gathered Soul portrays the personality's glorious multiplicity and complexity.

As a composite person, the elder brothers bring home for the king the apples of youth and the younger brother the water of life, inner youthfulness and insight, the spiritual qualities of vitality and wisdom. The Prince has gained these qualities during the rigours of his Soul journey, and at the same time can receive them only from the King. The personal self can only receive spiritual qualities when aligned with the Higher Self, when the King embraces his son the Prince.

To my mind, the spiritual quality which the Prince gains on his Soul journey and brings to the bright world is the Princess from the dark kingdom, his feminine side, without whom he can never be whole and never know deep wisdom and vitality. Thus, the culmination of the tale is the sacred marriage, Prince with Princess, masculine with feminine, the harmonisation of opposites.

So, what about the brothers, jumping into the river? The tale doesn't tell us they drowned. The brothers descend into the dark kingdom of the unconscious, where work is done, for "there's a work going on all the time, a fire burning, something elemental happening, the Soul's way of working on itself" (Hillman, 1983). The tale continues.

The folktale 'The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life' is a masculine rite of passage story involving the Prince bringing the Princess out of the dark kingdom into the bright world.

The folktale 'The Singing Tree and the Talking Bird', also from the collection of Aleksandr Afanas'ev (1945 and 1973), is a parallel folktale, in that it is a feminine rite of passage story involving the Princess bringing her brothers out of the dark kingdom into the bright world by sprinkling them with the water of life. I entreat you, the reader, to seek out this story, to reflect upon it, and to make of it what you will. Perhaps, someone reading this will one day write a parallel reflection on the tale 'The Singing Tree and the Talking Bird'.



COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

I dined and drank mead with them, and their cabbage was toothsome. Even now I could eat some!



Reflection : Self-Mastery, A Soul Journey

So we complete the circle and return to the beginning. The tale is about kingship in the sense of self-mastery, being master of our own will. Self-mastery is a Soul journey, the gradual way of becoming free from the distorting effects of trauma, of aligning with the will of Higher Self, of embracing the King.

The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the Water of Life

At the tail of the tale, the storyteller identifies with the story,

“I dined and drank mead with them, and their cabbage was toothsome,”

and its enduring relevance,

“Even now I could eat some!”

So, the folktale ends on this prosaic note, reminding us that the tale is for Everyman, everyone who has a Soul to nourish – man and woman, you the reader and me the writer.



This article is the Appendix of the book *Soulfulness : The Marriage of Shamanic and Contemporary Psychology*, which carries the following acknowledgement:

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