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Richard C. Ferre

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Developing My Own Identity
as Therapist: A Shaman

Richard C. Ferre, MD

I find it very hard to express in words what has happened to me in pursuit of a disciplined, professional identity. What has transformed me has been an integrated, poetic experience. It is not so much a change in my thinking as it is a change in how I feel—a welding of mind, heart, and spirit.

Somewhere between conspicuous pimples and manly stubble,
I projected myself, as egocentric adolescents do,
As the hero of my own myth:
Not really slaying dragons and mounting flying horses,
But surviving a desert fast,
A sun-scorched meditation,
Where inner calm eventually eradicates fear.

A resolute strength empowering me
By finally accepting my aloneness.
I would wish it otherwise.
I would have rather united with the universe
And have it consume my separateness with its energy.

But the journey of a hero is alone
into the world
into himself—
To be a shaman was the vision of that adolescent idealism.
Society confers status by birth, by privilege,
Power is granted by appointment,
Position given by loyalty to authority,
By the color of skin, wealth or beauty,
By talents or personalities currently in fashion.
One may wait endlessly to be inducted,
Wait to be called in order to simply share yourself.

To be a shaman
I could call myself.

I could call myself to a desperate discipline of internal integrity,
pay the price of personal cleansing,
By choice to purge in order to serve.
As an adolescent new with energy and thoughts of adventure,
I had not grown far from the child
Who still embraced the idealistic songs of childhood
And sang within:

give said the little stream,
give oh give, give oh give,
give then as Jesus gives.
do as the streams and blossoms do.
for God and others live.

To be a shaman:
To give,
To share,
To find within myself the courage to make my life’s journey a
heroic odyssey.

A shaman’s journey is no ordinary reality:
He or she enters altered states of consciousness
to make “journeys” to other dimensions
for the benefit of the community.
He interacts with beings and energies found there
in order to use them for the benefit of the sick person.
He sharpens senses, breaks conditioned responses,
and discovers all things are interconnected
and interdependent.
His is a spiritual transformation, 
a change in his perspective of the world. 
He cannot lead others without confronting the unknown in himself. 
He cannot lead a journey he has not taken himself. 
He must face his own fears, his unconscious, 
The dread of his own destructive anger, 
His fears of overwhelming need, 
and passion out of control.

The shaman must ask: 
What truly lies at the center of my soul, 
And motivates my being? 
Can I live with what I find in my heart? 
Can I live with who I am?

The study of man and woman, 
History, culture, literature, art, 
Opened the door of the journey for me. 
I sensed knowing intuitively what I must pursue, 
Human physiology, human personality, 
The body, 
The mind.

I discovered in the search for understanding psychological process 
Verifiable principles of human interaction. 
My own mind was challenged to comprehend another traveler, 
To accurately communicate. 
To master the discipline of communication, 
I had to confront my own distortions, past history, and projected perceptions of the world. 
To learn truth was to experience being confronted by others over and over again. 
To understand transference, 
To understand countertransference, 
A purge of comfortable cliches. 
To fast from looking without seeing, 
to accept my nakedness before patients who often see me more clearly than I see myself. 
To be vulnerable to their scrutiny,
To see myself in the mirror I hold up to them,  
and wrenchingly witness my own manipulations,  
controls, defenses and fears.

This journey required continual recycling of moments confronting  
my own feelings.  
Of searching within myself while in a heightened state of con­  
sciousness,  
To reveal the world of my own unconscious.  
The hero laboring with agonizing honesty.

It was not my mind that bore the courage  
to keep laboring within.  
But my heart.  
My heart would not relinquish the quest to connect with another  
heart,  
To touch and resonate,  
To create together.

Not to change myself within was inevitably  
to sever connection with another.  
Not to be vulnerable to accepting my part of the interaction was  
to grow distant,  
A feeling I grew to know as clearly as connecting.  
I must be there connected,  
Yet stand apart sufficient to learn from my interaction.

The hero takes a journey to his soul,  
A spiritual transformation of his heart:  
Continually confronted throughout my journey  
A spiritual transformation took place within me.  
A cleansing of my heart,  
A stretching of myself through the shared pain of another,  
To honestly give myself,  
To connect in spite of personal safety.
I risked the traverse across the desert to connect,
To touch
To be touched
To not be safe from feeling,
To be alive to another at that moment
To bond in spirit.

An integration evolved.

Distance taught as professional objectivity
was retreating before heart's need to connect
and be connected.
Not destroying intellect's objectivity to my own role and personal
agenda,
Yet I accepted the place of my feelings as essential teachers of
what is true at any given moment in a relationship.

Jennie was a patient I had seen in therapy over several months. The therapy had been successful in helping her to improve symptomatically and she was now ready to reenter school.

She had learned to be in touch with her feelings and was able to more appropriately assert herself to meet her needs. As is often done, I visited her school to consult with the counselor to help her secure a more appropriate class placement. The outcome was only marginally successful.

In the following session as I approached the problem of the placement, she turned away in her chair and became quiet for several minutes.

"You're not there," she broke the silence.

"I don't understand. We were talking about your classes at school," I replied.
"Forget it."
"What?"
"You're just like my parents," she snipped.
"I'm not getting it yet," I persisted.
"I don't want you going to my school anymore. I'll do it myself," she continued looking out the window.
"What happened when we went to school last week that has you so upset?"

"Nothing."

"I thought we were able to make some progress, but . . ."

"Oh yes, you tried to be very helpful," she interrupted, "but now you're not here."

There followed an extended pause and then she continued.

"It seems it's so darn important for you go get me in all the right classes. It's more important than how I feel. What about me?"

"I thought we had discussed this before and those classes were ok with you. What is it?" I was still unable to hear what it was she was angry about. Was it really the school issue?

"You're not here."

Tuning into my feelings, I could begin to sense that I was not listening; an awareness I have progressively become more able to acknowledge. I was not connected to her. "You feel distance from me?"

"Yes," she turned and looked at me.

"How come?"

"You tell me. You're angry you couldn't get the classes we worked out," she said with more energy.

"No," I responded.

Listen—listen to yourself—mirror yourself. It finally came to me. It is so important for me to get things right. Though what I am doing is ostensibly for her, my feelings are telling me that I am so invested in the outcome, I am really doing it for me. If I cannot get it right I get frustrated. No,—I get anxious when I want things to turn out a certain way. I then explained to her that when I get anxious in this way I get self-absorbed and I distance myself. This has to do with being afraid of disappointing her and projecting her being angry with me. I was anxious about the class schedule working out for her. Yes, I could now feel that I had distanced her and acknowledged this to her.
“So don’t take responsibility for me,” she rejoined, “don’t be anxious for me. I don’t need you to do this for me. I want you to be here, now. I need you to be here to share my feelings, and nobody else can do that. Be here for me now, for how I feel whether you’ve got it worked out at school or not.”

At this point, I gave up taking responsibility for her possible disappointment and we connected. We looked at each other and felt the pain of not getting it right and knowing that neither one of us could make it better. We were together in accepting this pain and that was what mattered.

I feel a poetic sense of my own passage,
The central hero of my own journey.

Imperceptively technique and discipline absorb into my cells
And the integration of mind and heart begins to intuitively respond to the moment.

Sometime ago an adolescent idealism called me to be a shaman
The journey to heal the estrangement of my own soul required
   being vulnerable to the refining pain of self-honesty—
Then stretched to master intimacy with another.

What was once a vision is now reality.
Myth is the metaphor of this passage.
The myth speaks of a journey to mastery,
Mastery requires change,
Change demands loss and pain,
aloneness and intimacy,
Sharing then separating.

These themes repeat themselves in cycles
And stitch my moments as with strong thread so that I see the meaning of who I am in the pattern.

Themes stretch across life.
Touch someone for a moment,
Inevitably accept pain and traverse loss.
To master myself,
I must master who I am with another,
share the pain and struggle with another,
Knowing I cannot carry their pain,
Yet be vulnerable,
Vulnerable to connect, to teach, to learn.
Reflect to another their own spiritual force,
The generative desire that entices to do good,
That which whispers truth to the soul
And speaks of their worth.
To increase the faith of another for having felt their worth
And reflect a vision.
Love is that shared vision.

I am on the journey of a shaman.
To take a journey for another
Is to undertake a journey for myself.
Risk connecting with another fully in the moment
Alive to dispelling the separateness,
Share intimacy
And let go.

To face the loss
The pain of letting go,
Is to have fully loved another,
Conquered my own estrangement
And feel whole.

Richard C. Ferre is In-Patient Medical Director at the Primary Children's Medical Center