

Illness as Initiation

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.-Wendell Berry

Lying inside the MRI machine, I listen to its clicks and clacks as it starts up a conversation with my body. I breathe deeply, try to relax inside this long, narrow tube, knowing that the outcome of this scan will determine the course of my life. The MRI image that comes back the following week is breathtaking—much like looking at the earth from the sky. The brain is magnificent, and I am looking at its cross-sections—bone and dura, cerebellum and cerebrum, reptilian and new mammalian brain. The intricacy of the structures is so mesmerizing I almost forget that I am looking at a large tumor located just behind the sinuses in my pituitary gland.

The doctor begins speaking, and I can hardly hear him. I am watching myself listen to my own diagnosis, watching the words tumble out of his mouth and land somewhere in my body. My pituitary region, normally the size of a pearl, is now the size of a large grape—and the pressure of the mass is causing hormonal havoc. If the tumor continues to grow at the current rate, it will impinge on the optic nerves or cause the pituitary gland to stop functioning or potentially grow into inoperable areas that house the carotid arteries. *Surgery*, the doctor says definitively. *I'll think about it*, I say, sure I will never allow any surgeon to enter the temple of my brain.

How could I know in that moment that this diagnosis was a call not a curse? How could I know that the path I was being thrust upon unwillingly would offer an opportunity to traverse stunning, wild, and unexplored terrain within and without? From here, all I could see was the void that had opened up in the very center of my life. I was free falling, without any landing in sight.

As the ground dissolved beneath me, I searched for something, anything I could hold onto. If I was going to dive headlong into unknown territory—at the very least I wanted some kind of roadmap. A month before my diagnosis, I left higher education to work with an organization offering school-based rites of passage experiences to young people—and, as part of my work, I was deeply immersed in the language and frameworks of rites of passage. The term “rites of passage” was first formally coined by Dutch

anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, to describe unique ceremonies and rituals in cultures around the world that mark transitions—the death of one phase of life and re-birth into another—and *initiate* new capacities, identities, and ways of being (i.e. puberty, childbirth, elderhood, etc.). These initiations inevitably involve a kind of radical redefinition of the initiate’s relationship to self, community and the mysteries of life. Gennep named three distinct phases of this initiatory process—*Separation* (separating from the known world and former identity), *Threshold* (the liminal or inbetween place, the “wilderness”), and *Reincorporation* (returning “home” with the gifts from the threshold).

As I was swirling in the shock of my diagnosis, I realized I was being given just the guidance I had asked for and that illness was an invitation to initiation of a different kind. These initiations are evolutionary, rather than developmental (as puberty or elderhood rites are)—as they invite us to make a quantum leap in our growth and surrender our old identities to the white-hot fires of transformation. And so, finding my feet on this strange and unfamiliar road, I held this rites of passage map close to my chest—knowing it would give me no answers, only a way to re-member my way through.

i. Separation

The Call

The call to initiation can come out of nowhere, very much like the crack of lightning on a clear, blue day. When it strikes, there is no going back—for you have already been utterly transformed by its charge through your body. Its call is prescient—it foretells of the coming storm, of the weather patterns that will roll through your life. The electricity in the air raises the hairs on the back of the neck. We rarely go willingly. Refusal and denial often accompany the initiatory call.

For days I could hardly leave the house. I was numb, in shock, unable to accept what was happening to me—a young, healthy working mother with two children. A crowd of rebellious voice inside surged forward—raging against the injustice of it all. Some days, I sat in my room for hours in silence and prayer, trying to find answers, clarity, a path forward. Other days, I turned to the internet, combing webpage after webpage for an answer, for an explanation, an answer, a way out. I resisted my diagnosis with all the strength I could muster. I dug my heels in the sand and refused. I begged and

pleaded and bargained with Life. I'll do anything but this. Please, just give me a different hand to play.

Leaving the Known World

Weeks passed and my diagnosis was confirmed over and over by different doctors around the country. You can try medication, they said—there is a slight chance they will shrink the tumor, but if you don't see a change in three months, you will have no other option besides surgery. I decided to play the odds, to give the medication a chance and to try every other alternative method I could find.

And then, stepping fully onto this unfamiliar path, I watched as my old identity crumbled around me. Now, I was a person with a tumor. I was “unwell”. The word spread like wildfire. People looked at me sympathetically. When they saw me at the grocery store or my children's school or the park, they tilted their heads, hugged me hard, and looked into my eyes. How *are* you, they said, emphasizing the “are” in a way I had never heard before. I knew this came from kindness, from compassion—but I could feel myself mirrored in their eyes, different now.

And, I could feel the shift inside of me as well—I was an imposter inside my same skin. My old identity—the one that revolved around health, invulnerability and clearly laid plans—had been cleanly and fiercely stripped away. Despite the love of my friends and family, I felt alone and isolated, separated from the rest of the “healthy” community. My vulnerability bared to the world, I felt as if my very being had become transparent, the entirety of my insides exposed. And there were questions, so many questions. What if my pituitary gland stopped functioning? What if I became an invalid? What if I didn't make it through this ordeal?

ii. Threshold

Only by a descent and a series of adventures along the dark roads of the unconscious can the inner life fully awaken. -Michael Meade

To cross over the threshold into the wilderness is to travel into the unknown, into the never-before-seen wilds of our own interior. In this beautiful, fierce, untrammelled terrain, we must discover an entirely new navigation system. Having left behind what we

have been, there is the open road of what we are becoming. This is the liminal place between worlds and identities, the place of “no name”—where we must let go of all we think we know about ourselves to meet the mystery of our own lives. For those in a healing journey, this wilderness often involves leaving an old identity to plunge full force into the world of the illness or condition itself—into research and appointments and scans and statistics and prognosis and endless choices about treatment options. As I moved across the threshold, I began to intensively research my situation, looking everywhere for information, for stories and case studies, for others who had gone through this same passage. I was intent on understanding how my body had created a block in the center of my in-sight. In the process, I also fell in love with the miracle of the body. I was awestruck with the beauty of brain structures, the intricacy of biochemistry, the delicacy of glands, the profound language of hormones.

This part of the journey was long and arduous, akin to a trek across Alaska in the months when light is scarce. I was feeling my way in the dark, relying on intuition, on this internal voice I had not heard in this way before. There were no successful medical precedents for any of the alternative methods I was trying. Having chosen this route, I was now bush-whacking through thick underbrush, looking for the clearing. And so, I continued to listen to the doctor’s prognosis and recommendations and to also ask my own heart, my own internal guidance, what step was next on the path. And when I was terrified, awash with the adrenaline that surges with the survival impulse of our very biology, it was this internal voice that told me that there was deep intelligence in my body itself. This voice said the tumor was not my enemy, but a messenger.

Road of Trials

We have left the known world, entered the wilderness, and are now deep in unmapped territories. Inevitably we meet obstacles—old demons, wounds, stories, blocks in our soul and psyche, disappointing news, unsuccessful attempts at curing ourselves. And, we are also inevitably blessed by the presence of allies, within and without—who illuminate dark places, speak essential truths, hold a mirror up to our gifts, remind us we are whole, even when we are fragile and “in between.” These demons and angels are all teachers who catalyze our transformation—who help us let go of our old

attachments stories so that something truly new can be born. And, like the caterpillar whose body fully dissolves into a primordial soup in the cocoon, there is no holding on to the old life. Here, we are no longer living in the realm of rational and linear understanding. This is the place of our dis-memberment and re-memberment—where our previous identity is taken apart, bone by bone and we are left in the vulnerable place of in-between.

In the six months, between my first and second MRI, I threw myself wholeheartedly into a healing regiment that included a new diet, medicinal herbs, acupuncture, supplements, meditation, prayer, energy work, journaling, dance, and extensive time on the land. I met with healers, energy workers, acupuncturists, wilderness guides, nutritionists, therapists, friends, family—who all supported me to discover deeper layers of the illness itself. I would let go and hold on. I would dive into fear and then soar into ecstasy. I would trust my own truths and then swirl in utter confusion. Contraction. Expansion. All of this was part of the labor pains of this re-birth.

As I dove deeper and deeper into the layers of my illness—the messages of the tumor began to be revealed. Part of me desperately still wanted to kill the messenger and avoid the messages—after all, wouldn't it be best to just slay the beast and free the kingdom? But I knew, that this “beast” had something to say and something to show me. And, as the weeks went by, it was the messenger who took me into the unlit places of my soul and psyche—to the places of my core wounding, to the times in my life where I had denied myself. It was this messenger who showed me unclaimed aspects of both my shadow and light.

It was here that I also met the “crowd inside”—the crowd that carries stories from ancestry and culture—stories of punishment, shame and blame. Some in the crowd insisted that if only I were spiritually stronger and more evolved, I wouldn't be in this situation. Others in the crowd absolved me of all responsibility, claiming me a simple “victim of circumstance.” And still others of this crowd inside insisted that I was in absolute control of my situation and that curing myself was all a matter of my state of mind. And yet, somewhere in me, I recognized that none of these beliefs, in and of themselves, were true, and that the mystery of my illness would continue to defy my

mind's attempt to “make sense” of it. I was being asked to surrender my old cognitive ways of making meaning and to come with my hands wide open before the unknown.

In the wake of this surrender, my inner landscape flourished. I spent hours on the land, listening to the trees, the plants, my own heart, taking in the medicine of the earth itself. I shed skins, many skins, of old identities and ways of being. And in this raw, naked state, I felt both painfully vulnerably and exquisitely alive. The need to understand, to analyze, to find the “core” reason for the appearance of my tumor slowly lost its hold, and I began to trust the profound dialogue that was unfolding in my heart and soul. I knew I was healing and wholing—and I could feel it happening from the inside out. So strong was this pulse within me, I was sure that my tumor was disappearing cell by cell, moment by moment, day by day.

When my second MRI came back showing continued tumor growth, I was devastated. I collapsed into a state of despair—how could I experience such intense healing and not be cured? The doctors again recommended surgery, and I again refused, saying I needed more time. Something inside me rebelled at the thought of such an invasive path that would cut out “the problem” (the tumor) without resolving the underlying causes. I was not interested in extricating a symptom only to have it reappear in a different time or place. I would give myself three more months. And in the meantime, I would take “radical” action and seek out healing methods that had previously been off the map and out of bounds. As I dove head first into this next phase of healing, I continued to feel that my body was responding, the tumor diminishing.

As I emerged from my third MRI, I felt calm and confident. A week later, I was reeling from the news. The tumor had substantially grown and was now pushing right up against the cavernous sinus, where major cranial nerves and arteries are housed. If the tumor crossed that boundary into the cavernous sinus region, it would become inoperable. Not only could I lose sight, I could lose movement and, eventually, my life. I felt I had hit a brick wall, a choiceless choice. Heartbroken, I struggled to understand what this persistently growing tumor was trying to tell me. Undergoing surgery was my deepest fear. My instinct was to run and hide, but there was no place to go, no place to turn to. I was being asked to surrender yet again and to meet my greatest fear—brain surgery.

Descent

I strip down, don the standard issue gown, and climb into the hospital bed. An endless stream of doctors, residents, nurses, anesthesiologists deliver papers for me to sign, explain procedures and risks, ask me the same series of questions. The IV drip streams twilight drugs into my bloodstream and the world begins to shimmer. Faces beam in and out like spotlights, each with their own particular quality of light and focus. And then it is my time—they wheel me down the hall, my mother and partner on either side, holding my hands, whispering reassurances. There is the door looming ahead—“Authorized Personnel Only”—another threshold, the place they must leave me, where I must go on alone. I am silently weeping as we wave goodbye.

Then I am in the surgery room, being picked up and hoisted onto a table. There is the drip drip of anesthesia into the veins, as I sip of the drink of the netherworld, feel the irresistible pull of sleep. And then I am a barely brimming consciousness ballooning around the room. I am floating in brilliant turquoise, while meanwhile my body is disrobed, catheterized, anchored in, clamped, and prepped for the surgery. I am in their hands, in the gesture of complete and utter surrender.

Slowly the surface appears like a mirror. I am emerging from this vast compassionate sea where I have been rocked and held in complete peace. I do not know who or what has been tending to me while I have been away from this body, but I know this is what unconditional love feels like. Now I am drifting in and out of this turquoise world on the morphine drip. This is the Post Anaesthesia Care Unit, and the nurse is the first face I see as I begin my ascent. Time passes, but I have no sense of time or space. I am moved to ICU. Another nurse enters, asks me my name, the day. Click click go the wheels in my brain. I am finding the coordinates, placing myself on the map, naming myself again. Faces float in and out, and I continue to surface. My pituitary is intact, they tell me. And, the surgeon thinks he removed the whole tumor. I am weeping with joy. I have made it out of the underworld, and I have not been maimed along the way. I am ecstatic, filled with adrenaline and steroids and the buoyant release of having arrived back *here*, in this body, in this life. This feels like profound grace. For three days I remain in the hospital in that in-between world, listening to the comings and goings of other patients on

the ward, feeling my body and spirit join together again. Little by little I gain strength, begin to walk, to feel hunger, to laugh, to cry, to heave a sigh of relief.

iii. Return and Reincorporation

“Every initiation causes a funeral and a birth; a mourning appropriate to death and a joyous celebration for the restoration of full life.” -Michael Meade

As with many initiation experiences, the most unanticipated challenge of the passage is coming “back” and returning home. After the intensity of the experiences and encounters in the Wilderness and the Descent, transitioning to the mundane world and re-entering the rhythm of daily life can feel strangely traumatic, bland and confusing. I arrived home feeling weak, tired, raw-nerved and fuzzy. I wondered what my life would be like now. Would I ever be the same? Did I even want to be the same? One part of me longed to be utterly transformed by the experience, while another part of me was afraid I wouldn’t recognize myself.

My initial recovery was three weeks long, a period that seemed both interminable and outside of space and time. I spent long periods of time in silence and stillness—my need for space and quiet as strong and primary as my needs for food and water. Daily, I walked slowly, so slowly, in nature—breathing in the sweetness of the unfolding springtime—the return of the bluebirds and herons, the bursting of buds, the greening of grasses. My weakness and fogginess required me to stay in the present, focused on my next step, on tending the pulse of the life force just beginning to move in my body again. I nourished myself on the every day miracles of life: clear air, towering mountain, warm honeyed sun. I did not want to leave this place of deep intimacy with self and creation. I no longer wanted my old life—it no longer felt like home.

The fourth week after surgery was like jumping off a cliff into a cold lake. I went back to work. The pace of life was faster than I could track and my nervous system was jangled, jumbled, unable to process at this speed. And though *I* had undergone a dramatic, life-altering experience, my community, family, colleagues had not. The world had continued on—and this juxtaposition was completely disorienting. People were kind and compassionate, but they had no way of fully understanding my passage. I felt like I

was living in a parallel reality, speaking another language, trying to make contact across borders. How could I connect with and re-enter this world, without abandoning this newly reborn fragile self? How could I both protect and integrate her into the world? The relief and joy of making it through the ordeal of surgery gave way to a kind of dull thudding depression. After having been in such an intimate and immediate dance with survival, work life and the hum of the civilized world felt hollow, unimportant, draining.

Having crossed this particular threshold, I could never go back to the other side. I had been alchemically changed—this was the heartache and ecstasy of this passage. As I emerged into my community and the flow of my life, I celebrated my return, mourned the parts of me that were no longer, and began to adjust to this new way of walking in the world. Slowly, the wobbly legs of the newborn one of me strengthened. Slowly, the new form of myself settled onto my bones. Slowly, I found the language to speak of the sea I had just crossed. And, slowly, very slowly, I found my way back into this new-old world.

Gifts from the Fire

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

—excerpted from Rumi’s “The Guest House”

Though our individual passages are intensely personal and unique—with very particular language and mythologies—they are also archetypal and universal. When any one of us journeys along this initiatory path, we not only bring back gifts for ourselves, but also for our community. And though many of the gifts from our journeys are impossible to verbalize or translate, naming the gifts from the initiatory fires—in whatever we are able—can be regenerative and restorative for all. We each contact the mystery uniquely, and so we are nourished and quickened by each other’s stories and transformations.

For me, through the healing journey, I was gifted a profound wake up call that led to a complete re-imagining of my own identity and way of being in the world. Having walked through this particular fire, having touched my own fragility and mortality, I had been emptied out—and in those spaces, I was filled with a groundswell of gratitude, with the visceral felt sense of the preciousness of every drop of the nectar of life. I knew now that it was a life or death matter for me to stay awake to my intuition and inner guidance,

to not suppress my own truths or live out of alignment with my sense of purpose. The changes this would ask me to make in my life were not easy, but they were essential and ultimately life-giving. I noticed, too, that a certain “caul” had been stripped away between my heart and the world—and that this *required* me to meet the world with more intimacy, openness and vulnerability than ever before.

There is an aspect here about the healing journey as a rite of passage that is essential to note. Illness is a very unique kind of rite of passage—for unlike other passages that have clear “endings”, we often “return” from a healing journey with a great deal of uncertainty. We may have undergone an ordeal with breast cancer or a heart attack, and we are still living with an unknown prognosis and with a host of questions about our future. And, we may, in some cases, be called to re-enter the threshold space of illness through a recurrence. Or, we may be called to undergo the most profound rite of passage there is—the journey into dying—a surrender to the deepest of mysteries. In this way, illness as initiation, by its nature, delivers us into a profound and ongoing dance with the unknown. It strips away any sense of our invincibility and insists that we understand our beautiful impermanence. This is the truth for each of us, every day—but when we experience an illness, we can no longer deny or ignore the fragility we have been living with all along. We know there is no time to waste and that time has never been ours in the way we thought it was. When illness is our initiation path, our “return” often brings a fierce invitation to bring exquisite attention to what is absolutely essential and joyful in our lives for whatever time we have here.

The Rites of Passage Map

"And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world". ~Joseph Campbell

The map of rites of passage offers us no answers and no universal truths, only signposts along a path that many have walked in their own way. Though we do not need illness or crisis to experience initiation, these experiences can act as catalysts for an intimate encounter with the mysteries of life and death. And in this process, our old lives are stripped away and our identities dismantled. We often become strangers to who we thought we were, only to find new sources of nourishment, joy and healing. And, we are

offered profound (and sometimes painful) truths about ourselves and our lives that were previously hidden to us. Through this revelation, we are given the opportunity to remake ourselves in a new image and to live from a different center of gravity.

Transformation comes when we are willing to meet and listen to these fierce messengers in our lives—to these ones who carry keys to doors of the soul. Despite our fear and resistance, despite our attachment to the familiar world, we know, in our bones, in our ancestral memories, how to make these evolutionary leaps and surrender to the alchemical flames of initiation. There are seeds that will not open without fire. And these seeds, that dwell and quake in the center of our beings, have been waiting our whole lives to open—in just this way, at just this time, for just this purpose.

