

A Life of Bliss

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Introduction

“A Life of Bliss” is a children’s story that I created in memory of my friend Bliss Kalk who passed away shortly after her 40th birthday in 2019. Bliss and I worked together at a holistic health and wellness nonprofit center where she practiced as a massage therapist, and I as a spiritual director. Our friendship had a lovely yin/yang dynamic whereby I was always concerned with the spiritually obscure and esoteric and she was always concerned with the body and the natural world. Our colleagues often commented that it was like having the root chakra (Bliss) and the crown chakra (myself) as co-workers.

Bliss taught me so much about how to live, and how to die with grace and authenticity. I have many fond memories of spending time in nature with her: floating in water, tending to her large garden, or foraging for mushrooms and wild onions in the woods with our children. I wanted her story to reflect both her whimsical personality, and also her grounded spirit. I chose to do this through the discipline of storytelling, specifically geared toward children, so that the story would be told in language that her children Elanor and Lincoln would understand.

Incorporating insights from authors studied throughout our semester, I will explore the themes and symbols present in my story, page-by-page, as they relate to the individuation journey of a child. The motif of the journey into the wilderness seemed an especially appropriate one because of how much time she spent outdoors. The story begins with her embarking on “an epic quest” desiring to find her unique purpose in the world. As she retreats to the forest she quickly finds herself both enchanted by nature, but also stumbling, falling, and a bit in-over-her-head. As she “loses herself to find herself,” she finally comes to the realization that her “epic quest” isn’t outside herself to be sought after, but rather inside of herself, simply to be noticed, and shared.

The Quest

Bliss was on an epic quest. To live a life unlike the rest. She knew to make a heart of gold.

Nature was where she must go.

Bliss is embarking on a journey to find her special and unique place in the world. Her burgeoning ego is desirous for a life “unlike the rest” as her personality development begins. However, identity is not something she can strive to attain, rather it is given to her by the world, and life as it unfolds. Instinctually, she already knows that nature is where she must go for this to happen; specifically, her mother’s garden. This is both literal and symbolic because in her childhood she spent much time in her parent’s large garden where they planted, harvested, and canned their food. Gardening was a hobby that continued in adulthood, and she enthusiastically shared her gardening knowledge with her family and her friends. It is also symbolic, in that the garden evokes a collaboration with nature not easily attained. “We plant gardens, tend them, nourish them, gather and prune them, all the while negotiating the claims of nature’s forces” (“Garden,” BOS124, ARAS). It is by willingly participating in the quest, and being thrust into cooperation with nature, that her heart will be forged into gold.

This first page of the story is where the reader has their initial encounter with the morel mushrooms that are hidden within the illustrations of the entire book. Again, this is both literal and symbolic. Bliss spent many hours foraging the woods looking for these delicious and well-hidden treasures of the forest. Symbolically there is something both extraordinary yet familiar about mushrooms. “Above ground, mushrooms appear suddenly, overnight, where no plant was visible before. They are oddly weightless. They seem to be plants, but they are not green. Eaten, they are sometimes gourmet treats, sometimes poison, and sometimes cause visions” (“Mushroom,” BOS190, ARAS). The challenge of finding them hidden throughout the

book is a way for the reader to participate in the journey alongside Bliss as she embarks on her adventure.

The Invitation to Nature

She stayed all day in mama's garden. But when the sky began to darken. The Cheshire moon was on the rise. And nature had a big surprise.

Being in nature brings her the comfort of the familiar, as the darkening sky is emblematic of the growing pull for Bliss to enter the unknown of the unconscious. The Navajo see in the darkness of night both the sinister, and also the night's capacity to protect us because it confers invisibility. The color black is fundamental to the task of transformation, because it elicits in the imagination a turning away, or a turning inward. Mystical experiences such as the "dark night of the soul," depict a sort of luminous darkness of self-understanding, eclipsing those old, tired patterns of identity and meaning ("Black," BOS,027, ARAS).

The moon, for alchemists, represents the task of navigating this uncharted territory of the soul, and bringing it, so far as possible, into consciousness. "The dangers of the undertaking are intrinsic to the allurements and the gravitational pull of Luna herself. The adept can emerge from the far side of the psyche initiated into self-knowledge, or they can become irretrievably lost in the darkness" ("Moon," BOS185, ARAS). Bliss does not see just any moon however, it is a Cheshire moon, which was Bliss' favorite symbol, hanging in both her office as well as her home. In this story it connotes a very specific element of childlike mischief meant to point to this being the first leg of her individuation journey. Artistically, the Cheshire moon is an image which her own mother (who also died very young of the same cancer that would later take her daughter's life) often painted in her artwork and was a reminder of her continued presence with

them. This scene sets the stage for the “surprise” awaiting her in the darkness: tiny shimmers of light.

Lightning bugs had filled the sky. And mischief filled her glowing eyes. Rules are not meant to be broken. But fate can often leave doors open.

Lightning bugs or fireflies are an important symbol across both eastern and western cultures, encompassing a multitude of meanings and representations depending on the particulars of that civilization and the time in which the story was written. I use them here in particular because the firefly is the perfect image for the dance between dark and light and the rebirth from darkness into new life (Demers, 2021). The “glow” that fireflies are able to reflect in Bliss’ eyes inspire her to follow her curiosity over any latent fear about venturing into darkness. The firefly also foreshadows the reality that light shines from within us, as well as outside us. Since Bliss does not yet see that in herself, nature gives her the gift of an example of just such a creature as herself in the natural world through the symbol of fireflies.

Doors are places of transition from one state to another, often a dangerous and numinous place. On the other hand, sometimes doors and gates must be opened to release what is too confined inside (“Gate/Door,” BOS.125, ARAS). Here, for fate to leave the door open at night, when Bliss would typically be in the safety of her house, gives her the green light to answer her budding call to adventure. Historically the image of the door meant something of spiritual value was inside, or that there was something behind the door that must be contained. (Estés, 2003, p. 52). Bliss, however, will no longer be curtailed, and rules get thrown out her bedroom window!

Not wanting to reinforce the idea to children that “rules are meant to be broken,” (although that was one of Bliss’ most favorite sayings) instead I invite the element of fate having a hand in the rising forces of intuition in young Bliss, similar to what Estés (2003) is

emphasizing when she says: “Another way to strengthen connection to intuition is to refuse to allow anyone to repress your vivid energies...that means your opinions, your thoughts, your ideas, your values, your morals, your ideas. There is very little right/wrong or good/bad in this world” (p.118). So breaking with societal norms here is not indicative of youthful rebellion, but rather the awakening of her intuitive senses.

The Journey into the Unknown

She ran into the cottonwood forest. Trees whispered: “child, slow down and trust us!” “But why am I here? What must I do?” The excitement inside Bliss grew and grew.

For Bliss, nature is alive and speaks to her. The imagination of a child that engages with the material world in a way that anthropomorphizes nature creates the perfect playground for inviting the unconscious domain into awareness. The whisper of the trees to Bliss, as if she is one of their descendents, is meant to give her a tree-like nature. Trees possess an intense inner life and development that eventually reveals the “evergreen” within. Alchemists are sure to not overlook the reality that trees not only represent awakening to new life, but also, a life of suffering (“Tree,” BOS.292, ARAS). The trees attempt to remind her to “slow down and trust” because they possess the innate wisdom that she cannot rush into the forest demanding answers.

Folk tales, myths, and scriptures across traditions often use the motif of a journey into the dark woods to connote an initiative time, calling the main character to lean into the discomfort of this “new and dangerous-feeling numen of being in one’s intuitive power” (Estés, 2003, p. 91). Bliss is called to navigate the unknown. This motif in storytelling is synonymous with what Jung means when he talks about letting ourselves be overpowered by the numinous. A wandering in the wilderness or a dark night of the soul, initiates the individual into a new and wider experience of herself (Smith, 2020, p. 112).

She stumbled down an unknown path. And through the mud she slipped and crashed. A couple scrapes, a torn up shirt. But a little dirt never hurt.

The experience of suffering is a certainty in life...pain, loss, illness, violence, injustice, the struggle for survival-these are the moments in life when most often we have a felt sense that any control we have over our lives is being ripped away (Smith, 2021, p.129). The trees knew that her youthful enthusiasm to rush the process would yield this result; the first fall on the journey. Her tenacity, both in real life as well as in this story, were always a marvel. She was fond of reminding her children when they would fall and scrape their knee, or picked a dirty tomato out of the garden that “a little dirt never hurt.” The wisdom of that saying goes far beyond soil, and has become a mantra of sorts among her friends for moments when life is unfair or challenges are refining us to be a better version of ourselves. “Jung believed that we are able to bear suffering as long as we have some understanding of why we suffer-that is, when our suffering has meaning” (Smith, 2021, p.50). Young Bliss knows that this momentary setback is one she can recover from with a splash in the river.

The surrender to the river

Bliss knew just how to mend her wounds. The river whispered “I have room.” The healing waters gave her hope. So Bliss went for a little float.

Jung said “when the spirit becomes heavy, it turns to water...Therefore the way of the soul...leads to the water.” (Estés, 2003, p.321). Rivers are often viewed as the veins of great mother earth, speaking of life as flow, movement, things running their course, but also dangerous currents and unknown depths (“River,” BOS.232, ARAS). When we swim or float we trust a source much greater and more powerful than ourselves to hold us. “The chemistry of our bodily fluid is remarkably similar to that of the sea, signaling to the body memories of its watery origins

as human newborns contained in utero” (“Swimming,” BOS.232, ARAS). When Bliss relaxes into the flow of the river she engages in the process Smith (2021) describes by letting herself be overpowered, and surrendering to an opening of our narrow perspective into a larger, transpersonal or ‘divine dimension.’ This is the realization of the Self” (p. 112).

But the water current became so fast! Furious, mighty, the waters crashed! Bliss was launched into the night. And although it was dark, Bliss saw a light.

Bliss has now entered the divine dimension, and it is disorienting. Psychoanalysis sees water primarily as a symbol for the activities of the unconscious (Becker, 1994, p. 323). The river reminds us that we can never rise above our source; all rivers flow downhill, finally terminating in a sea or confluence. There is both fear of being snatched by the undercurrent, and also elation in the experience of floating above it (“River,” BOS.232, ARAS). Likewise the ego self-navigates the psyche’s shallows or depths, sometimes fighting the rapids, sometimes surrendering to flow. The attitude of the swimmer is the most important part because a panic response will drastically change the experience (“Swimming,” BOS.232, ARAS). With certain particularly powerful experiences, the choice is either to “let oneself be overpowered by them, or to be overpowered by them against one’s will” (Smith, 2021, p.101). Either way, once she waded into the river, the river was in charge.

The Encounter with Self

Not with her eyes, nor with her ears. She saw with her heart, and it melted her fears. The forest told her heart of gold: “Be still like the trees, your spirit will grow.”

When Bliss “sees the light,” she finds out that what she was seeking to know with the intellect cannot in fact be “known,” but rather, must be experienced. Smith (2021) points out that when we encounter a powerful symbol, it is not something that can be possessed in the

traditional way knowledge is attained, “just as we do not ‘know’ a spectacular sunset. We simply stand before it and are moved by it” (p. 41). Much like the skull light of Vasalisa that Estés (2003) recounts in *Women Who Run with Wolves*, Bliss receives eternal light, shining ahead like a presence that goes before her. Once a woman sees it, she is then called to do something about what she sees, be it for good, or balance, or to allow something to come to pass (pg114).

Here the light is the symbol activating her attention, initiating the movement toward a response from her consciousness toward her epiphany that the answer to her “epic quest” has been there all along inside of her. She can simply stand still like trees now and it will be possible to feel it stir inside her.

She knew now just what she should do. Walk home, to share this love so true. It was past her bedtime, but at any rate. Bliss was always, just a little late.

The deep and challenging work of her journey into the forest has come to its conclusion and the lesson is simple: Go home Bliss! No deep philosophical lessons to shout from the rooftops: just go home and love your family- something she was exceptionally good at. During a lecture given during our residential weekend, Hoffman noted, “the point is to deepen our relationship with psyche in the world, not to *make* it mean something” (personal communication, October 2, 2022). Keeping the story’s conclusion vague and maybe even a little confusing was my way of not bringing too much interpretation so as to have a closing off effect by immediately meaning-making on behalf of the reader. The concluding scenario of being late isn’t symbolic or meaningful in any overt way. It’s actually just a funny joke. Rather than ending the story with a deep harkening to the power of love, I chose to keep it light with the inside joke of the friend that we all knew and loved having a reputation for never being on time. Bedtime and time in general

being subjective, it gives her individuation process a “better late than never” quality that I hope inspires a little chuckle that both parents and children alike can share.

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