

Column

BREAKING FREE: An Illusion

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Theme: Breaking Free

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I was the *only* person in my family to break free. That's how strong our German family system was. My rebellion was doubly astonishing because I was the model child for all the others. Maybe that's why the atmosphere of obedience felt so oppressive to me. Maybe that's why I *noticed* it, and, when the time came, wrenched that heavy burden from my shoulders and hurled it to the ground.

That story of how I broke free of parental and societal bonds when I was 26 years old became a teaching tool, an essential gadget in my bag of tricks. I relished telling the tale, relished the astonished looks in my listeners' eyes. I enjoyed their participation in my own freedom, if but only momentarily. The story served to set in motion the same dynamics for them when their time came.

When we tell our tales we complete our stories, we close that chapter, and can move on. I've heard this many times. Well then, why did I not move on? Why repeat the story? Was it simply because there were so many eager listeners? Or were other, deeper motives at work. Was I, by repeatedly telling my tale of breaking free from all that would oppose me, by insisting on my complete and triumphant autonomy, forever running in place?

The whole family thinks the break from my parents was over religious belief. It was but the first in a long line of breaks: from my first husband, from my children, from my second husband, then my third. I was proud of my capacity to assess the situation, find it wanting, and move on.

I notice the tone here is ironic. Not one I usually use — not for myself, nor in any public writing. What does this tone signify? Where am I going with this tale?

I suspect the tone is a symptom of a process that has just barely begun. A process in which I am, once again, uncovering something that I did not know was there, something inside me, something deep. And worse, this is something of which I have long been proud, so that now, I must, pardon the phrase, “eat shit.” I blush in the face of my own blustering arrogance. I see how I have been manipulated, once again, by my mind’s tendency to transform anything I do into a legend and brag about it. I sense that my irony is therefore a defense — against my anguish at the stupid mistake? At my abysmal ignorance? My shameful pretense? Whatever was the stimulus for this defense, I sense it lies just below the surface, and, once unleashed, it will overwhelm me. I must not allow that. I must work through this process with dignity and circumspection — so I think.

Just as I have done for years. Always looking at myself, attempting to get to the bottom of things — in order to break free of whatever was hampering me at the time. My speciality has been “breaking free of ‘unconscious assumptions’” — those unnoticed habits of mind that pervade the mental atmosphere in which all our thoughts arise; which we might see as the hard-wiring of our brains, but which, I discovered, can be melted down. I wanted to melt down my assumptions because I knew — and still do know, about this I am not ironic — that once brought to the clear light of awareness, assumptions lose their power. That they are like bogey-men in the dark, hiding under the bed, upon which I lie paralyzed with fear.

If I can, whatever the terrible odds, set my foot down on the floor, and not be snatched by the bogey-man’s bloody claws, then I can stand up and walk. Or run. I have broken free.

This was the metaphor that I have operated with all these years, a resonance reaching back into the darkness of a fear-strapped childhood from which I have been forever running.

But now, the hard part. Where I must drop the irony and say what exactly is going on. What new thing has grabbed my attention and demanded that I stop in my tracks, stop running, stop running away? For that is exactly what I have been doing, I now realize. I have run from the very thing that I thought I have been running towards, real connections with other people. I thought my differences with my parents, husbands, even children, were so great that I had to leave. That I had to go off on my own and establish my autonomous identity. And maybe I did. Maybe I needed to do that, as an initial step in a process. But the process, no matter how large or long, winds back on itself; once again, I have caught a glimpse of its subtly curving walls.

I thought I was leaving all these connections behind because they were not real, i.e., because I couldn't "be myself" with them. So I went to look for myself, and found a disappearing act. All the many and various identities of which I have been so proud are veils of illusion I have worn (proudly) to entrance myself into believing that I was separate from *them*, different, better than/worse than.

The above realization came to me, stole into me like a thief in the night and robbed me of the meta-identity I will call She Who Breaks Free, and who has encased all those smaller identities, two evenings ago, as the moon was darkening from her fullness. I am entering the dark of my own moon, the Crone phase of life, and things have a way of catching up. Things that used to look so obvious and certain, are now laughable. Things like identity, especially, whatever I used to call myself, whatever I still call myself when people ask, because they want to know about identity; that's how we are taught, to establish positions, poses, which we then defend and promote.

To make a long story short (the story involves a ritual I did with myself, including a 45-minute meditation during which I fell asleep several times, a candle, a Tarot reading, and a brilliant flash of insight once I had gone to bed), I realized that I never did leave

my parents, never did break free, not really. And that realization came as not only a jolt, but as a thrill of discovery, the kind of thrill that I feel when my world has suddenly, unaccountably, opened. Because after all these years of “separation,” years in which my heart has felt the blows, over and over again, of my mind’s insistence on feeling estranged, I realized that my isolation is not only self-imposed, it is a joke! Not real.

Now comes the really, really hard part, the part where I must soften, soften the mind and its penchant for identity, melt down the brain as a whole. So that I listen, listen, listen! — to the heart. To the heart and its message. A message which comes as a whisper in the dark. A quiet, barely discernible whisper in the exact center of an enormous, yawning cave, and it draws me like a magnet. I am making my way slowly, slowly to the center, to that still point of the turning world, to the place where all the illusions flying by, all the beliefs, religious and otherwise, which I have used to divide and conquer, are just so much mind-stuff, that joke!

I am so scared. The saliva in my mouth tastes metallic. I am so scared to drop into my own heartbeat, for I know that it will take me back. That I will fall into the bottomless depths of my own mother’s heartbeat, and her mother’s, and hers before that. I am so scared. My eyes flutter, glitter in panic. For I can feel that beat starting to drive me down, that rhythm of the universe, that intimate union, and know that I am lost. There is no breaking free, there is only breaking through, to that vast ocean of awareness washing eonic shores.

Below the shouts of identity lies Love’s whisper. When she calls, we can only respond. We are as infants, helpless, pulling milk from our Mother’s soft, rounded breast.

Update 2010: this essay was/is also informed by forty years of contemplation of my astrological birth chart, in which the planets Mars (thrusting energy) opposes Uranus (sudden changes) in the signs of Gemini (surface understanding) in the 6th house (daily

practices, analysis) and Sagittarius (larger perspectives) in the 12th house (investigating the unconscious).

There, I just had to say it! As incomprehensible as it may be to others, to me that one long sentence speaks volumes, as a sort of code for both “break free” as an unconscious reaction to internal pressure for enormous change, and “break through,” as its eventual conscious transformation from reaction to responsiveness.