

The Eleventh Labor: The Golden Apples of the Hesperides

The last two Labors are “extra,” making twelve instead of the original ten. King Eurystheus discounted two earlier ones, because Heracles had had some help. Knowing how myths evolve over time, this probably means some clever philosopher thought up two really great new tasks for Heracles to perform, and had to alter the back story to make room for them. They certainly add extraordinary new dimensions to the tale. The number twelve is also significant, and allows the labors to bear correspondence with the zodiac, as noted in the introduction. Dr. Mees has related the zodiac to stages of the spiritual path in his *Revelation in the Wilderness*, and *The Key to Genesis*.

The story of Heracles’ retrieval of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, relating his entry into a virginal paradise after a long struggle, is intriguing from start to finish. Let’s take a closer look.

The highest aspiration of humans is for spiritual awakening. This usually comes at the end of a trying and convoluted journey of discovery. It is only attained by those who thirst for the meaning of life and are committed to finding it despite the obstacles. In such an endeavor, expert help from those who know at least part of the way is indispensable.

Heracles’ Eleventh Labor is close kin to a universally known myth at the very foundation of Western civilization, as we shall see. Eurystheus ordered him to fetch three Golden Apples from the paradisiacal Garden of the Hesperides, whose streams flow with ambrosia, the nectar of the gods, said to confer immortality. The Apples are a glowing substance with some very un-applelike qualities. Adding to their mystique, they grew on a tree that was a gift of Gaia, the Earth goddess, on the occasion of the marriage of Zeus and Hera, the primeval male and female. Something about the Apples made them highly covetable. It is likely they were, in fact, psychedelic substances with powerful mind-altering abilities.

To protect the special “Apples” from surreptitious truth-seekers eager to taste their magical elixir, Hera assigned three

nymphs known as the Hesperides to care for the tree, but because they sometimes pilfered the Apples themselves, Hera also brought in a monstrous serpent to guard it. This was no ordinary snake: it was a hundred-headed dragon, each of whose heads spoke a different language.

It's hard to miss the similarity with that other paradise myth in which the original man and woman were named Adam and Eve instead of Zeus and Hera. They appear to be two versions of the same tale, coming down to us from the drowned depths of time, back when communion with the "gods" (whatever that may mean) via psychedelics was a normal and essential part of becoming a properly prepared member of the community.

If this is true—and there is every reason to believe it is—our human heritage has been far more profoundly influenced by the insights gained from taking enlightening drugs than we have been led to believe by the official historians!

The Garden of the Hesperides duplicates the Eden myth in that in addition to being paradisiacal, both contain highly alluring apples guarded by serpents. I contend that these mysterious fruits were most definitely psychedelic substances, and that the ancient storytellers were advocating for their educational use in a spiritual setting. Where the pervasive Puritanism of the present day recoils in horror at the thought, those of us who have defied its prohibitions have been granted a glimpse of "immortality" by its divine Apples, and most of us are elated to have had the privilege.

Heracles underwent a number of adventures on route to the Garden, a couple of which are well worth recounting. At first he had no idea where the Garden was, so he sought out Nereus, a god of the sea who was reputed to know where it lay. Like the sea itself, Nereus was a shape shifter, but Heracles held him tight as he swiftly changed from one creature to another (or in one version, back and forth between fire and water), not letting go until Nereus revealed the location. The shape-shifting sea god is reminiscent of the ego, which shields us from the "threat" of realization in order to maintain its precarious perch in the driver's seat. The ego

doesn't want us to know where Paradise may be found, out of fears it would then be superseded by a superior intelligence.

As recent neurological observations have shown, our surface consciousness plays a minimal role in directing our life, despite its all-wise aspirations. Neuroscientist David Eagleman likens the ego to a stowaway on an ocean liner, along for the ride but with no influence over the course of the cruise, though it probably has a wee bit more utility than that. In any case we have very limited leverage in a life that only appears to be ours to control.

The sea symbolizes our ever-changing emotional state, which can easily deflect us from accomplishing our goals, its currents sweeping us up blind alleys of conformity. We have to be firm in whatever path of growth we choose if we want to make something worthwhile out of it. Our ego would just as soon pay lip service to admirable aims, without actually doing anything laborious. Being borne by the tide is far less arduous than bucking trends.

In intense confrontations where the conscious mind enters the unconscious realms, as with dying, or the surprises wrought by psychedelic traveling, the first stage includes evasion, where the ego tries to shut out the unsettling awareness of its predicament by denial or displacement. As soon as you catch on to the ego's desperate deception, it shape-shifts into another, and another. A spiritual aspirant must remain steadfast and not be thrown off by this, and only then can penetration be made into the boundless lands beyond. Heracles' encounter with Nereus demonstrates how we must hold on heroically to our focus when confounding maneuvers threaten to divert our attention.

Reminiscent of Nereus' deceptive tactics, Jay Stevens, in his psychedelic history, *Storming Heaven*, describes how psychologists in early studies observed the first stage of an LSD trip as producing evasive maneuvers by the ego, leading to a second stage, hallucinations, which were so absorbing they diverted attention from the therapeutic aims:

What happened was this: the drug, by its very nature, released such a flood of new thoughts and perceptions that the patient's normal conceptual framework was overwhelmed, producing a panic condition with overtones of paranoia. But with skillful manipulation of set and setting, the therapist could guide the patient smoothly through the evasive stage to the point where the overly famous hallucinations began. These shifting geometrical patterns were a last gasp of the ego which, "having lost the battle to divert attention through unpleasantness, seeks to charm and distract the conscious mind by throwing up a smokescreen of hallucinations to hide the inner knowledge which it fears." (179)

One other adventure en route is of preeminent importance: Heracles went out of his way to free Prometheus, a Titan who symbolizes the urge to know and progress, by breaking his chains. In it there is a curious convergence of Indian and Greek myths. In Indian mythology the divine eagle Garuda brought the nectar of the gods, soma, from heaven to earth. According to the Greeks, in a parallel move, Prometheus purloined the divine fire and smuggled it to earth. Because he had revealed the secret of immortality to humanity, a furious Zeus had sentenced him to be tortured daily. His punishment was to be chained to a rock and have his liver regularly consumed by... an eagle.

We can certainly interpolate a connection between these stories of the remote past. Both myths feature an eagle and depict the transmission of something special from the gods to humans. In the Western version it engenders terrible consequences, but in the Indian version it is an event to celebrate. Their gods of old loved soma dearly, and drank it whenever they could, but they didn't want to share it with humans any more than their Western counterparts did. Yet after Garuda delivered the soma to humanity, no one was castigated. In the West, no good deed of expanding consciousness goes unpunished.

In both cultures the eagle was considered a divine messenger able to fly between the celestial and earthly realms, and heavenly nectar and divine fire might well refer to the same substance, which has often been called a gift of the gods by those who partake in it. Toxic alkaloids present in the nectar could have a ferocious impact on the liver, too. The pain they cause might well feel like being gnawed by a raptor's beak.

Going out of his way to the ambrosia-filled Garden of the Hesperides, Heracles shot the ravening eagle and freed Prometheus from his chains. In gratitude for his release, Prometheus told Heracles how to safely fetch the Apples out of the garden. Though this is somewhat tangential to the official labor, the spiritual meaning is readily apparent. Being freed from whatever is gnawing at your vitals while breaking the chains of your conditioning is the primary purpose of a spiritual enterprise.

As a side note, this is supposedly where the olive wreath originated, which Heracles later made the prize of the Olympic Games. Since Zeus had decreed eternal punishment for Prometheus, Heracles had to devise a symbolic continuation of it after he released him, and the wreath symbolizes Prometheus' chains of bondage so he could otherwise go free.

And what exactly is this divine fire? A substance that confers the intelligence of the gods must be more than simple flames of oxidation on a stick. Fire symbolizes the principle of illumination. The effect of even a single spark of the divine fire was to stimulate creative thinking and activity in mortals, along with spiritual vision. The Greek version of soma, perhaps. It's hard to imagine any gods getting upset about humans obtaining ordinary fire, which at current estimate has been around for a couple of million years (give or take a few decades), but expanded consciousness is another matter entirely. That seems quite recent, as far as we can make out, and may well have been the spark that propelled humanity's evolutionary leap to conscious decision making. Staring into a campfire is a good meditation, but a dose of divine fire will really take you places!

Mundane thinkers assume that Prometheus just brought back ordinary fire for heating and cooking, but it seems clear enough that that would hardly constitute a serious transgression of divine decree, punishable by eternal torment. It was more likely to have been something quite special, perhaps a substance that would confer immortality, a thing the gods were very jealous about keeping to themselves, as many myths indicate. You may recall that the god (or gods—*elohim* is a *plural* word) of the Bible was extremely jealous of the fruit of the sacred tree in the Garden of Eden, and warned Adam and Eve away in no uncertain terms.

Immortality is an interesting concept. The common assumption is that it means living forever, but that is once again a materialist viewpoint. Immortality means the opposite of mortality, of death. Spiritual or psychological death occurs when we become docile victims of the social tides, conditioned to accept our lot without question. Rebirth is when we wake up to our inner sense of purpose, and in the process break the chains that bind us to the rock of unquestioned assumptions. Immortality, then, means reawakening the divine intensity, the divine fire, which ignites our enthusiasm to live well and fully, for however brief a span we are physically alive.

Enthusiasm is exactly the right word here, by the way. *Enthuse* is a corruption of *en theos*, meaning the god within. Entheogens or psychedelics reconnect us with our inner divinity, and enthusiasm is the indicator of being alive to its presence. One of the greatest benefits of entheogens is that they reawaken the enthusiasm that tends to be stamped out in the process of growing up and becoming socialized. They are an antidote to the mind-numbing conformity that ejects us from paradise and tacks a “Closed” sign on the gate.

Just as the divine fire is more than plain fire, the Apples are more than ordinary fruits. Eating of them confers immortality, which is not about life without end: it means seeing the unity underlying multiplicity, the divine or cosmic nature of all existence, conferring Blake’s “eternity in an hour.” The joy of

living is associated with freely chosen activity, and if you don't chose any, and just live your life out as a slave to the dictates of others or to the patterns laid down in musty tomes, you are squandering your immortal birthright.

In the Indian context, our true birthright is the *amrita*, the immortal nectar of pure existence. *Mrita* is death, *a-mrita* is the opposite of death. Interestingly, *amrita* is associated with the soma plant, which is a "food of the gods," that allows you to truly see. *Ambrosia*, the nectar that waters and nourishes the Garden of the Hesperides, is a closely related word that means exactly the same thing as *amrita*. It is quite possible that *amanita* of the *amanita muscaria* mushroom is also a related word, though that's purely speculative—the kind of musing that munching magic mushrooms motivates. My oh my!

Clearly the Biblical Garden of Eden is the same tale as the Garden of the Hesperides, though they evolved separately before being recorded. There are significant differences in them, too, especially that the serpent protected the Apples in the Greek version, while it invited humans to partake of them in Eden. A common thread, shared with many traditions, is that the gods are jealous of humans obtaining enlightenment or knowledge that raises them up to their level. Because of this, wisdom-seeking is a serious, nontrivial affair.

Like the red pill in the movie *The Matrix*, wisdom irreversibly changes the trajectory of life. That's what the Jewish God meant in Genesis, too, when he counseled Adam that he would surely die if he ate the divine fruit. He didn't mean *literally* die; as we are informed, Adam lived to be 930 years old. But Adam and Eve died to their *innocence*, their naïveté. As the serpent expressed it, "in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." When our eyes are opened, it never quite works to shut them again. The genie has been let out of the bottle. We may try our best to forget, but at least an inkling of what we have learned persists. And for the brave heroes among us who have partaken in something like the

Golden Apples of immortality, living with eyes wide open becomes their natural state, which they would never surrender no matter what pressures they faced, divine or otherwise. This is something the psychedelic community holds in common trust today, and we are very fortunate to be alive at the end of the long dark age in which eye opening substances were nearly eradicated from human awareness, in an attempt to glue our eyelids permanently closed.

So Eden had its forbidden fruit that dispels childish ignorance, and there is an undercurrent of an equally divine elixir in the symbolism of the Golden Apples. The substance hinted at wakes the eater up from a state of childish innocence to a state of adulthood where we can be quite certain, with Hamlet, that “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” The new awareness is a great blessing, yet one that may cause discomfort and anxiety, to know that what we are normally aware of pales to insignificance next to the vast cosmos in which we live. Whatever this awareness may be, it is not just a desiccated idea; the myths are referring to a living reality of direct experience, and that is exactly what psychedelics are capable of transmitting to us.

Assuming our hypothesis is correct, Dr. Mees—who, by the way, had no inkling of the impending psychedelic revolution—throws light on why the Golden Apple tree was a gift for the mystic marriage of Zeus and Hera, as well as its importance in conferring higher consciousness:

These fruits correspond to the Apples of Immortality of Idunn and to the Ambrosia and Amrita, and symbolize the Treasure of God-realization. (iii, 207)

Amrita is the mythical Elixir of Immortality.

Soma was said to be born “between the two sacred stones that were used to press it out,” symbolism referring to the union of Father and Mother, or God and his Creative Power, resulting in Enlightenment, and reflected in the preparation of

the unfermented wine that was used in rituals. It is the Jnanavari, “the Water of Gnosis” of the Hindu tradition dealing with Knowledge. It is the Elixir of Life, the production of which was the aim and end of the Great Work of the Alchemist. It is further the Rasa of the Hindu tradition dealing with Bliss. In the Rig-veda (IX, 63.13; 65.15) the Rasa is the juice of the Soma-plant. The Rasa is the blissful essence of life. In the Taittiriya Upanishad (II, 7.1) and the Maitri Upanishad (V.2) it is self-luminous consciousness, ecstasy, and the perfect taste or realization of life. (i, 189)

Indra is the helper of the poor, a deliverer and comforter, the bringer of benefits and wealth, the thresher of foes. He is the most faithful of friends, but he grants his friendship only to those who drink Soma. He “will have nothing to do with the wretch who does not press the Soma”, that is to say, with the man who has no Culture and does not know the inspiration of the Tradition and the ecstasy of its fulfillment. Indra can also “bless with treasure.” The greatest Treasure is Self-realization. (III, 52-53)

When Heracles arrived at the edge of the magical Garden he met Atlas, a Titan who holds the world and sky on his shoulders. Heracles offered to take the heavy burden if Atlas would get the Apples for him, and Atlas agreed, thinking he would leave him holding the weight of the world forever. He brought out the Apples and told Heracles he was taking them to the king himself. But Heracles tricked him back: he begged Atlas to hold the world for just a moment while he got more comfortable. Atlas obliged, and Heracles gathered up the Apples and took off for home.

Is it possible that the blessing the Apples confer lifts the weight of the world from our shoulders? It sounds almost too literal. And yet....

In the two main versions of the myth, either Heracles got the Apples himself or he took over the sky burden while Atlas did the

deed. The serpent was killed and three Apples obtained. The Nymphs were nowhere in sight. They were probably sleeping off the effects of partaking in an Apple or two.

The hundred-headed serpent calls to mind the Tower of Babel, as each head speaks a different language, within one towering creature. The unity represented by the Apples is defended from intrusion by multiplicity, which can be quite ferocious, as well as diversionary. Outward appearances forever distract us from the subtle beauty at life's core. Multiplicity stands for thorough selfishness, or the orientation toward materialism, which has to be overcome for the goal to be achieved.

In passing, if we take the Babel languages as equivalent to the filter bubbles of the Internet, closed-group echo chambers, we can see an especially sinister relevance of this Labor to the toppling of civilization currently in progress: humanity united in a single enterprise—the World Wide Web—but without meaningful communication between the multitude of “nations” within it, is tearing itself to bits.

Anyone making a serious attempt to realize their spiritual self has very likely been accosted by all sorts of hostile comments by nay-sayers, cynics, and doubters of all stripes, not to mention their own qualms. Scornful thoughts and opinions have a corrosive effect on a person's determination that does its work mainly in the subconscious, and halfhearted seekers will often find themselves losing their resolution without knowing why. It's curious that so many humans not only do not support idealism, but are actively subversive of those who aim for lofty goals.

Being a heroic type, Heracles was able to overcome this last defense of Immortality and retrieve the Apples. We are encouraged to stick to our ideals, even as we are assailed by doubts, so that we can complete our task, whatever it might be. Doubts are important at the beginning, to make sure the task is worthwhile, but after that they must be swept aside, or “killed.” The diversions of sensory appearances must also be overcome before the light they are guarding can shine forth.

Successful at last, Heracles presented the Apples to Eurystheus, who simply gave them back to him. Heracles then placed them on the altar of Athene. As Dr. Mees puts it, “The Treasure of Immortality, once obtained, is only for giving away.” He continues:

As likely he had enough wisdom not to dare taking them for his own, Herakles wisely offered them to the Virgin Goddess of Wisdom, who acted in accordance with the Tradition she represents, in taking them back where they belonged. Immortality belongs to all. It is for the taking of all who will strive sincerely, one-pointedly and perseveringly, to obtain it. Having obtained it, they will give it for the benefit of others. The Supreme Treasure of God is obtained by renunciation... and is held only by ever-renewed renunciation. When people advance on their spiritual path and experience “a flash of Illumination” or “a glimpse of Reality,” or “taste Bliss,” they make the mistake of wanting to hold it, that is to say, hold it for their own. And then they are miserable when they lose it again. When they learn that “the only way to hold is by letting go,” they will have learned the secret of the renunciation connected with the Ultimate.... When the soul manages to give everything, it obtains the All. (iii, 207-8)

We have a modern-day cautionary tale that verifies Mees’ insights. Some of those who have taken psychedelics and experienced an intensely liberating state of mind have wanted nothing more than to hold on to it, to remain in that state. There has been a tendency to keep getting high with the drug, and it has led to some dire consequences. The ancients knew that the safest approach was to garner the vision, and then strive to bring it to life without endlessly drinking the ambrosia. Of course you want to share the divine vision with the world, but you must pass it on, and not simply hold it. Giving away what you have gotten is the nature of a true gift, which the Apples were from the very beginning.

India has a lesser-known myth of the three Ribhus, recounted by the estimable Dr. Mees. They were pupils of Tvashtri, the divine craftsman who shapes beings in the womb, and whose Amrita confers immortality. The three Ribhus were told by the fire god Agni to make four cups of soma out of the one he gave them, and if they could they would be honored as gods. They succeeded, and then drove straight to heaven, where they were granted immortality, along with the right to drink the heavenly soma. Tvashtri was angered by their boldness, and urged the gods to kill them before they could drink the amrita. But the Ribhus were allowed to live because they had fulfilled their task of making four soma cups out of one. Mees points out that the soma cup is the moon vessel, the Holy Grail. Multiplying the soma cup in all four directions means making it widely available, similar to Jesus feeding the multitude with five loaves. There may well be an echo of this in the Eden myth also, in the verse “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads.” [Gen. 2.10] In all these cases there is a single unitive source that is transformed into something that ordinary people can partake of, and thus be nourished in the depths of their soul. Heracles has shown us the way to it.

Because of the challenges, a trip to paradise is not for everyone. Heracles had to overcome the many-headed serpent to retrieve the Apples. There are a thousand reasons for us to avoid a visit to immortality, but if the determination is there, it can be done. Heracles “took” the Apples, but then he passed them on, which is the righteous thing to do. In India, soma was an integral part of mainstream spiritual discipline for centuries if not millennia, but as in the West, it also faded from view eventually. We should always be seeking and finding new ways to open our eyes, and then share our insights and the kindness they inspire with our fellow beings. The wise seers of the ancient world have sent us that message in many guises through their myths, in hopes that we will keep alive the tradition of learning to see. The psychedelic community is the inheritor of a great and noble tradition, and it is

right for it to stand tall against all the opposition mounted by those who seek to crush the human spirit and punish those who revel in the divine fire.

The Apples are so tempting! They dangle from their branch tantalizingly close to our fingertips. Is it any wonder that we should want to pluck one and eat it?