

The First Labor – To Kill the Nemean Lion

The famous Labors were assigned by King Eurystheus as punishment for Heracles going temporarily insane, goaded by the goddess Hera, and killing his wife and children. On regaining his sanity, Heracles was eager to go to the ends of the earth to atone for his crime, which he immediately regretted with all his heart. For this he accepted Eurystheus' ten impossible tasks, which later became twelve after two were disallowed by the king.

In his first labor, Heracles was sent to Nemea in Greece's Peloponnese region to subdue a dreadful man-eating Lion. It was no ordinary lion. Its skin, in some accounts made of gold, was so tough that nothing—not arrows, knives or spears—could pierce it. Finding his weapons useless, Heracles drove it into a cave and grabbed it with his bare hands. He squeezed it so tightly it couldn't breathe, and soon it dropped down dead.

Heracles needed to take the lion's pelt back to the king to prove he had killed it, but he was baffled how to do it, since his knife couldn't cut it. Then a clever idea occurred to him. He took up a great paw and pressed the lion's own fearsome claws against the stomach. It sliced into the skin with ease, and he soon had the whole skin off. Knowing how tough it was, he decided it would make a fantastic coat of armor and a helmet.

Heracles is easy to spot in Greek paintings and statues, because he is almost always wearing the lion skin or else carrying it over his arm. Otherwise he's dressed in only the open air: in other words, he went around naked, which itself is a symbol for the lack of pretension.

Strangling the lion seems like a simple enough task, but there is an important spiritual lesson woven into it. Let's see what we can make of it.

In addition to its lethal ferocity, the distinguishing mark of the Nemean Lion is that its hide was impervious to all weapons; it turned out the thick skin could only be cut by its own claws. The symbolic reference is to vanity or the spiritual ego, what the Greeks called hubris. Our misguided beliefs coupled with natural self-interest create layers of defensive barriers in the conscious mind, which adroitly parry all attempts to penetrate it. The myth hints that, while impervious to outside attacks, our egoistic cocoon contains the seeds of its own unraveling, and that's a *good* thing.

In many cultures, lions symbolize pride. In English, a family of lions is even called a pride. Pride or vanity, along with its aspects of conceit, arrogance, pretension and the like, is the first stumbling block to a spiritual life. It closes us down precisely where we need to be open, and causes us to be satisfied with inferior accomplishments by exaggerating their value. It acts like a thick layer of hide, making us *hidebound*. Look it up; it's the perfect word.

The lion is also the king of beasts, and kings are likewise the epitome of pride. Pride can be pure, as when it supports adequate self-esteem, but the lion is the king of *beasts*, and thus master of less wholesome qualities. Whether leonine or kingly, our pride tends to make us impervious to advice. Even the best ideas don't get through to us if they conflict with what we already believe. The only way to rid ourselves of that kind of pride is to be proud enough to admit we have it, because we want to be even better than we are now. Psychologist Carl Rogers put it perfectly: "When I accept myself as I am, then I can change." This means there is a valuable pride that enables us to improve and an inferior kind that makes us selfish and insensitive, that keeps us swathed in a narcissistic bubble. The authentic form prompts a dedicated seeker to make great strides. Heracles cutting the thick skin with its own claw is like using intelligent pride to overcome ordinary pride, to peel away the tough layer of resistance to outside input that the immature ego is afflicted by. This is not a one-time accomplishment: we have to always remember to be honest about

our shortcomings, or selfish pride will sneak back in to make us foolish again. Heracles carrying the lion skin with him everywhere reminds us to remain humble and admit our faults at all times.

Vanity, excessive pride, originally meant emptiness. The Biblical “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” implies that everything is made up of our ideas about it, while in reality having only the qualityless Absolute for its real nature. Pride is empty even by the standards of mental imagery, but all of us routinely substitute our ideas for the reality around us, and we live wrapped in those ideas. This is after all how we function as thinking beings, and it has positive as well as negative influences in everyday life. But to a spiritual seeker ego defenses are fatal, because we become impervious to transformative instruction. We cling to our beliefs in preference to learning from others, especially those we have been trained to disdain, but also those we profess to admire if they challenge our conceits, and we become habitually deaf even to our own best intuitions.

Overcoming prejudices is a primary task of spiritual aspirants, and the spiritual ego cleverly reinforces them, even while claiming to overcome them. In some ways this makes vanity—empty though it may be—the most insidious stumbling block of all, by diverting our determination for excellence into dead ends and providing premature satisfaction with the little we’ve done. Why follow through when we’re already comfortable? We must conquer the Lion of pride before further progress is even possible. It is truly our first Labor as seekers of self-liberation.

To begin to disarm ourselves, it helps to know how our skin becomes so thick. The first time we experience something it is really profound and powerful. Direct. The next instance it’s still pretty profound, but mixed in are our expectations about how good or bad the next experience is going to be, based on our memories. We will have already prepared a label to describe it, and the label includes a rating of its value to us. These thoughts overlay the direct experience like a blanket—or a hide. As the event is repeated the reactivated memories become virtually the entire

experience, and the stimulus itself is barely noticed at all. We have decided we like the *idea* of that particular experience, and in consequence we don't much register it ever again. Still, we are certain we know what we like, so there is no need for us to change. Concepts have replaced actuality, and in consequence our reality has become vain and empty.

This affects much more than spiritual endeavors, of course. A significant aspect of the normal aging process is the substitution of mediated or verbal imagery for direct experience. As we move more and more into repetitive conceptualizations, the joy of being alive drains away. We become either content with mental dullness or desperate to reignite the joy through new experiences that often wander into bizarre realms. Spiritual acuity does not rely on either extreme, but remains alive to immediate involvement at any age.

The ego is the part of us that says "I know what I like." It holds fast to its little likes, and its dislikes too for that matter. It knows what it dislikes. It especially dislikes anything that threatens to dislodge it from being in the driver's seat.

Spirit itself is a living, flowing emptiness that is ever changing. The ego is continually challenged by the movement of life, and so builds a defended nest where it coddles its likes and dislikes and protects them from the assaults of the newness of spirit. This ego nest is just like the thick skin of the Nemean Lion that no weapon can get through.

No matter how thickly we are swaddled in fixed beliefs, deep down a part of us longs for the joys of direct experience. When we embark on a spiritual path, we do so because we have enjoyed some exciting or blissful stimulus that reminds us there is much more to be had in life if we only knew how to access it. We intuitively understand that if we were truly open, then bliss would be our everyday state, but instead we have supplanted living experience with ideas and memories. We have replaced bliss with notions of bliss. The skin that's woven around spiritual ideals is even thicker than in ordinary conditioning, and more impervious to

any weapon, “weapon” in this case meaning a conflicting idea or belief system. Our personal beliefs trump all others.

The Indian idea of the need for a Guru is based on this conundrum. We are nearly helpless to extricate ourselves from our self-deception based on our best thinking. Some kind of outside agency is required to cause us to surrender our spiritual ego, since it is the very “us” we most identify with. Psychedelic medicines can do it for a period, in the process demonstrating the technique of letting go of our accustomed mental framework, and the value of such aid was central to many ancient cultures, including those of Greece and India.

Heracles, however, was able to kill the beast on his own, through intense concentration and determination. Most of us are not focused enough to bring that kind of intensity to bear, but I’d like to agree it’s possible. You have to really want it, and be eager to transform yourself. For most of us, our ability to delude ourselves that we are making spiritual progress when in fact we are merely mired in a familiar web of deceit is legendary.

The value of a crisis in precipitating enough motivation to face up to our faults is acknowledged in these Labors. Very often it takes dissatisfaction or worse, heartbreaking misery of some sort, to provide the intense energy needed to resolve to make a breakthrough. Preferably you won’t have “pegged the meter” the way Heracles did, by murdering his family.

The words ‘vanity’ and ‘vainglory’ are closely related. Vainglory is when you are even more proud of your vanity: you exalt your emptiness beyond all boundaries of good sense.

We see vainglory in the self-glorification of politicians and narcissists, dependent as they are on popular approval. The childish adult ego seeks vainglorious enhancement through fame and fortune. Some, either by achieving glory or being thwarted in striving for it, substitute a spiritual longing, imagining a state that is vastly superior to mere temporal success: being seated at God’s table as the ultimate ego trip. The spiritual ego is even more grandiose than the transactional ego, so convinced of its

righteousness that it cannot entertain doubts. Many spiritual sects play on this by defining doubt as a diabolical obstruction that must be abolished through faith. Pruning away all doubt makes for utterly dedicated cult-followers. Yet spiritual goals can be even less “real” than worldly success—aiming at nonexistent abstractions. Such abstractions can be beautiful, as in compassion, nurturing, solidarity and the like. But there is a huge gray area where you may be asked to trade in your sovereignty for a slavish devotion to someone or something.

In healthy spirituality a person is not asked to surrender their intelligence, including their doubts.

Heracles has reached a critical stage by the time of his first Labor. Once the urge for vainglory is dismissed as an impediment, the deeper, more primitive urges may find room to burst to the surface. If these are treated as the “will of God” or otherwise given credence, they can run away with the ego, expanding it beyond all semblance of sanity. By secretly promoting selfish desires as divinely sanctioned, it releases all restraint. As everyone knows, some fanatics are willing and eager to exterminate those who cast doubt on their own fantasies.

Desires surface in the shape of the conceptualization of the bearer, and their attendant concepts appear in the form of verbal structures. Below the verbal level, the ego has no control whatsoever. It has to content itself with manipulating appearances on those higher levels, because it has no access to the vast terrain of the rest of the mind.

For anyone to reclaim contact with their whole being, they must reduce their dependence on the verbal level of interaction, allowing the depths of the mind to guide them. Such sorties are jealously prevented by the ego, in fear it will lose control. The greater the success of the reduction, the more the resistance mounted by the ego to frighten the truth seeker away from that direction. Ego defenses can be as ferocious as a man-eating lion, and when we are denying ourselves entry into our whole being, it is as if our true nature is the deer, the prey. We have been cut off

from our spiritual side, consigned to live as mere shadows of our full potential. This is the slaving beastie that Heracles has been sent out to defeat as his initial test. Without taking down the vicious blockade, we cannot get where we need to go.

This is a particularly terrifying and challenging part of spiritual development, and most seekers turn back here, substituting a less stressful set of goals.

There is one very important corollary to emphasize: the role of words in the spiritual quest. All of us are wrapped in a thick skin of words that has been growing thicker since birth. Words are very enchanting, but they only *represent* reality, they are not real in themselves. By adulthood we have all pretty much substituted word reality for essential reality, which we often refer to (in words, at least) as spiritual reality. It is not enough to merely recognize this. Somehow the beast must be killed and the skin cut away. The myth tells us how: we must use the claws themselves, nothing else will do the trick. This means that only through words can we slice through the web of words which binds us.

Many of us recognize the conundrum we're in due to being caught in word reality, but not as many appreciate the power of words to extricate us. We fail to recognize that everything we think and do is based on and shaped by words. False and misleading words can further entangle us, but wise words can actually set us free, if we take them to heart. The fact that this paradox occurs in the very first Labor means it is of preeminent importance. We have to resolve this issue before we'll be able to go any farther.

When we listen to a teacher or read up on techniques for stilling the mind, we are being instructed by words, words which present new ideas and aim to shake us out of our conditioned state. Without the stimulating challenge of wise words, we are likely to remain content in our habit-laden comfort zone.

The appeal of mind-expanding drugs and some religious rituals is that they allow us to enjoy nonverbal, direct experience for a time. It is very refreshing to be released from the thrall of

word-mediated reality. But the Herculean myth reminds us that this doesn't remove the skin; it merely renders it temporarily transparent. We always come back after the ceremony into the persona made up of our old thoughts and attitudes, and that's as it should be. Inspired by what we've learned, we can then work to gradually rewire our neurons to actualize the transformation we envision. The key is to find an intelligent orientation for letting go of verbal interpretation, which process is often encouraged by almost the same thought processes that hold us fast. Meditation serves as a generic term for means of stilling the mind through intelligent determination.

Ordinarily, humans talk to themselves continually, describing who they are and what they are doing. Psychedelics tend to stifle this narrative impulse, leaving the sojourner speechless, so that unmitigated reality stands revealed. Many eminent Greeks were introduced to the mysteries revealed by psychedelics in rites held at the sanctuary of Eleusis. The eleventh Labor addresses this aspect of the spiritual search directly.

In this first Labor, Heracles overcomes the Lion with his bare hands. Dr. Mees sees the hands as symbolic of the Guru, and he has a point. But to me it also means that weapons (tools) are superfluous. We have to wrestle directly in hand-to-hand combat with our own spiritual vanity that is based on the beliefs we have made out of words. The weapons symbolize religions or thought systems, designed to produce higher states, yet futile to do so against this enemy. They just don't cut it. According to the ancient seers, these kinds of weapons are to be abandoned and the situation addressed head on.

After killing the Lion, Heracles tried to remove its skin, but nothing would work. Finally he tried the Lion's claws and the skin came right off. As noted earlier, this means that words are the only way to get disentangled from a defective philosophy. The claws are very sharp and pointed, like the words of the Guru.

Heracles next made a protective coat of armor and a helmet from the hide. This tells us he forged an intelligent frame of

reference that from then on would assist him in his quest. His armor made him impervious to other weapons (inadequate belief systems) and the helmet gave him an invincible outlook.

Heracles wears the coat of skin only in battle. Usually he carries it casually draped over his arm or shoulder, demonstrating that he has conquered his prideful spiritual ego. This implies that he has not just assumed another, tougher persona, but intelligently employs his ego only in conflict situations. It is brought with him only as an adjunct. The ego is a useful tool, but a terrible master.

The Lion is driven into a cave, where Heracles strangles it. This certainly looks like words being stifled in the throat, though it doesn't have to be as literal as it looks. Mere suppression of the urge to talk won't work, but a nuanced (yogic or dialectic) attempt may stop the flow of web-weaving words or thoughts. In fact the futility of brute suppression of the life force is the issue of the next Labor, when Heracles takes on the Hydra.

The internet "filter bubble" or echo chamber makes a good analogy for the lion's invincible skin, where commercially-driven algorithms are prone to create a web of self-ratifying falsehoods. It's impossible to determine truth when all incoming information is crafted to be attractive. For anyone wondering about the relevance of Heracles' Labors, think of the Nemean Lion as one of the social media giants of our time. How are you ever going to subdue it?

Mammalian or not, the Nemean Lion resembles the horrific "monsters from the id" depicted in the 1956 movie *Forbidden Planet*, which are a stunning foreshadowing of today's internet trolls, where lethally destructive impulses are made manifest to carry out the nefarious unconscious cravings of those enabled by technology to unleash them. It seems an impossible task to put that genie back in the bottle, and it sets off the desire to strangle the bastards, if only you could! Sadly, they are too elusive for that simplistic solution.

The Bhagavad Gita suggests that only when we directly experience the underlying reality does the narrative compulsion fall away, for instance in II.59:

Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.

Several Indian teaching stories use an elephant's hide in the same way as the Nemean Lion's pelt. In fact, Shiva himself killed the elephant demon Gajasura, whose skin was so thick it was impervious to all ancient weapons, and used it for a cloak, just like Heracles.

Summing up, one thing that's of the utmost importance is to cultivate and maintain a sense of humility. We are not much in charge of anything, even when we believe we are. Reminding ourselves of how much comes to us from the "divine" or unpredictable side of life, and how little we contribute ourselves, is very helpful. Taking the time to admire and appreciate the many really talented and wonderful people (and minerals and plants and animals) with which we are surrounded, helps keep things in perspective. And continually challenging our own assumptions is extremely important. Friends and family sometimes help with this, but it can also emerge from a simple openness to what's around us. Above all, extrication from spiritual egoism can be a gentle and sweet process, in contrast to the violent imagery of Heracles. The most important thing is to be alert.

For all his vaunted bravado, Heracles was in fact humble in some respects, and he honored the gods—what we today might call the natural order. His straying from perfection in very human ways is meant to include us in the game. We don't have to be perfect to grow and evolve, only determined to. We will always make mistakes, but they teach us lessons that exemplary behavior never could.

Spiritual stories reflect our inner reality so we can better understand ourselves. Our task here—our Labor—is to translate the symbols of the myth into contemplative action, so that we may find ways to break free of our prejudiced and claustrophobic

attitudes and restore a radically open state of mind. The first step is to recognize both the value and the severe limitations instilled by the ego, and learn how to nullify its constrictive tendencies, even turning them to our advantage.