

The Fourth Labor – Subduing the Erymanthian Boar

The fourth labor was to capture the enormous and ferocious Erymanthian Boar, a huge creature that was goring people and ripping up their farms. On the way, Heracles passed through the realm of the centaurs, half horse, half men, who were known to be carousers and fighters, not to mention sexually voracious. One centaur, however, Chiron, was wise and a model of decorum. Heracles went to him to ask advice, and Chiron instructed him to drive the boar into deep, fresh snow, which would make him easy to catch.

Heading out to retrieve the boar, Heracles stopped off to visit a centaur friend of his, who ate meat raw. He convinced the centaur to open a jar that Dionysius had given him, filled with some very potent sacred wine. The smell of it drew a crowd of centaurs, who became drunk and rowdy and attacked Heracles. A fight ensued where Heracles drove the centaurs off with his poisoned arrows, killing many. He then went to the forest and drove the boar up into the snow, tiring him out. He caught the boar in his net, bound it tightly with rope so it could no longer injure him, and carried it to Eurystheus.

Of all the labors, this might be the easiest for us to discern the meaning. The boar epitomizes selfish indulgence; even today we call people pigs who rut around in intemperate desires. Pigs are considered greedy and self-indulgent. If you hog things to yourself, you are being piggish. If you insist on things going your way, you are being pig headed. And so on.

Pretty much every psychological self-development program preaches overcoming our animal instincts to rest in a peaceful, balanced state of mind. We don't think clearly when we are driven by ravening desires. Yet, as is often noted, our vitality is not to be simply suppressed, because if it is, we wind up wrestling with it full time. In the interests of doing away with it directly we unintentionally magnify it to the point it becomes an all-consuming attraction, so it has to be tamed and sublimated with sagacity. To

achieve spiritual health we must redirect our energy from insatiable carnal appetites to the higher erotics of love of the sublime. Therefore Heracles does not kill the boar, despite its having devastated the forest where it lives, but catches it alive and binds it. He uses his net, symbolic of cerebral intelligence, to subdue his animal urges. This is by no means a simple achievement, and it takes him a long while of diligent tracking before he will be able to bring the net into play.

Heracles is easily diverted from his task at first by his association with the rowdy centaurs. In case we need one, this is a hint as to the meaning of the quest. The cave he parties with them in is not unlike the seedy bars of our time. Or think of the Mos Eisley Cantina in the Star Wars movies, with its menagerie of sentient scalawags from around the galaxy. Just as the situation threatens to ensnare him permanently, making him an addict and fellow cave dweller, Heracles escapes by firing off his poisoned arrows at the advocates of indulgence. The poison represents the intelligent lessons he has learned during previous encounters, and arrows themselves indicate targeted resolve. The use of extreme directed force is often a necessary first step to break free of the lures of addictive pleasures. The idea that he kills only a few of the centaurs means some of our obstructive desires can be dealt with relatively simply, and we might as well get those out of the way first off. The ravening boar remains the ultimate quarry.

After leaving the centaurs, Heracles traveled to the devastated forest and drove the boar of indulgence rooting there out into the snow. When we want something very badly, we get hot for it. If we are too hot, we make mistakes and can do a lot of damage, ruining the “forest” of our personal environment. In order to master our selfish feelings, we have to cool them down first, after which we can restrain them so they no longer do us any harm. Driving the boar into the snow tells us to cool down our excessive passions in order to be at our best.

Addiction, both personal and collective, lays waste to our beautiful environment. Many of us have personally experienced

how addicted friends can wreak havoc on everyone around them; likewise the addiction of modern society to unsustainable growth and rapacious consumption is destroying the entire planet. To stop the damage, we must somehow temper our burning passions and regain our cool, our equipoise. We say “cool it” when someone is over-agitated. “Chill out.” Pristine, new-fallen snow is virginal and unsullied, not to mention cold. The boar of rampaging desire is indeed insatiable, but when it is redirected into the peace of cool wisdom gently falling from the heavens, its madness dissipates and it calms down. As Dr. Mees puts it, “The field of snow illustrates that there is nothing like a cold bath or cold counsel to put down libidinous excitement, in all fields of life in which it may manifest itself.” Heracles diligently driving the boar into the snow teaches us that a serious measure of intent is involved with effecting the cure.

When the boar of unrestrained passion has become tame, it can be snared in the net of intelligence, making it fit to lay at the guru’s feet as an offering. A true offering is one that has been won through valiant struggle, not something that has been offhandedly purchased at the market. The net symbolizes the mind, the loom of consciousness. Using it in the capture means that intelligence must be brought to boar, er, bear. Heracles wisely binds the boar tightly so that it cannot escape and begin another spree. Since we can’t fully trust ourselves regarding our desires, they must be trussed, lest they break out and gore us again.

No matter how you go about it, taming our animal instincts is truly a Herculean task.