

The Fifth Labor – Cleansing The Augean Stables

The fifth task, the cleaning of the Augean Stables, illustrates the paradox of the one and the many, and hints at something resembling kundalini yoga. It is by far the most famous of the twelve Labors, yet in a fairly extensive search I have not found anyone (other than my two obscure sources) who appreciates its humorous touches or who has even taken a stab at what it means. This is a shame, since it is downright funny as well as highly instructive. Heracles is at his best in performing this daunting assignment with aplomb.

King Eurystheus was irked that Heracles had succeeded at every task he set him so far, since he really meant for him to fail. He wracked his brain to conceive of a truly impossible task, and came up with a good one. He demanded that Heracles clean out the vast Augean Stables in one day. King Augeas had owned 3,000 oxen for 30 years—the biggest herd in all of Greece—but had never had his stables cleaned. Thinking the job was clearly beyond anyone’s capability, Augeas offered Heracles one-tenth of his herd if it was completed on time.

According to Dr. Mees, the stables were actually a farmyard, which makes sense, as a building for that many would have been ridiculously huge, as well as totally choked with excrement. Even outdoors the cow poop was mountainous, obviously, and it was constantly being replenished. Anyone who tried to simply shovel it away would never come to the end of it, since by the time you’ve cleaned up one pile, a hundred new ones are lying steaming on the dirt. Thus the job would not only be impossible, due to the huge amount of filth, but as an added bonus wading in shit would degrade and humiliate Heracles too.

Obviously a different strategy than shoveling would be required. Heracles had to use his brains. He thought for a long time, which is what we call meditation nowadays. In a fit of inspiration, he dug channels from two nearby rivers and diverted

them through the fields. In no time the water had flushed out all the muck, and the farmyard was fresh and clean.

Clear thinking is like fresh running water: it keeps rushing forward, sweeping away all impediments in its path. If it is accurately directed to a problem, it can solve it in no time.

By not having to wade into the mess, Heracles never got his feet dirty, either. Afterward, Augeas refused to pay him the fee he had promised, and the disappointed Eurystheus refused to count it as a legitimate task, claiming the river had done the work, not Heracles.

Decoding this labor is helped by visualizing it. Imagine looking from ground level through an immense corral of cattle feeding at their troughs. The oxen are eating hay and defecating continuously, and the accumulated pile reaches to the heavens. The smell is almost visible it is so strong. You look down and see you are carrying a small manure rake; compared to the Labor ahead it is no more than a fart in a windstorm. You realize immediately that the stuff is being generated faster than you can possibly take it away, so to address it one item at a time would be utterly futile.

Meditating on the problem, you come up with the clever idea of diverting two pristine streams nearby through the higher end of the yard, and voila! Rudimentary plumbing is invented, and all the crap is quickly swept away.

So what does this symbolize? In English at least, bullshit is even today a common term for lies and falsehood, especially when accompanied by braggadocio, and the term aptly communicates the loathing we feel when we have been deceived by charlatans. Apparently assholes are assholes, whether in 2000 BCE or 2000 CE. Even many animals use their feces as a universally-comprehensible form of derogatory comment.

Moreover, our own mind plays us false at times. Bullshit can be both internally and externally generated. We are full of shit, and the public arena is likewise full of shit. Oxenshit doesn't have quite the same ring, so we call it bullshit, if only for the poetry of it. In

any case, one of the most critical tasks of a spiritual life is to get the bullshit out of your way. Heracles' time has come.

Such vivid imagery! Like the braying pundits of propaganda radio and television, we can conjure up an endless line of assholes spewing toxic filth, their hairpieces resembling oxen tails swishing over their filthy, unwiped maws. So what if they're prettied up for the cameras? The crap that comes out leaves an indelible mark, and it stinks. The oxen are content to mindlessly consume and excrete the fodder they have been served by their master's lackeys. They don't care what havoc they wreak with their excretions, they just know they have to be faithful and obedient or their sustenance will stop being doled out to them.

This could well be the Labor with the most resonance with our time.

A sincere person might spend an eternity shoveling up the refuse, refuting lie after lie, but then what is accomplished? As soon as one lie is nullified, ten more have been launched. Only an inner blast of light that neutralizes it all at once, that treats it as one single situation instead of millions of separate ones, can conquer this tenacious problem. The proper way, then, for us to overcome the challenge is to convert from a materialist view that addresses each problem separately, to a unitive, spiritual vision that resolves all dilemmas simultaneously. Dr. Mees offers us this:

The Labour teaches that the dirtiest work can be performed without losing face and in a dignified manner and that to the spiritual man no activity is degrading. Considered in its analogical implications the Labour shows that the Holy Ghost alone is able to effect a cleaning up of Ahankaric dirt within the soul. No amount of "psychological shoveling" (which is only "spadework") can bring the same result.
(iii.196)

Falsehood in the form of bullshit or horseshit is endless and perennially renewed. It can't possibly be dealt with piecemeal—it

would take forever. The only solution is to call up a spiritual flood that cleanses everything. For Mees this is symbolized by the Christian Holy Ghost.

The Bhagavad Gita treats the same subject in a somewhat less colorful way. Horizontal life is described as a proliferating tree, in which “many branched and endless are the reasonings of them in whom reason is ill-founded.” The solution is not to painstakingly cut off every leaf or twig, but to go to the root and sever the whole conglomeration in one fell swoop.

One requirement Eurystheus laid down was that if Heracles failed to complete the job in a single day, he would have to remain in the service of King Augeas and clean his stables for the rest of his life. This implies that if one gets caught up in dealing with horizontal activities there is no end to them. They keep renewing themselves. You either dispense with them in toto, all at once, or you stay stuck. Realization is not the product of a series of linked steps, but a quantum leap to a new orientation.

When confronted with an endless series of lies, it is difficult to hold fast to truth. Without repudiating them, they are likely to steer you (pun intended) away from what you know into muddy waters. If we don't have a firm grasp of who we are, we can be led astray by the convictions of others, not realizing that their ideas are likely to be self-serving propaganda masquerading as facts. As Machiavelli was well aware, most people have an innate sense of justice and fair play, and they assume others are observing the same parameters. It is easy for deceivers to take advantage of such people, because they will tend to give them the benefit of the doubt. If you dress up your selfish motives with high-sounding verbiage, and keep it coming, you can fool most of the people most of the time.

I well remember a bully in my high school who had a novel technique for beating people up. As he punched, slapped and smacked you, he would insist, “I'm not hitting you! I'm a nice guy. I'm not doing anything to you! What's the matter with you?” Where you might stand your ground and fight back against simple

punches, the tirade invariably threw you mentally off balance. There is a deep-seated urge in us to respond and correct the falseness of claims made against you. So, as our teenage indignation rose up at the obvious lies, you would get hit three more times before you took cover.

Modern so-called conservatives have adopted this gambit quite successfully. As they cheer on the smashing and plundering of the public treasury and its idealistic defenders, they insist they are the only patriots in the room. Anyone who tries to stand up to them is labeled unpatriotic, or worse, traitors. More civilized people are tempted to attack the false claims, and as they waste their breath trying to establish truth in those who care nothing for it, those “patriots” make off with whatever they can grab. As long as multiplicity is the norm, with opinions supplanting facts, they will always be several steps ahead of the law. Absolutist vision is necessary before we can recognize a thief in sheep’s clothing.

Augeas’ stable, like many a modern political movement, was so full of shit that the stench pervaded the entire region, making it the most unpleasant task to try to clean it up. The first instinct is to give such places a wide berth. Decoders of mythology in the Age of the American Empire can certainly get a picture of what this means. Influential leaders of a nation have either an inspiring or a poisoning influence on their whole domain. They “set the tone” so to speak, for everyone far and wide, not just in their personal state of mind but in business relations, the arts, education, everywhere. Bullshit at the center of the stables of power produces hostility among people, distrust in business, and bitterness and resentment in education and the arts. Such is the perfume we, like Heracles at the outset, are forced to inhale, if we want to confront the problem.

There is a psychological theory that wading into the mess will be good for our constitution, if not our Constitution. Yet shoveling shit at close quarters, you can’t help but get it on you, meaning that by fighting evil on its own terms and with its own tactics you become corrupted yourself, as history well demonstrates.

At present the United States, in company with most of the nations of our planet, has been nearly destroyed by thieves and thugs who use bullshit philosophies to keep honest citizens confused and disheartened. We are now facing the daunting task of stanching the damage so we can begin to restore some kind of functionality. If the recovery is accomplished bit by bit, as seems politically inevitable, it will take forever. However, that is the current strategy. Where might we discover a better solution?

The ancient Greek rishis are using Heracles to counsel us that a wholesale rejection of dishonest ways is necessary. Without a change of heart, we are doomed to continue to replay the same degrading scenario over and over. Those of us who live in the US are watching the bullshitters torpedo every sensible program with hairsplitting protestations and diversionary tactics. Meeting their insatiable demands is as daunting as cleaning the Augean Stables with a pitchfork. We have to find a way to get to the root of the problem instead.

Of the numerous apt examples of this Herculean task from modern life, let's look at the worldwide drug war. Prohibition is a proven failure in combating drug abuse, and yet it is ineluctably appealing to law enforcement and politicians, who make very good livings off it. At the same time it promotes extreme violence in smugglers, and the artificially high prices drive users to commit additional crimes to pay for their habits. When military pressure is applied in one area, the business simply moves elsewhere. Yet even in a limited region the effort-to-result ratio is astronomical. The whole mess looks exactly like millions of steaming heaps of manure, and no amount of additional effort will sweep it under the rug.

The tragedy could be quickly ended by legalizing and regulating drugs, thus stripping out all the illegal profits. The legitimate revenue could then be used to treat addicts and rehabilitate smugglers, not to mention helping make life in the world enjoyable enough so that recourse to drugs is not the only available way to be happy. Severing the tree at the root causes all

its pernicious ramifications to wither. A few countries have already implemented this type of policy, with tremendous success.

As usual, we don't want to view this labor solely as an external matter, and miss its spiritual efficacy. The teaching here is definitely about spiritual or mental life also. Most mundane tasks in the allegedly real world must still be accomplished one step at a time, and enlightenment does not give us a pass on taking care of ordinary business the old-fashioned way. Unitive realization, however, does not magically emerge from any accumulation of knowledge or activity.

Our own soul is polluted with similar filth as the halls of government. Vedantins politely call it ignorance, psychologists, conditioning. "Going along to get along" we deceive ourselves as much or more than the government or any corporation does. Renewing ourselves bit by bit could be accomplished in just about an infinite number of years. Advaita Vedanta, and apparently Greek wisdom tradition also, directs us to an instantaneous or at least a very rapid transformation. We must open ourselves to the cleansing flood of spiritual connection, like Heracles digging trenches to the two rivers to direct them where they are most needed. Letting in the flow renews everything at once.

The two rivers Heracles diverts, Alpheus and Peneus, are named after sons of the god Oceanus, and they may be viewed as standing for involution and evolution, the twin aspects of a balanced spiritual life. It's a bit of a stretch to imagine the Greeks knew of it, but Vedanta also has two parallel rivers of prana, vital energy, called the Ida and Pingala, that are to be united into a single stream of kundalini energy to overcome all obstacles and attain enlightenment. The fifth labor works well as a pictorial image of how this might look from inside the body. No matter how you frame it, our spiritual progress depends on not simply plodding ahead step by step, but on seeking and finding creative—and energetic—solutions.

The accumulation of garbage over a long period of time is a significant aspect of the moral here. Augeas' lordly attitude of not dealing with the consequences of his behavior, leads to his congested state, where there's hardly any room for more shit, even though it keeps on coming. Owning cattle is evidence of wealth, but they have to be tended properly. A lot of pleasurable pastimes are fun, but it's important to take care of the after-effects, which isn't nearly so enjoyable. If we ignore the consequences of our behavior, garbage piles up, and once it gets deep enough we seldom have the heart to deal with it. We might hope it will just disappear, but it doesn't. We have to bring pressure to bear on it.

And not just any pressure: it has to be intelligently and creatively conceived. Much of the charm of this labor is that Heracles comes up with a solution no one else could imagine.

The Sacred Mythoi of Demigods and Heroes understands this, speaking about King Augeas:

Thus the sphere of his life, his consciousness, his existence, like the fields, or stalls or stables of the cattle, become more and more congested and in need of purification and readjustment. The unbalanced condition produced prevents him from seeing things as they really are, he becomes unjust, hypersensitive, and less and less inclined to undertake the unpleasant task of removing the accretions that have grown around his entire transient nature. Instead of sitting on the throne of balance, he becomes chained to the wheel of causation or Karma, and is unable to escape its cumulative influence. Only the power of the hero-soul, with the aid of divine life, can undertake this task. (29)

King Augeas didn't take care of his effluvia for his whole life, believing it was his "royal prerogative" to ignore it. Spiritually, we have to be willing to deal with our own shit, meaning facing the stuff we'd prefer to avoid, that we'd rather pretend was someone else's mess. We have to clean out all the

samskaras, the wrong conditionings, that have piled up over the years, because they stink up the atmosphere. They plop out in front of us and we walk right into them, bogging us down and causing us to slip and fall. We could go into talk therapy and address them one by one, but that would take more than a lifetime. Alternatively, we can attune with the Absolute and vaporize them all at once, which leaves us some time yet to really live well.

Making an instantaneous breakthrough requires an extraordinary effort. Psychedelics have often served the role of fast-acting spiritual cleansers. Both ancient Greece with its Eleusinian and other Mysteries, and ancient India with its soma, included psychedelic medicines in their advanced spiritual practices. Under veteran guidance, these have the ability to accomplish the kind of spiritual rebirth implied in the fifth Labor. Psychedelics act as transformative forces that literally sweep away traumatic memories and conditionings with a burst of clarity. By some accounts, a single session is equal to many years of talk therapy, and is almost effortless, which is exactly the image portrayed by this Labor.

While it's true that humans cannot do this kind of job without some form of therapeutic assistance, Heracles deserves full credit for discovering the only solution that could actually work, in his time.

Besides conquering the Hydra, this is the other Labor for which Heracles did not get credit, because he had tried to get paid by King Augeas for it, and because he hadn't actually done any of the dirty work. Payment for spiritual services is at least unethical, if not downright deceptive, and it certainly corrupts anyone who imagines there is a connection between spiritual wisdom and remuneration. Spiritual seekers should be after results, real transformations, not fame or fortune. The two Kings' denial of Heracles' achievement was little more than resentment that his spiritual progress could not be derailed by their obfuscations.

It's curious that the two labors that "don't count" are quite similar. Both the Hydra and the cattle produce an endless series of

problems: either you cut off a head and it grows back, or you sweep up the mess and it falls right back on the floor. Both the shit and the Hydra's blood are toxic or noxious. With one you have to cauterize the root and with the other you have to call down a righteous river. Either way, the solution includes not getting caught up in details but invoking a Zen-like lightning bolt.

I've known some people who could've used the veiled advice of this labor: those who put off doing something they really want to do, until they got their life in order. Of course, life is never orderly, never certain, and they waited so long for the "right moment" that the opportunity faded away. A couple of my friends thought they should delay having children until they were on an even keel, and wound up completely missing the joys and lessons of parenthood. Some people postpone their dream trip until after retirement, and by then they are too old, or dead. Most of us fritter away our life on petty necessities when we should be writing that great novel or spending time with friends or volunteering on a project. We put our life on hold just as King Augeas put off cleaning out the stables, and so the inertia builds up, making a breakthrough more and more daunting.

In one of those "divine coincidences" that happen from time to time, I ran across a passage from St. Theresa de Avila while I was editing Nataraja Guru's *An Integrated Science of the Absolute* (in Vol. III, p 25). De Avila compares four stages of spiritual progress in the form of prayer with different ways to water a garden plot, and her third stage will look familiar: while it is virtually certain that she knew nothing of Heracles, the parallel with the fifth labor is astonishing and instructive. Then she goes one step farther. Let's close with this, since it is gentle and sweet, in contrast to the heavy-handedness of the Greek myth: she is nurturing a garden, where he was clearing away muck. Nataraja Guru introduces the quotation:

Next we read St. Theresa's "Four Degrees (or Stages) of Prayer." To follow the broad features of our own idea of structuralism, as we can easily recognize, we read:

We may say that beginners in prayer are those who draw the water up out of the well; which is a great labour, as I have said. For they find it very tiring to keep the senses recollected, when they are used to a life of distraction....

Let us now turn to the second method of drawing it which the Owner of the plot has ordained. By means of a device with a windlass, the gardener draws more water with less labour, and so is able to take some rest instead of being continuously at work. I apply this description to the prayer of quiet....

Let us now speak of the third water that feeds this garden, which is flowing water from a stream or spring. This irrigates it with far less trouble, though some effort is required to direct it to the right channel....

But now the Lord is pleased to help the gardener in such a way [with rain] as to be, as it were, the gardener Himself.... The soul does not know what to do; it cannot tell whether to speak or be silent, whether to laugh or to weep. It is a glorious bewilderment, a heavenly madness, in which true wisdom is acquired, and to the soul a fulfillment most full of delight.

In this state (i.e. the fourth state) the soul still feels it is not altogether dead, as we may say, though it is entirely dead to the world. But, as I have said, it retains the sense to know that it is still here and to feel its solitude; and it makes use of outward manifestations to show its feelings at least by signs.

How what is called union takes place and what it is, I cannot tell. It is explained in *mystical theology*, but I cannot use the

proper terms: I cannot understand what *mind* is, or how it differs from *soul* or *spirit*. They all seem one to me.

(St. Theresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, tr. J. M. Cohen, Penguin edn., London.)