

The Sixth Labor – Defeating the Stymphalian Birds

In his fifth Labor, Heracles learned to channel his spiritual energies to *rapidly* overcome impossible obstacles, by treating them unitively, rather than piecemeal. His next task was to rid Greece of the diabolical Stymphalian birds: man-eating creatures made of brass, with sharp bronze feathers that they could shoot at their victims, and poisonous dung. They had settled in a swamp near Lake Stymphalus and were terrorizing the surrounding countryside, destroying crops, orchards, and even buildings. Nesting deep in a dark forest, they were breeding like mad and threatening to lay waste to the entire region. Adding to the Labor's challenges, they were sacred to Ares, the god of war.

Heracles first thought this Labor would be a walk in the park, but when he arrived where the birds were gathered he found that the ground was too swampy to support his weight, and the forest was so thick he couldn't see anything. As he stood wondering what to do, he was approached by the goddess Athena with a solution. She instructed the divine blacksmith Hephaestus, to forge a stupendous set of bronze clappers. When Heracles smashed them together with his supernatural strength, the startled birds would fly up out of the forest where he could shoot them down. Heracles picked off a number of them with his deadly arrows, and the rest flew to an island sacred to Ares in the Black Sea, never to return.

Well, I have news for those ancient Greeks: the Stymphalian birds have returned, and their flock is now bigger than ever. The only difference is the Stymphalian brass is now called the military brass.

It is quite plain that these birds represent warriors run amok, or what we nowadays refer to as the military/industrial or military/corporate complex. That they are sacred to the god of war makes this patently clear, and this lends them an imprimatur of divine sanction, as anyone who has advocated for the reduction of defense spending knows. The evil birds even bear an uncanny resemblance to the latest war weapon, the unmanned killer drone,

which has adroitly sabotaged the long and painful struggle to establish legal justice within a sometimes violent and bloodthirsty species. Now anonymous murderers can execute people at will, without the least fear of being called to account by any judicial system, safe behind a legal forest of obfuscation.

We live in a time when the military mindset has essentially conquered civilization, where its clever birds have even usurped the honorific of “heroic” for themselves. Where spiritual seekers were the heroes of old, upholding the highest aspirations and abilities of the human race, the title has been shifted to anoint violent actors within the material realm. Masters of propaganda, militarists readily convince immature humans that they are the true heroes, and recruit them to join them in the fight against the “enemy,” which happens to be the very humanity they are laying waste to and that the children are members of. At least the ancient mythographers knew who the real heroes were in this tale: the local citizens hoping to preserve their land, not the birds of brass despoiling it.

From the dawn of history, warriors have posed a threat to their own side as well as the opposition, seeking to prolong war not only for the joy of it, but to preserve their jobs, and in the process consuming scarce resources, while shielding their murderous motivations within a forest of secrecy and pseudo-patriotic disinformation. The comradeship men feel in a company of warriors makes for nearly-invincible bonds, the Band of Brothers syndrome. As Norman Rush puts it in his book *Mating*: “A deep calm drenches the male soul when it feels the persona it inhabits being firmly screwed into a socket in some iron hierarchy or other, best of all a hierarchy legitimately about killing.” (224)

Like the fast multiplying flock of birds Heracles was sent to evict, the “defense” industry—truly an offense industry—has swollen to huge proportions and is busily laying waste to vast areas of the planet. The anonymous author of the myth probably anticipated this, as Heracles was unable to kill off the birds, instead merely driving them away. That they “never return,” sounds a lot

like “they lived happily ever after,” in the later myths known as fairy tales.

It may well be that the carrion birds of war cannot be eradicated short of divine intervention, and here’s why. Once a military clique has detached itself from civilian control, it takes on a life of its own, like a macro version of a super pathogen. Veiled in stealth, humans become mere pawns within its incomprehensible structure, with no one individual having either the will or the ability to rein it in. Anyone proposing to curtail its excesses is simply excreted from the fraternity: fired or moved to a position of no power, or even executed, while enthusiasts of continued lucrative adventures are rapidly promoted. When you think of the Kremlin or the Pentagon and their ilk, they are for all the world like the Stymphalian forest, dark and impenetrable, a nesting ground for promoting conflict. If you try to enter their domain on behalf of common decency, you will sink in the bureaucratic mire before you get ten feet. Inside it is so dense that you cannot see any of the “rare birds” who thrive there; much less can you “pick one off” by exposing their ignoble deeds. If you do flush one out you might be able to bring it to justice, but the birds can replace it immediately. It’s all perfectly legal and perfectly well insulated from outside interference. At present in countries like the United States, the police forces have attained a similar insular condition, even more directly inimical to the society they are sworn to protect than the military. Vigilante groups thrive on the internet, too, where their anonymity is simple to maintain, and the lust for slaughter easy to inflame.

Athena is the goddess of civilization, wisdom, strategy and skill, among other things, but primarily of civilization, of a healthy social web. Civilization is eternally opposed to warfare, which tears it to shreds, flouting its every aspiration. Its primary reason for even existing is to control the mayhem that may arise when humans aren’t governed by law. The modern military actually began as a fatally flawed method by civilized people to put an end to war and wholesale criminality. Sadly, humanity seldom seems

to anticipate the paradoxical results of its half-baked notions, which often boomerang to produce the exact opposite of their intent. Modern-day “security forces” being an ever-present threat to their own citizens are a perfect example.

Athena—the civilizing impulse, so deeply embedded in our psyches as to merit goddess status—must teach Heracles how to defeat the evil birds. Unfortunately, though he follows her guidance, his is a temporary victory at best, with only a handful of sacrificial lambs eliminated. The remaining lovers of violent power are only driven out of sight and out of mind, where they are free to plot their ever more explosive return. Nevertheless, King Eurystheus was convinced of Heracles’ success, as the immediate devastation was curtailed.

The use of the clappers to startle the birds into flight is an interesting image. A tremendous blast of sound, reminiscent of the opening conch salvo of the Kurukshetra War in the Bhagavad Gita, forces the creatures out of hiding. A loud noise symbolizes a wakeup call, or a jolt of clarity. Dr. Mees notes that Heracles’ clapper is related to Thunder, and is wielded by the Guru.

Heracles had to make a lot of noise to dispel the cloak of invisibility and force the malefactors out into the open. It takes a courageous effort to stand up to warmongers and drive them out of their breeding grounds, so that real peace can be restored. Civilization occasionally mounts such an initiative, normally in the wake of the latest disaster. The founding of the United Nations and the Nuremburg trials after World War II come to mind, when for a brief period after its end, the idealism of a healthy society held the upper hand over the pestilential minions. Sadly, as with Heracles, a few bad actors were picked off after the war, but many escaped. In the case of the Nazis, some were actually brought into the United States and promoted to key posts in military and civilian intelligence, all with top secret clearance. That’s like Athena adopting the Stymphalian birds after they were flushed from the forest and taking them back to Mount Olympus to keep it “safe”

and stand guard. What can you say about such a stunning magnitude of stupidity?

A good myth is true on many levels, and we need to always address the personal implications. Even this highly “external” seeming myth has important lessons for seekers. Most of us probably won’t be curing military madness in the public arena, but we can root out its homologue in ourselves, where there is certainly a correlative impulse.

We all have our secrets and veiled motivations, which may not all be benign regarding other people’s needs for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Appropriately, the Stymphalian birds feast on human flesh, since “consuming humans” is the prime motivation of the whole business of war. Like that, we each have a vicious streak deep in our psyche that is prone to prey on people, that likes nothing better than to tear them apart and watch them squirm. If we don’t acknowledge that aspect of our total makeup, we are only deluding ourselves. Sure, we have plenty of kindhearted and loving qualities also, but the ego takes pride in those and keeps the vicious ones under wraps, where they can spawn unresisted. We have to be able to admit them into the light to ensure their docility.

For the most part it’s beneficial to associate with people who wittingly or otherwise can help further our objectives, enshrined in the adage “birds of a feather flock together,” but in this case the feathers are sharp, metallic and deadly. A spiritually alert person should always question their own impulses to be sure they are aboveboard and legitimate, if not harmonious. Heracles picking off some of the birds with his arrows symbolizes using a sharply honed intelligence to negate our antisocial tendencies. We must fire our most clearheaded understanding right into the center of the problem, or it will escape and regroup.

Nearly every great saint and all the grand masters of the spirit extol peace and compassion, which are after all our truest and most salutary nature. Yet in their name it is still far too easy to whip up their followers into a lethal frenzy. We must never allow ourselves

to become credulous fanatics driven by empty promises. The world already has more than enough.

Ahimsa, non-hurting, is such an important concept, because we humans are innately primed to respond to provocations—real or imaginary—with violence. Especially in groups or flocks, ruthless behavior is almost irresistible. We know we will be evicted from the group if we don't acquiesce to its dictates, so we compromise and rationalize about it. The Narayana Gurukula and similar spiritual outposts proudly proclaim the central tenet of ahimsa, so that all participants can rest assured that those institutions will never issue a call for any kind of injurious activity.

Just as the birds only retreat to a distant island and are never defeated, our own militant instincts cannot be completely eradicated, but only kept under control. Given the right stimulus they will flare up again. We have to remain on guard lest they return to wreak more havoc. Within us are archetypes of both Heracles and the Stymphalian birds, and although we would prefer to identify with the hero, we should acknowledge that the entire myth is cradled deep in our unconscious. That will keep us from getting an inflated sense of our own superiority, and keep us honest in preparation for the complex labors yet to come.