

## The Seventh Labor – The Cretan Bull

Heracles' seventh Labor was to subdue a deranged bull that was devastating the island of Crete, and it was a relatively simple matter for him to overpower it and drive it back to the king. But Heracles came late to the story, with the primary spiritual lesson occurring before his arrival. The meaning of the Labor hinges on why the bull went mad in the first place.

The tale begins with King Minos of Crete praying to the sea-god Poseidon for a special bull to sacrifice to Zeus, the highest of the Olympian gods. Poseidon acceded and sent him a bull from his watery realm, but when it emerged from the ocean it was so beautiful that Minos coveted it and couldn't bring himself to kill it. Instead he substituted an ordinary bull from his own herd for the sacrifice, assuming no one would notice. Of course, the gods can instantly tell the difference between a sacred object and a humdrum one. In revenge for the deception Poseidon made the glorious Cretan Bull go mad, and it wreaked havoc all over the island. Eventually Heracles was called in to bring it back under control.

The story is deceptively simple and even appears rather trivial, unless we contemplatively dig into it. In the wisdom context, if we treat sacrifice not as the slaughtering of an animal to propitiate a deity but as freely chosen, non-obligatory activity, the myth can teach us something really valuable. Sacrifice understood in this way, in keeping with the Bhagavad Gita's highest recommendation of a wisdom sacrifice, is heroic in itself: not a prescribed mechanical action but an inner attitude of personal integrity that is rarely found in socialized human beings.

In myths and fables, we ourselves are what is meant by the protagonist king or queen, prince or princess, charged with administering the nation of our life, or else with expectations of eventually being able to do so when we come of age. Mythical monsters are always said to be devastating the countryside or ravaging the king's domain. In the language of the unconscious the

meaning is clear: when you give in to your “demonic” or disharmonized tendencies, it ruins your life, at least until you get it under control. Myths often imply that after the beast is killed or otherwise disposed of, the “countryside” once again becomes a lush and fertile Garden of Eden, letting us know that the outcome is in our own hands.

Like many of us, King Minos was initially inspired by a divine or wholesome vision, but instead of acting honestly in harmony with it—allowing it to be processed through him to benefit something greater than himself—he cheapened and degraded it. In so doing the visionary impulse changed from one of transcendent beauty to a selfish one brimming with insanity and violence. Watering down our aspirations doesn’t always have such a dramatic impact, but the myth wants to highlight the destructive possibilities so we take it seriously. Most often it merely opens the door to mediocrity, but this is no mediocre myth.

When we are granted a pure vision or blessing from the depths of our soul, it is so captivating that we want to cherish and hold onto it. Paradoxically however, the more we try to possess it, the more it eludes us, slips out of our grasp and runs rampant, symbolized here by the bull going wild and turning destructive.

Initially spiritual seekers aim for pure action as the expression of our dharma and the means to liberation. All too often, however, our actions are premeditated, and thus are vitiated by our prejudices and selfish interests. We are busy plotting and scheming, and our machinations dilute the purity of our original impulse, so much so that we may find our life in ruins or even go mad.

Needless to say, there is all the difference in the world between a generous, spiritually motivated impulse and a selfish one. And like Minos, we can easily convince ourselves that our selfish urges are really just fine, perfectly spiritual, and there won’t be any negative repercussions if we keep them secret. No one will even notice, will they?

The pictographic language of the seventh Labor tells us a perennial psychological truth: humans are often deceptive, even self-deceptive, spinning false tales that sound convincing instead of being completely honest. It isn't always easy to tell the difference between truth and fiction. While glib liars can deceive many people most of the time, the universe is never fooled. Nature responds exactly to what we do, not to what we say or wish for. No plausible denial passes muster. Therefore we should honor our promises, and only promise what we are willing to live up to. It takes a special kind of strength to be utterly straightforward, to be true to our word.

Modern psychology has detected a “narrative feature” supposedly hardwired in the brain, whose function is to make a credible story out of whatever haphazard elements are present. Veracity is not for the most part of much importance in our narratives. A logical explanation is all that's needed, and it does not have to be wedded to truth if it's appealing enough. The mind busies itself fitting the facts to the convenience of the person weaving the excuse. In other words, the ego is a guileless liar, and humans tend to take its wild surmises as true on their face, so while we often promise to deliver a “pure bull,” we end up delivering bullshit instead. For some, manure delivery becomes a full-time occupation. This is not a recipe for a happy life, only one based on expedience, whose fruit is a life in shambles. The least we can do is maintain a coherent, well-intended narrative, and strive to live up to it.

What we have here in the seventh Labor is a depiction of the gap—a yawning chasm, really—between ideals and actualities. We begin our programs with noble conceptions, but when we try to make them manifest, we wind up constructing a feeble replica of the original vision. Selfish interests and material practicalities convert the optimistic aspirations of our life into something ordinary and even abased. But we cling to the original vision even when what we hold is a tattered simulation of it. Possibly we can fool our fellow fools, but Nature—the flow itself—goes by our

actions, not our pretenses. And because Nature is perfectly reciprocal, “bad karma” rebounds on us in the exact measure of our fraudulent substitution.

I know lots of people who have big ideas for how they want to live their lives, but when it comes right down to it, they just sit and stew about what they are going to do some time in the future. They are trapped by the gap, unable to actualize their ideals. Their vision doesn't motivate them enough to get their ass in gear, so they come up with some bull instead. We say they “talk a good game,” meaning they don't play worth a damn but they can tell you in no uncertain terms how it should be done.

When one of those gaps holds me in thrall I feel almost physically bound, as if I'm in the clutches of some subterranean monster whose tentacles encircle my body. I have to consciously tear myself away with a mighty effort to get started. But I have found that once the task is truly begun, the requisite energy kicks in with enthusiasm. Like a hybrid gas-electric car, the forward momentum recharges the battery to make the project nearly self-perpetuating.

I wonder, too, if having ideals that are sky high doesn't paralyze us sometimes. The loftier they are, the harder it is to forge a link between the present and our vision of the future. While we shouldn't sell ourselves short, we shouldn't reach for the moon either, unless we are riding a rocket. Regardless of the course we choose, though, we have to determine our first step before we can anticipate the last, yet the very act of making a determination invites the bait-and-switch of an ordinary beast out of our stock supply that can masquerade as something unique.

The fact that King Minos prayed for a special bull to be given to him to perform the sacrifice tells us that what we hope and pray for is often unrealistic, and this can be damaging when it sets expectations at a level that we are unable to live up to. Like that, prayers often express our hopes of being lifted out of our present state to a better one, but a forthright assessment and acceptance of who we are would actually serve us much better. Minos should

have offered a bull from his own flock from the start, meaning something real of his, not something hypothetical. A regular sacrifice would be just fine, so long as he didn't try to pass it off as anything other than what it is. "Ordinary" is already spectacular, in its own way.

So what are we to do about this paradoxical dilemma? How do we conquer the rampaging beast unleashed by our own inability to examine ourselves honestly and accept who we are? We are fortunate that life gives us many opportunities to improve our personal "product" and make it into something really beautiful. Doing so requires us to be humble about our stature and diligently strive to improve ourselves. We have to avoid being either unduly proud or unduly daunted by the difficulties we encounter. In social environments where we are ridiculed for not living up to other people's ideals—even if they themselves fall just as short of them as we do—it is easy to develop a self-deprecating, defeatist attitude. That will block a clear self-assessment as thoroughly as an inflated ego does. There is definitely an aura of heroism involved with holding fast to honest ideals in a make-believe world.

The ideal of the silent recluse is based in part on the belief that if you don't speak, then you won't suffer any conflict between what you say and what you do. Unfortunately, the disconnect between ideals and actualities takes place primarily in the mind, regardless of any outward posturing. We fool ourselves before we ever try to fool the world. The expertise aspired to by a yogi is to bring deeds (*karma*) in line with thoughts (*jnana*). When we live with a mismatch between thoughts and deeds, it is corrosive to our well being. If the gap is very pronounced, the person is described as "living a lie," a soul-demeaning state. The silence of the recluse has to be an outgrowth of expert living, and not a technique for attaining it. It must be dynamic rather than suppressive.

The moralistic exhortation to always be honest is aimed at the same goal of inner harmony. This has been over-simplified to mean always telling the truth, which is a far different matter, truth being a very mysterious quality. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry*

*Finn*, Mark Twain demonstrates for all eternity that lying and telling the truth are tangential to the goal of honesty. In that magnificent book, the effects of lying are shown to range from the worst degradations to the highest nobility, and the truths told have a similar range of impacts. So factual truth-telling is not the issue here, though it plays a part. The crucial point is harmony between our actions and our intelligence. Honesty is the measure of how closely the two sides match.

This is not a dilemma where you can just say okay, I'll be honest with myself; it has to be wrestled with for a very long time. When he finally arrives in Crete, Heracles has to literally take the bull by the horns and ride it across the wide ocean in order to bring it home. Even then, Eurystheus doesn't want it and lets it go again, to wreak yet more havoc. It is finally killed only much later by another hero, Theseus. Matching words and deeds is a lifetime project. When my guru, Nitya, used to say there is no holiday in spiritual life, this is one of the main aspects he was referring to.

Where does this tragic tendency to dissemble come from? Early in life we lose faith in our own integrity. Most of us as kids learned to say what we thought the authorities wanted to hear while relinquishing our inner sense of truth and justice. Very often we were rewarded for abandoning our integrity. It takes bravery, strength and persistence to rectify this deeply lodged schism. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, (Vintage, 1977), explains this very well in terms of our early life:

If a child is told only stories "true to reality" (which means false to important parts of his inner reality), then he may conclude that much of his inner reality is unacceptable to his parents. Many a child thus estranges himself from his inner life, and this depletes him. As a consequence he may later, as an adolescent no longer under the emotional sway of his parents, come to hate the rational world and escape entirely into a fantasy world, as if to make up for what was lost in childhood.

At an older age, on occasion this could imply a severe break with reality, with all the dangerous consequences for the individual and society. Or, less seriously, the person may continue this encapsulation of his inner self all through his life and never feel fully satisfied in the world because, alienated from the unconscious processes, he cannot use them to enrich his life in reality.... With such separation, whatever happens in reality fails to offer appropriate satisfaction of unconscious needs. The result is that the person always feels life to be incomplete. (65)

So how do we apply the insight of the seventh Labor to our everyday life? Let's take friendship as an example. Many relationships begin with great love and self sacrifice in favor of the beloved or admired other. After a while, though, self-interest reasserts itself. In place of the naked soul that our love tempted us to reveal, we erect a plausible persona out of our "breeding stock" of familiar characters and hold it up to view. The beloved reciprocates accordingly, offering a persona in place of a soul, and soon the pure love begins to be parodied in a charade that becomes ever more tedious to maintain. The harder we have to work to meet the expectations we have loaded onto the friendship, the more likely it is to engender anger and resentment. Fighting may break out. Before long we begin to look for an escape route. Only an attitude that is brave enough to be honest about itself can arrest the downward spiral.

Another example is feeding the poor, as enjoined by many religions. The pure sacrificial act would be to meet a hungry person and give them food out of unalloyed compassion, but the reality is that people often have to be coaxed into doing it, because it doesn't appear to have any benefit for them. Incentives range from immediate social approval to future admission to heaven. But if we are motivated by self-interest rather than simple compassion, our ego will block any initial altruistic impulse and lobby instead for its own needs. Soon pride creeps in, and so the game has to be

maintained by strenuous effort, often including prevarication. This is precisely what is meant by the image of the king substituting an ordinary bull for the special one bequeathed by the gods. Of course mayhem will ensue: only a pure act engenders no negative consequences. Our ordinary, selfish acts are disruptive on many fronts, commensurate with the degree and kind of deception perpetrated when passing them off as noble gestures.

Avoiding working in a soup kitchen or not making friends doesn't exempt us from this universal malaise that must be consciously overcome—whence the need for Herculean efforts. Lobbyists and politicians, and propagandists and advertisers in general, are masters at dressing up their selfish interests in an appealing and persuasive package so they can be palmed off on the unsuspecting. Although most people are easily bamboozled, Zeus—the Greek Absolute and template for the Latin Deus, the Christian God—is not. For the most part, humans believe what they are told and strive to make the best of it, but the Absolute reflects things as they truly are. Therefore Zeus cannot be deceived, and the falsity boomerangs back onto the one who perpetrated the deception, ravaging all his domain.

Another case in point is exemplified in a *New Yorker* article by Jane Meyer (Aug, 30, 2010), about two brothers who together have the third greatest pile of wealth in the US, and who are financing an entire political movement to destroy environmental regulations and worker rights so they can amass even more money. One of the supposed “grass roots” movements one brother has started to further these ends was touted in an ad as “a populist uprising against vested corporate power.” Meyer quotes the ad “Today, the voices of average Americans are being drowned out by lobbyists and special interests, but you can do something about it.” The President's senior advisor then adds, “What they don't say is that, in part, this is a grassroots citizens' movement brought to you by a bunch of oil billionaires.” While a lot of people have bought into the sales pitch, the environment continues to be trashed irrespective of anyone's opinion to the contrary. This particular



grassroots movement is really a movement to rip up the populist grass by the roots and throw it on the burn pile.

*The Ecology of Fear*, by Mike Davis, (New York: Henry Holt, 1998) deals with the slow-motion disaster of Los Angeles, California, attributing much of that city's demise to the false image which has always belied its actual circumstances. This fascinating book examines in detail how for more than a century, city officials have advertised an idyllic image of paradise and taken pains to cover up everything that didn't accord with the image. This led them to fail to address critical problems, which naturally became worse and worse, producing an avalanche of devastation throughout the city, which is rapidly sliding into financial and structural ruin. As of old, the Cretan Bull of false promises is freely trashing the entire domain, while the king and his court busy themselves with proclaiming their piousness.

At every point in the demise of Los Angeles the city fathers were free to act, and like Minos they chose to deceive and make inordinate profits instead. Where their "sacrifice" should have been for the overall good, they gambled instead for selfish ends. The result is widespread disaster, almost exactly like a monster run amok, out of control. Davis chronicles the sad decline of a once-great city, as the culture of deception desperately holds on to its illusions.

The Los Angeles basin up until the twentieth century was perhaps as close as the Earth ever came to perfection, resembling the divine bull given to Minos by Poseidon. But greed has pounded away at it until little remains but a bankrupt wasteland.

This pattern is a microcosm of Western (and World?) civilization as a whole, where ever-receding frontiers beckon to crowds seeking to escape the misery that selfishness and greed never fail to let loose. The problem is that we have run out of frontiers, and are coming up hard against the consequences of our species-wide folly. It looks like this time there is no great Hero who can save us, though many sustain desperate hopes in their favorite mythical character. Will it be Jesus, or Hitler? I'm afraid it

is going to fall to those of us who are not taken in by false hopes, to be heroic in whatever way we are able.

The humble seventh Labor thus proves itself to be a crucial lesson in sane living, with implications that go to the heart of our economy, our social stability, our well-being: even the survival of the very planet on which we live. It's a sad testimony that even those who boast a knowledge of history have for the most part forgotten the absolutely essential messages bequeathed us by our ancient progenitors; knowledge that we disregard at our peril.