

The Odyssey of Therapy
2015 Commencement Remarks
Southwestern College, Santa Fe
November 7, 2015

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Good morning. It is such an honor to be able to speak to all of you today, you who are graduating and also all of you who love and support them. Southwestern College is a special place, and I have been affiliated with it for just over a decade, first as a student, then a graduate, and now as a teacher and supervisor.

The Odyssey

Going through Southwestern is an adventure – really a series of adventures. And therapy is also an adventure. That’s why I’m turning to the Odyssey, an ancient Greek story almost 3,000 years old, to share some reflections about our adventures as students and therapists. The Odyssey was Homer’s song about the long journey home, by sea, of Odysseus and his men at the end of the Trojan War. The trip back was supposed to take three or four weeks...and it ended up taking ten years. Sounding like therapy already, isn’t it?

So let’s just start with who Odysseus was. Even if you are not especially familiar with myth, you’ve heard some things about him. He was the guy who had the idea of creating the Trojan Horse, the giant wooden horse that a few of the Greeks hid inside. The Greeks offered it as a gift to the Trojans, and then when the Trojans brought it behind the city’s walls, the soldiers hiding inside came out and turned the tide of the war. So Odysseus, like any good therapist, had his ways of slipping past defenses.

You’ve probably also heard about his adventures with the Sirens, with the Scylla and the Charybdis, the monster and the vortex he had to sail his way through so carefully. And lots of others. And so it’s easy to imagine him as just another Greek hero, full of courage and inspired by the gods to do great things.

But on a closer look, Odysseus is really a very different kind of hero, and the story that bears his name is really one not of continuous great feats and accomplishments, but quite the opposite: it’s the story of someone who is stranded at sea, pining constantly for home, having already been in a war for ten years, and now cursed to remain far adrift for ten MORE years. Nearly every exploit and every adventure in the Odyssey begins in the same way: things are looking good, seems like we’re getting closer to home, but then the ship is tossed and turned, crashed into some strange island if it survives at all, Odysseus and his crew seek refuge, are trapped or

ensnared or helped, manage to escape, and then set out for the next adventure in hope of a way home.

By now you can see the Odyssey isn't just the story of Odysseus - it is our story too, a story for humanity. It is the story of the journey home to oneself, the process of returning to one's truest self, one's truest place. It is a journey that involves encountering all sorts of strange, wonderful, and terrifying creatures who live on islands scattered in the sea of the unconscious. It involves delays, repetitions, shapeshifting, sorrow, sorcery, and magic. It requires engaging all of one's resources and skills, and also of regularly calling upon the aid of the gods to navigate seemingly impossible circumstances.

To me, it is all of these things that also make it the story of psychotherapy. Because like Odysseus, most of our clients come to us from one kind of war zone of one kind or another, and like Odysseus, they are on their way home - home to themselves, to their hearts, to their Souls.

Odysseus: The Art of Getting Lost

One of the things that most stands out about this story to me is that it is a story of being lost – lost at sea. The sea is a powerful image of the unconscious, of the realm of affect, imagination, sensation, that which is not contained in words and concrete terms, but which we all carry within us, or which carries us. These are waters we may sail upon, swim within, and sometimes drown under. And the story seems to say that if you want to journey home, you must come to terms with the sea and all the mystery, danger, and possibility that it contains.

More specifically, you must become *lost* at sea. Basically, the Odyssey is a series of shipwrecks. Over and over again, Odysseus and his crew end up somewhere they've never been, dealing with things they've never seen. Again, sound like therapy?

I think getting lost is something we excel at here at Southwestern. In fact, I would say that our program insists that you get lost.

By now you graduates all know it's not true that our program is about doing your own work so you are clear enough and issue free enough to be able to help others. If that's what you think you did, became clear and issue free, I invite you to ask your loved ones who came today, or your fellow students – I think they'll be able to clear that one up for you.

And thank goodness that's not what happened. Because it's not resolution that we need to be good therapists. It's practice. Practice walking in the dark. Practice tolerating confusion. Practice messing up again and again. Practice encountering our limits.

Our clients don't need our issues to be resolved, they need to know that we can be relied upon when things are unresolved. They don't need us to figure them out, they need to know that we can handle having no clue who they are. And they don't need us to make them feel better, they need to know that we can tolerate being there when they don't.

And this is something you graduates have done. You have surrendered yourselves to the sea again and again. You have brought story after story, image after image, into classes, not knowing where things might go. You have met monsters, gods, goddesses. Often you have done this in environments that may not have felt comfortable. Yet, still you came. And again and again you have sought refuge from one another, and again and again you have provided it to one another. With each new adventure, you trusted the process enough to hoist the sails for the next leg. And this odyssey of Southwestern will prepare you for the odyssey of work as a therapist.

There are of course many ways to do therapy, and I support you in any which suit you. Take any boat, learn well how to navigate it. Take the maps, and the compass, and use them. Study them. But once you've set sail – and I don't mean this is in a rude way – get lost! And by get lost, I mean make yourself available to travel places you don't know – relational and emotional seas yet unmapped.

It's when we're lost that things get interesting, and the uniqueness of the individual shines through. Once we're lost and off the map, we find ourselves crashing onto unknown islands and meeting strange and mythical creatures there. The sorceress Circe, who reveals our animalistic nature. The Lotus Eaters who offer us a lifelong numbness and amnesia. The Cyclops part of us who can only see in one direction. The Sirens whom we must carefully engage, to partake of their wisdom and avoid their trap. In therapy we meet all these characters and more – we crash upon their islands, beg them for refuge, learn from them. Sometimes we also become them for our clients: monsters, gods, mothers; and they too for us. And with each adventure, we and our clients learn our way around, develop some more wisdom. We talk about informed consent, but I believe that when we are doing our best work, we have no idea what we are doing or where we will end up going.

It takes great courage and fortitude of soul to willingly subject oneself to such things. It also takes real skill. Odysseus wasn't Gilligan from Gilligan's Island, he was the well-educated son of a Greek king, precisely the kind of person you'd want beside you if you were lost at sea, trained for these situations – like you. He had been placed in many seemingly unworkable binds before – and so have you. He had a relatively sure hand, and he had some psychic heft – and so do you.

Like him, you have all these things – you have learned many things about how to steer the ship, how to recognize dangerous currents, how to read the skies of consciousness, how to call upon the people and the gods who help you in the work.

But what will take real courage, and what I hope we have succeeded in helping you to embrace is this: get lost with your clients. That’s when the action really gets going, and the work runs deep. We feel throughout the Odyssey the growing wisdom and depth of Odysseus across his endless shipwrecks. For anyone who is seeking to find themselves, the Odyssey offers a clear message: to be found, you must first be lost.

Penelope: Raveling and Unraveling

The other story I want to share with you about the Odyssey is about Penelope. Penelope is the wife of Odysseus. When Odysseus goes to Troy, Penelope stays behind at the palace in Ithaca. When the 10-year war finally ends, she waits eagerly for him to return, but he doesn’t. All the other warriors make it back in a few weeks, but no Odysseus. Months pass, and then years, and rumors begin spreading that he and his crew have died at sea. The kings and the princes of other lands see an opportunity to seize control of Ithaca for themselves – to take over Odysseus’s kingdom. They start to come calling for Penelope’s hand in marriage.

But year after year, Penelope refuses their advances. She keeps the hope that Odysseus will return. As the years go on, the suitors become more impatient and demanding. They begin to occupy the palace and constantly push her to choose one of them. After waiting for seven years, and that’s seventeen years adding in the war, it begins to seem that the suitors might finally force the issue. Penelope’s hope is also starting to flag.

It’s at this point, when her hope is nearly gone, that Penelope receives a visitation from Athena, goddess of wisdom, disguised as one of her serving-women. Athena tells her that Odysseus is still alive, and on his way home. And she shares a plan for Penelope to keep the suitors at bay a few years more, while Odysseus finds his way home.

The day after Athena’s visit, Penelope announces to the kingdom that she will at last choose one of the suitors to wed. She tells them she’ll do it just as soon as she finally finishes a weaving project: a funeral shroud for her aging and near-collapse father-in-law.

And so, every day for those last few years, Penelope is hard at work on the shroud. Any time the suitors look up they see her carefully weaving it together, skillfully, dexterously sending the shuttle across the threads. All her waking hours seem to be spent at work on the shroud.

But what the suitors don't see is that every night, when no one is around, she equally carefully, equally dexterously, undoes all the weaving she had done that day. So every morning, she starts afresh, and every evening she takes it all apart again.

For three years, Penelope keeps this deception going. By day she weaves the shroud, by night she takes it apart. Utterly uncertain of her husband's fate, with only dreamlike visitations from the goddess to encourage her, she ravel and unravel, ravel and unravel, over and over again. All the while, we the readers know that Odysseus is undertaking his unimaginable journeys across the seas. But she doesn't know. Her doubt is profound, but still she continues her tying and untying, weaving and unweaving, keeping the throne open, holding a space as we say at Southwestern, for Odysseus to return.

To me this part of the story is also incredibly like therapy. Our clients come in under certain precepts, what we might call treatment goals. Often it is to deal with one suitor or another, one substitute or another that tempts us to give up on our own soul's return. Keep this addiction from consuming me, make these unhelpful desires go away, or to be really literal, help me stop falling for all these narcissistic men! Our clients tell their stories, or share their beliefs, or reveal their defenses. And gently, skillfully, we and they, ravel and unravel, knit and unknit, these.

Sometimes there are particularly tight knots that we run into together. Some stories are harder to untangle than others. But when I think of therapists who come to me for consultation, they are sometimes in need of learning how to do the work better, learning a better weaving and unweaving technique if you will. But just as often or more often, what I find most ails the folks I work with, it's the same as Penelope: doubt. We frequently doubt ourselves and our work. How many times have I thought, or have I heard from a supervisee, "Is anything really happening here?" "Is this helping him at all?" "Am I actually accomplishing anything?" All this story-telling, image-making, it seems not to be leading anywhere. It often seems that just when you think it is done, it all gets unwound again by the next session. The patterns keep getting repeated, the stories keep playing out, and it's as if nothing is really changing.

If we are lucky during this, our clients may see a dream, and tell it to us, which will give us hope – or perhaps we will see something in an image or hear something in a story that seems to point to change happening. Like the visitations of Athena to Penelope, these can often give us, and our clients, the faith to keep on going.

But very often, these signs are hard to see. We may feel like giving up. Why keep going? What is the point of all this raveling and unraveling? Like Penelope with Odysseus, we will feel uncertain whether all of this knitting and unknitting has any real purpose – we will doubt that

our efforts truly serve the Soul who sits across from us. Especially if we are not seeing whatever ideas we get in our heads about what we are supposed to be seeing.

And yet the story reminds us that even when it seems like nothing is happening, our patient, skillful, conscious raveling and unraveling, tangling and untangling, is also what creates the space and the possibility for a great adventure, and for the appearance of the soul. Because somewhere out on the wild seas of the unconscious, somewhere in unseen and fantastic realms, incredible things are already underway, and a homecoming is soon to occur.

And all our knitting and unknitting, raveling and unraveling, will have made all the difference, and we will begin to recognize the soul of our client, their deepest, truest, self, take its rightful seat at the throne of their own lives, just as Odysseus eventually did.

Blessing and Benediction

There are so many things happening in the manifold realms of Soul, while we do our patient raveling and unraveling, while the seasons pass one to the next. Here is Rilke, translated by Robert Bly, reminding us that we are never alone in this work, that there is a realm which makes sense of everything. Apropos of our season, it's called "Autumn":

The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,
as if orchards were dying high in space.
Each leaf falls as if it were motioning "no."

And tonight the heavy earth is falling
away from all other stars in the loneliness.

We're all falling. This hand here is falling.
And look at the other one. It's in them all.

And yet there is Someone, whose hands
infinitely calm, holding up all this falling.

So, graduates, in the name of that Someone – Psyche, Self, God, Soul – I offer this blessing to you: may you become lost, may your journeys be long, may you be shipwrecked again and again, may you meet strange and wonderful creatures in the inner worlds of yourself and your clients, may you throw yourself upon the mercies of the gods and the other realms, may you offer refuge to those parts of yourself and others who have been driven from their homes, may you be divinely guided, may you ravel and unravel the many marvelous tapestries of the whole human experience, and most of all, may you know that in the waiting and the moments when

all you seem to be doing is keeping the suitors at bay, you are also engaged in a journey home, your client's and your own, one that has inspired the human race for at least 3,000 years.

This work we do is nothing less than an odyssey. We say to you: you are ready.

References

Homer (1996) *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books.

Rilke, R. M. (1981) *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Trans. Robert Bly. New York: Harper Perennial.