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The Finer Forge: Work and the Fires of Transformation

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In this paper I want to begin to sketch a depth psychology of work. Looking into the General Index of Jung's *Collected Works* to find out what Jung has to say about the subject of work, however, the interested reader finds only one entry under the heading "career" and ten under the heading "work." Of those ten, three refer to the work of alchemy and three to the work of therapy. Only four take the reader to passages on what might be called the psychology of work, and these passages offer only scanty hints regarding Jung's thoughts on the subject.

Broadly speaking, there are two trends of ideas that can be discerned in the little Jung says about work. Depending on which of these trends we follow, our understanding of work—its function in our lives and how it is addressed in the therapeutic encounter—will be radically different.

The first of these two trends—and the one that is adopted in most of the literature following Jung—is found in Jung's essay "The Stages of Life" (CW 8). There, work is associated with the first half of life, that is, with a person's adaptation to life in the social

world. This is the time of raising a family and establishing a profession. It is a time of ego consolidation and persona development. It is in the second half of life when one's concerns turn inward toward the Self. This is the time of life when one is often required to turn away from the external pursuits to which one has dedicated his or her energy. At this time our attention shifts from our external work to "inner work." The value of external work, according to this way of thinking, then, decreases during the second half of life.

Jung sees the activities of the first half of life as the expression of nature and those of the second half as the expression of culture. When work is understood in these terms, it sets up an opposition between external work—often called "real work"—and inner work, which Jungians tend to consider as "real work." External work, according to this formulation of Jung, is felt to be earlier than—and in some sense inferior to —inner work. Meaning, then, is associated with inner work and becomes divorced from one of the main activities of our everyday lives. We are left with the situation we find ourselves in today, in which our beliefs about work are firmly fixed in an economic fantasy, which is to say that work is defined, imagined, and enacted solely as a means toward a monetary end.

The fallacy of the economic fantasy is the belief that all that is involved in a person's work is a simple exchange—time for money. The employee trades his or her time for the employer's money. But this is not the case. The all-too-common experience of burnout attests to the fact that work affects a person at a fundamental level. For good or for ill, we are changed by the work we do.

This leads us to the second trend of Jung's thoughts on work, which, I believe, is more deserving of being called a psychology of work. Here, Jung takes an historical view of the work instinct (Jung, 1928). He derives the appearance of work from the activity of the transformation of libido and associates this with the development of culture. In other words, an internal activity—libido—leads to external activity—work—which is manifest in the products of culture. In this view, work is primarily an expression of culture and only secondarily related to the survival function, i.e., nature. Put succinctly, we could say, work is a symbolic process reflecting an inner development. External work and 'inner work' are reunited in this attitude.

This point of view is affirmed by Mircea Eliade (1962) in his book *The Forge and the Crucible* where he says:

> As is often the case, the image, the symbol and the rite anticipate—sometimes even make possible—practical applications of a discovery. Before providing a means of transport, the chariot was the vehicle of ritual processions; it was used to parade the symbol of the sun or the image of the solar god. . . .Before changing the face of the world the Iron Age engendered a large number of rites, myths and symbols which have reverberated throughout the spiritual history of humanity. (24)

Jung (1912) sees modern work life as suffering from a loss of its symbolic nature as the industrial and economic understanding of work takes precedence. Eliade goes so far as to say, "The secularization of work is like an open wound in the body of modern society" (178). It is this line of thought that I want to follow in the remainder of this paper, and the main point that I want to make is that the energy of transformation is present in our work whether we perceive it to be so or not. There are powerful libidinal forces—powerful archetypal forces—that seek expression through the work we do, and things will go much better for us if we can recognize them and enable them to be realized.

At the heart of the experience of work is the image of fire. Both Jung and Eliade find the symbolic roots of modern work in humanity's mastery of fire (Eliade, 1962; Jung, 1956). This suggests that we might be able to discern some of the archetypal background of the experience of work through the figure of Hephaistos, as fire is not only one of the tools that this god employs; it is also his very nature. His name means fire, or at the very least, is used as a synonym for fire (Kerenyi, 1951; Stein, 1980).

In the pantheon of Greek gods, there is really only one god who works: Hephaistos. Hephaistos is the sacred Smith-god who tends the fires of his smithy deep in the bowels of the earth. In the Homeric Hymn to Hephaistos we learn that "he taught men work . . . work that was noble for men to do on the earth." We could say that our imagination of work in the western world begins with Hephaistos, and I believe that it is primarily an Hephaistian energy that operates at the heart of our work experiences in the modern world. This can be seen most clearly in our contemporary mania for technology and in the almost religious belief we hold in the redeeming power of technology. Only a god can inspire that kind of belief. In fact, our word "technology" derives from the Greek word *techne*, meaning "art," "craft," or "skill." It is the god Hephaistos who embodies *techne*.

It is not possible in the short space of this paper to enter into a complete exploration of the figure of Hephaistos. There is, however, a strange little tale from the Grimms' collection that provides some insight into our theme. I want to use this tale—titled "The Old Man Made Young Again," or, alternately, "The Fires of Youth"—to illustrate the transformational nature of this Hephaistian energy that manifests in our work and its potential for both creative and destructive outcomes.

The Old Man Made Young Again (The Fires of Youth)

At the time when our Lord still walked this earth, he and St. Peter stopped one evening at a smith's and received free quarters. Then it came to pass that a poor beggar, hard pressed by age and infirmity, came to this house and begged alms of the smith. St. Peter had compassion on him and said, "Lord and master, if it please you, cure his torments that he may be able to win his own bread."

The Lord said kindly, "Smith, lend me your forge, and put on some coals for me, and then I will make this ailing old man young again." The smith was quite willing, and St. Peter blew the bellows, and when the coal fire sparkled up large and high our Lord took the little old man, pushed him in the forge in the midst of the red-hot fire, so that he glowed like a rose-bush, and praised God with a loud voice. After that the Lord went to the quenching tub, put the glowing little man into it so that the water closed over him, and after he had carefully cooled him, gave him his blessing, when behold the little man sprang nimbly out, looking fresh, straight, healthy, and as if he were but twenty. The smith, who had watched everything closely and attentively, invited them all to supper.

He, however, had an old half-blind crooked, mother-in-law who went to the youth, and with great earnestness asked if the fire had burnt him much. He answered that he had never felt more comfortable, and that he had sat in the red heat as if he had been in cool dew. The youth's words echoed in the ears of the old woman all night long, and early next morning, when the Lord had gone on his way again and had heartily thanked the smith, the latter thought he might make his old mother-in-law young again likewise, as he had watched everything so carefully, and it lay in the province of his trade. So he called to ask her if she, too, would like to go bounding about like a girl of eighteen. She said, "With all my heart, as the youth has come out of it so well."

So the smith made a great fire, and thrust the old woman into it, and she writhed about this way and that, and uttered terrible cries of murder. "Sit still. Why are you screaming and jumping about so?" cried he, and as he spoke he blew the bellows again until all her rags were burnt. The old woman cried without ceasing, and the smith thought to himself, I have not quite the right art, and took her out and threw her into the cooling-tub. Then she screamed so loudly that the smith's wife upstairs and her daughter-in-law heard it, and they both ran downstairs, and saw the old woman lying in a heap in the quenching-tub, howling and screaming, with her face wrinkled and shriveled and all out of shape. Thereupon the two, who were both with child, were so terrified that that very night two boys were born who were not made like men but apes, and they ran into the woods, and from them sprang the race of apes.

We are clearly in the Hephaistian configuration in this tale, which I am suggesting connects us to the archetypal dimension of our working lives. Simply put, this tale shows

the two very different outcomes that result depending on the spirit with which we approach our work. In the first case, when the Lord puts the beggar in the fire of the smith's forge, the old man is renewed. In the second case, not only is the mother-in-law burned and in agony, but the smith's wife and sister-in-law give birth to apes.

We can imagine that the old beggar represents the state of the outside world, the world of want and poverty. When the blacksmith performs his work in the right spirit, or, in Jungian terms, when the Self is manifest in his work, or again, using the language of the story, when the spirit of the Lord works through him, the world in the form of the old man is regenerated. When, however, the smith approaches his work in a literal fashion, when it is only his ego, as it were, that does the work, something profound occurs that causes a regression to the animal state. The old woman is not renewed; humanity is not renewed. There is instead a complete reversal of evolution. To perform our work in the right spirit is important not only in order to bring about a renewal, but also to avoid a dangerous degeneration. We are literally playing with fire. Apparently we do not stand still—we progress or we regress.

Jung (1956) speaks of exactly this dynamic when writing of the use of fire in the religious rituals of various cultures. Often these were associated with rites of spring, when a new fire would be lit to signify the renewal of the year and of the tribe. (Once again we have the image of fire linked with the idea of renewal.) Psychologically, the fire represents the internal fire, the libido, psychic energy. The rite had to be performed absolutely correctly for the renewal to be achieved. If it was performed incorrectly, it could have the opposite effect. "Fire-making," wrote Jung, "represents primitive man's victory over his brutish unconsciousness and subsequently became a powerful magical

device for overcoming the ever-present 'daemonic' forces lurking in the unconscious." If the rite is performed poorly, however, it causes

> a retrograde movement of the libido, a regression which threatens to reproduce the earlier, instinctual, and unconscious state…. The consequences of this are a serious danger not only for primitives; in civilized man, too, they may give rise to psychic disturbances, states of possession, and psychic epidemics. (168-169)

There are many contemporary examples of exactly this "retrograde movement" in the arena of work. For example, this formula might help explain all the corporate scandals that were so recently in the headlines—millionaire executives with seemingly no qualms about bilking their employees or their shareholders. A clearer and more dramatic example would be the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal in Iraq, which graphically demonstrates how seemingly normal people can become like brutes when their work is not guided by the right spirit—in this case the guidelines of the Geneva Convention. That's a very explicit example of what Jung means by the phrase "psychic epidemics" and what the story images as the birth of "the ape within"—our bestial nature. But we can also find more everyday examples: road rage on the daily commute, the middle-manager who gets beaten up on the job and takes it out on his family at home, or, perhaps even more commonly, the countless addictions that people use to cover up the sense of meaninglessness in their work lives—alcohol, drugs, sex.

It is when we forget the inner, transformational dimension of our work that we are most prone to this kind of "negative transformation." Our work is not just an activity of the ego; it is simultaneously an expression of the Self seeking an outlet in our lives. The clinical implications of this involve the quality of imagination that the analyst brings to the therapeutic encounter. That is, do we see an analysand's work complaints merely as being so many symptoms, or will we begin to understand them more fully as symbols?

I want to end with these lines from Emily Dickinson, who also employs the imagery of Hephaistos to remind us that the work we do in the world—real-world work, outer-world work—is at the same time a symbol for our inner-work, our soul-work:

> Least Village has its Blacksmith
> Whose Anvil's even ring
> Stands symbol for the finer Forge
> That soundless tugs—within—

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