

MYTHIC PASSAGES  
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*Authentic Questions and Answers*

by Creative Director, [Honora Foah](#)

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I love to read Cary Tennis, the agony aunt of [Salon.com](#). He is the most compassionate and wise columnist I believe I have ever read. He tries very hard to understand what people may be or about really, as opposed to simply what they say, while maintaining a sense of humor and equilibrium rare in public discourse. For instance, in a recent column a young person wrote to ask him about whether or not he should keep in contact with his unreliable, lying, alcoholic father. Mr. Tennis, in his answer, managed in a few paragraphs, to bring together contacts and evaluation tools from Adult Children of Alcoholics; with personal revelation about his own addictions; with King Lear; with, crucially, common sense; and perhaps most importantly, framing the young man's questions with new questions.

"...First, we should consider how the condition of alcoholism affects our responsibilities toward any alcoholic, irrespective of our relationship — whether the alcoholic is a friend, lover, parent, child, employee, etc. Then we should consider what responsibility all children bear toward their parents, regardless of what their parents are like and how they have treated their children."

The resulting 'conclusion' of his advice is full of good sense and heart. He very rarely says the type of things we often say to each other, 'Forget that guy; he's a leech and a loser.' Much more profoundly he takes all sides of the dilemma seriously, morality as well as survival, without resorting to sanctimoniousness or rules of duty as absolutes. If someone tells him that they adhere to a certain code, religion, or vow, he is respectful, though he often asks them to go beneath the vow, per se, to the meaning of the vow.

And then, often, he just throws in some line, like the one in this column, that suggests the rereading (or an initial reading) of King Lear. He doesn't dwell on it, he just seeds the suggestion.

In another column, where the letter from the person who wanted advice, just made you want to crawl under the table, he simply acknowledged that — your letter made me want to drop to my knees and pray, because lady, how the hell would I know what to do with as wretched a story and predicament as you have described? For God's sake, I'm not a psychologist or a priest, I'm a writer — and *this* (in case you were wondering) is my point.

The answer he finally gave to this woman was as good and wise as anything I've come across. Sometimes, he directly references great literature, myth and story as his teachers, and sometimes not, but it is there, bleeding through everything he says. He's a writer and he knows the stories.

I do not believe there is any shame in using cognitive and behavioral approaches to our problems, just as I find no shame in an aspirin on a day of headache. But these things are insufficient in themselves. The problems of the soul, the psyche, ultimately must be addressed on the level of the soul. Instinctively, Freud looked toward the great stories as he began his modern investigation into psychology. Jung carried that aspect further. Psychology deeply influenced the artists and art that has been made in the last century, and art in turn has been the food of psychology and psychologists.

Much of the greatness of James Hillman's work has to do with his penetrating look into the old stories and his love of art. And asking better questions.

Lately at Mythic imagination, we've been working on how to describe what we are and what we are doing. Honestly, it isn't easy. Here's one thing we can say: we are trying to create good conditions for Imagination. Our route is by way of the wisdom stories of the world, the sacred and the profane, those that present bombastically, those that present wistfully, those that present whimsically.

But here's the thing. If people were more imaginative, if our responses to life and problems were more creative, less programmed, less knee-jerk, more alive, what would it look like?

I don't know. Here is a clue I'm following: **the questions will be better.**

I have had the good fortune in my life to speak with some very interesting, brilliant, wise people, and if I were to make a generalization about them, it would be that first of all, they can take a stupid question and transform it in such a way, that the entire room can suddenly breathe. They do not start with the answer. They do not accept the premises the questions are predicated upon. They first look at the question. I have seen this phenomenon over and over. Some amazing person is asked a question that just makes you want to squirm, full of idiocies, conceits or partialities. It is especially painful if I happen to be the person asking the question.

There is usually a pause. There is usually a 'Well...!' And then the Amazing Person (AP) begins to ask a much better question than yours, but actively related to your question. *Do I have to see my*

*lying, alcoholic father?* The question the AP poses will almost always change the scale of your question. 'Well...what is our responsibility to the damaged among us, whose damage has penetrated into the moral sphere? What is our responsibility to those who have severely damaged us? What is our responsibility to those who have brought us into existence, who have given us life?'

At that point, it begins to be clear that the discomfort that has brought us to the point of asking for help *at all* is actually a matter of powerful consequence, for us, and — this is another hallmark of the AP's answer — for others. So very often the AP will manage to enlarge our consciousness to include others: the others in our problem, the others who may have similar problems, the relationship to existential universal problems. And at that point, the need we have for each other, the need to be serious about how our own choices in regard to this problem will affect others grappling with it, begin to stand out.

The AP is always re-constellating. I find my response to this changing of the question, even if the new questions are 'harder', is gratitude and relief. The AP has released me from the prison of myself into the world and usually at the same time, suggested I have a definite place in that world.

This is the blessing I also find in both myth and imagination. The shoulder Mr. Shakespeare put to the wheel in trying to understand the follies and tragedies of parents and children, is a contribution we cannot afford to overlook as we attempt to become human beings.

That may be the main value in Mythic Journeys itself, this working on better questions together. We have asked the MJ presenters to consciously go at this in the Big Conversations — to ask authentic questions of each other. The Mythic Journeys presenters are too valuable to simply waste them on answers.

Imagination leads to good questions. Good questions lead to imagination. That's my story. I'm sticking to it.

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