

Psyche and Amor, Transitions, William Bridges - extract (1979 / 2019)

Once upon a time – which is to say, right now and from the very beginning and till the end – there was a very lovely young woman. She was the loveliest woman in the kingdom, but although this was universally admitted, no one courted her. Others married and began families, but Psyche (for that was her name) seemed too perfect for any ordinary mortal.

Psyche's parents finally sent to the great oracle at Delphi for an answer, and the answer came back. But when they heard it, they wept, for the oracle said that Psyche must die. She was to be dressed in funeral clothes and taken to a wild and desolate crag in the mountains on the far side of the kingdom. There she was to be abandoned.

In stories one does not ask why, for everything goes according to a plan that is patterned on life itself. The oracle is saying that no new time of life is possible without the death of the old lifetime. To gain, you must first give up.

So they dressed Psyche in funeral clothes and conducted her death rites and left her on the cold and windy mountaintop. As she lay there, numb with fear and sunk in despair, Amor, the god of passionate love, came to her side. Gazing on her perfection, he fell in love with her. He flew off to bring the West Wind, his helper, and ask him to carry Psyche down into the hidden valley beneath the mountain tops where Amor lived in a dark palace.

So it was that when she awoke, Psyche found herself in a mysteriously beautiful castle. Everything she could possibly need was there – food and drink, lovely clothing, perfumed baths, everything but companionship. But then when darkness fell, she found that she had that, too, for Amor came to her in the darkness and slept with her. Night after night he did this. Sometimes they talked all night, sometimes they made love, and sometimes they dined together in the darkness and fell asleep at once. Psyche could not have asked for more. She was happy at last.

As always happens, and ending clears the ground for a new beginning. In this story, the person did little – everything just happened. Some transitions are like that. They just happen. But when they happen this way, something is missing.

Psyche and Amor, (Cont)

The outer situation has taken shape, but the inner state remains unchanged. The old outlook, the old self-image, the old value system remains intact. Outwardly, the change is complete, but the real transition process has hardly begun.

In time, Psyche began to feel a strange incompleteness about her life. Everything was perfect, but she missed her old friends and her family. This hidden palace was indeed beautiful, but it was also unreal – outside the real world, outside time, outside human connections. She talked of this to her secret lover. She told him she wished to see her family again. Could her sisters come and visit her, perhaps?

Amor at first refused, but she so longed for contact with her family that at last, he relented. “They must come”, he said, “when he was away. And they must be gone before his return.” She was delighted and promised to do as he said.

The sisters came, carried by the same West Wind that had brought Psyche to this paradise. They were amazed – and jealous. Who was this secret lover, they asked? Psyche did not know, of course, but she made up stories. (She had never seen him because he came in the darkness and never showed her his face.) Psyche hid her ignorance as well as she could, but it was not long before her answers began contradicting one another. “You don’t even know what he looks like!” cried the sisters. “Why, he is probably a great beast that uses the darkness to hide his awful ugliness! You have been a fool. You have a wicked and loathsome animal for a lover.”

When they left, Psyche was desperate with confusion. Amor seemed like a gentle, loving person. But it was true that he never let her see him. Her sisters’ suspicion filled her head, and she vowed to find out the truth for herself. Late that night, after he had fallen asleep, she crept out and found a candle and a knife. She would steal a look at him, and if he were the terrible creature her sisters said he must be, she would stab him.

She lit the candle in the hall and tiptoed up to the bed where he slept. Raising the candle in one hand and the knife in the other, she leaned over the bed. There he lay, the handsomest of gods! Amor, her lover. In her excitement, her hand trembled and hot wax fell onto the sleeping god’s shoulder. He awoke.

Psyche and Amor, (Cont)

... When he saw what she had done, he told her that, having broken the rule of darkness, she would never see him again. Suddenly he was gone, and Psyche was alone, stunned by what she had done and its effect.

In the everyday world of fact, agreements are meant to be kept, but in the world of myth everything happens for a reason and points toward some further end. Losses happen because it is time to let go of that way of being connected. Psyche had lived in the darkness for long enough, and it was now time for her to see. Yet the change was a violation of the old rules, and it destroyed the old situation. It was time for her to change – grow and deepen, to take responsibility for who and where she was. It was time for the inner changes to catch up with the outer ones.

So Psyche left the palace where she had been so happy and began a lonely journey in search of her lost lover. In her grief, she called upon the gods for help, and one of them, the great Aphrodite, answered. “You seek my son,” she said, (for she was the mother of Amor,) “... But I think that you are not strong enough to do what must be done.” Psyche said that it was not so; she would do anything.

“Very well. You must complete four difficult tasks,” said Aphrodite. “First, you must sort out this roomful of seeds – put each type of seed in a separate pile – in one night.” She threw open the door, and there Psyche saw a large room piled high with all kinds of seeds jumbled together in one immense heap. She gasped at the impossibility of the task, but Aphrodite continued without pause. “Second, you must go to the field where the golden-fleeced rams live and bring me back some of that fleece.” Psyche was stunned, for those rams breathed fire and killed anyone who entered their field. “And third,” Aphrodite said before Psyche had time to recover, “You must bring me back a goblet of water from the great River Styx – that plunges off the inaccessible cliffs and into the underworld.” She looked at Psyche, amused by the hopeless look on the mortal’s face.

“And finally,” she said, “you must go down into hell itself and ask Persephone for a little box of her magic ointment that enhances one’s beauty miraculously. Get it and bring it back to me.” And having said that, Aphrodite vanished.

Psyche was stunned. Sadly, she opened the door and gazed at her first task.

Psyche and Amor, (Cont)

The pile of seeds was higher than her head, and it covered the floor of a good-sized room. She bent over and picked up a handful of seeds. Little ones, big ones, dark ones, light ones – no one could possibly bring order to this confusion in a year of sorting, and she had one night! The enormity of her task overcame her, and she sank down weeping at the edge of the pile. Feebly, she picked over a handful or two, but she was weary and depressed, and soon she fell asleep.

The first time her life had changed, Psyche had been quite passive – it had all just happened to her. Now, however, she was ready to act – but the tasks! They were impossible ones! She tried to do them, but then she had to give up. And when she did, she discovered that...

As she slept, a vast army of ants came into the room. On the command of their leaders, they began the sorting. All night they swarmed over the huge pile, and gradually it melted away until in its place were a dozen smaller piles of wheat and rye and beans and mustard seeds. At sunrise, Aphrodite threw open the door and woke the sleeping Psyche. Both of them gasped in amazement when they saw the piles of seed. Psyche said nothing, and Aphrodite said only, “You have three more tasks.”

With the golden fleece and the water from the Styx, similar things happened. Just as she was about to give up hope of getting the fleece, the reeds that grew by the river whispered to her that if she waited until sunset, when the rams retreated to their night’s rest, she could creep up to the edge of the field and find bits of the fleecy treasure on the bushes. And just as she was about to abandon hope of getting a goblet of Styx water, a great eagle flew down from the heavens, took the vessel from her hands, and filled it from the torrent far above her head. Aphrodite was startled each time by Psyche’s success, but she only said ominously, “We’ll see how you do with the journey to the underworld.”

What are the ants and reeds and the eagle? Why does something appear to help Psyche each time she has given up hope? The “helpful creature” is a common element of folklore and dreams, and it corresponds to some instinctive and sub-rational level of insight and energy. The tasks of transition are not, it seems, of the sort that one can consciously set out to accomplish. Yet neither are they taken care of in the automatic fashion of Psyche’s original and outer transition on the mountaintop.

Psyche and Amor, (Cont)

Now she must struggle and even exhaust herself before help arrives – almost as though it is only when one is at the end of one's resources that new and hitherto unsuspected powers appear.

But now, how is she to go to the underworld, survive its dangers, and return with the treasure? As she is on the verge of giving up, a tower near which she is standing begins to speak to her. It gives her instructions – bring coins to pay for her passage across the Styx, carry sweet cakes to pacify the guardian animals, and resist all requests from anyone for help. So off she goes. The coins and cakes are simple enough, but it is difficult for her to refuse the entreaties of the poor man whose donkey has dropped part of his load or the women who need assistance with their weaving or the dying man who calls pitifully after her for succour. Shutting out the sad calls from those in need, Psyche pushes onward and downward. This journey no one can make for her. She alone can make it, and despite temptations to abandon her errand, she succeeds. Thank goodness for the tower and its counsel!

A talking tower? Refusing to help those in need? A journey to the underworld? What is this all about?

Well, most significant transitions – the sort of inner change that Psyche is dealing with – involve a time in hell. You go down before you come up. And most of these journeys must be taken alone. All our habits of caring for others (and seeing ourselves as people who would care for others) become self-defeating. We need to resist the old impulses to take care of others and instead to pay attention during this time to what we are doing and why we are doing it. We are going where we must go if we are to do the god's bidding. Having left behind a life that we have outgrown, we must continue the transition process to find our new life.

And the tower? Why, after all the previous help from insects and birds and growing things, does this aid come from a human construct? An inanimate object? It seems that, in the end, one needs that kind of assistance – that one's own deeper and unconscious resources are essential, but that they stop short of the goal. When one is going down the dark path into hell, some conscious plans must be made. The result is paradoxical – as was my urging you to trust your own inner process, and then my advice on what to do. So be it. Both are essential.

Psyche and Amor, (Cont)

And in the dark times, one may have little but that dimly remembered advice to go on.

It would be nice to say that Amor was waiting when Psyche reappeared, but he was not. In fact, things took an apparently bad turn at that very point. Back in the land of the living, Psyche looked indecisively at the box of magic ointment in her hand. She was tempted to open the box. Anything so valuable must be wonderful. Why should Aphrodite get it all? So, she opened it. But the power of the content was too much for a mortal, and Psyche was overcome and collapsed.

Everything in a myth points to a purpose, and just as the earlier impulse to peek at her secret lover led to the quest that carried her to a new level of awareness, so this peek opened up immense power. That is always how it is in the wilderness of the neutral zone: one encounters there forms of energy and insight that are life transforming, but also just barely supportable. That is one reason why the old rituals were so important, for, like the tower, they gave direction and reassurance. That is why the sort of understanding that this book provides is so important, for without it you can be caught in fearful places that make no sense. So, Psyche is not just overly curious when she lifts the lid of her treasure from the underworld. She is taking the final step to becoming aware of herself and gaining power for the new status and phase of her life. As with all people after important life transitions, she is going to be different.*

No sooner had she fallen to the ground than Amor appeared and picked up the limp form and carried her up to Olympus. There, after due deliberation, Psyche was made immortal. She and Amor were married, and they lived happily ever after...

... or until the next major life transition, whichever came first.

*the 'neutral zone' is Bridges' term for the liminal space between an ending and new beginning that comes after it. The neutral zone is defined by un-knowing, being out of control, and the need to surrender to the process of letting go of the old so that the new may be born.