

How many days and months has it been now? How many days and months that this new virus has rearranged our lives? Not so long in real time, very long in subjective time where the days blur into one another. I have trouble keeping track on a daily basis. The old signposts have fallen, the clock chimes the hour without rhyme or reason.

What is not in doubt is that our lives are not what they once were, and that they will never be the same again. Opinions are divided on whether this is a good thing or not.

Spend just a little time on the internet, and you will find posts revealing that the virus was bred in a lab in order to usher in a new age of surveillance and tyranny. There are posts proclaiming that the virus is here as a teacher or guide or lesson sent by God, the Devil, or Mother Earth.

Most troubling to me are the ones where the writer likens our current predicament to a collective vision quest, or a collective rite-of-passage, or a threshold into some new maturity for all humanity. History does not support this expectation, by the way.

Because the virus is a perfect mirror for our beliefs, it reflects our vanities and our imperfections, our certainties and our uneasiness. We want it to confirm that which we already know, or want to true.

There are lessons to be learned, yes. Lessons about ourselves, our culture, and the world, but history has shown us that if you already think you know what the lesson is, you probably aren't going to learn anything.

When it comes to this being some kind of quest, my understanding is that such a quest requires intention. Intention to leave your old life behind, cross a threshold, and enter into a new life guided by the medicine.

That isn't what is happening, to my eyes. Nor is this a rite-of-passage. Those also require intention, the intention to leave one stage of life/existence behind and enter another, and have community recognize it, like weddings, funerals, divorces, graduations, and so on.

We – humanity - don't possess the collective maturity and social agreement necessary for either of those intentions to be true. We don't have any real collective intentions as a species, nor any real idea of where we are going as humans.

We are, to put it bluntly, lost in a hall of mirrors of our own devising. And the reflections can be pretty frightening.

No, my friends, I think what we are currently experiencing is known as "coming off a bender." The booze is gone, the drugs are gone, and we have collectively woken up on the living room floor with a splitting headache, a bad taste in our mouth, surrounded by trash and empties. No one will answer our phone calls except our dealer, and we've got one dollar and some change in our pocket. There's nothing in the fridge but a jar of mustard and a piece of pizza so old and hard you could stab someone with it. The utilities have been turned off, the toilet is clogged, and there is no water to slake the thirst in our throats or our souls. The landlady is banging at the door wanting all that past-due rent. Some of you may know from experience exactly what I'm talking about.

Don't like that analogy? Think about it. For at least a hundred years or so, we've collectively been on a bender. A bender of consumption, fueled by destruction. The destruction of lives, ecosystems, cultures, values, and so much more. The environment is threadbare, all our pretty toys are falling to pieces, our cultures and values have been sacrificed at the altar of economic growth, we've fouled the air and water beyond repair, and nobody is answering the prayer hotline.

This party really is over, and it's time to recognize it.

The tempting thing about coming off a bender is that the only immediate relief is another hit, another drink, another of whatever you're addicted to. Which will inevitably lead to another bender and another brutal Sunday morning coming down.

The only thing that can break the cycle is to sober up, and stay sober. We are collectively a long way from that. (And our dealer is tapping at the door, just one more hit, baby, one more fast food meal, one more tank of gas, one more cheap flight to Cancun, and all will be as it was. The pain will go away. It'll cost you double, but let's not worry about that now.)

In order to vision quest, or be initiated, you have to be sober. You can't do these ceremonies when you're high, or enter into a new life stoned. Or hungover. These are contracts with yourself, with your community, with Spirit. And being mentally/emotionally/spiritually impaired invalidates the contract. Null and void. It will come back to bite you if you try.

So as lovely as the thought is of humanity going through some collective transformation... well, let's talk about that when we've sobered up, and stayed sober. Oh, and cleaned up the mess we've made. That comes first.

But there is an opportunity here, so let's return to Robert Bly's poem and the rat's way.

The rat's way out is down low. Through the underworld. Down in the dark lie all our shadows and addictions, and our grief. And also treasure, if we care to go deep enough. In these times of chaos and confusion, when things seem to be falling apart, the best approach is to dive deeper. NOT to batter against the walls lured by the false promise of the light.

One of the oldest underworld myths recounts the story of the Sumerian Queen Inanna and her twin sister Erishkegal. It begins with a choice. Inanna, the beloved Queen of Heaven, chooses to descend in order to attend the funeral rites of the husband of Erishkegal, who is the terrifying Queen of the Underworld. Inanna knows it is the right thing to do. What she does not know,

until she begins her descent, is that she will be required to pass through seven gates, at each of which she must relinquish her trappings of power followed by every last remnant of her clothes. Inanna protests but ultimately chooses to submit to this stripping, so that she may honor the dead and perform the rites of mourning. When she finally meets her twin sister, she is naked and humbled.

Inanna's reunion with her abandoned and grieving twin sister in the underworld does not go well. Erishkegal is angry. Inanna is judged, killed and hung upside down on a meat hook for three days. When Inanna does not return from visiting the Underworld, her handmaiden Ninshubar goes to Inanna's father gods for help. They refuse. They will not engage with the Great Below. Only Enki, the compassionate God of Wisdom will act. He creates messengers to travel to the Underworld from the dirt beneath his fingernails.

When the humble messengers reach Erishkegal in her Underworld realm they find her in labor, and respond empathically to her cries. "Oh, oh my inside" Erishkegal wails "Oh, oh your inside", the messengers mirror back. Their compassion and companionship softens Erishkegal's grief and rage, and she offers these creatures any boon of their asking. They request Inanna's corpse and sprinkle it with the food and water of life. She is resurrected, healed and transformed, born anew from the womb of the underworld, through the witnessing of grief and the agency of compassion. Now initiated, Inanna can never again be innocent of death or place herself above the limits of life.

That's just one ancient story of many that underlie and inform cultures . Those stories are not our stories. But we can see ourselves reflected in them.

How many of us live the life of Inanna with the royal privileges of water, power, transport and food available on demand along with endless consumer choices? Our queenly lives are costly to others and the Earth. There are descents to be made and death rites to attend, so that new ways of living may be birthed. The further we descend, the harder it gets. We get to the first

gate and maybe we recycle. Like Inanna, we protest when we have to strip off energy intensive lifestyles, relinquish privileged mindsets, and stop placing ourselves above the limits of life.

Martin Shaw, a vision quest guide and mythic storyteller, says that we are now in the underworld and that it looks just like this one. And he makes that the point that in the underworld, in the darkness, you can't see.

And without sight, what you must do in the darkness is listen.

I don't think we've listened enough yet. I'm not talking about listening to the cacophony of media and pundits and podcasts and politicians. I'm talking about listening to our deep inner voices, to the deep wordless currents underneath the wind and the earth and sky, that which is being said in the field among and between all beings.

There are wounds to heal, so many wounds, wounds to people and cultures, to the earth, the air and the waters. There are bodies to be made whole again, colored bodies and queer bodies, women's bodies and men's bodies and children's bodies, poor bodies and rich bodies, young bodies and old bodies, animal bodies and plant bodies. Bodies to be sprinkled with the food and water of life so they may live again.

In order to do that, we need to be in the underworld long enough, stripped bare and humble. Listening until we really hear what is going on. Until we know the lay of this new land and the where the compass points now.

Our old lives and our old ways beckon. The truth is that we have not spent enough time in the underworld. We have not passed through all the gates. If we cut our underworld journey short, we will never undergo the transformation that the journey brings. There are no shortcuts, and to imagine this virus will change us is wishful thinking. At best, it is an invitation to the funeral.

In the depths, there is treasure to be uncovered and brought into the light for the good of the world. And quite simply, we can't do that if we return too soon from the underworld. We will return in pieces, powerless.

This flies in the face of every demand from our culture. We have been trained to want quick decisions and fast resolutions. Get it done and move on. Fast food, instant gratification, no waiting. Anything to shave a minute, an hour, a day, from our travel time to and from anywhere. And now we are being asked to sacrifice lives and health to get "the economy" back up to speed.

I don't think so. It's time to live into the darkness and listen. Not let anyone push us to go fast, to resolve things and move on. For us to be wary of those who claim they know the way to the light.

The way out is down, and we have the choice to dive, or not. That is where we are poised in this time of betwixt and between. Will we continue to dive, to go down, to discover what lies in the darkness, uncover the treasure and bring it back?

It remains to be seen. I hope we dive.