

BOOK REVIEWS

ARMSTRONG, THOMAS. (2007). *The human odyssey: Navigating the twelve stages of life*. New York, NY: Sterling Publishing Co. xx + 368 pp. ISBN 1402739966. Hardback, \$24.95. *Reviewed by Craig Schlarb.*

Armstrong's book, *The Human Odyssey: Navigating the Twelve Stages of Life*, is a joy to read. It is filled with intriguing perspectives and keen observations. Key concepts introduced early are well developed throughout each of the 12 stages of human development. Armstrong has until now limited his writing to child development. This book further develops his core philosophies as he applies them across the life span. Constructs, such as our a priori universal spiritual roots termed *spirit down* development and what he refers to as *body up* development, are returned to in each stage. He unfolds these concepts across the life span by discussing our balancing between *adaptation* (adapting to the demands of a body-up oriented society) and *remembering* our spiritual roots. This current work extends both himself while also extending our conception of the human journey as a profound adventure. With ample research sourced from psychology, biology, mythology, anthropology, literature, the arts, and more, Armstrong presents the transpersonal as a given inherent quality of being human in a defenseless and enjoyable way.

Borrowing archetypal themes from Homer's "Odyssey," Armstrong makes this a lively and engaging read of the human adventure. He stays true to the Odysseyan metaphor for biological and spiritual development throughout the book. For example, he first introduces our biological being as such: "...like a Greek sailing vessel, you had to search for a suitable landing site on the surface of your mother's uterus"; and ends the book describing our and Odysseus's final task of "planting your oar in the sand" to make a final affirmation and peace with your life. It is again and again enlightening to have stages of biological/neurological activity amplified through myth and archetypal psychology. Although there are gems in each chapter that shed new light on well known vicissitudes and stages, its real genius and contribution is its gestalt of the stages into a whole life. Readers will be left with a vast appreciation of where they have come from and where they may be going. Armstrong keeps alive the odyssey's mystery and excitement while thoroughly explicating it.

His intimately descriptive and non-technical writing from the perspective of the given stage of development invites readers to reflect on their own past, present, and future stages. For example, "Your head is pressed against your breastbone as you begin to move through the cervix on your way down the birth canal. Your head arches back as you move upward and outward into the light of day" (p. 37). His tactful self-disclosure humanizes and normalizes the various stages and is a welcomed addition to the narrative drawing readers closer for a more intimate experience of the odyssey. His regular breaking down of words into their original meanings is an education in and

of itself that helps readers further see through the many diverse lenses he employs. This book is written for a wide popular audience, making the transpersonal accessible to many.

Armstrong allows the reader to imaginatively look forward from one developmental conquest to the challenges of the next and vice versa reflects back from adulthood onto the skills first acquired in childhood. At the end of each chapter is an invitation to personalize the collective journey he describes making this a life span self-help book. For this, he provides greater reflection on the “gift” of the given stage through poignant examples and his own clear heart advice. The last section of each chapter: “Ways to Explore and Support [the given stage],” offers specific suggestions and exercises encouraging readers to integrate and foster that stage’s value and meaning in self, family/friends, and community. For example, in the Adolescence stage he invites readers to listen to music from that time in their life and journal personal responses to the music, create meaningful rights of passages in the lives of adolescents, and donate to a local community teen center. In this way, he furthers our appreciation that the health of our individual is connected to the health of family/friends and to the larger community. Furthermore, Armstrong graciously provides readers with invaluable appendices that further guide them into deepening the gifts of each stage of life. Appendix A: “Films to Illuminate the Times of Your Life.” Appendix B: “Books to Help Throughout the Life Span.” Appendix C: “Organizations that Support Human Development.”

There are times throughout the book where his quiet critiques of contemporary American culture fail to fully develop. For example, he speaks to the clear market driven trend toward a lack of embodied play in early childhood yet stops short of describing implications for a society that fails their children in such a fundamental way. Admittedly his model is superimposed from a classic Western work, “The Odyssey,” and speaks to the Western experience. In an age of increasing demand for a detailed racial/cultural/ethnic competency, the book comes up short of describing how various segments of American culture experience struggles at various stages differently from the generalized experience he describes. He does well however in providing readers with a sampling of key developmental issues as experienced from around the world. For example he speaks to various historical and contemporary cultures’ experiences with birth, rites of passage, midlife, and death. Biological and psychological differences in gender, particularly at adolescents and midlife, are honored.

The overarching subtle theoretical underpinning of the book is a perennial transpersonal notion of the play of consciousness and unconscious shadow drawn particularly from Jung. In this sense consciousness is related to “body-up adaptation”, and unconsciousness related to “spirit-down remembering.” Indirectly, he points out the development of the unconscious alongside conscious development. The use of anecdotal dreams and fantasies throughout the stages deepens and enlivens this theme. Although I am a lover of Jung’s work, there was too much reliance upon Jung especially in the midlife stage.

Armstrong alludes to how all of our inherent spiritual meaning making capacities that we forget during our adaptation to the demands and adventure of life will keep knocking on our door throughout all stages of development. He does well in pointing out how to recognize that knocking as well as the means and gifts of remembering to open those doors at any stage.

In his broad sweeping strokes, for better or worse, he lacks synthesizing his stages into a comprehensive developmental theory. This is perhaps because he is offering us less a theory of our development and its corrective measures as he is beautifully laying before us our lives for what they are. Although he describes each stage's gift, he proposes no defining dichotomous struggle for each stage similar to Erikson's dichotomies. Readers use to theoretical analysis and detailed explication could be left waiting for an Armstrongian theory to emerge. He often develops his main concepts of "body up" and "spirit down" by largely drawing on other theorists from diverse fields. In this way his voice is sometimes muddled by relying heavily on other theorists. Yet overall, I enjoyed the eclectic combining of various disciplines in part, because it served as the near perfect vehicle to present his holistic view of the healthy individual and society. The book flows much like a familiar novel with an intriguing and sympathetic narrative for our human depths and heights. Armstrong skillfully weaves in non-transpersonal theorists in divergent disciplines throughout the book to support his subtle but persistent transpersonal perspective on the human adventure. To his credit perhaps no other transpersonal writer has been able to present a life span model by utilizing traditionally non-transpersonal theory.

Armstrong does make his theoretical voice heard by assigning inherent gifts to each developmental stage as follows:

- Chapter 1/Stage 1: ('Pre-Birth: The Undiscovered Continent') "Potential."
- Chapter 2/Stage 2: ('Birth: Through the Tunnel') "Hope."
- Chapter 3/stage 3: ('Infancy: Legends of the Fall') "Vitality."
- Chapter 4/stage 4: ('Early Childhood: The Magical Mystery Years') "Playfulness."
- Chapter 5/stage 5: ('Middle Childhood: Entering the Civilized World') "Imagination."
- Chapter 6/Stage 6: ('Late Childhood: Becoming Part of the Crowd') "Ingenuity."
- Chapter 7/stage 7: ('Adolescence: Adventures in the Twilight Zone') "Passion."
- Chapter 8/stage 8: ('Early Adulthood: Building an Independent Life') "Enterprise."
- Chapter 9/stage 9: ('Midlife: Moving Through Muddy Waters') "Contemplation."
- Chapter 10/stage 10: ('Mature Adulthood: Scaling the Peaks') "Benevolence."
- Chapter 11/Stage 11: ('Late Adulthood: Approaching the Horizon') "Wisdom."

Chapter 12/Stage 12: ('Death and dying: Crossing the Bridge') "Life."
Chapter 13: ('Beyond death: Travel to Other Lands') No gift assigned
Conclusion: Planting Your Oar in the Sand

The Author

Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D., has written 13 renowned books largely on the subject of child development, including *The Radiant Child*, and *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*. He has appeared on many national television shows. He is often a conference keynote speaker and lectures throughout America.

The Reviewer

Craig Schlarb, Ph.D. has written on childhood peak experiences. He has been on the faculty of the California State University, East Bay, Social Work Department and is now the director of the Community Center for Health and Wellness of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA. He enjoys a private practice in transpersonal psychotherapy in Menlo Park, CA.