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LE GRICE, KEIRON (2013). *The rebirth of the hero: Mythology as a guide to spiritual transformation*. London, UK: Muswell Hill Press. xvii + 284 pp. ISBN-13: 9781908995056. Paperback, \$18.21. *Reviewed by Jay Dufrechou.*

“If you can live comfortably within the bounds of an old mythic-religious tradition,” writes Keiron Le Grice in the spirit of Joseph Campbell, “then all well and good. But if for you the old religious signs and symbols no longer have the authentic credibility they used to have, you are forced to find your own way through life, to find your own life meanings, your own personal myth” (p. 59).

Drawing upon the work and lives of Campbell, C. G. Jung, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Le Grice offers an intellectual and emotional grounding for the

heroic journey of individuation some of us feel compelled to take. Eminent explorers of the depths of human experience, whose ideas form background for the emergence of transpersonal psychology, Jung, Nietzsche and Campbell appear in *The Rebirth of the Hero* not only through their work, but also through their personal histories. This is part of the sense of reality conveyed in the book – and reality is important because heroes are reborn psychologically in our time not in theory, but courageously through actual, and typically very imperfect, even chaotic, lives.

For those familiar with the work of Campbell, most importantly *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2008) and his other articulations of the cross-cultural heroic monomyth, a psychological understanding of the heroic journey is not new. The understanding of the psyche and individuation process in *The Rebirth of the Hero* is essentially Jungian, also familiar to those in the transpersonal field. But even if many of the concepts are familiar, Le Grice writes in a way that feels as though he is talking personally right now to those of us on “a spiritual path.” Le Grice situates the hero’s rebirth, as a symbolic model of the psychological death-rebirth process, within a wide range of prior wisdom and examples of contemporary culture. This is helpful experientially by broadening one’s sense of personal participation in a human adventure undertaken by many before us.

On the contemporary hero’s call to adventure, Le Grice observes, “Sometimes there is one decisive moment,” but often “the call is ongoing; you are invited to continually respond to your own calling and remain true to your own path” (p. 114). For instance, “when following synchronicities, those uncanny ‘meaningful coincidences,’ as Jung described them...” (p. 114).

If you are able to follow one synchronicity, another will come along in due course, and then another, and another. On each occasion you must choose if you are to follow the promptings of the spirit within the universe – a response that always requires a leap of faith, the willingness to take a step into the unknown. With each step, future possibilities open, drawing you further and further along your own life path. You are invited at each life juncture to put your trust in the transrational life direction suggested by the synchronicity. Goethe said that if you dare to follow your highest destiny, to attempt to do something great, the whole universe will bend to your aid. But to do this requires placing your trust in life, and accepting and embracing your own life journey with all the challenges and suffering it entails. It will ask of you everything that you have got. It will take you past all of your existing limits. It will force you to face everything in your psyche, good and bad, for on the path of spiritual transformation, as we read in the words of Jesus (Matthew 10:26), “there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.” (p. 114)

As illustrated by the above passage, Le Grice draws not only upon Jung, Campbell, and Nietzsche, but also from a wide range of recorded human wisdom, including that mesmerizing source of contemporary mythology – movies. Most of us, like it or not, have images living in our hearts and minds from classic cinematic journeys – such as Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, and

Jason and the Argonauts. Le Grice draws on those images to bring to life many aspects of the psychological heroic journey that we may previously have encountered only conceptually. As many times as I have thought about various elements of the individuation trajectory, experiencing one or two scenes from a movie as interpreted by Le Grice makes a world of difference in embodied understanding – and, frankly, in evocation of the archetypes within me. As a whole, *The Rebirth of the Hero* teaches ways to see and feel mythologically – with mythology understood as stories or artistic creations illuminating the powerful forces of the human psyche, and suggesting possibilities for navigating them. This allows us to realize that myths are living and constantly arising all around us – and offering us support and guidance. Just like myths did for our ancestors.

Part I of *The Rebirth of the Hero* suggests how one might understand human history, both Western and Eastern, as leading to the present moment wherein each of us has the opportunity to undertake our unique heroic journey. Le Grice understands the Western collective journey as producing an ego consciousness separated from body and nature – which for many of us is bad news, yet, as Le Grice explains, allowed an emergence of individuality. Le Grice understands East and West as different but complementary paths that are now coming together. Unlike the West, the East, as articulated by Campbell, has remained closer to an ideal of collective experience or the Ground of Being, with spirituality offering the means to relinquish individuality into the (more collective) flow of what is. Le Grice writes:

The spiritual emphasis of the East is not on the fulfillment or realization of the self, but on liberation from the self and the limitations of egoic existence.

The notion of seeking to gratify one's personal desires by exercising one's own individual will – the ideal of modern life in the West – has been largely alien to Eastern traditions. For it is the essence of the Western attitude to life, emerging particularly out of the Greek ideal of the rational self-determining individual, to place high value on individual choice, and to affirm the validity of the individual's own impulses and desire to live life as he or she sees fit. (p. 31)

Le Grice portrays Nietzsche, one of my personal existential heroes, as embodying – tragically in terms of his personal life – a turning point in Western Civilization, when Nietzsche was the first to realize “God is dead.” Le Grice asks:

What happens when, as a culture, we break out of the traditional Christian world view into a period of history shaped by the dawning realization that “God is dead”? What happens when the primary source of life meaning passes away? The answers and consequences are plainly evident all around us: Secular and political ideologies assume quasi-religious status; materialism, economics, and consumerism are pursued with religious fervor; science, in the service of the state, becomes the new moral authority; higher purpose and aspirations are lost as many people live for exclusively secular values. Meanwhile, others – the creative spiritual minority – are forced to confront

the reality of nihilism. For when the old belief systems and the old collective mythology that gave meaning to experience are taken away, the metaphysical and cosmological frameworks that supported human life are shaken to their foundations and begin to crumble. (p. 58)

For many of us living now, in our particular historical moment, the call begins with – or at least takes place within – a realization of the heartbreakingly painful spiritual wasteland in which we find ourselves. The pain of the realization is worse when you feel no one else knows but you. What does one do?

Le Grice writes, “If, as [Oswald] Spengler believed, we are indeed in the terminal decay and subsequent death phase of modern industrial civilization, what, we might wonder, will come next? Where do we go from here?” (p. 97). The answer involves turning within: looking for salvation through our own despair – and hope – and commencing a personal heroic journey toward spirit that can now be found only through our own psyches. Oddly enough, as Le Grice articulates, this is both necessary and possible because of our separate sense of self. That separate sense of self must be developed (individuation) through conscious experience of all that exists within us, including all that we have introjected from contemporary culture, which to some of us, after we have begun to awaken, may feel like a wasteland.

Ultimately, the wasteland involves personal wounding, and paradoxically that very wounding is the source of salvation. As Le Grice writes:

The wasteland is an important motif in Campbell’s analysis of the contemporary spiritual and mythological situation. The concept originates in the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King who is wounded in the groin by a “spear of destiny” (the so-called Dolorous Stroke), and his kingdom becomes barren – a condition symbolically suggested by the king’s wound. The healing of the king and the renewal of the wasteland can only be effected by the successful fulfillment of the quest for the Holy Grail. (p. 96)

The quest for the Grail, even though individual in our times, is not selfish. Even contemporary heroes seek rebirth not just for themselves, but also for their people (and in our times, we are all one people, one global community). Le Grice writes, “Campbell believed that the creative individual can bring a new flow of life to the wasteland of modernity, to reconnect the culture to the vital springs of life energy that reside in the unconscious. He sees this as the central sociological task of the hero” (p. 97). While the journey may have sociological ramifications, it is necessarily intensely personal.

In Part II of *The Rebirth of the Hero*, we find Le Grice even more personally present as he considers aspects of the heroic journey as actually lived. While ancient heroes fought external battles, we contemporary heroes must go inside, into our own psyches. This requires no less courage, perhaps more. Having undertaken his own particular journey, Le Grice writes from a depth of experience about the actual psychological and sociological perils of finding one’s way to an individuality infused with spirit while living within

contemporary culture. Le Grice's personal voice carries the thread of the Part II narrative, yet supported by an impressive range of references to poetry, sacred texts, film, art, and many other manifestations of culture. It is evident Le Grice has been reading and watching and following his call into finding affirmations and guidance for the journey all around us – and we learn from this example how to watch for and gather modern mythological support for our own response to the call.

As Le Grice explores, if we follow the call, we can expect various obstacles. While ordeals in the outer world challenged ancient heroes, we must face our own psychological reactions as we leave the comforts of home, the assumptions of others and consensus reality in a materialist culture. For instance, what felt like certain knowledge or implicit assumptions about ways of being and knowing may start to fall apart. The old structures of the ego may start to fall apart. For Le Grice, this is moving beyond the threshold and encountering “the opposites.” Remember Jason and the Argonauts sailing through that narrow Aegean Sea passage that had just destroyed another ship, boulders crashing down all around them? That scene has been burned on my consciousness since I was a kid. As an example of how Le Grice uses such memorable film moments:

Breaking down the psychology of this scene: the boat represents the vehicle of life and consciousness, Jason is the hero representing ego-consciousness (or the heroic part of the ego), and the crew members represent other parts of the psyche that Jason is trying to control and direct. The narrow passage leads between the opposites, the rocks representing the crumbling old psychological structures that crash into the water (representing the unconscious). At the same time, the collapsing rocks cause the water to whip up, lashing the Argo, tossing it from side to side, suggesting the turbulence of the desire nature and instincts when the old psychological structure starts to collapse and long-repressed drives, fears, and passions are violently released into consciousness. (p. 152)

Without the structure of a psychologically-useful religious or spiritual system in our culture, in a time when following the heroic call to spirituality requires us to negotiate falling rocks in our psyches and external lives, many of us need to develop the strength and courage to negotiate the passages on our own, at least in early stages. In real life, as Le Grice and many of us know:

Usually, when a person experiences deep psychological transformation of the kind described by Jung or Stanislav Grof or John Weir Perry, he or she just simply does not know what is happening, and there is nothing in the immediate environment that will help. Perhaps this isolation is itself part of the evolutionary strengthening that has to take place. On the heroic journey, you must be able to handle the incredulity and judgment of people close at hand who have no understanding of what is happening or what you are experiencing. You must learn to control your emotions and instincts yourself, develop confidence in your own judgment, trust your deeper sense of what is happening. (p. 154)

The growing trust in self – like the ancient hero’s growing confidence in his external abilities – is inevitably tested. As described by Le Grice, we may encounter the guardians of the “empire of the ego” (remember Darth Vader, and Luke Skywalker’s realization that to beat him, one needs to surrender to guidance from the force) or we may face “the beast within.” For instance, to slay a gorgon-beast like Medusa, who turns us to stone if we look at her directly, one needs a self-reflective shield, which, for Le Grice, “symbolically suggests the role of human self-reflective consciousness, making known the dark power of the unconscious...” (p. 189). The reflective shield can be understood as that primary tool of psycho-spiritual growth: self-observation. Continuing the shield analogy, Le Grice writes, “consciousness has to become detached both from the instincts and from the old structure of the personality [enabling you] to relate to your instincts as an object, outside of yourself, rather than unconsciously identifying with them...” (p. 191).

As the Self/spirit-infused ego passes the ordeals thrown up by our individual psychological structures and social circumstances, we become ready for the more direct encounter with the unconscious, which Le Grice, following Jung and Campbell, characterizes as feminine. Often an anima figure appears at this juncture, but we must discern between what manifests as a regressive pull back into pre-individuated unconscious mergers and the quite different individuated “unconditional acceptance of life as it is, exemplified by the mother’s love for her child .... [where] in the embrace of the Great Mother all the opposites are reconciled, recognized as aspects of a greater unity” (p. 198). We can feel the difficulty of this discernment through Le Grice’s description of a scene from the film *La Dolce Vita*:

As the film unfolds, we see Marcello [Mastroianni], in shock following the tragic suicide of his close friend Steiner, seemingly abandon himself to his lower instincts, spending his time in hedonistic, orgiastic parties in which his behavior becomes almost bestial. At the close of the film, Marcello wearily makes his way with a group of friends from a party to the beach. Here, in the distance, he catches sight of the young waitress Paola, known to him from an earlier scene in the film. Though Paola tries to speak to Marcello, amidst the roar of waves her voice cannot be heard. Her gestures to him, barely comprehensible, meet with a reluctant shrug of the shoulders, as if he were resigned to his fate. Although drawn by Paola, Marcello chooses to remain with the group, the herd, rather than heed the voice of his anima. Symbolically, that is, with the roaring waves of instinct active in his own life, Marcello fails to respond to the cries of his anima – and therein the soul and inner child – that might lead him beyond his life of hedonistic indifference. (pp. 203–204)

In one of my favorite lines of the book, Le Grice observes, “Individuation, as will be plainly evident, is not synonymous with happiness.” This is because following the call can be psychologically, inter-personally and socially treacherous (not to mention economically disastrous) – and also because on return we may feel drawn to expressing what we have learned creatively, a whole new form of challenge, and almost inevitably find ourselves facing many

of the same wasteland problems that caused, at least in part, our need for the journey. Yet now we must respond from a more mature and compassionate place – which typically takes patience, resilience, and a fair amount of energy. While the work sometimes called “chopping wood and carrying water” is not necessarily a picnic (I might personally rather be with Marcello Mastroianni in that life of hedonistic indifference), for the hero reborn, the world is nonetheless blessedly different. Le Grice writes:

To the triumphant spiritual hero, the enchanted world of childhood is known again: pristine, mysterious, familiar, thunderous, alive, wondrous, murmuring, promising, bubbling. An innocence, a simplicity, which once seemed gone and never to return, reveals itself anew, now wedded to learned wisdom, hard-earned self-knowledge, a concentrated consciousness, and resolute will.... For all the unavoidable suffering it entails, individuation brings with it the experience of deep life meaning that can sustain one through even the most arduous trials and tribulations. (pp. 235–236)

One way to assess a book on the archetypal hero’s journey involves what it does for one’s own archetypal passage. Last April, after visiting with Le Grice in Cardiff, Wales, I returned to London, where I started reading, interspersed with tourist activities, the copy of *The Rebirth of the Hero* he kindly gave me. After viewing British artifacts at the Victoria and Albert Museum, I had lunch at an Italian restaurant. Slicing through a Margherita pizza (cheapest thing on the menu), I read Le Grice’s description of Nietzsche’s experience that in the final stages of transformation, “the human spirit assumes the form of a child who represents ‘innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes’” (p. 75, quoting Nietzsche, 1968, p. 55). Le Grice continued with an example:

A process of this kind may be observed in the lives of many great artists, particularly those who became pioneers in their fields. To be proficient in any field of endeavor, it is first necessary to learn the rules and techniques of one’s craft, whatever that might be. To remain at this stage, however, one would simply be a craftsman, skilled perhaps at replicating and implementing established styles or regurgitating knowledge secondhand, but not yet able to bring forth anything original. To be genuinely creative, one must be willing to set aside a rigid adherence to learned techniques and the knowledge one has assimilated to allow the emergence of one’s own unique style of expression. Picasso was a master of his craft at a young age, but obviously Picasso only set himself apart after he developed his own new approaches to forms of representation in painting. To do this, he had to dare to leave behind more traditional styles, of which he was a master. In time, his painting exhibited a quality of childlike freedom of creative expression. He created as if he were a child, living out the spontaneity of his own center, unhindered by what was expected, without concern for what others thought. “It took me four years to paint like Raphael,” Picasso

remarked, “but a lifetime to paint like a child.” (pp. 75–76, citing Penrose, 1981, p. 307)

After lunch, I took the tube to St. Paul’s so I could walk across the Millennium Bridge. I wandered into the Tate Modern but none of the exhibits called to me, so I walked back across the bridge and along the Thames. Eventually, I saw a large building with a vertically hanging banner proclaiming Somerset House, which I vaguely recalled as the name of a museum. Interested, I crossed the Victoria Embankment and entered Somerset House, immediately noticing signs for a temporary exhibit called *Becoming Picasso: Paris 1901*. I made my way into the exhibit in the Courtauld Gallery and was astonished to find myself looking at paintings demonstrating the transition about which I had just read. As explained in the exhibit’s descriptions of the various paintings, and, as I could see for myself as a fan of European art, there was Picasso painting like Velasquez, Picasso painting like Toulouse Lautrec, Picasso painting like various other masters, and then apparently from nowhere emerges the Blue Period, when Picasso started painting like Picasso.

Interestingly, I learned from the exhibit that an encounter with death (sometimes part of the heroic journey) was part of Picasso’s transition. In 1901, his friend Carlos Casagemas shot himself in the head in a Parisian café in front of various friends (not including Picasso, who was in Spain), after taking an errant shot at a woman who did not return his obsessive love. Casagemas appears in several Blue Period paintings, including an arresting death portrait, as well as an El Greco-like ascension to heaven, both part of the exhibit. Understanding what I was witnessing mythologically, as I was learning to do through *The Rebirth of the Hero*, I saw and felt Picasso’s individuation into astounding creativity, contrasted with (although perhaps in some way assisted by) the failed individuation of his friend, who could be understood to have tragically followed the unconscious side of his anima into obsession and suicide.

After the exhibit, I dropped the day’s acquired accouterments (aka souvenirs) at my Covent Garden hotel and found a pub for a pint. I sat near the window, so I could continue reading. I read the part about the Fisher King quoted above regarding the so-called Dolorous Stroke, which was a spear to the King’s groin (referenced as his thigh in some texts, and considered a euphemism for a strike to the genitals). In myth and legend, the quest for the Holy Grail must be undertaken to heal the wound which will not close, symbolically coinciding with barrenness of the kingdom, a wasteland.

As I sat there reading, in dim light from the fading sun in the street, I vividly recalled the strange dream I had the night I spent in Cardiff, after dinner with Le Grice, before I even opened the book. I dreamt that I had a very large wound on my upper left thigh, gaping, like a funnel down through my muscle to the bone. In the dream, I tried but could not close the wound. I knew it was no use finding a doctor: no one could close that wound. I would have to walk on it. When I woke, there was that sensation of enormous relief upon realization “this was only a dream.” I actually felt my upper leg to make sure.

When I started my own journey, in the mid-90s, I read about the Fisher King and the “thigh wound.” But it had not come to mind in years, and was not mentioned in my conversations with Le Grice. When I read this passage in the pub, sitting near the window with my pint, alone, suddenly remembering the dream, I said aloud, “Oh, \*\*\*\*” Yet again, God bless me, I would have to descend into my woundedness, much of which was currently up for consideration given life events. I was also aware that I might have to finish various creative endeavors my woundedness had drawn me into beginning. The light waned beyond reading and I took the plane back to the States the next day, finishing the book over the Atlantic. Then, strangely, upon returning home, I was hired in my law practice to conduct a mediation involving medical coverage for a large thigh wound (after a surgery) that would not heal. My preparation involved looking at a number of graphic photographs. The following week, a new client hired me (an entirely separate matter) to fight for insurance coverage relating to unrelenting “pain in the right groin area.” I would like to hereby publicly assure the Universe that I have gotten the message. No need for more – I will keep going, keep walking on the wound, not just for myself but also for our barren wasteland.

With respect to *The Rebirth of the Hero*, I share these stories because the book, perhaps even before I started reading, managed to activate archetypes within me. This is likely because Le Grice drew from his own encounter with the archetypes in creating this work. As I write this review, it occurs to me that part of the significance of the Picasso synchronicity involves my awareness that Le Grice, through *The Rebirth of the Hero*, is stepping into his own voice. The scaffolding on which he builds – primarily Jung, Campbell, and Nietzsche – provides initial structure for the book, but emerging is Le Grice’s ability to describe the actual perils and ecstasies (and they are entwined like lovers) of individuation – and to provide a measure of guidance. I have read plenty about individuation, much of it encouraging, inspirational and hopeful. I would suggest that we could use more guidance for the trenches of those moments when one wonders whether one is sane, when one cannot sleep and has perhaps drank way too much coffee or alcohol, when one sees disbelief and disavowal in the eyes of one’s friends and lovers after trying to explain, when one is about to quit one’s job without other prospects, or when one is unconsciously off on one of those psychological and/or behavioral side-shows that so many of us in the spiritual movements manifest, perhaps harmlessly, perhaps not, sometimes for the rest of our lives. When reading *The Rebirth of the Hero*, one becomes convinced that Le Grice has some experience in these territories and that he, unlike many of us, has the capacity to discern and explain. Awareness that he knows is the main reason that I trust the voice in the book.

I find *The Rebirth of the Hero* an excellent read for those of us who have been “on a path” for many years. Wisdom that was previously primarily conceptual comes alive through Le Grice’s experientially relevant explanations of the teachings of many masters – and through the mythology of film and culture. The book may also be particularly instructive for people only recently hearing “a call.” I showed my copy of *The Rebirth of the Hero* to a man who recently joined the dream group in which I have participated for several years. After

reading the back of the book, and leafing through it, he put it under his dream journal on the lamp table next to him, already taking possession. I had to tell him I still needed it to write this review. He looked at me blankly for a few moments before it sunk in that he had to give it back.

The next morning I ordered a few copies for sharing with those brave souls I happen to meet who seem willing to enter the depths. Interestingly enough, just last week, the dream shared by my new dream group friend suggested his awareness of a need for separation from some army-camouflage types who had been marshalling him along (led by Brad Pitt – and the man is from Pittsburgh). In the copy of the book I give him, I will highlight the following words written by my friend Keiron Le Grice: “To attain the Grail, that is, you must become who you are, realize your unique potentiality, become a type until yourself. For no one else exactly like you has ever lived before, and no one exactly like you will ever live in the future” (p. 47). Being willing to accept the challenge of becoming this person, a terrifying idea indeed, is how the post-modern hero is reborn.

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