Secrets of Men and Meaning


Reviewed by David H. Rosen

These two books by James Hollis are well written and bring together clinical, social-cultural, scholarly, and personal points of view. Hollis describes the book on the wounding and healing of men as “a sort of confession,” because he too has “suffered from living under the shadow of Saturn. . . .” (Under Saturn’s Shadow: The Wounding and Healing of Men. Toronto, Inner City Books, 1994, p. 8) To justify autobiographical material he quotes the painter Tony Berlant: “The more personal and introspective a work of art is, the more universal it becomes.” Hollis’s books have an intimate folksy tone and an archetypal as well as ecumenical appeal.

Hollis opens Under Saturn’s Shadow with a reflection on how the gender of his patients has changed from mostly women in the 1980s to mostly men in the 1990s. I, too, have seen this same shift in my clientele. Hollis realizes that men are seeking help to heal. Perhaps this is, in part, fall-out from the women’s liberation movement and the subsequent men’s movement. At any rate, it is a real change and one deserving of an in-depth analysis.

In the Introduction, Hollis feels “obliged to tell male secrets,” and he comes up with the following eight that he believes most men carry within (often silently and unknowingly):

(1) Men’s lives are as much governed by restrictive role expectations as are the lives of women.
(2) Men's lives are essentially governed by fear.

(3) The power of the feminine is immense in the psychic economy of men.

(4) Men collude in a conspiracy of silence whose aim is to suppress their emotional truth.

(5) Because men must leave the mother, and transcend the personal mother complex, wounding is necessary.

(6) Men's lives are violent because their souls have been violated.

(7) Every man carries a deep longing for his personal father as well as for the tribal fathers.

(8) If men are to heal, they must activate within what they did not receive from without.

In the rest of the book, Hollis explores these "secrets" by taking us on a labyrinthine tour of male mysteries. In chapter 1, "The Saturnian Legacy," he reviews the construction of maleness through the growing boy's internalization of family 'tapes' (particularly related to one's own father), through learning social roles (personae), and through identifying with cultural expectations. Hollis argues for a return of meaningful rites of passage in masculine development, and he outlines the following six perennial initiatory themes: (1) separation; (2) death; (3) rebirth; (4) teachings; (5) ordeal; and (6) return. In the past, ritualized rites of passage have helped men deal effectively with shadow issues, especially fear and power. Hollis rightly speculates that not having such rituals in place leads to unnatural rage, violence, isolation, depression, and suicide. Underscoring the last and most malignant outcome is the fact that we have two current and tragic epidemics of suicide in our country, youth and elderly, and both are predominantly male.

Chapter 2, "Dragon Dread," concerns the inner and outer woman that a man encounters in life. Hollis focuses on the development of the anima or the feminine aspect of a man's psyche. The first and critical step in masculine development is to separate from one's mother (and the internal negative mother complex). Then only might it become possible to have a lover, partner, and soul mate (ideally all in one). The essential ingredient is loving oneself (in the form of one's
inner woman) and experiencing an inner marriage of one’s masculine and feminine aspects, which helps to ensure a successful outer marriage.

In the third chapter, Hollis examines “the necessary wounding” that results from leaving the mother (and negative mother complex). Young men can’t go home again; they must join the realm of the fathers. Hollis gives the example of football as a helpful initiatory rite of passage. However, when men ultimately retire from football-like vocations they may often suffer from depression and self-destructive behavior.

The next skeleton in the closet that Hollis has us face is the reality that men’s lives are violent because their souls have been violated. Hollis gives the example from the Grail stories, of the wounded Amfortas who must find the Grail (soul equivalent) in order to heal. Modern man, even though successful materially and in an ego sense, has likewise lost contact with his soul, and to heal and reconnect with soul, he must find the anima.

In chapter 4, “Father Hunger,” Hollis encourages men to seek the non-personal fathers (father surrogates or mentors), because their father-son relationships were so damaged.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, “Healing the Souls of Men,” focuses on activating within oneself what was not received from without. Hollis posits that the initial step toward healing is the most difficult. He maintains that men must stop lying to themselves and to each other; they must allow their negative shadows to become conscious. They must look at themselves in the mirror and accept that from the perspective of wholeness their lives are all wrong and realize that from this point in time it is their responsibility to change. Let me now summarize my understanding of Hollis’s other steps to male healing:

(1) Men must acknowledge that much of their lives is driven by fear.

(2) Men must contact their own souls.

(3) Men must no longer be silent, and they must reveal their pain.

(4) Men must be wounded to undertake the heroic task of leaving their mothers and becoming masters of their own destinies.
(5) Men need to confess their own anger and rage and then use this immense energy to save their souls.

(6) Men must grieve the loss of their fathers.

(7) Men must admit that they are suffering from "soul attacks" and then embark on life-long journeys to heal their souls.

Hollis realizes (as I also do in my book, *Transforming Depression: Healing the Soul Through Creativity*. New York, Penguin, 1996) that the key is to transform anger, guilt, depression, and despair into creative products through active imagination and thereby heal the soul through creativity.

Hollis ends *Under Saturn's Shadow* with a discussion of seven actions which support men's healing:

(1) Remember the loss of the fathers.

(2) Tell the secrets.

(3) Seek mentors and mentor others.

(4) Risk loving men.

(5) Heal thyself.

(6) Recover your soul's journey.

(7) Join the revolution.

"Healing thyself" is the beacon in the darkness, really the centerpiece of Hollis's approach, for as Martin Buber once said, "There is meaning in what for long was meaningless. Everything depends on the inner change; when this has taken place, and only then, does the world change." (*Good and Evil*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 5)

*Swamplands of the Soul*, the second book of Hollis's that I am reviewing, is about "the search for meaning," which is the title of Hollis's Introduction. (*Swamplands of the Soul: New Life in Dismal Places*. Toronto, Inner City Books, 1996)

In my own thinking, I have linked Jung and his psychology to Frankl and his psychology of meaning. (V.F. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*, 3rd edition. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1984) Hence, I was pleased to see that Hollis has also created a bridge between Jung's psychology and existentialism. I concur with Hollis's somewhat un-American view that the goal of life is not happiness, but finding meaning in suffering. In addition, this sentiment gives this book a slight
Buddhist flavor. Probably Jung’s attraction to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism as well as to Taoism (D.H. Rosen. *The Tao of Jung: The Way of Integrity*. New York, Penguin, 1997) relates to his view, quoted by Hollis, that neurosis is “the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning.” (p. 9)

At the outset, I want to mention a concern I had about Hollis’s subtitle. He links swamplands to dismal places. Many of us might do the same, yet, in my discussion of the book with a friend and colleague from Louisiana, this person pointed out that swamps have a unique natural beauty and are unperturbed and peaceful places, which is just the opposite of dismal, depressing, and gloomy.

In chapter 1, “The Ubiquity of Guilt,” Hollis dives right into existential self-reproach. He raises our consciousness about guilt as a defense. Going through this defense and owning one’s shadow is the key. This then allows for self-forgiveness and grace. Forgiveness, which Hollis connects to the divine, is the hardest objective to realize.

Chapter 2, “Grief, Loss and Betrayal,” is about letting go of the false self (the old self which is on a false journey) and actualizing the true self (realizing one’s authentic self and living one’s personal myth, which leads to meaning). Hollis cites a powerful Elvis dream (pp. 40-41) that facilitates this process of healing the soul and finding meaning in a grief-stricken depressed patient. Existentially Hollis is right when he writes, “Our life begins with loss.” (p. 41) Our birth represents the number one loss—the bliss of mother’s womb. This was Otto Rank’s view as well, in his 1929 classic, *The Trauma of Birth*. (New York, Harcourt Brace)

Hollis zeroes in on grief, a word which is from the Latin *gravis* and means ‘to bear.’ His view of loss and grief as natural makes for an excellent, albeit brief, discussion. For someone who wants to delve deeper, I recommend the superb small volume, *A Time to Mourn*, by Verena Kast. (D. Dachler & F. Cairns, trans. Einsiedeln, Switzerland, Daimon Verlag, 1988)

Next Hollis tackles betrayal, which he claims is the most difficult thing to forgive. He correctly maintains, however, that forgiveness is the only path to freedom from this pain. I love the way Hollis expresses his existential view: “Betrayal stings us toward individuation.” (p. 50) For those readers who would like an in-depth focus on understanding how helpful
forgiveness is in the healing process, I recommend Michael Luebbert’s excellent chapter on “The survival value of forgiveness” in a new book which we co-edited. (D.H. Rosen and M.C. Luebbert, eds., *Evolution of the Psyche*, Westport, CT, Praeger, 1999.)

In chapter 3, “Doubt and Loneliness,” Hollis creatively spotlights three positive characteristics of doubt: (1) “fuel for change, and therefore growth,” (2) “essential for democracy,” and (3) “a form of radical faith.” (pp. 55–56) In sum, he calls doubt “the agency of change and renewal.” (p. 58)

Then Hollis puts loneliness center stage. He quotes Thomas Wolfe’s existential view of loneliness as “the central and inevitable fact of human existence.” (p. 59) Hollis rightly differentiates being alone from being lonely when he states, “It is precisely our aloneness that permits our uniqueness to unfold.” (p. 60) This quote made me think of Anthony Storr’s outstanding book on solitude. (*Solitude: A Return to Self*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1989)

In chapter 4, “Depression, Desuetude, and Despair,” Hollis examines what he calls the dreaded triplets. (Since I had to look it up, I’ll define *desuetude*. It means “dispirited, lacking in energy, being joyless, and adrift in anomie.”) First, he challenges everyone (and we all get depressed) “to ask the fundamental question, what is the meaning of my depression?” (p. 71) Hollis stresses the Jungian point of view that there is therapeutic value in depression. He encourages each of us to make the descent into melancholia and “find our soul’s greatest treasure.” (p. 73) For those readers wanting to immerse themselves in this life-changing experience, I refer them again to my book, *Transforming Depression: Healing the Soul through Creativity*.

Hollis then addresses depression’s twin: despair. Despair is to be without hope. However, as Hollis stresses, our task is to continue to struggle as did Sisyphus when we see no purpose or meaning in our suffering. The maxim that Hollis invokes to hold on to hope is the same one Frankl kept in his soul while in Auschwitz: have hope in a hopeless situation.

Chapter 5 deals with “Obsessions and Addictions.” Our labor here is to find meaning in our unbidden ideas. We must find out through analyzing our dreams and active imagination what our symptoms are attempting to reveal to us. If we don’t
discover the meaning, then we stay in the fiery hell of our obsessions, and we struggle in vain to put out the fire through some compulsive addiction, whether to alcohol, illicit or prescription drugs, or self-harming behavior such as self-cutting or unsafe sex.

In chapter 6, on “Anger,” Hollis delineates three types of anger: (1) attacked or abused (“too-much-ness”), (2) neglected (“not-enough-ness”), and (3) self-directed (rage turned on the self resulting in self-hatred). He emphasizes that we need to face and understand our rage. Hollis wisely states, “Anger is a legitimate reaction of the soul to its wounding. . . . When transformed by consciousness, anger becomes vital energy which is available for healing.” (p. 99)

Chapter 7, “Fear and Anxiety,” differentiates these two emotions from each other and from angst. Hollis then discusses how anxiety can manifest through adjustment or personality disorders. He contrasts normal anxiety with crippling neurotic anxiety, but seems to favor anxiety when he says, “Anxiety is the price of a ticket on the journey of life.” (p. 115) He states further, “We are daily forced to choose between depression and anxiety. Depression results from the wounding of the individuation imperative; anxiety results from moving forward into the unknown.” (p. 115) This seems to me to be an unnecessary dichotomy of either/or when actually it’s a both/and situation. Depression is evolutionarily adaptive; Jung described it as “the empty stillness which precedes creative work.” (C.G. Jung. “The Practice of Psychotherapy,” Collected Works, Vol. 7. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 181)

Chapters 8 & 9, “A Simple Complex Interlude” & “Going Through,” concern finding meaning by working through and understanding difficulties, neurotic conflicts, or complexes. We must endure all of life’s sufferings and proceed with the arduous journey in order to find meaning and realize our personal myth.

Hollis closes his book with an “Afterword: The Blur and Blot of Life.” He asks “What is to be gained by these unwelcome descents into Hades?” (p. 141) Hollis discerns three ideas or principles:

(1) Due to the natural ebb and flow of psychic energy
we will inevitably and frequently be pulled down, against
our will, into dark places . . . into the swamplands, and we will suffer there.

(2) In each of these swampland states there is an implicit challenge to discover its meaning and the change of behavior or attitude it may oblige.

Our characteristic response patterns to swampland stress is reflexive in character, tied to past experience; we are obliged to re-imagine ourselves in order to live in the present. (pp. 141-142)

I like these three tenets. They reveal a window to wisdom. Yet, I resist Hollis’s final request that we let go of what he calls “two impossible fantasies”: immortality and the Magical Other. I would suggest that Hollis reconsider and let go of his ego claim of no immortality or Magical Other. In the Talmud it says that immortality is assured by three things: having a child, planting a tree, and writing a book. Hollis and many of us are thereby assured Talmudic immortality! Furthermore, the Magical Other, which Hollis links to Hope, seems to be a necessary Absolute. It is what kept Frankl alive in Auschwitz. It also seems to ground Hollis’s statement that “the psyche is inherently religious.” (p. 145) Could it not be that Hollis’s philosophy of finding meaning through suffering is itself actually the Magical Other—itself a visionary Meaning?

To conclude, I wholeheartedly recommend these two books by James Hollis. Clearly he is a person who is resolving Erikson’s final two stages of human development (adolescence and old age) in an exemplary way. The inherent struggles of Erikson’s last two stages involve psychosocial issues (generativity and integrity vs. stagnation and despair) and virtues (care and wisdom vs. rejectivity and disdain) (E.H. Erikson. The Life Cycle Completed: A Review. New York, W.W. Norton, 1982, pp. 32-33), which parallel the swamplands of the soul and the light and darkness that inhabit these places. In the final stage of life, Erikson links hope with integrity and wisdom. (Erikson, p. 64) I’d suggest, and I imagine that Hollis would concur, that we add meaning to make this a quaternity representing wholeness. The next step I would add is to connect these four characteristics of personal being with those of the Supreme Being: Hope, Integrity, Wisdom, and Meaning.