

The Acorn Theory

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Each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived.

The Acorn Theory was first postulated in the modern era, at least in the public domain by James Hillman, author and psychologist, in his bestselling book; *The Soul's Code*. It is Hillman's view that one of life's greatest mysteries is the question of character and one's destiny. In this theory he proposes that our calling is inborn and that it's our mission in life to realize its imperatives. He has called it the "acorn theory," the idea that our lives are formed by a particular image, just as the oak's destiny is contained in the tiny acorn.

The central theme behind Hillman's acorn theory is that some remarkable people including renowned artists and world leaders as well as even some serial killers are born and not made. This of course flies in the face of what we call conventional psychology which believes that early childhood conditioning or socialization is the greatest determinant of what a person will make of themselves later in life.

Hillman asserts and I quote; "neither nature nor nurture" (neither genetics nor environment) that dictates the outcome of a life. Rather, it is an innate quality possessed by each person, the spark of individuality that, like a master code for a person's life, determines the direction in which he will pursue his destiny."

Where it really gets complicated is when he discusses an over-arching intelligence that provides a road map for a person's life. In many religions this is referred to as guardian angels, spirit or soul. In other words the adult's true fate is already known to the child, and it is this knowledge that guides the child despite all the obstacles imposed by parental and societal norms, in the inevitable direction of its fate. In his book he refers to this as the "soul's code," hence the title.

So then the acorn theory broken down into its simplest terms proposes that each life is animated by a particular image that calls it to its destiny, yes, finally there is that word. Plant an acorn in a field of sunflowers and you get an oak tree, not a

sunflower stalk. No matter what mom or dad do in the way of encouragement or discouragement, it makes no difference, the little "child-soul" knows where it is going and will find its way there in time. Their guardian angle will guide them!

Now what Hillman also says is that it is more of a myth than a theory. He attributes this myth to Plato; "that you come into the world with a destiny, although he uses the word paradigm, instead of destiny."

So understand that he is not throwing out the baby with the bath water as it were but he is saying and over his many years has said it quite strongly, that sometimes you run into an individual who cannot be explained in terms of nature or nurture. There is of course a place for conventional psychology but it should entertain the possibility of the acorn theory when it confronts a puzzling individual and not try to search endlessly employing the status quo of conventional psychology.

Now me on the other hand, well I do not have the brain power to argue the merits of his argument against conventional psychology anywhere near his level but being the romantic that I am and steeped in Christian faith, love to entertain the notion and idea of it. But in saying that, my life experience and belief that "life is difficult," suggests something very different, something far more earthbound than the idea of destiny or some sort of pre-ordained outcome to ones life.

When I first came across the acorn theory many years ago, quite frankly I initially thought that it had been penned by some self-help guru in a book he/she had written and than took out on the road to sell on a speaking tour. You have to admit when reading it, especially for the first time, it does make you think! I know it did that for me. My initial thought(s) were that it meant that we all have uniqueness and a contribution to make and the power within to move out and realize our dreams. But pre-destined never entered the picture for me. Rather, if we were taught to believe in ourselves and to understand the value of hard work, we could find our way to our life purpose, to fulfillment and the realization of our dreams. At the time I never realized it meant something very different for James Hillman and the world of psychology. The thing is I still believe what I had originally thought but having now come to understand a little bit better that this theory (myth) actually came through a pretty reputable guy by the name of Plato to James Hillman, makes me want to approach it with considerably more respect for what it can teach.

I am sure that anyone who has ever had at least a passing interest in psychology has heard about the concept of nature (genetics) and nurture (conditioning or socialization) in reference to first family experiences and the role that those experiences play in our formation leading to adulthood. In particular the influence that mom and dad have on our emotional, spiritual and for that matter intellectual and physical well-being growing up. During those formative years we develop our personality style or way of communicating, we develop our core values, our needs, and our interests grow out of the relationship and influence of family and school.

All of that early life experience inside the family translates, for better or for worse into the adult.

The idea that no matter what my first family experiences are, or what I try to do or control will turn out to be of little or no relevance is abhorrent to me. I am going to become something that was pre-determined by some force beyond my conscious awareness is just a bit too much to comprehend or for that matter believe. "What will be will be!" If that were the case than most of us would probably be "slugs." After all what would be the point of working hard toward a goal, getting out there and accomplishing something, anything?

Either inborn to us (nature) or socialized into us (nurture), take your pick, is a set or hierarchy of needs described by Abraham Maslow another psychologist. How then would we have our ego-status needs met, where would we get our sense of belonging, of being a part of something from, our sense of worth? How would I derive meaning in my life, where would the validation and affirmation come from if it was all just going to happen, be handed to me without any effort on my part?

Healthy, reasonably well-adjusted, neurotic individuals are naturally drawn or have developed a need to achieve something meaningful for themselves even sometimes without really being aware of what is driving them (need tension).

I remember once saying to my parents when quite young that I wanted to be a doctor not saying I was meant to be a doctor. Needless to say that did not work out. In fact after that there were a number of false starts and stops. Finding my way to my life purpose at the age of 59 (man for others), came about because of life

experiences that I had little or no control over and experiences that I strategically had control over. I asked myself the question a lot!

In the end it took a near-death experience lasting better than four years to finally get me there.

Am I to believe the acorn theory applied to me, that almost dying from failing lungs over the course of two years and at the 11th hour receiving a lung transplant was part of my destiny, part of the master plan for my life? That's a stretch even for a somewhat liberal thinker like me.

And let's not lose sight of how important CONTROL is in everyone's life. When left with little control we become terribly stressed and dysfunctional. Some are even prepared to fight to the death for control, particularly control of their lives. I believe we call that freedom which all of a sudden raises the whole spectrum of free will.

The acorn theory flies in the face of free will, something that Christianity teaches us we have. How could anyone believe in destiny and free will at the same time? They are not congruent if you believe that no matter what is going on out there and how it affects your life you are still being pulled or drawn to your destiny.

However, the dilemma and what makes it all so fascinating for James Hillman and others, me included, are the exceptions, those individuals who grow up in an unhealthy environment to become solid citizens, leaders, famous and accomplished people, and how about those who become serial killers in spite of what seems a normal, healthy upbringing? Could these individuals really have something else going on in their lives? Clearly it's a mystery but what an intriguing notion!

So for all the parents in the audience and those soon to be parents or who eventually plan to be parents, besides the fascination of the question, if you come down on the side of nature-nurture, as most do, there is a pretty powerful message here don't you think.

As you work to find your way to your life purpose and reflect back upon the impact that your first family had upon your journey, and your struggles past and present, think about what will happen to your children under your care during their formative

years? Will they get the quality time and attention they need from you to grow up healthy and balanced emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and physically? The demands of our world, makes it very difficult to differentiate between what our children need versus want and then be able to give it to them.

Hillman is credited with the following:

"I think we're miserable partly because we have only one god, and that's economics. Economics is a slave-driver. No one has free time; no one has any leisure. The whole culture is under terrible pressure and fraught with worry. It's hard to get out of that box. That's the dominant situation all over the world." James Hillman

My god is that living? I cannot believe the power in the truth of his statement for all of us. Are we letting economics rule our lives, so much so that we are compromising our mental and physical health and in turn our children's?

In reference to children, James Hillman's message can be summed up in the saying; "we worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today." Stacia Tauscher

And please, please never forget; "children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.

John W. Whitehead: *The Stealing of America*, 1983

Coach Ladd

P.S. Make sure you get all those acorns raked up before the snow flies, otherwise destiny will be coming up all over your lawn next spring.