

AS FAR AS LONGING CAN REACH

Peter and Maria Kingsley

WHAT IS THIS LONGING THAT DRIVES MEN AND WOMEN CRAZY,

deprives them of sleep, of rest and peace—this longing that keeps surfacing throughout history in the literature of people as far apart as ancient Greece, Anatolia, Iran, and remote places hardly any of us even know? Echoes reach our ears of those who have been laughed at, persecuted, even killed because they dared to live their longing in public; but we often choose to make ourselves deaf. It can be so much easier, so much more convenient, to pretend they never existed; that their longing can never be ours; that their timeless teachings are too old and out of fashion for us now.

And yet, like a heartache that stubbornly persists in spite of all our best efforts to ignore it, this longing follows us too. It drives us from one place to another, from one desire to a different one and then another one, as we go on searching to fulfill ourselves and finally silence the inner voice that never seems satisfied with anything. But whatever we do, and however hard each of us tries, we still sense that something is missing.

Already two and a half thousand years ago a Greek man from southern Italy called Parmenides spoke about this longing in a poem he left behind about the journey he

made deep into the underworld to meet the queen of the dead, Persephone, and be taught by her the secrets of reality. The beginning of his poem starts like this:

The mares that carry me as far as
longing can reach
rode on, once they had come and
fetched me
onto the legendary road
of the divinity
that carries the man who
knows
through the vast and
dark unknown...¹

And the clue to the whole poem lies already in the first line. The one crucial factor in this strange affair that for Parmenides influences everything—that determines just how far on this journey toward reality he can actually go—is longing. The Greek word he uses is *thumos*, and *thumos* means the energy of life itself. It's the raw presence in us that senses and feels, the massed power of our emotional being. Above all it's the energy of passion, appetite, yearning, longing.

Since the time of Parmenides we have learned so well to hedge our *thumos* in, to dominate our longing, punish and control it. But for Parmenides himself the longing is what comes first, right at the beginning. And there is a profound significance in this, because what he is saying is

that—left to itself—longing makes it possible for us to go all the way to where we really need to go.

There is no reasoning with passion and longing, although we like to deceive ourselves by believing there is. All we ever do is reason with ourselves about the form our longing will take. We reason



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that if we find a better job we will be content, but we never are. We reason that if we go somewhere special we will be happy; but when we get there we start wanting to go somewhere else. We reason that if we were to sleep with the lover of our dreams we would be fulfilled. And yet even if we were to manage



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that, it would still not be enough.

What we sometimes refer to, so misleadingly, as "human nature" is simply the state of being pulled by the nose in a hundred different directions and ending up going nowhere very fast.

But although there is no reasoning with our passion, it has a tremendous intelligence of its own. The only trouble is that we keep interfering; keep breaking it up into tiny pieces, scattering it everywhere. Our minds always trick us into focusing on the little things we think

we want—rather than on the energy of wanting itself.

If we can bear to face our longing instead of finding endless ways to keep satisfying it and trying to escape it, it begins to show us a glimpse of what lies behind the scenes of this world we think we live in. It opens up a devastating perspective where everything is turned on its head: where fulfillment becomes a limitation, accomplishment turns into a trap. And it does this with an intensity that scrambles our thoughts and forces us straight into the present.

Longing is the movement and the calling of our deepest nature. It's the cry of the wolf, the power of the lion, the fluttering of all the birds inside us. And if we can find the courage to face it, it will take us back to where we belong. But just like animals, this longing is dangerous as well as beautiful. Longing is the powerhouse of our being, and on this path of return it breaks everything except what is unbreakable. It shatters all the man-made structures that we try to build up around it and place in its way. It washes away the future and past and leaves us with nothing but eternity. For longing is the creator of time, and time can never contain it.

Time is the sequence of respectable faces and forms that we give to our longing, from moment to moment and day to day. But as soon as we turn away from all these distractions toward the energy of our longing itself, something extraordinary happens. We discover that what we really want is what has been wanting us since before the beginning of time. Longing longs for us. It wants us to wake up, to become conscious. It is divine intelligence longing to become known. All along we thought it was *our* longing: assumed that we could do whatever we wanted with it, even run away

from it if we chose. But how can we run away from our own inner nature, our own divine heritage? We were born to know this mystery which, as Gnostics used to say, "has no name but all names refer to it" or which Sufis describe as the nameless mystery that "appears by whatever name you choose to call it." And just like Parmenides, who made the heroic journey into the depths of darkness to find what he called "the unshaken heart of persuasive Truth," we too can start out on the journey back to reality—guided by the call of our longing.

This journey, "as far as longing can reach," is a journey to end all journeys: way beyond any ordinary human experience. It demands tremendous courage. It changes every cell in our body. Mythologically, it's the journey of the hero. And yet to understand what's involved we have to forget all our concepts of what it means to be a hero. We usually think of a hero as a warrior, a fighter. And yet what will get us where we want to go isn't willpower; it isn't struggle or effort. It isn't even a matter of having to do anything ourselves. It's just a question of knowing how to turn and face our own longing without interfering with it or doing anything at all. And that goes against the grain of everything we're used to, because we have been taught in so many ways to escape from ourselves—find a thousand good reasons for avoiding our longing.

Sometimes it appears as depression, calling us away from everything we think we want, pulling us into the darkness of ourselves. The voice is so familiar that we run from it in every way we can; the more powerful the call the further we run. It has the power to make us mad, and yet it's so innocent: the voice of ourselves calling to ourselves. The strange

thing is that the negativity isn't in the depression but in running from the depression. And what we imagine we are afraid of isn't what we are really afraid of at all.

It can be so terrifying to face our longing because it makes no allowances for what we think, or what we care for. Like

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a sharp sword it cuts through all our cares and ambitions and leaves us naked. It wants the whole of us, and we know that in the end this longing is a fire which will consume every part of us. But what in all honesty is the alternative? How long will we go on looking for truth everywhere outside ourselves? How many books do we have to read, how many people do we have to ask?

Always we want to learn from outside, from absorbing other people's knowledge. It's safer that way. The trouble is that it's always other people's knowledge. We already have everything we need to know, deep in the darkness inside ourselves. And our longing, if we dare to follow it all the way, is what turns us inside out until we find the sun and the moon and stars inside.¶

¶ For more of Parmenides's poetry, and the background to his teachings, see Peter Kingsley's books *REALITY* and *IN THE DARK PLACES OF WISDOM*.