

A photograph of a forest with a path made of logs. The path is composed of several large, weathered logs laid out in a winding pattern on the forest floor. The trees are tall and thin, with dense foliage in the background. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment.

THE SERPENTINE PATH

BY JOHN GRANROSE

THE SERPENTINE PATH

By John Granrose

Back in 1979, when my three children were young, we went as a family to see the film "The In-Laws," with Peter Falk and Alan Arkin. At one point in the film the two main characters are being pursued by some of their "enemies," who are shooting wildly. One of the actors keeps yelling "Serpentine! Serpentine!" and so they run in a zig-zag pattern across the open courtyard, amid a hail of bullets. For some reason, this struck all of us at the time as hysterically funny. (Perhaps, as they say, "you had to have been there." ?) I can still recall my children running crazily around our backyard after seeing the movie, shouting, "Serpentine! Serpentine!" to each other. It is one of those special memories of "family" that all of us treasure.

Years later I visited the Jung Institute in Switzerland for the first time. The possibility of my training to become a Jungian analyst had recently occurred to me and I wanted to look around and ask some questions. While there I discovered that one of the senior training analysts of the Institute was Dr. Hilde Binswanger, the daughter of Ludwig Binswanger, a philosopher and psychologist whose writings I had long admired. Because of my interest in philosophy, I arranged a meeting with her. We talked about many things and at one point, as I mentioned my interest in perhaps studying in Zürich, she asked why I hesitated. My answer was that I was so "settled" in my profession back in Georgia. After all, I was a tenured full professor in a good university where I enjoyed my work with students and considered myself appreciated. What more could one want? At the same time, however, I was increasingly aware of various kinds of dissatisfaction in my life: in my marriage, for example, and also with the "narrowness" of traditional academic philosophy. Still, in many ways I had accomplished most of what I had set out to do in my life and had in a sense "arrived."

Then what was wrong? Sometimes I would wake at 4 a.m. and ask myself, "Is this all there is?"

Hilde Binswanger helped me explore some of these feelings, including the typical feeling of not being "good enough" for something one values highly. But when I mentioned my concern that I might be considered foolish for giving up a stable and successful career at the University to return to being a student again, she simply said, "Jung used to say, 'Follow your Schlange.'" That is, "Follow your snake, follow your serpent."

It is, of course, clear that snakes follow a snakelike path, a serpentine path. First this way, then that. A zig-zag pattern, not a linear one. My life up to that point had been mostly "straight ahead." For the most part, I set my goals and worked directly to reach them. And this procedure had more or less worked for me for over 40 years.

Following my encounter with Hilde Binswanger I returned to the States, and entered Jungian analysis for the first time. At that point, in 1984, there were no Jungian analysts in Georgia so I arranged to work with Gene Qualls in Birmingham, Alabama. But the whole time I was asking myself, "What would it mean for me to 'follow my Schlange?'"

I began to pay more attention to my instincts and to my fantasies. I was no longer so quick to dismiss impulses as "foolish" or "silly." It is not that I suddenly started doing dangerous or totally irrational things (like driving drunk or insulting my friends). But I started, perhaps for the first time, paying attention to my inner life. Who was I, really? What did I want? What was my true path in life? (Perhaps some of you reading this have asked yourselves these same questions.)

I realized that I had for some time felt that I might have a "calling" as a psychotherapist of some

sort. During my teaching career in philosophy, for example, students frequently came to me with personal and psychological problems. While I was willing to sit with them and talk, and although they typically reported that our talks helped, I always felt that I didn't really know what I was doing, that I wasn't trained to do this kind of work. So I began to consider whether I should decide to seek such training (even if a career change at this point in my life might look stupid to the rest of the world).

As a first, exploratory step in this direction I decided to attend the so-called "Intensive Study Program" at the Zürich Jung Institute in the summer of 1985. The ISP is a two-week program of lectures and seminars, in English, aimed at persons who for one reason or another cannot manage to spend an entire semester studying in Zürich, but who nevertheless want to experience the Jung Institute. Not surprisingly, I found that I liked it. The feeling I had was that I was "in my element", perhaps for the first time. "Why didn't I do this sooner?" I asked myself. Being something of a slow learner, however, I didn't make any sudden decision about training in Zürich. Instead, I decided to continue teaching philosophy in Georgia, but to return to the Jung Institute the next summer for an additional ISP. I enjoyed the second one even more than the first. Predictably, however, I still was not quite ready to commit myself to a major career change.

Because the University of Georgia was on a quarter system in those days, I was able in 1987 to arrange to teach all my courses in the fall and winter quarters and to have the spring and summer free. Taking advantage of this "lucky coincidence," I enrolled in the Zürich Jung Institute for the Summer Semester (April to July) as a Matriculated Auditor. Again, I found that I really enjoyed it, and benefited from it. For one thing, I began my long-term analysis with Dr. Mario Jacoby. And I came to know many of my fellow students and formed lasting friendships. Predictably, perhaps, I felt the urge to return for further study. So I applied and was accepted as a Training Candidate and arranged my university schedule to be able to study in Zürich each Summer Semester for several years. Finally, in 1993, I was eligible for early retirement from the University of Georgia and I became an emeritus professor, and a full-time student at the Jung Institute.

I lived and studied in Zürich from 1993 until I received my Diploma from the Institute in 1996. These were some of the most significant and enjoyable years of my life. The whole time, however, I kept asking myself where my Schlange might be leading me. And I kept my eyes and ears open for some place where Jung had written those words, "Follow your Schlange." No luck. Not only did I not find them in print, no one but Hilde Binswanger recalled having ever heard Jung say this. I remember thinking, "Well, if he didn't say it, he should have!"

As I neared the end of my studies I began writing my thesis. Having been an amateur magician nearly all my life, I had chosen "The Archetype of the Magician" as my subject. I searched the library and Jung's Collected Works for references to "magician," "magic," and related topics. The process of researching and writing was fascinating, and I found far more on the subject than I had expected.

Finally, when I had completed what I thought of as the final draft of the thesis, I happened to notice a reference in the General Index to Jung's Collected Works that I had somehow not paid attention to before. Under "wand, magic" I found the following: "see also caduceus", that is, the magic wand of Hermes, Asclepius and others. And in looking this up I found the following passage, again a "lucky find", and one which I interpreted as the answer to my search for Jung's reference to one's Schlange:

...the right way to wholeness is made up, unfortunately, of fateful detours and wrong turnings. It is a longissima via, not straight but snakelike, a path that unites the opposites in the manner of the guiding caduceus, a path whose labyrinthine twists and turns are not lacking in terrors." [Psychology and Alchemy, CW 12, para. 6]

"Nor lacking in rewards" would be my only addition.

The path of individuation is a serpentine path. One who only looks straight ahead and limits himself or herself to the conventional and expected ways misses out.

These stories of my experiences are, of course, of little importance in themselves. They are intended only as examples of how "serpentine" the path may be. The call is for each of us to seek and be true to our own path. Wherever it may lead.

A Footnote to My Story:

After graduation from the Institute I returned to Athens, Georgia, where I began my private practice as a Jungian analyst. Again, I was comfortable and mostly content. Then one day a fax arrived from Zürich: the Jung Institute was seeking a new Director of Studies. During my academic career I had served as Coordinator of Graduate Studies and enjoyed it. And I still missed my many friends in Zürich. So I decided to apply for the position.

I was offered the job, accepted it, and moved back to Zürich in October 1998. Will I stay here forever now? Perhaps. Life is good here. But, on the other hand, the path is never as straight ahead as one might expect.

And I still hear those words from the movie: "Serpentine! Serpentine!"

Postscript, February 2019: I lived in Zürich from 1998 to 2002. Then after my four years of working for the C.G. Jung Institute, I retired and returned to Athens, Georgia. On a visit to London I met Jennifer Iliffe, whom I first met at the Zürich Jung Institute in 1985, but whom I had completely lost touch with for 17 years. She and I then married and lived in London from 2003 to 2005. When she retired from her job as a hospital social work manager in 2005 we moved to Athens, Georgia, and lived there until we jointly decided, in 2018, to move back to England for the remaining years of our lives. I will be 80 years old this year and I add this postscript to complete the account of my serpentine path begun so many years before. I suppose it goes without saying that the path I have taken is not only about my outer life; it reflects the unfolding of my inner life as well. My years of passion for philosophy gave way to years of passion for C.G. Jung. And now I find myself fascinated more and more by magic and mystery. And it has all been worthwhile.