Thoughts on Reading:

A Mythic Life,
Learning to Live Our Greater Story

Jean Houston (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996)

Attending a recent funeral of a renowned actor and singer, Robert Peterson, perhaps best known in the world as the man who replaced Robert Goulet in the Broadway musical “Camelot,” I was struck by his daughter’s and son’s description of his life as bridging the heroic and the every day.

He lived his parts, he was as heroic, and as flawed, as his characters. He was fully human yet larger than life, a true star! He saw his performances as important to the audience because it invoked within them the deep emotions they worked so hard to avoid in daily life. And it is those emotions, his son explained, that he felt allowed us to live lives of mythic import and splendor.

No wonder that shortly after attending that funeral I saw and snapped up a copy of this book. It seemed to be an expansion on this same theme!

I believe that we each create a mythology over time. That mythology defines us and determines our choices of roles in life. Jean Houston acknowledges that, but adds in the notion that our personal myths are copies and adaptations of cultural myths, and are the key to allowing a new global consciousness to emerge. Well, that may or may not be so, but I enjoyed
aspects of the book immensely and need to write down what those aspects were. So, here goes.

Houston, like the son and daughter of Robert Peterson, grew up in a world made vibrant by myth and fantasy: she grew up on an MGM movie lot where her father was a resident comedy scriptwriter. She was raised on the periphery of a dreamscape, as she describes on pages 2 and 3. What caught my interest however, was her take on her ritual of evenings at her computer exchanging messages on the Internet (page 5):

These simultaneous, electronically linked, planetwide talks give me enormous happiness, for they seem to me “a blast from the past,” a high-tech communion of ideas and feelings with many people from many different cultures. Somehow, these planetary conversations seem closer to my recollection of how we moved about “where I came from,” a knowing that I suspect almost every child shares.

Houston is enamoured with fractals and sees them everywhere as patterns used over and over, and of course this leads to a discussion of myth as a fractal (page 7):

A myth is itself a fractal, a repetition of patterns of becoming. Our personal stories weave between our local lives and Life writ large, the mythic equation of each life doing its part to illumine the screen of the world. When we reflect on our lives, it is possible to discern repeating themes and patterns, which if acknowledged and unfolded would allow us to see the bigger picture. Thus the sets I walked through as a child and the life that I now live are fractal waves of the same stories rolling through my earlier and my later life. But their deeper currents, as in all lives, may be nothing other than the fractal wave
forms of the Mind of the Maker, the Creator or Creative Spirit who started it all in the first place.

That is a long quote, but note how neatly she goes from pattern to life, large, small, old, young, human, divine. It is a masterfully woven paragraph. She has my attention.

She has my attention, and I enjoyed breezing through her words and thoughts, but until I got to page 50 I was not again in thrall as I was on page 7. On that page she discusses the experience of time: she describes several sorts of time experience and knows, she says, how to make time expand for people she is working with so that in a matter of seconds they do what they thought was taking them many minutes! The three sentences that grabbed my attention, however, were these:

Time flies; time crawls or stands still. We regularly experience the spectrum of party time, hanging-out time, condensed time, wasting time, scheduled time, falling-in-love time, anxiety time, creative time, boring time, dying time, meditation time, timeless time. Ecstasy and terror have their own temporal cadences, and in high creative moments as well as in mystical experience, the categories of time are strained by the tensions of eternity.

Wow, that reminds me of the times, especially when younger, but also now, when a dream seems to be lasting all night, then I wake up and see I have not been asleep all that long. That is what creative, mystical, and falling-in-love time seem like to me. Houston says much more on the subject, and suggests one can learn to “enter into subjective time,” she teaches people how in her “Mystery School” seminars.
Where Houston next captures me into a close reading is on pages 62 through 83, which is most of her third chapter on “The Many Faces of God.” Where I became once more enthralled was where she has turned six and asks too many questions in Catholic girls’ school and was chastised for it. Her dad took her to see the 1940s movie “The Song of Bernadette.” Her dad embarrassed her by laughing loudly in parts where she (Jean) was very seriously impressed, but the interesting part of the story comes after she gets home, goes into her closet, and calls on God to show himself as was the case with Bernadette. She tries again and again, bargaining with God, and simply cannot understand why God didn’t appear. Then she gave up and went to sit in a window and stare out. It was at that moment that her perception changed (page 65):

... suddenly the key turned and the door to the universe opened. Nothing changed in my outward perceptions. There were no visions, no sprays of golden light, certainly no appearances by the Virgin Mary. The world remained as it had been. Yet everything around me, including myself, moved into meaning. Everything became part of a single Unity, a glorious symphonic resonance in which every part of the universe was a part of and illuminated every other part, and I knew in some way it all worked together and was very good.

She goes on to describe her perception of her father coming into the house laughing then, and the whole universe joining in with his merriment. It is a powerful yet endearing story, and I can relate to that feeling of unity she describes. On page 73 she explains that shortly after this evening’s experience in the closet and then the window, circumstances gradually led her away from Catholicism.
In the pages between 65 and 71, Houston shows that in college she met several of the pioneers of mystical religious thought: Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Joseph Campbell. She has also met many of the world’s leaders. Hers is an impressive life. She tells a story of, at a lecture, Joseph Campbell basically tricking Martin Buber into admitting he had no respect for Eastern religions’ gods. On pages 73 through 77 she tells a hilarious tale of being a child preacher in a church where the ruling thought was that God spoke through children. After this hilarity, on page 79 she gains catches me paying close attention when she asserts that:

My model assumes that we humans are nested in several different realities, each one more encompassing and greater than the other, so that once we get... beneath the surface crust of consciousness, we discover that we are citizens in a much larger universe. In secular psychology we take it for granted that our existential life is the larger part of our existence, while psyche is some anomalous misty stuff that we relegate to the basement. In sacred psychology, however, we discover that it is not the psyche that exists in us, but we who exist in psyche, just as the larger life of the psyche exists within the realm of God. The distinctions I draw, then, are between the realms of the historic and factual (This Is Me), the mythic and symbolic (We Are), and the unitive, source-level of being (I Am). Each realm seems to have its own reality. While each is reflected within us, each exists independently of us as well. Our local selves are not the only center of reality, nor do they singularly create all we behold and experience, as some New Age psychologies suggest. Neither, however, can we escape from any part of experience, existence, or reality, for all are woven together and all invite—indeed require, our participation.
Houston goes on to explain the feelings at dimness and loss that come with trying to turn down “the rheostat” of who they really are. Several very captivating insights in these words, and loved the little back-handed slap at the New Age idea of our creating reality: it was here before us and will be after us. And, if Houston is right, we will always be part of it. However, even if we did not create these reality-realms, we are co-creators in those realms even at this very moment!

Pages 80 and 81 connect mythology into this model, and she suggests that the “gods” of myth are archetypes, “encodings of particular energy patterns from the We Are realm” and made accessible by assuming characteristics we can relate to. At the end of page 81 Houston suggests that it is when we encounter the archetypal images of the We Are realm in an altered state of consciousness that “we can speak directly to the inner imaginal realm in which mind, nature, and spirit converge, and our highest potential become available to us.”

But what about the I Am realm? She explains on page 82 that it is God, not the gods of the We Are realm, but the very ground of being:

This is the realm of Being itself, pure potency, love, the very stuff of reality. This is the realm many know as God. This does not mean “the gods,” for they live in the We Are; rather, it means God as the ground and unified Essence of being. About this realm nothing and everything can be said. The I Am is the supreme fractal wave from which everything branches, out of which everything comes forth.
She goes on in a superlative tome suggesting that “We are signaled all the time by the pulsings of original grace,” whether through another human or an object. Then she observes something about life’s purpose that makes me sit up and take notice (pages 82-83):

Perhaps the purpose of evolution is to create cocreators, who can help transform the potentials existing in matter and ideas into new forms, richer meanings, and higher art. In such an all-encompassing task, we participate in the totality and vigor, the creativity and generosity of divine life. The seed within, which held and nurtured the divine spark, is now fully grown, and we find ourselves transplanted into the vast gardens of universal life. This shift from the personal-particular to the personal-universal may well be a deep and essential requirement for an emerging planetary society.

And so she has now brought us all the way to the divine state, and hints again at the joy she described on page 3 when she is engaged in planetary discussion on the Internet!

When I finished page 83 I had a sad feeling and thought: the book has to go downhill from here. This is a dizzying height, we are at the divine level, there is nothing higher! So I read on, expecting little more.

It is amazing how expectation colors experience, isn’t it? I was slowed in my reading by mention of quantum physics and Gary Zukav on the same page (125), but both references were ones I could relate to and approve of, and signaled the start of a discussion of the state of entelechy, which Houston defines as (page 125)
... the dynamic purpose that drives us toward realizing our essential self, that gives us our higher destiny and the capacities and skills that our destiny needs for its unfolding.

The pages that follow give examples, some quite striking, but I am after the explanatory notes that tell, for example, that someone has “touched into Essence” (p. 126) when they feel themselves “enter into a mythic domain in which the extraordinary is ordinary and reality conspires to bring us to our fulness.” On the next few pages Houston writes:

I firmly believe that all human beings have access to an alternate or archetypal energy system that allows vital energy to mutate into extraordinary capacities and powers. (p. 127) ... Essence is often activated by a particular geographic spot, as is each of us has a recognizable home place. (p. 128) ... some places are so strongly part of our existence that Essence returns to us there. (p. 129) ... Where do these wise and creative things come from? The answer is the apparent chaos of the depth self. The music of Essence plays over this chaos, pulling patterns up from the depths. (p. 130)

I was attracted to these words, out of many more also of interest, because they describe for me how I have felt on my sojourns into Southern France seeking the remnants and places of the Cathars. It was like a different energy possessed me while there. Speaking of possession, Houston spends several pages on the “daimon” that sets up our lives and helps us move into our higher purposes and modes of being (pp. 130-132). She suggests that getting in touch with the archetypes in our depth is key to moving into our Essence on pages 132-133, and I want to quote her here so I can remember this:
To find this deeper directive force, we turn again to archetypes. The word itself refers to the “first types” or “primal patterns” from which people derive their sense of Essence and existence. Quintessentially, archetypes are about relationship. It is easiest, perhaps, to understand this in psychological terms. Standard interpretations describe archetypes as the primary forms and constellations of energy that govern the psyche. Carl Jung observed that when archetypes are repressed—whether within one person or in an entire society—we are cut off from nature, self, society, and spirit. The mechanistic view of the world that we have inherited infects us with a split between subject and object (mind and body, inner and outer realities), between individuals and their relationships, and between the world of human culture and the natural realm of biophysical processes. Archetypes, in their finest sense, serve to heal these splits.

Houston continues, but I have to stop and catch my thoughts. So, not only have I experienced something near to Essence in Southern France, now I also see the reason for the content of the one truly vivid revelation I had while there. While sitting quietly in the ruins of the castle at Montsegur where the Cathars made their last stand, expecting something earthshaking to be revealed to me as promised by a truly intuitive couple there from Hamburg, I had this unexpected, powerful, yet intellectually disappointing revelation. A long row of wall-hanging portraits moved in front of me with my wife, children, parents, and other family and several friends as if I were moving down an extremely long hallway. Some were repeated. All the while I felt this urging come from inside
myself: repair and maintain, even strengthen, these relationships! Life is relationship!

I was hoping for some dazzling insight into ultimate reality. I felt I was in touch with something very deep in my or out of me, I couldn’t tell. And rather than show me the secret of Being, it said to men and cultivate my relationships with other humans, especially those related and now close to me. I accepted that, wrote about it, and made some effort. Now, from reading this book, I see that this message is very much in tune with the archetypes being orchestrated by my daimon to give my life its core meaning. Meaning is relatedness for me! With my tendencies for withdrawal into my own little cocoon I can see why this was my message from within when I asked for it.

I was interested in her descriptions of her research work using psychedelic agents, during the same time that Huston Smith was doing similar research as described in his *Cleansing the Windows of Perception* book. Now she brings people into these same states of altered consciousness without drugs. This is the subject of her chapter on “Altered States.” I was particularly interested in her likening the stages of the psychedelic experience to Dante’s movement into hell, purgatory and heaven, and her later likening the stages experienced through drugs to her model, previously described, with the highest, or “I Am” level being reached by very few. This is discussed on her pages 178 through 182 especially. Somewhere in those pages she mentions that not only did she study with Paul Tillich, but also with Reinhold Niebuhr. On page 233 she adds Teilhard de Chardin, Aldoux Huxley, Gerald Heard, Paul Ricoeur and Martin Buber to the list of persons with whom she exchanged thought. Hers was a privileged life, good for her!
On pages 233 and 234 she describes some peaceful ancient civilizations with a balance of power between the male and female and mentions their demise at the hands (holding weapons) of marauding patriarchal tribes. She then begins to tell her story of trying to start an organization that will effect change in modern society, back to the shared power and peaceful mode of being of long ago. A most interesting discussion illustrated in large part by her description of her run-ins with Margaret Mead, with whom she became fast friends at the end of Margaret’s life. This story is told on pages 236 through 249. The gist of the story concerns freeing the feminine archetype, something also discussed at some length by Carl Jung, who celebrated the Annunciation of Mary (though he was a Protestant of sorts) as the triumph of the feminine archetype in the Catholic culture.

I recall having difficulty with Frankl’s insistence, in Man’s Search for Meaning, that suffering is inevitable, and even desirable, as it were, as a path to meaning. So, imagine my surprise when Houston says something similar on pages 265-267 based on her own experience with a serious concussion leading to (temporary, it turns out) blindness. She acknowledges also having learned from others enduring great suffering. One of her conclusions on page 267 is:

Wounding often involves a painful excursion into pathos; we experience massive anguish, and the suffering cracks the boundaries of what we thought we could stand. And yet, time and again, I discover that the wounding pathos of our own local stories contains the seeds of healing and even of transformation.

She gives advice on how to “revision” the wounding (pain of any sort caused by accident or other person) so that “its larger
story” is revealed. Focusing on the facts of who or what hurt us keeps us from taking the opportunity afforded by this suffering to see it as “the hand of god pulling us into a new story.” This reminded me of the Robert Peterson funeral again, where a son explained that his father’s losing his voice because of a stroke had him actually listening for a few months prior to his death. The son suggested this was a merciful thing to allow him to round out a personality too much defined by his wonderful voice. His voice was heard, always and everywhere, he was not a good listener. The son suggested that something in his relationship with his wife was healed because of his need to listen to her for a while before his death.

It also reminded me of my own bout with worry over disease in the early ‘90s when it was thought I might have MS, but it turned out to be a simpler case of neuropathy that went into remission. But during the height of the symptomatic stage I was panicked because I was unable to read a book! I simply could not do more than read a paragraph at a time and forgot it as soon as it was read. So I watched TV for intellectual stimulation, and even that wasn’t all that successful. I felt like myself, but there was just no way to think deeply or consistently. I spent a lot of energy keeping up with reading that allowed me to work. Personal reading was impossible. Maybe that is why I am hurrying through these huge reading projects now? In case the mental windows frost over again? Yes, that is a fear.

But it was not long after that condition ceased that I also learned that “I am not my intellect, my intellect is my tool, it is important to my functioning effectively in life, but it is not me.” So perhaps the scare of having my intellect impaired for a time prepared me to be more accepting of this radical
thought that led to a revision in the way I am, led to a change in the person that I am.

As I am aging, I can also relate well to Houston’s chapter on “The Feast of Maturity” wherein she suggests that some of the spiritual insights that are a struggle for us when younger come more naturally when we are older (page 296):

   In full maturity, distinctions between the inner and outer worlds dissolve. The encasement of personality turns out to be an illusion, a permeable membrane, which allowed for an exchange of nutrients between here and there, I and thou, body and spirit. You have the sense of touch that comes only with experience and the instinctive knowing of the right time to cut through the illusion of boundary and share your riches with those about you.

As I began contemplating starting my web site, I worried about the erasing of my personal boundaries that this would entail if I were to really tell what I have learned from my life experience. When I finally started the site, I felt a great relief, like giving up those boundaries allowed me to breathe more freely, to ne myself more freely. I have had some second thoughts, at times. Shows I am not at “full maturity” yet, I suppose.

Houston describes a group exercise to lower personal boundaries on pages 300–304. Don’t misunderstand, these boundaries serve a purpose for us, but there are times when it is a good thing to lower them to enrich ourselves and others with our stories.

Houston’s last chapter is full of personal anecdotes and describes some of the activities of her “Mystery School,” including its annual “Night of Gifting.” She describes this
night on pages 326-328, and describes it as a getting close to one’s “archetypal partner,” “docking with one’s angel,” or assuming “however briefly, something of the qualities of one’s archetypal partner.” She likens the state of awareness that may be achieved as a shamanic state, compares it with the ecstasies reported by Saint Francis. She describes it as a “suspension of their usual ways of being, and the acquiring of metanormal capacities through communion or identification with archetypal energies. This description of one of her annual ‘gifting’ sessions leads to the end of the book, which I recommend you read for yourself. That ending is both a challenge and a blessing pronounced on the reader by the author, as if the reader were an attendee at gifting night. I found it quite touching, and deem it inappropriate to reproduce it here since it is a personal message from her to you (if you read the last page of the book).

So, this was a real gem of a book. I am glad I own it, so that I can revisit it whenever the mood hits me to do so.