

CHAPTER ONE

*Projecting Your Gold*

My first analyst, Fritz Kunkel, said that there are three ways to learn psychology: “Read Greek mythology, read Jung, and watch. Watching is best.” I learn so much from watching, and one of the things I observe most carefully is the exchange of inner, alchemical gold. Inner gold is the highest value in the human psyche. It is our soul, the Self, the innermost part of our being. It is us at our best, our twenty-four-karat gift to ourselves. Everyone has inner gold. It isn’t created, but it does have to be discovered. When I speak about gold this way, I am also speaking about God. These are two ways to describe the mystery.

When we awaken to a new possibility in our lives, we often see it first in another person. A part of us that has been hidden is about to emerge, but it doesn’t

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go in a straight line from our unconscious to becoming conscious. It travels by way of an intermediary, a host. We project our gold onto someone, and suddenly we're consumed with that person. The first inkling of this is when the other person appears to be so luminous that he (or she) glows in the dark. That's a sure sign that something is changing in us and we are projecting our gold onto the other person.

When we observe the things we attribute to the other person, we see our own depth and meaning. Our gold goes first from us to them. Eventually it will come back to us. Projecting our inner gold offers us the best chance for an advance in consciousness.

The Medieval Mind

In the Middle Ages, the work of alchemy was to produce gold from base metals. There were charlatans trying to make actual gold, but the best alchemists were those working with the gold of the spirit.

Alchemy comes from a time when the medieval mind was at its highest flowering. In medieval times, people did not divide reality into inner and outer or even acknowledge a difference between the two. For them, inside and outside were the same. To accomplish all that we have today, we've had to split the

world in two. We couldn't be this competitive with a medieval mind. But the price we pay for our accomplishments is loneliness and an inability to love. When we're in love, we *are* our beloved. I spent many years trying to help people differentiate between inner and outer: You are you, and I am I. Your husband is your husband. We still have not yet completed the transition to the modern mind. Many psychological problems are a failure to differentiate between *out there* and *in here*.

According to the teachings of India, the external world is *maya*, illusion. It is considered illusory because it is actually within, not *out there*. We see only the "ten thousand things" that we project. In ancient China, Lao Tzu dreamed of a butterfly, and for the rest of his life he didn't know whether he had dreamed the butterfly or the butterfly had dreamed him.

In the West, gold is the symbol of the Self, while in the East, the symbol of our inner divinity is the diamond. In their interior meanings, they are the same, but the images are different. Diamonds are the hardest matter on earth—unearthly, celestial, and impersonal. Gold is much softer, a matter of relationship, the Self as related. I think we're lucky to have gold to cope with.

The Glow in Your Eyes

When we see that we have given our spiritual gold to someone to hold for us, there are several ways we might respond. We could go to him or her and say, “The meaning of my life has suddenly appeared in the glow in your eyes. May I tell you about it?” This is another way of saying, “I have given you my inner gold. Will you carry it for me for a while?” But we rarely see and do things that directly. Instead, we stand across the room, turn our back on him, and feel totally frightened, stumbling and carrying on in odd ways. We meet at the coffee pot during the morning break at work and banter with each other, speaking all kinds of nonsense. We joke and laugh, and an animated play goes on. Then, when we head back to work, we feel energized and brightened for the day. It was not the coffee. It was the exchange of inner, alchemical gold.

The exchange of gold is a mysterious process. It is our gold, but it’s too heavy for us, so we need someone else to carry it for a time. That person becomes synonymous with meaning. We follow him with an eagle eye wherever he goes. His smile can raise us to heavenly heights, his frown will hurl us to hellish depths, so great is the power of meaning.

Hero Worship

Sometimes the exchange of gold takes the form of hero worship. For a ten-year-old boy, his twelve-year-old neighbor is a hero. The ten-year-old wants to imitate him. He walks like him. He wears shoes just like his. He borrows his vocabulary and hangs around him as much as he can. We all know the power of fashion, and especially how fashion runs through a neighborhood of adolescents. The style of shoes, prisoner pants, all those things you've got to have. It's both inspiring and funny to watch somebody hero-worship.

Two years later, when the ten-year-old is twelve, he has become the characteristics that he projected onto the twelve-year-old. He assimilated them back and became them. Now he hero-worships a fourteen-year-old and has a new ladder to climb.

I remember vividly my own early hero worshipping. It was so strong. Slowly and painfully, I've drawn those hero-worship projections—this placing of my own potential onto others—back to myself. Turning gray in the process, I have become what I was hero-worshipping.

Hunting for Gold

When I was fourteen, I drove with my grandmother to Spokane, Washington, to attend a family funeral. One of my cousins, a little older than I, had married, and I saw her husband for the first time. Instantly, he became my hero. I was unstable in that period of my life. My feet didn't work well, and I hadn't really entered the masculine world—I'm not greatly endowed in that direction.

His name was Thor. He was of Norwegian ancestry, in his early twenties, a big, strong guy, an absolute master of the physical world. That fellow did something so kind and important for me. The day after the funeral, he plucked me out of the family gathering and took me into the woods to go hunting, the first and last hunting I've ever done. He sensed who I was, what I needed, and at what speed to initiate me. He knew I had to be told which end of the gun to point where, and he did it all so well. He was a God-Man, someone of infinitely high value for me. I was envious and bound to him, almost literally. I placed my feet in his footsteps as we walked through the forest, giddy with his greatness.

Suddenly he stopped and said, "Squirrel on a limb. Over there." Ten or twenty yards away was a

squirrel on a pine branch. “All right,” he said, and told me exactly what to do: “Line this up with the squirrel. Pull the trigger gently, so you don’t jiggle the gun and lose him out of sight. It’ll go bang in your ear. Don’t be afraid.” I did it, and of course I thought I’d missed the squirrel. “Come on,” he said, and we went over. And lo and behold, I hadn’t missed. There on the ground under the limb was a ragged, bloody mess of a squirrel. I was so proud and so horrified at the same time. I learned in a split second what heroism costs you and what it gives you. I had become a big man, but I couldn’t stand it. I did not want to shoot squirrels. We went back home, and I was more pleased than unhappy.

Giving Back

Forty years later, I got a letter from my cousin, Thor’s wife: “You must be Bob. My granddaughter brought a book home from her psychology class by Robert Johnson, and I think it must be you.” I hadn’t seen or heard from her in more than forty years. We spoke on the phone, and she asked if she could visit for her sixtieth birthday.

What a wonderful time we had! She brought a small entourage of people, among whom was a young

Thor, the grandson of my hero. He was the same age I had been when I knew the first Thor. And he was skinny and frightened, the way I'd been, quickly going down in the whirlpool of the modern world. My head was swimming with possibilities. So I entertained young Thor with the story of my first and only hunting trip, talking about his grandfather and the wonderful day he had given me. Unfortunately, the elder Thor had drunk himself to death and was pretty much a failure in his life. My cousin had divorced him, and he just went down skid row. I didn't like hearing this. He had been my hero.

So I told this little guy, who hadn't said a word, "I owe your grandfather an immense debt, and I transfer that debt to you. I owe you whatever you need from me." The boy latched on to me immediately, and I became his hero. It was a beautiful exchange.

This is alchemical gold. You put your own gold onto somebody until you're able to hold it yourself. As a fourteen-year-old, I couldn't do what Thor could. He was twenty-four or twenty-five, and I put my gold onto him, the gold of masculinity, strength, courage, and independence, things I had none of and he had lots.

Over the course of forty years, I got my gold back. I didn't do it by way of guns—I've never shot