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The Search for Identity in the Epic of Gilgamesh

Elizabeth Williamsen ‘99

Dr. Carl G. Jung’s theory of individuation can be described as the emergence of a hidden, more complete personality through gradual changes within the conscious and unconscious halves of the human psyche. These changes occur most prominently at periods of stress in an individual’s life, such as puberty or “mid-life crisis.” The changes can also occur through a person’s relationships with others, which can cause intense anxiety or intense contentment. The Sumero-Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh can be interpreted as a demonstration of the ways in which interpersonal relations can bring about a more satisfying relationship with the Self. A deep and binding love for another human being is a beautiful thing. A friendship based on such a love should be a goal for each individual, no matter where, how, or when he/she lives. Forty-seven centuries ago, two men shared such a bond. Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk and Enkidu, the wild man of the plains, were important religious figures and their sexuality was celebrated as a demonstration of the ways in which interpersonal relations can bring about a more satisfying relationship with the Self.

Gilgamesh feels the power conflicts between men and women even before his meeting with Enkidu. He rules over Uruk, but the fertility goddess Ishtar, apparently the most important deity of the city (as would seem most appropriate in an agricultural community), rules over him. In defiance against her power, and synonymously, her sexuality, he seeks domination over mortal women: he “hears the girls of other men / for his own purpose” (I.i.56-57 Jackson 3). This form of retaliation, while probably very physically satisfying for Gilgamesh, is not successful, since by enjoying female sexuality, he only empowers his enemy. The people of the city call upon the gods to remedy the situation, for Gilgamesh is not the king he should be: “Is that the shepherd of Uruk’s flock? Our strength, our light, our reason, who hears the girls of other men for his own purpose?” (I.i.56-57 Jackson 3). In response, the gods ask Aruru, goddess of creation, to create another man, Enkidu, as quick in heart and as strong in arm in the arms of the harlot. John Tigue sees Enkidu’s sexual encounter as a social becoming. He is furthering his independence from the chthonic kingdom and entering into the paternal “civilized world.” The first sexual experience is always a turning point in a person’s life (sic). (60)

Enkidu feels the difference in himself and returns to the courtesan, the cause of the change, for advice on dealing with the change. The prostitute’s mission is to become initiated into civilization. The prostitute’s mission is to bring him closer to the human, to bring him to Uruk” (45). As with those animals who will cease to care for their offspring after the young have been touched by human hands, Enkidu’s bond no longer recognizes him as an animal after the seven days he spends in the arms of the harlot. John Tigue sees Enkidu’s sexual encounter as a social becoming. He is furthering his independence from the chthonic kingdom and entering into the paternal “civilized world.” The first sexual experience is always a turning point in a person’s life (sic). (60)

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Enkidu’s feminine qualities are emphasized to underpin his masculinity. In the later dream he bends the bow of God, an act of feminine dominance. Enkidu’s femininity is more of a disguise, a mask, to be dropped, as the wild man challenges the king to a wrestling match (which has been interpreted as a metaphor for homosexual intercourse), that ends in a draw, with each man respecting the other’s prowess. Whether Enkidu serves as a model of a balanced psyche or a homosexual temptation matters little. Robert Hopcke offers a beautiful rationalization of male femininity:

“...to be in relationship to oneself as a man means fundamentally to both acknowledge and celebrate a kind of homosexuality, an enjoyment of one’s own manhood as a man; this enjoyment is anathema in a patriarchal society whose dominant values and social structures are organized along heterosexual lines. (101) At one with his own psyche, Enkidu meets Gilgamesh and proves the prophetic words of the prostitute, who instilled in Enkidu a feeling of destiny by telling him that Gilgamesh had already dreamt of Enkidu. In response, the gods ask Aruru, goddess of creation, to create another man, Enkidu, who seeks to bring him to the city. To aid him in this, he recruits a temple prostitute.

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The wild man is born of a lump of clay, feeds upon the grasses of the steppe, and runs with the wild herds. His animal nature is totally at odds with the civilization and culture which Gilgamesh represents. They are opposites, yet divine mandate has declared them to be equals. The two are destined to become one, but Enkidu must first be educated in the ways of men.

Enkidu is more animal than man, he has “neither clan nor race;” “uselessly he roams across the land . . . / he eats the food of beasts” (I.i.86, I.i.104-105 Jackson 4, 6). He is accepted by the animal herds as one of their own; however, he demonstrates intellect in his defiance and methodical destruction of the hunters’ traps (Wolf 4). The hunter who observes him, as a civilized being, cannot accept the thought of a human living like an animal, and seeks to bring him to the city. To aid him in this, he recruits a temple prostitute.

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At one with his own psyche, Enkidu meets Gilgamesh and proves the prophetic words of the prostitute, who instilled in Enkidu a feeling of destiny by telling him that Gilgamesh had already dreamt of his coming (I.v.231-233 Jackson 11). Kluger states that a very important part of the process of individuation is just such a feeling of destiny, a belief that something is meant to be (47). Enkidu’s
beliefs in this friendship as his fate spurs him onward in his journey with any hero, his spiritual development is incomplete, and he is balance his roles as "simultaneously a powerful individual and a func-
tionary of society" (Wolff 63). The introduction of Enkidu, who was specifically created to be Gilgamesh's equal, opens a new way of life to the king.

Enkidu is a shadow figure, a perfect foil for Gilgamesh. The eponymous king who recently ran with the herds represents all those qualities not possessed by the city-dwelling king (Van Nortwick 21), including the feminine qualities he gained from his encounter with his anima. Gilgamesh, the more powerful, dominant, and masculine of the two, turns Enkidu toward his own way of life, rather than immediately absorbing his newfound brother's path to individuation. He molds the wild man into all a civilized man should be: a warrior.

Gilgamesh has made himself into the perfect warrior-hero. He is unsurpassed in strength and skill with weaponry; he has the abil-
ity to overcome any opponent "by wit or force or fear" (I.13.23 Jackson 2). With Enkidu as companion, he can take the final step: with
out strong friendship, a man must look to marriage for fulfillment (Doty 76). However, an effective warrior must be without familial ties; no one must be wounded by a warrior's injuries but the war-
riors bring Humbaba to his knees in defeat, he begs them to spare his life, offering in exchange his lumber and his servitude. Enkidu
urities bring Humbaba to his knees in defeat, he begs them to spare his life, offering in exchange his lumber and his servitude. Enkidu
must become the guide on this foray, as he is the man of nature, and Gilgamesh is little more than a raw youth when it comes to surviving outside the city. The feminine qualities in Enkidu become less pronounced as the necessary violence of survival in the natural world claims control of his mind. We can see the con-
flit between nature and culture exemplified in the attitudes of the two men toward this little excursion. Gilgamesh sees the conquest of the monster as "part of a larger vehicle for getting status in the culture" (Van Nortwick 22), but Enkidu considers it a fight for survival. His animal instincts are the driving force behind all the deci-
sions he makes on the journey.

Gilgamesh, unused to a quest of this sort, and, more deeply, uneasy about what he might discover on this journey into the uncon-
scious, shows signs of uncertainty, expressing worries about the value of their mission and voicing disturbing dreams. Their pos-
tions have been reversed: previously, Enkidu had felt anxious about dying in battle with the monster; Gilgamesh had replied that all mortals are destined to die, but only heroic men of action can live on through the glory of their deeds (III.v.57-63 Jackson 22). Now it is Enkidu who reassures his brother.

The two men return triumphant to Uruk, bearing their trophy of cedar wood. When Gilgamesh has washed the gore of battle from himself, the goddess Ishtar becomes enamored of him and presents an offer of marriage. She offers him the godlike status which he has apparently been seeking in his physical quests: "Come to my home, most sweetly scented of all places, where holy faces wash your feet with tears as do the priests and priestesses of gods like Anu. All mighty hands of kings and queens will open doors for you." (VI.16-20 Jackson 33)

Having rejected women as irrelevant to the life of a warrior (Wolff 9), Gilgamesh refuses the goddess's offer in an appropriately bellig-

erent manner, going out of his way to remind her of her negative aspects:

- "Ishtar the heart gone cold, a broken door, without the gold; tar that can't be washed away a god's own sandal filled with piss . . ."
  (VI.37-46 Jackson 34)

and then going on to refresh her memory of the various miserable fates of her former lovers. The goddess, justly angered, arranges

for the bull of heaven to wreak havoc on Gilgamesh's realm. However, Gilgamesh's rude refusal is almost equally justified. In a relationship such as she offers, Ishtar, the female, would hold all power. Gilgamesh, as a mere male (and a mortal at that), would be but a temporary fixture in her home. His male mentality, still trying to believe in its superiority, cannot abide the idea of being replaceable, and there is no chance of his exerting dominance over Ishtar. "[F]emale deities willing to be dutiful wives have not yet been invented" (Roscoe 171). The king's masculinity has not yet connected with his feminine side, and so he fears everything Ishtar represents, especially her sexuality. Ishtar embodies all the nega-
tive aspects of the anima: uncontrollable physical lusts, bitchiness, irrationality, selfishness.

If Gilgamesh accepts Ishtar when she is passionate, he would be feeding his hunger for sensual gratification. To reject her so abruptly is to reject the passion within himself and thus try to deny now this unruly side of himself. (Tigue 67)

Gilgamesh's fear of Ishtar's aggression is about as surprising as her furious response to the hero's insults.

Accordingly, the bull of heaven is released on the unsuspect-
ing citizens of Uruk. Gilgamesh, as their king, must protect them, after all, if his subjects perished, who would he have to rule? Properly heroic, and perhaps recognizing and accepting their own re-
sponsibility for the bull's terrorism of the city, the two heroes work together in harmony to physically overcome the corporal threat posed by the bull. Enkidu, having become endowed with more understanding than his counterpart since his seduction by and connection with his anima, realizes the moment of defying a deity by destroying the bull: "How could we defeat a god? / Brother, I see great challenge here, but can we dare defy such force?" (VI.145-166)
Jackson 37-38). However, the heroes join as one and conquer the bull, disemboweling it in celebratory glee. Masculine bonds have proven more powerful than the heavy artillery of Woman (Roscoe 171).

Gilgamesh gains from these two encounters a "sense of self-importance" from identifying himself and seeing the world identify him as a conqueror of monsters and nature. Unfortunately for him, however, this success suffers a reversal and results in his immediate suffering. True, he has proven his physical prowess, but he has failed miserably at being a person with any common sense or empathy for others. His heroism is strictly physical at this point and will need to be spiritualized if his life is to be meaningful. (Tigue 62).

The importance of physical heroism and all it represents has inproved more powerful than the heavy artillery of Woman (Roscoe 21-22). By the time his wasting illness hits him, Enkidu has died, but only heroes will live on through their deeds (III.iv.57-63 Jackson 38). The entire episode, in which mere pawns attempted (and succeeded in their venture) to defy the will of the gods, forces the gods to destroy one of the pair.

Enkidu, in so much with his Self that his dreams need undergo no interpretations, envisions the council of the gods and knows his end is near:

"The gods all gathered round last night / and Anu told Enlil that one of us should die / because of what we've done against their names." (VII.i.2-8 Jackson 41)

The impact of his brother's death on Gilgamesh is incredible; this seems to be the first time his death has affected him in a personal manner, "the first time he has been struck by the awareness that man will die and that this applies to him" (Kluger 159). But perhaps he is mostly affected by the indignity of wasting away in "slow disgrace," when his warrior's way of life dictates that he should perish in battle-glory. Gilgamesh also feels guilt for the part he played in bringing about Enkidu's death, and this causes him to drive himself out of the community (Wolff 12) and wander over barren hills, mumbling to his own spirit:

"Will you too die as Enkidu died?" (X.I.24-25 Jackson 55)

Without becoming actively suicidal during skirmishes, Gilgamesh, as the perfect warrior, has no way of reassuring that he will die in combat as a battle-hero. Therefore, he must arrange things so that he will never die. Accordingly, he sets off on his quest to locate and learn from Utnapishtim, the only mortal known to have bypassed the path all non-deities must follow into the underworld. This part of the poem depicts Gilgamesh as "the one who goes farther, sees more, than anyone, who cannot be prevented by threats, hardship or kindly and practical advice from reaching his goal of finding out death and how to stop it" (Wolff 13). He intends to follow the path of the sun-god and so travels to Mt. Mashu, quite likely the axis mundi, through which Shamash makes his nightly journey. His entrance into the utter darkness of the tunnel, the region of the unknown, can be seen as "a kind of spiritual death ... the feeling of being cut off from the world" (Van Nortwick 27). After traveling through the mountain for eleven hours, he emerges into a new and beautiful land.

Gilgamesh, on entering the tunnel, has symbolically returned to the womb, and his emergence is a sort of rebirth. According to Joseph Campbell,

"[the] hero whose attachment to ego is already annihilated passes back and forth across the horizons of the world, in and out of the dragon, as readily as a king through all the rooms of his house. And therein lies his power to save ..."

He also notes the (individuated) hero's ability to pass safely by the guardians at the entrance to the "World Womb, the World Navel" (92). Hence, if Gilgamesh is able to pass by the scorpion creatures at the entrance to the mountain, he must have achieved one-ness within himself. At Enkidu's death, and during his subsequent bonding with nature (Enkidu's native environment), he has absorbed essential qualities of Enkidu's being. "[T]he outcome of grieving is to make the ones we have lost a part of ourselves, to make their attitudes and characteristics behave our own" (Roscoe 173). Enkidu's qualities have become integrated into the being of the king, although Gilgamesh himself may not yet know it.

Emerging from the mountain, Gilgamesh comes upon the dwelling of Siduri, an awwlet "who gives her men lifegiving drinks" (X.I.13 Jackson 61). She is frightened by his savage appearance until he relates his tale of wandering after the death of Enkidu, "my soul's good half" (X.I.44 Jackson 62). On hearing of his quest for immortality, Siduri, another guiding anima figure, advises him:

"Remember always, mighty king, that gods decreed the fates of all many ages ago. They alone are let to be eternal, while we frail humans die as you yourself must someday do.

What is best for us to do is now to sing and dance. Relish warm food and cool drinks. Cherish children to whom your love gives life. Bathe easily in sweet refreshing waters. Play joyfully with your chosen wife. It is the will of the gods for you to smile on simple pleasures in the leisure time of your short days." (X.III.88-99 Jackson 63-65)

"She is able to reason upon the various possibilities for her existence and arrive at a sound conclusion. This is something Gilgamesh has yet to learn to do ..." (Tigue 70). Siduri's is somewhat a voice of civilization, urging Gilgamesh to accept the cultured, mortal life as a prerequisite for the divine. However, if he takes her advice, he will simply regress to the sort of life he led before Enkidu (Kluger 179-180). And yet, his rejection of her suggestions of marriage and children (X.III.110 Jackson 65) is, while a refusal of mundaneness, is also the same rejection that characterized his identification with the warrior ideal. Following the awwlet's directions, he finds the grove of the ferryman, and purposelessly attacks and destroys the "Stone Things," which, it turns out, would have facilitated his journey across the waters of death. "It is only by using his [weapon] in a constructive manner, guided by Urshanabi in cutting [a large number of] pining poles for the seaassage, that he is able to go forward" (Wolff 16).

Gilgamesh reaches the island of Utnapishtim, past the waters of death, and explains his quest to the deified man. Utnapishtim, however, is quite unsympathetic, with an apathy smacking of practicality:

"Why cry over fate and nature? Chance fathered you. Your conception was an accidental combination of the divine and mortal. I do not presume to know how to help the likes of you." (XIV.224-229 Jackson 70)

Gilgamesh asks to at least be given knowledge of how Utnapishtim achieved immortality, and is regaled with the story of the flood, prior to which Utnapishtim was warned by a god to take certain life-preserving precautions. Gilgamesh can now see this sage as a man no different from himself, both have their fates decided by the gods, although it would seem that Utnapishtim is the more favored (Wolff 18).

Utnapishtim, as a harsh father-figure, scorns Gilgamesh's desire to attain immortality: "which gods will be called on / to direct your path and future life?" (XIV.183-184 Jackson 79). He commands Gilgamesh to withdraw an ordeal: the king must stay awake for seven days and nights. Considering how little sleep Gilgamesh has had recently, it is not surprising that he drifts off almost immediately (XIV.188 Jackson 79). Gilgamesh has effectively been made to die "symbolic death."

As an immortal hero, Gilgamesh fails, but as the mortal hero he has been throughout the poem, he succeeds: he survives, and in the crafty manner of mortals predicted by the wise man, he tries to pass off his sleep as a mere wink. (Wolff 18-19)

After waking, Gilgamesh realizes that, as a mortal, he is constantly surrounded by death: "My own / bed is where death sleeps and / I crack her spine on every line / where my foot falls" (XV.220-223 Jackson 80).

Utnapishtim unceremoniously sends Gilgamesh to bathe and redress in clean clothes so that he can return to his city. The mourning period is finished (Van Nortwick 34), his period of awakening is
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over; "the moment has been reached at which the hero moves from one stage of his life to the next" (Wolff 20). Utnapishtim's nameless wife, a mother-anima who is willing for Gilgamesh to remain a child (Jacobsen 28), feels compassion for the weary king and persuades him to reveal yet another "special secret, one / that the gods alone do know" (XI.vi.257-258 Jackson 81). The wise man tells Gilgamesh of a magical plant that brings eternal youth. The immortality-seeking king, whose fear of death has only been intensified by his "symbolic death," obtains the plant with little difficulty and embarks on his homeward voyage. As Tigue notices, Gilgamesh takes the plant with him, intending to share it with the "aged men" of his city. This self-extension shows the maturity he has gained from his pilgrimage; he is no longer the selfish ruler of the epic's beginning (64).

On the journey back to Uruk, the triumphant hero stops to bathe in a pool and "a cruel snake slither[s] by / and [steals] the plant from Gilgamesh / who [sees] the snake grow young again" (XI.vi.282-284 Jackson 83). Throughout the second half of the epic, Gilgamesh had been fleeing death by fleeing old age, even maturity; he [was] reaching back to security and childhood. The loss of the plant stands thus for the loss of the illusion that one can go back to being a child. It brings home the necessity for growing up, for facing and accepting reality. (Jacobsen 29)

His "resignation to the fact of death" (Doty 82) enables Gilgamesh to discover his bonds to other mortals; he has learned "to see [himself] not as preeminent among men, but as a part of a larger whole, ruled by forces often beyond his ability to control" (Van Nortwick 37). He is ready to return home and devote himself to the success of his community, rather than to personal glory.

The quest for personal immortality as a way of denying the reality of death is an inherent problem in human culture. The Gilgamesh epic attempts to teach the importance of "seeing not those things which separate [us] from other humans, but rather the emblems of [our] essential kinship with all creatures who must die" (Van Nortwick 32). Gilgamesh returns to his city with the ferryman and says,

"Rise up now, Urshanabi, and examine Uruk's wall. Study the base, the brick, the old design. Is it permanent as can be? Does it look like wisdom designed it?" (XI.vi.301-304 Jackson 84)

Gilgamesh's pride in his work is "no longer that of the ambitious, power-driven ego of the beginning" (Kluger 205). His pride is now in the good work of his people in building the wall and in the thought that the wall will protect the citizens of Uruk for centuries to come.

Enkidu, Gilgamesh's second self, has continued to have an effect on his brother long after the death of his body. The wild man who ran with the herds from birth knew the value of community, and that value is one of those that was unwittingly absorbed by Gilgamesh during the grieving process. Gilgamesh meets his anima through Enkidu's qualities of caring, gentleness, and loyalty. As Van Nortwick suggests, "one part of the self [is] showing the way for another until a final reintegration is possible" (38). This "reintegration" occurs gradually during the heroes' relationship, but the effects do not become fully apparent until Gilgamesh discovers the importance of relating to the world and its inhabitants.

The relationship between Gilgamesh and his companion serves as the ideal toward which Gilgamesh will strive as he begins to interact more fully with his community. The love of these two men also demonstrates a "conception of male wholeness" (Doty 83). Their friendship blossoms into the incomparable radiance of a human being who has achieved individual realization, and who can straddle the border between nature and culture, between mortal and immortal, and between the conscious and the unconscious minds.

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