NECESSITY, CHOICE AND CHANCE: WHERE THE THREE ROADS MEET

Introduction:

In his plays, Oedipus Rex and Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles undertakes an exploration of the ancient myth, I believe, to find the true answer to the riddle of the Sphinx – "What goes on four legs and two legs and three legs, and when it has most legs is at its weakest?"

The answer, we know, is "man", but perhaps it is better put as a question – "what is it to be human?" This is the true subject of Sophocles' and Oedipus's investigation. As psychotherapists this is the stuff of our work, the subject of our inquiries with our clients.

I have called this paper, "Necessity, Choice and Chance: Where The Three Roads Meet", because I believe that it is these three elements that make up the warp and woof of our lives. We are born into particular and unique circumstances, not of our (conscious) choosing. This is our fate, or necessity. However, what we make of these limitations is at least partly up to us. And of course, there is the happenstance aspect of life – those chance events that befall us, sometimes to our betterment, in which case we call it good fortune, and sometimes to our detriment, in which case we call it bad luck.

There is a passage in Herman Melville's classic Moby Dick, in which he describes the interplay of these three elements: (my thanks to John Gross for bringing this to my attention.)

Ishmael and Queequeg are weaving a mat on the ship deck. Ishmael says

"As I kept passing and re-passing the filling or woof of marline between the long yarns of the warp, using my own hand for the shuttle, and as Queequeg, standing sideways, ever and anon slid his heavy oaken sword between the threads, and idly looking off upon the water, carelessly and unthinkingly drove home every yarn: I say so strange a dreaminess did there then reign all over the ship and all over the sea, only broken by the intermitting dull sound of the sword, that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive,

indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance--aye, chance, free will, and necessity--nowise incompatible--all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course--its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events."

Let us take a closer look at these three forces that shape our lives.

Part One: Fate

To the ancient Greeks divine law was a central tenet, a cosmic order, beyond the understanding of mortal man. It was administered by the Moirai, the Fates. The Moirai were the daughters of Nyx or Night, They ordered the celestial spheres and were the first born even before Zeus and Apollo; before time itself. Not even the gods could escape the decrees of the Moirai. Moira means "share" or "allotment". The Moirai were three sisters; Clotho who wove the thread of life, Lachesis who measured it and Atropos who cut it. To each human being the tapestry of life was meted out according to his lot.

The Greeks of Sophocles' time believed that a sympathetic connection existed between human conduct and the ordered law of nature. When a sin was committed, all Nature was thrown out of balance, poisoned by the offence of man. Fate was the guardian of cosmic law and justice, the keeper of the boundaries of necessity.

But the workings of Fate are mysterious and strange and even our premonitions and foresight do not always tell us truly what lies ahead and what way is best to take.

Mythic tradition has it that a familial curse plagued the house of Labdacus, who was the grandson of Cadmus, the founding ruler of Thebes. It is said that Labdacus disrespected the god Dionysus and as a result was torn apart by the god's female followers. Laius was his son. In his youth he was forced to flee the city and seek asylum with Pelops, the king of Pisa in the Peloponnesus. Laius repaid his hospitality by abducting and brutally raping the son of Pelops. Apollo, through the Delphic oracle warned him not to have a child, for if he did, his son would kill him and marry his mother. In Aeschylus's version Laius was warned of this three times by Apollo. But one night, Jocasta, not knowing of the god's warning and longing for a child, got her husband drunk and seduced him. Thus Oedipus was conceived. Laius learned told Jocasta of the oracle's warning and ordered her to sacrifice the child in order to save his life. So Oedipus was given by Jocasta to a servant who was to take him to a mountain top, bind his ankles and stake his feet to the ground,

leaving him to die of exposure. But a kindly herdsman rescued him and in doing this good deed he unwittingly served the prophecy and fulfilled the will of the gods.

Most of us do not speak or think of Fate these days. However, Fate goes by many names and it still pervades our consciousness and the fabric of our culture. We know it better through expressions such as “luck”, “fortune (or misfortune)” or “karma”. Psychology uses words like instincts, heredity, predisposition, conditioning patterns, complexes and archetypes when confronting issues of fate. Science speaks of the laws of nature – gravity, motion, thermo-dynamics. These are all in the province of Fate, the law-keeper.

Part Two: Chance

Although we often conflate the two, Fate must be differentiated from Chance, the randomness of events. Chance is the roll of the dice, the vagaries of fortune. The television shows, “Wheel of Fortune”, “Deal or no Deal”, and “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” are prime examples of the workings of chance. Someone wins the jackpot, someone else leaves with nothing and everything in between. It can be fun to play as a game, even exciting, but when it comes to our own lives it is a different matter.

Chance plays a part in the story of Oedipus. If he had not heard the chance taunt of a drunkard would he have been moved to question his parentage and to seek out the Delphic oracle? And, following from that would he then have had that disastrous meeting with Laius at the crossroads? The play is filled with chance encounters that move Oedipus inexorably towards the final outcome.

Jung speaks of the synchronicity of life, those apparently chance events that shape the direction of the individual. We can find examples of this in our own lives and that of our clients; the chance encounter or remark that has significant, unforeseen and unintended results, or the uncanny way in which we seem to attract those clients whose issues reflect or constellate our own. Or the mysterious way in which, if we succeed in making a breakthrough or have some insight, so do our clients without a word passing between us about it.

Part Three: Choice

Laius incurred the wrath of Hera, protectress of children, who sent a monster out of Ethiopia, called the Sphinx. She had a woman’s head, lion’s body, serpent’s tail and eagle’s wings. Teiresias warned Laius to sacrifice at Hera’s alter to beg forgiveness, but Laius didn’t listen and set out instead to consult the Delphic oracle again. As it turns out, this was a fatal choice.

Creon, Jocasta’s brother, ruled in Laius’s stead. The Sphinx continued to terrorize the city, asking every Theban wayfarer a riddle taught to her by the three Muses.

Those who couldn't answer were strangled by her. Creon's own son was killed. He decided to offer Jocasta and the kingdom as a reward to whoever could overcome the Sphinx.

Meanwhile, Oedipus met Laius, who was on his way to visit the Delphic oracle. Not surprisingly, father and son were men of similar temperament – both proud and impetuous men, who would not give way pride of place to another. Oedipus's pride and intelligence were his gifts but they were also his undoing. He could have given way to Laius and averted catastrophe. He could have ignored the drunk who blurted out the secret of his adoption and swallowed the insult to his parentage. But this is not who Oedipus was. He had to learn more. His intelligence allowed him to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, but his character choices brought him down.

He was a man of action, passionate, quick and decisive as opposed to Creon, the prudent politician who led with his head not his heart. Oedipus's faith and confidence in the power of his intellect and reasoning ability reflected the ideals of the age. We see it in the language of the play, the language of mathematics – "measures" , commensurate, equal, the question of one man or many who killed Laius. The chorus sings of "numberless, uncountable". "One cannot equal many", Oedipus says in reasoning who killed Laius, but counter to logic, he **does** equal many – son, father, husband and brother.

Was Oedipus fated to carry out the oracle's prophecy? Greek scholar Karl Reinhardt has this to say,

> "For Sophocles, as for the Greeks of an earlier age, fate is in no circumstances the same as pre-determination, but is a spontaneous unfolding of daimonic power, even when the fate has been foretold, and even when it is brought about by means of an order immanent in events and in the way that the world goes." (Karl Reinhardt, "Illusion and Truth in Oedipus Tyrannus"; Bloom, p. 69)

Daimon is the genius of a person. It is the force that shapes his life from within and makes or mars his fortune. It is not a destiny, allotted to him from without. Daimon means dispenser. Oedipus does what he does because of his character, which determines his choices.

As for Apollo, there are two functions he fulfils. He gives the oracles and he brings the truth to light. We might think of him as the unconscious at work. The tragedy of Oedipus Rex is composed of a conjunction between the pronouncements of Apollo and the free will of man. The gods do not enforce. There is always a choice, even if only an internal one. This is not simply a tragedy of fate - "bad things happening to good people". The character of Oedipus is essential to the events which unfold.

Part Four: <u>Oedipus Rex:</u>

In Oedipus Rex the oracle is consulted as to how to restore harmony to Thebes and rid it of the plague. An evil must be rooted out, a wrong redressed. No matter that Oedipus didn't start the chain of actions and events that led up to his error, committed in ignorance of the truth. There had been a long history of errors before he was born, but still Oedipus had a responsibility of necessity to fulfill.

The play opens with Oedipus at the height of his powers, respected, upright and just; a king and a leader of his people. He is hailed as a saviour, since it was he who rid Thebes of "the hard songstress" …"the watcher….who wove dark song". Unknown to Oedipus and the Thebans, he is not the saviour he appears to be but actually part of the pestilence that affects the city, since the coming of the Sphinx results from the unatoned actions of Laius. Ironically, the death of Laius could not be properly investigated at the time because of the arrival of the Sphinx in Thebes. So continues the shrouding of things as they truly are and illusion holds sway.

On the face of it, as the play opens, Oedipus's problem is simple: Who killed Laius? But as he investigates, the question changes to "who am I?" Gradually, through Oedipus's insistent uncovering of the truth, he learns his own history. Freud likens it to the progress of psychoanalysis.

> "The work of the Athenian dramatist exhibits the way in which the long-past deed of Oedipus is brought to light by an investigation ingeniously protracted and fanned into life by ever fresh relays of evidence. To this extent it has a certain resemblance to the progress of psychoanalysis."

Oedipus gradually realizes that he is faced with the expiation of ancestral sin. He must become the vessel through which that which was hidden and dark may be exposed to the light of day. Through his sacrifice the gods may once again be pleased and balance can be restored. He is the scapegoat and the sacrifice. Sterility, death and disease afflict the city. The offender must be identified and expelled, taking the affliction of the city with him.

As in the tradition of the scapegoat, Oedipus has had a period of living comfortably and happily. Like the scapegoat, he is held responsible for the evils of the community. He is also the chosen of the gods and sanctified as a sacrifice for the greater good. Both king and scapegoat are individuals responsible for the good of the collective. He thus becomes a purifier for the people.

Part Five: The role of fate in Oedipus Rex:

Oedipus was a man of determination in both senses of the word – a man of fate and a man of action and will. Oedipus Rex is a play about the mysterious workings of Fate. Both Oedipus and Laius have attempted to avoid responsibility. The paradox

here is that without proper reverence for limits, widespread suffering occurs, yet to bow to necessity can bring unbearable awareness.

The journey of Oedipus in the plays Oedipus Rex and Oedipus at Colonus is a journey from certainty to uncertainty and finally to integration. Oedipus goes from being a hero in the outside world to being a tainted and reviled outcast and at last to true heroism. His self-blinding carries a dual meaning, referring both to his wilful blindness and to his turning to the world within. In doing so, and in going into exile, he gains in wisdom and character.

Sophocles' characters live with a sense of order and adherence to natural law. The gods' authority is unquestioned and noble values are completely accepted. Sophocles presents this order of things at its most complex and problematic. In his plays Sophocles accepts these absolute principles as fixed, like the law of gravity and concerns himself with the individual's reaction to them.

What is of interest to Sophocles is the relationship of the individual to chance and necessity – and what choices he makes. Similarly, Freud says of the Oedipal phase of infantile development:

> "It is ….true that even at birth the whole individual is destined to die, and perhaps his organic disposition may already contain the indication of what he is to die from. Nevertheless, it remains of interest to follow out how this innate programme is carried out and in what way accidental noxae exploit his disposition." (Freud, P. 316, Vol 7)

At the play's opening, Oedipus is a lucky man, a "son of Tyche". Fortune has favoured him and he has won a kingdom and a bride. He is portrayed as a good man, blessed with nobility of character, a leader and saviour of his people, loved by the gods. He is a man who helps others and takes their burdens upon his shoulders. His people regard him as almost a god himself and he in turn calls them his children. He is the "first of men", an example of greatness and stands high above all others. As a king he has the responsibility of discovering how to lift the plague from the city of Thebes.

To the Greeks the worst sin was hubris – an overstepping of boundaries of the natural order. Like Icarus flying too close to the sun or Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, the laws of necessity punish hubris.

What was the hubris of Oedipus? I contend that it was his stance of knowing. He thought he could escape his fate. Rather than taking it up and getting to the bottom of things he attempted to run away. He thought he knew himself, his history and his heritage and placed too much trust in his own intellectual ability to understand the outlines of his life. His arrogant reliance on his own strengths – intelligence, dignity and pride brought him down.

The Jungian analyst Liz Greene says of this:

"The core of Greek tragedy is the dilemma of hubris, which is both man's greatest gift and his great crime. For in pitting himself against his fated limits, he acts out an heroic destiny, yet by the very nature of this heroic attempt he is doomed by the Erinyes to retribution." (p. 20, L.G.)

(The Furies, or Erinyes, were goddesses of vengeance who reigned over the punishment of wrongdoers, especially those who shed familial blood or broke their oaths. Their punishment was madness.) *footnote?*

Once he has at last unravelled the mystery of his past and has seen only too clearly the results of his blindness, a judgment of innocence or guilt doesn't help Oedipus. It can't alleviate his sense of shock and horror at what he has unknowingly participated in. It can't release him from the truth about himself and it cannot alleviate the contradiction between what he imagined himself to be and what he truly is. He himself is the riddle he has to solve. He must now face the truth of his past and the reality of his own condition. But even in his horror, self-revulsion and shame, Oedipus has a sense of being singled out for greatness as an example for all. Before he goes into exile he calls for all to see him exposed as the murderer of his father and husband of his mother.

Incest and parricide were among the most reviled crimes of Sophocles's day. Freud refers to them as "the two great crimes proscribed by totemism." (Introductory lectures, Vol 1, p. 379) Those who committed these crimes were beyond the pale. They were tainted, and ignorance of the (divine) law was no excuse. Oedipus thus becomes stamped with a religious quality to be feared. He is marked now as belonging to the gods and because of that he is both defiled and consecrated.

No longer blind to his fate, Oedipus voluntarily goes into exile. As the Greek scholar Charles Segal says:

"He comes to accept that his life "has a particular shape, a pattern which it must fulfill, formed by the interlocking of internal and external determinants, character and chance both." (pp. 138-139). (Charles Segal "The Music of the Sphinx" – Bloom)

Part Six: Oedipus at Colonus

In old age Sophocles returned to the story of Oedipus, the only Greek dramatist to deal with his passing. The scene is the grove of the Furies at Colonus. When Athena the goddess of wisdom, offered them haven and honours in her city, the Furies became known as the Euminides – The Kindly Ones. It is said that they came to terrorize and stayed to be blessed. Their grove was a place of beauty and peace.

In the play, Oedipus stumbles blindly upon the grove of the Furies. He is allowed to remain until the king decides what to do. He informs Theseus that he has a benefit to confer on whosoever will give him shelter. As a man marked by the gods Oedipus is regarded as one for whom they have special plans. They have taken him as their own, to do with what they will and to use for good or ill. In this way, he is now consecrated and holy and to be treated with great respect.

Through his hard-won human experience and suffering, Oedipus has acquired inner sight. He doesn't look into the future, but into the past to find the meaning of his life and to face his own all-too-human condition. He has come to his resting place after a long journey. Suffering, time and nobility of character have taught patience and self-reflection to Oedipus. He has learned that man must suffer to be wise and he has changed from the unwisely impetuous man of Oedipus.Rex. His temper is no longer blindly directed. He uses it now with authority.

His reward in Oedipus at Colonus is death. But in death he gains what he sought in life – to be equated with the gods. He becomes a hero – a spirit who has power for good or ill in the affairs of men. He is still himself – still proud and wrathful, but he has passed from exile and disgrace to once again become a man with authority and power. Only this time it is not a material power but a power of the spirit. He is accepted by the gods as a man of stature, a man of endurance and dignity amidst all the fateful curves that have been thrown at him.

Part Seven: Fate and Trauma

Oedipus was seeking self-knowledge when he went to the oracle, but he was not able to use what the oracle told him. Instead of reflecting on the message and the warning he has been given, he goes into a panic and flees, a defensive response. Everything seems to go well for a time. He defeats the Sphinx and Thebes welcomes him as a saviour-hero instead of the bringer of the plague that he is.

He has the freedom to know or to not know the truth about himself, but in fleeing from his chance at self-knowledge, Oedipus is doomed to enact his fate in the most graphic way.

Once he stops fleeing and turns to face his fate he is able to integrate his experience. He suffers a lot in the process, but it is a "useful" suffering. When we meet up with Oedipus again at Colonus, he has made his peace with the Furies.

What are we to make of this? There has been a long journey of many years' duration and at the end of it when we encounter Oedipus at Colonus he is a changed man, yet still himself. I find myself wondering about this journey, this transition time. It is the in-between space of the two plays. What has transpired? Oedipus shuts himself off from the outside world, a shamed exile, and wanders alone. One might see this as a kind of schizoid withdrawal. He struggles with pain, grief, loss, shame

and perhaps rage as well, against the fate that was allotted to him. Exiled from human connection, I imagine that Oedipus goes through a kind of death. He questions his identity and must come to terms with what is possible for the future. He must accept a new reality and begin again. He has been brought low, going from king to beggar. His self-blinding indicates to us that there is important internal work to be attended to.

He is pursued by the vengeful Furies, the harsh, punishing super-ego, the Kleinian bad attacking objects, with which his ego is partly identified. Oedipus must undergo the difficult task of ego development, contending with his despair over ever being able to reconcile the harm that has been done, both to him and by him. He must internalize his relationship with his lost world of human relations, his values and perhaps most of all, his relationship with who he thought himself to be and who he finds himself to be now.

How is it that the Furies who pursue Oedipus vengefully for his unwitting crime of parricide and incest can also be known as the Eumenides, The Kindly Ones? I believe it is because once we are able to understand ourselves with compassion, knowing ourselves as loving and lovable, we can face our guilt and our self-recrimination.

The daughter-sister of Oedipus, Antigone, joins him in his lonely exile and ministers to him, showing him loving care and dependability. In effect she becomes the good mother and helps Oedipus to recover (or perhaps discover) his good internal mother. Now he can grieve his losses and reparation can be set in motion. Only when we gain confidence in our reparative capacity can we heal. Once Oedipus has come to know himself and has faced his guilt, shame, and self-hatred, the Furies are reconciled to him and can welcome and shelter him in their grove. Oedipus's arrival at the grove of the Furies in their aspect of "The Kindly Ones" signals his arrival at a new position of ego integration and self-containment.

It is in the grove of the Eumenides at Colonus that Oedipus finds new connections of love and belonging with his daughters Antigone and Ismene and at last a new community upon whom he can bestow blessings. The restructuring of his being-in-the-world is completed. Oedipus comes through his journey stronger and wiser than before.

Part Eight: Fate and the Family

The family curse of Greek myth is a vivid portrayal of the invisible inheritance of the family line; an embodiment of the fate of the family. As we know from our practices, unresolved sexual, emotional and psychological difficulties are passed on to the children of families.

Liz Greene says of this:

> "Our families are our fate because we are made of the substance of those families, and our heredity – physical and psychic- is given at birth….It is as though the real unity of the family psyche is revealed by one individual taking on the responsibility of working with the family complexes." (p. 95, L.G.)

Although a manifestation of fate, a parent can seek greater insight into self so offspring are not burdened by unconscious dilemmas. If Laius had made expiation for his crime against Chryssipus, Oedipus, his son, could have been spared his ensuing fate. Instead, Oedipus is now left with the task. He seeks to atone for the past, not only his but that of his family lineage, in the grove of the Eumenides. In this way he can kill his father and marry his mother on a higher internal level.

Just as the Oedipus complex re-emerges at puberty, to be reworked, Oedipus must integrate the internal mother and father, bringing about their demise at the same time.

Freud says of this period:

> "From this time onwards, the human individual has to devote himself to the great task of detaching himself from his parents, and not until that task is achieved can he cease to be a child and become a member of the social community." (Intro. Lectures, vol. 1, p. 380)

Oedipus has suffered, but it has been a conscious suffering and it brings benefit not only for himself but for others.

Part Nine: The Oedipus Complex

Perhaps Freud was referring to the intergenerational family curse or fate when he conceived of the Oedipus complex, for he has this to say about it:

> "Mankind as a whole may have acquired its sense of guilt, the ultimate source of religion and morality, at the beginning of its history, in connection with the Oedipus complex." (Freud, Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 1 Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. P. 375).

Heredity is also an aspect of Fate, that is to say, natural law, as is development and growth along certain pre-ordained structured lines. The inherent predispositions of the body can't be altered. Our instinctual drives are the province of fate – they are born of the flesh – universal to the human family. According to Freud, the Oedipus complex as well is a necessary part of development, one function of which is to "erect a barrier against incest". (S. Freud, On Sexuality, Vol. 7)

He states:

> "Although the majority of human beings go through the Oedipus complex as an individual experience, it is nevertheless a phenomenon which is determined and laid down by heredity and which is bound to pass away according to programme when the next pre-ordained phase of development sets in." (p. 315)

Freud gave the name of Oedipus to his discovery of the existence and nature of infantile sexuality. At first he theorized that infantile sexuality existed only in the dormant mode unless an adult intervened and brought it into the open, with disastrous results. This he called the seduction theory.

He abandoned the seduction theory in the summer of 1897 and conceived of the Oedipus complex shortly thereafter. The seduction theory has been misunderstood as an eschewment of the existence of childhood sexual abuse and the resulting trauma.

James Strachey says:

> "It was not until the summer of 1897 that Freud found himself obliged to abandon his seduction theory. He announced the event in a letter to Fliess of Sept. 21 (letter 69), and his almost simultaneous discovery of the Oedipus complex in his self-analysis (letters 70 and 71 of Oct. 3 and 15) led inevitably to the realization that sexual impulses operated normally in the youngest children without any need for outside stimulation (see, eg. Letter 75 of Nov. 14). With this realization Freud's sexual theory was in fact completed." (p. 36, J. Strachey)

As mentioned above, Freud posited that one function of the Oedipus complex is to erect a barrier against incest. He has this to say:

> > "The barrier against incest is probably among the historical acquisitions of mankind, and, like other moral taboos, has no doubt already become established in many persons by organic inheritance….Psychoanalytic investigation shows however, how intensely the individual struggles with the temptation to incest during his period of growth and how frequently the barrier is transgressed in phantasies and even in reality." (Freud, p. 148, n.3)

As to the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, Freud thought that it may be that as a normal phase of human development, when the time comes for its disintegration, it passes away "…just as the milk teeth fall out when the permanent ones begin to grow." (p. 315)

Through this passing away of the Oedipus complex Freud believed the super ego was born.

He says of this:

> "The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis. The libidinal trends belonging to the Oedipal complex are in part desexualized and sublimated (a thing which probably happens with every transformation into an identification)…" (Freud "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex, The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 7, p. 319)

Part Ten: Working with fate in our lives and in our practices

Insight does not and cannot spare suffering although it can spare blind-suffering. The gods know the future but they do not order it. Oedipus becomes great because he accepts responsibility for all his acts, including the unconscious and unknowing ones.

When we become willing to own our past, we truly become masters, not of our fate, but more importantly, of ourselves. This is our exercise of free will, for as Jung says,

"Free will is the ability to do gladly that which I must do."

Or as the Greek Cleanthes said,

"The Fates lead the man who is willing and drag the one who is not." (attributed by Seneca to Cleanthes)

You may think it isn't fair that Oedipus should have to pay for his father's crimes. Why should Oedipus have to take the responsibility for this curse and terrible fate?

In Oedipus at Colonus, he himself says,

"And yet, how was I evil in myself?
I had been wronged, I retaliated; even had I
Known what I was doing, was that evil?"

But isn't this what we encounter in our own lives? Do we not pay for the mistakes of others, our ancestors' especially? We are all born into families that have handed down to them an intergenerational "plague" or curse to deal with. It may become fainter and fainter with each generation, but like original sin, it leaves its mark.

What happens to Oedipus is part of the web of human life. The innocent suffer with the guilty. This is the nature of life. A taboo is broken in all innocence. Children are

born into circumstances of privation or abuse; good intentions go awry.

The Greeks believed in the natural order of the universe. Oedipus is blasted by contravening this natural law in the same way as someone may be if they interfere with the natural flow of electricity. It is not a punishment for wrongdoing, but a natural outcome and there are consequences. We do not suffer because we are bad, but because the natural order of human life has been upset and there are consequences. Trauma brings traumatic response and being a good person of intelligence or even wisdom does not always protect one against the blows of fate.

But Oedipus also acts in his own right. He cannot blame everything on his fate. He has a part in it too. As he admits:

> "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo that brought this bitterness,
> My sorrows to completion
> But the hand that struck me was none but my own" (ll. 1329 ff.)

To Sophocles, to have been great of soul is everything. To him I think this is what is meant to be a human being. This is the true answer to the riddle of the Sphinx.

Taking responsibility is what is asked of us in the psychotherapeutic process. Paradoxically, owning our fate can deliver us from it.

Part Eleven: Fate and transformation:

Perhaps Fate is a property of the unconscious, shaping our lives more potently than any of our acts of conscious cognition; an inner psychological ordering principle or pattern, a natural law within. Like the blind world of the instincts, it is a realm of evolutionary necessity, reactive to boundary violations because survival itself may be threatened, the sequential pattern broken.

Can we transform our fates? Our **relationship** with the unchangeable can change. If we can find meaning and understanding in our lives, through this may come the possibility that the pattern can express itself in a different way; different levels of expression for psychic energy. It can transform from instinctual compulsion to meaningful inner experience.

Liz Greene says:

> "It would seem that consciousness ….is the fulcrum upon which the relationship between fate and freedom balances, for this quality of consciousness permits fate to unfold in a richer and more complex tapestry which is at the same time both more supportive of the ego and, paradoxically, more honouring of the unconscious." (p. 156, L.G.)

Conclusion

The existence of Fate, or necessity, teaches us the need to accept limitations in order to concentrate our energies and live a centred and fulfilled life. Native American teachings say that the Great Spirit sent us here to learn the value of limitation.

Limits can help us to focus in a useful and satisfying way. If we do not know our limits, we do not really know ourselves or anyone else. Our personal limits help to define us; they keep us within respectful bounds. Even our bodies, our skeleton and skin form a limit, a boundary between inside and outside. Limits define the boundaries and make it possible to interact with each other in cooperation and tolerance.

As psychotherapists it is important for ourselves and our clients to know our limits, so that we can do what we do best, most skilfully, rather than attempt to be other than who and what we are, misrepresenting ourselves both to ourselves and to our clients.

Our limits are part of what makes us human, flawed, but with the freedom to choose within the cracks of our imperfection, whether those choices lead us to learning, evolution and growth or to breakdown, relapse and stagnation.

When it comes right down to it, what matters at the final limit – death? What we have outwardly accumulated and accomplished, or what we have learned, experienced and found contentment in? I humbly submit that it is the latter.

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