

Confronting finitude

A conversation with James Hollis

James Hollis was born in Springfield, Illinois, and taught for 26 years in various colleges and universities before retraining as a Jungian analyst at the Jung Institute of Zurich. He is a licensed Jungian analyst in private practice in Washington DC and the author of 18 books, including Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life and Living an Examined Life.

OB: Could you say a little by way of introduction about how you became a Jungian analyst? It isn't the kind of job people say they want when they're five years old and they're asked what they want to be when they grow up.

JH: When I left college, I had no idea what to do with my life. So I went on to graduate school and I kept learning, and finding myself with an interest in ideas, and that led me to college teaching. I started teaching at the university level, when I was 25 years old, and I've never really stopped.

On the other hand, at midlife, I was blessed with a serious depression, which was contrary to all of my heroic efforts to live otherwise. That sent me to my first hour of personal analysis, a long, long time ago, in Philadelphia. I realized that a lot of my focus on outer learning was in some way a defense against the reality of an inner life that was in turmoil, and undertaking personal analysis led me ultimately to go to Zurich to continue the training process.

You're right, no one sets off to be a Jungian analyst. Not many people on the planet even understand what that means. I can't imagine as a child that I ever fantasized that sitting with people hour after hour after hour, day after day, would have been an appealing prospect, especially when we're focused on their suffering or the issues in their life which are harmful to them. But now I can't imagine a more meaningful conversation that I could have. And so that's why at 81 years old, I'm still having that conversation.

OB: One of the ideas that I write about in my book is the way that we approach the question of how to use our time in ways that are based around helping us *avoid* confronting our finitude, rather than confronting it. And it seems to me that this idea of our being finite creatures, yet capable of

thinking infinite thoughts and making infinite plans, and the tension that arises – this is something central to your work. In *The Archetypal Imagination* you write: “That disparity, the longing for eternity and the limits of finitude is our dilemma, the conscious suffering of which is also what most marks our species. It’s the symbolic capacity which defines us uniquely.”

JH: That’s right. Blaise Pascal in the 17th century said: We’re so fragile. We’re so vulnerable. We’re like a reed that could be easily snapped in two – but he said, “We are a thinking reed.” And he might have added we are an *imagining* reed – we can conjure with the universe that so casually could destroy us. And that’s the paradox, he said, of the grandeur of this species and also its infinite vulnerability.

So it’s precisely our finitude, the 4,000 weeks that you talk about in your new book, which I admire by the way, that requires us to address the question of meaning. If I lived in perpetuity, I could do one thing for a century, and then I could do something else for another century, and so forth.

A great American philosopher, Paris Hilton, said once, “I sure hope there’s an afterlife because if there isn’t, it’s going to be terribly, terribly boring.” In fact, if there’s no afterlife, she won’t be here to worry about it. But it’s very much the paradox that Pascal was observing: it’s our finite nature and our capacity to grasp that that makes our decisions have gravity, makes them have purpose and meaning. If you’re not living a purposeful life or a life that you find meaningful, then for heaven’s sake, change it – for the simple reason that you’re not here forever. Don’t put off until retirement to go back and pick up the pieces of your life you left behind, because you may not reach retirement, or you may find yourself dealing with physical infirmity and so forth.

A personal example: this past year I spent, while working full time, dealing with two cancers that came upon me. So I was in and out of hospitals for surgery and chemo infusions and massive radiation. And I’m still in treatment for it, although the current telemetry is very good. My mantra was what I called “militant submission.” First of all, why would I ever think that I’m immortal here? I’m finite. So I can’t deny that I’m speeding toward my dissolution. Why would I think that I could be exempt from illness? And

to submit to that is actually a certain freedom. But the militant part is that I was also going to live as fully as I could in the face of that.

So I wrote a book and a half, and I'm working on another one at the moment, and I had a full work practice. And that's why I'm pleased to say I honestly didn't think very much about cancer. I paid attention to all my instructions and treatment plans. But the rest was almost a kind of a peripheral matter rather than being preoccupied with it.

OB: That's fascinating. Your productivity as an author when it's not even your main job is a little bit intimidating.

You're describing there, I suppose, the experience of being brought into confrontation with finitude in a way that's very hard to avoid. But it does seem that whenever we can get away with it, we have a very deep-seated desire to not confront. We'll put a huge amount of energy and mental effort into *not* facing these truths and trying to feel immortal, unlimited by age or health. And as I understand the Jungian perspective on things, that's when the trouble starts.

JH: Well, of course it is. And it often leads to a superficial and distracted life. I think it was Lewis Carroll who said: "We are but children, dear, who fret to find our bedtimes near." You see, there is something rather infantile about modern popular culture, which is all about distraction. 24 hours, seven days a week, in perpetuity. What is it we're distracted from? Well, one thing is an encounter with our own depths. Another is our encounter with mortality. And the flight from these things leads to not only a fugitive life, but a superficial life. We *can* recognize mortality infinitude and our susceptibility without succumbing to despair.

That's why I think submission is critical, meaning that I'm not exempt from the human condition, and why should I think I was? On the other hand, how am I living? In service to what values – and what am I going to do about fighting for those things that really matter for me? Because if I don't do it now, when do I think it's going to happen in my life?

One of the things that Jung said that I'm always haunted by, in a constructive way, is what is denied inwardly will have a tendency to come to us as outer fate, or what we think is fate. I was talking with someone earlier today who's had a series of serial relationships that have all turned out the same way. And he's only now beginning to recognize he's the one constant in all of those relationships. And so this flight from encountering what it is in him that's drawn to certain kinds of people and certain kinds of dynamics – this is something that's going to take some unpacking for sure. But without which he will continue to be at the mercy of what he thinks is outer fate.

OB: There's a developmental view of this according to which the infant and the toddler feels unlimited and grandiose, but that's appropriate, and then healthy development is a process of gradually being put in touch with the truth that you're not God. Is that a fair understanding?

JH: Sooner or later, reality knocks on the door, limitation knocks on the door and the inflation of the child is replaced progressively. Because at first, as an infant, you have this total sense of the imperial sovereignty, everybody oohs and aahs at you. You can get attention at anytime you want. And then from probably two or three onward, you have to start dealing with playmates on the playground who may not always bow to your infinite superiority. That's why often cartoon figures or athletes or popular actors become so important for them, because they can identify with the magic that they think that those people have. Well, sooner or later, that has to be replaced by realistic thinking – and we learn, as adults, there's no magic. There's hard work – and you don't always get rewarded for hard work.

And you slowly learn that there is no contract with the universe. That's what the Book of Job was about. Not many people have bothered to read that for a few centuries. Life happens and you're going to have to deal with it as it comes to you. And a person who has avoided that is not going to be particularly prepared for reality when it does appear. Throughout life, one is being forced into progressively coping with the world, losing our security over and over and over. And the thing that breaks down so many adult relationships is that this need for constant reassurance and security gets transferred to someone who's just an ordinary human being on the planet, just like us, yet we've endowed them, unconsciously, with expectations that would constitute magic if in fact they could produce those things.

What part of my work is about is helping people recognize that they're equipped by nature or divinity, whichever metaphor you prefer, with the essential resilience, the capacity to take on life, even if it feels intimidating at times. And even if it feels beyond your powers, we always have a task in every situation. And that task is essentially what is it that moves me from a sense of victimhood to a sense of active participation in what's happening in my life.

Probably the toughest talk I ever had to give in my life – and I still shudder to think about it – was that I was asked by a hospital in Houston, Texas to go speak to glioblastoma patients, people who had probably three weeks to three months to live. Now, what do you say to people under those circumstances? I thought, well, if I were in that position – that sooner or later we all are in our different ways – what would I be most feeling? Well, I would feel keenly the loss of connections to people that matter to me, such as children and partner and so forth. But I'd also feel acutely the loss of my freedom. So I tried to focus that night on what is it within us that can restore to us a sense of personal autonomy.

I realized everybody for understandable reasons was avoiding looking at each other and staring at the ground. So I thought: What's the most innocent question I could ask? I asked: do you have a long way to drive before you get here to the hospital? Because some people came from over an hour's drive, or two hours' drive. The ice was broken, and there were jokes, and after a while we got to talking to each other. I won't say bonds formed that are everlasting there, but it humanized the place. We were all prisoners of the biological condition but we didn't have to be prisoners psychologically. That's why Jean-Paul Sartre said sometimes the prisoner in the cell is freer than the man who holds the keys to the jail cell.

OB: I can imagine somebody listening to all this and saying: there's something about it, the sort of choosing to confront all this darkness and difficulty that's kind of a downer. I mean, eventually we're all going to have to face different forms of sadness and pain in our lives, but why seek it out?

JH: This is why your choices matter. If you think that denial is a good way to live your journey, go ahead, try it, see how well that works. I think it

means that one is a fugitive, because one is spending one's time avoiding something rather than stepping into what is really meaningful to you. And that's why I said that while I couldn't have imagined as a child having the conversations that I have on a daily basis, today I can't imagine anything more honorific than to be invited into people's lives in times of difficulty for them, and to share this journey together because we're here a short time.

One of the things it steels me to do is to decide what is important in my life and what's not important, and to spend less and less time with the things that I really don't want to be doing with my life. I don't want to waste my time, precious as it is, doing the things that don't matter to me anymore if they ever did, because we're here this short time. That's not morbid. That's an injunction to being decisive. That's an invitation to be thoughtful: what are your choices and in service to what?

OB: What does that look like, in your life?

JH: Well, I've spent quite a bit of time in administration through the years. Originally in academia and subsequently in nonprofits. I'm remaining on one board at this time in my life out of loyalty, but I'm not spending any of my time anymore on committee meetings or administrative issues. They have to be done, they're important, but I don't have to do them. Saying no for me has not been an easy thing. I'm still working at it as a matter of fact, but saying no to more and more people who are wanting pieces of your time and energy and so forth. And I have to decide: is this important for me or not? Is this something I really need to be doing in service to the right values here? Okay, fine. But if not, I'm not going to do it.

OB: The book of yours that really led me to your work is *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*, about confronting finitude at midlife. But you're now someone who one might call an elder, and I'm interested to know if your understandings have changed. Do you think you understand things about the finitude of life that you didn't when you were writing that book?

JH: That's a very good question. And I think the answer is a qualified yes. First of all, we're always in service to something. When you're a child you're responding to what your parents want from you. What playmates want from you. The schoolteacher wants from you. The employer wants from

you. Your partner wants. Maybe very legitimate responding – but it takes our authority away from us. And the second half of life – we’re speaking here more psychologically than chronologically because sometimes it doesn’t even begin until a person loses their spouse through death or they’re downsized at work, or the children leave – that’s when you have to say, “All right, what kind of obligation do I have to my own soul here? And what is the soul asking of me?”

Now, I’ve asked this question periodically of individuals. It doesn’t matter what their background is like, whether it’s overtly religious or it’s coming from a holy secular place, but as you understand the word soul: What does your soul ask of you? And what are you going to do about that? So in the second half of life, the responsibility is the recovery of a personal authority. You have it when you’re born, as instinct – but then we are necessarily socialized and we trade it away every day. But getting back personal authority, what does that mean? It’s that I have to discern what is right for me, as judged from the responses within me, and then have the courage to live that in the world outside of me.

The unreflective life is responding simply to whatever the pressures are in your environment. And if that’s how you’re going to spend your journey, full speed ahead. But there’s something inside sickens and sours when that happens. And in my profession, strange as this may seem, we pay deep respect to something called psychopathology. Suffering.

Nobody wants to suffer, but it’s suffering, the autonomy of our psyche’s response to how our life is going, that is our clue as to what is right or wrong for us. My own life example was that I had accomplished all of my goals in life by the time I was 30 years old. By the time I was 35, I was deeply depressed, and in analysis for the first time. I didn’t think I was starting the second half of life. I was just trying to figure out how quickly I could get rid of these feelings and resume the merry-go-round. But it was the beginning of a different kind of journey, and a more authentic journey, I believe. And so psychopathology is the autonomous response of our system, our natural organism, expressing its disfavor as to what’s happening to us from outside, or the choices we’re making.

And that's a powerful clue. It gets our attention. So for example, just to look at depression for a second: I was forced to ask the question: if I've done the right things, as I believed them to be, then why has my psyche autonomously withdrawn its approval and support? Why is it that I can't will that energy up as I was able to earlier in my life?

And the answer that became obvious after a while was: It's because you're placing it in the wrong directions. You have to ask yourself: What is the psyche asking of you here. Not what your complexes are asking of you or what the world's asking of you. And when you make that turn within, this is not narcissism, this is not navel gazing; it's checking your own internal guidance system. That's what we get separated from.

In 1862, Emily Dickinson said: "The sailor cannot see the north, but knows the needle can." And I think she was acutely aware, based on other things she said, about the slipping of external authorities, of the religion of her family, and of other points of reference of Western culture. She was saying: You better have a compass. And if you have a compass, then you can figure out what's true north for you, and make your decisions. But if you don't have a compass and you don't know to look within, you're going to be very much adrift.

OB: This seems like the right place to bring in this question of yours that I've written about several times, and always had an amazing response from people for whom it really seems to resonate: the idea that when you're facing a significant fork in the road, or a choice about how to live your life, a better question than asking "What will make me happy?" is "Does this choice enlarge me or diminish me?"

JH: That's right. I'm going to say something outrageous here, but happiness is overrated. It's not like it's a steady state. If you're thirsty, happiness is a glass of cold water, for example. But too much of it, you drown. So it's very contextual and it's short-lived and happiness is the byproduct of being in the right relationship with your own soul at that moment. But if you ask that question: does this path, this relationship, this career enlarge me or diminish me? ...We usually know the answer to that question. We know it in our gut. And if you don't know the answer to that question, keep asking it. It will reveal itself.

Another question that I think is important when we do things or fail to do things, is: if I do something or fail to do something, what is that in service to, inside of me? That's a question that begins to open the door. Maybe if I do a "good thing", it's not really a good thing, it's an old compliance, to stay out of harm's way. Maybe that's my good boy complex. Maybe I'm simply avoiding conflict here. But unless I start asking questions about that, more of my life is going to be on automatic pilot than I would ever imagine possible.

Most folks go through most days on automatic pilot and don't reflect upon it. When you say, "Why did I do that? What was that in service to inside of me? What old button, or issue or agenda did that hit in me? Where have I been here before?" These are questions that begin to open up the mechanism working within each of us. And through that, you gain some greater sense of self-awareness. And with that, the potential for a greater sense of freedom in how you live your life.

OB: Of course what people want, of course, when they are feeling troubled by finitude, or overwhelmed by the pressure of time, is *tips* – they want techniques and methods and things that they can do. I know that people in the depth psychology tradition tend not to be fond of tips. But what can you say to someone who wants to know what to *do* about this situation, who is already troubled by these questions and wants to take action?

JH: Well, yes, first of all, the whole self-help industry out there is fueled by giving people tips, but if they worked, we would know it by now. The real issue is people don't ask large questions. If you don't ask large questions, you're going to have a small life. I don't say it judgmentally. I say it with sympathy. Large questions bring you a larger journey. What really does matter to me? What is on automatic pilot? What fear is driving this repetitive pattern? What kind of payoff do I get through my avoidances in life? Because there's always a payoff. People have to start asking a different kind of question about themselves. And again, this is not self-absorption. It's paying attention to what's governing your life. If you don't pay attention, nobody else is going to, and they're going to have to pay the cost of your unconsciousness.

When Jung said, “The greatest burden the child must bear is the un-lived life of the parent” – boy, if you’re a parent that really reminds you, “I better be doing my own work here, because where I’m stuck in life my child, who I might profess to love, is either going to stay stuck or be spending their life trying to get unstuck.” So the work we do is not just about us. It’s the kind of person that we bring to our partners, to children, to our communities, to our society, and so forth.

So when it comes to tips, I think, the first one is to really start paying attention more to the internal guidance systems that nature gave us. First is the feeling function. You don't choose feelings. Feelings are autonomous, qualitative evaluations by your psyche as to how things are going. We rarely really say, “But what do I really feel about that?” Because you might find out that you're doing things you really have no positive feeling for, because there’s a cost for not doing it or it will unsettle something in your life.

Secondly, to follow the energy systems. When you're doing what's right for you, the energy’s there. We all know that. And yes, we have to mobilize energy repeatedly to do the tasks of life: you get up at three in the morning to feed the baby and so forth. But if you keep putting your energy in the wrong places, then it always leads to boredom and then to depression and burnout and self-medication and so forth. So find where the energy wants to go in your life. And when you track that, the energy returns to you.

Thirdly, dreams. Most people think “I don’t dream” or “I don’t dream very much” but in my work, we recognize that this is another of those autonomous, qualitative responses by the deep psyche to how our life is going. And if we pay attention to our dreams over time, we realize there’s some other agency inside, some other intelligence that is invested in my life. It’s paying attention. It’s trying to communicate to me. And it would behoove me to begin to dialogue with that. And when people do that in analysis – and if they’re not in analysis, then they need to start paying attention on their own – then that whole center of gravity begins to shift, and the quality and the depth and the dignity of a person's life begins to change.

And then fourthly, and the most important of all is the issue of meaning. If what you’re doing is truly meaningful for you, it will carry you through

difficult times. It will help you, support you, sustain you, guide you. And if what you're doing is not meaningful, you can't force it, over time, without something awful happening. It gets transferred into the body, or it shows up as a debilitating depression, or whatever. This isn't a matter of ignoring the outer world. It's saying: "What kind of person am I bringing to the outer world? What kind of person am I sharing with those people around me of who I claim to care?" That's what it's about. And the best thing I can do for others is bring a more evolved person in relationship to them.

There's a wonderful exchange in Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet, where the young poet is saying, "Give me the answers, give me the answers." And Rilke said, You're not ready to live the answers. He said, you have to live the questions, "until some distant day when you live your way into the answers" that are right for you. I can give you my answers right now, but they don't work for you necessarily. What works for you? Well, that's for you to figure out.