

# Underground River of Life

One of the biggest traps to progressing our potential and wellbeing is lethargy of the mind, that is, not being fully awake and aware, just cruising along through each day in a trance of activities and habits where we can be lulled into the false safety and comfort of familiarity. It is easy to do, after all people tend to live this way with routines and habits, even when it can look like a life of variety on the surface. The entertainment and information alone that are readily available from an armchair can hold attention for weeks at a time. But attention is not synonymous with mindfulness. While all that entertainment, information and knowledge captures us, do we remember who we are and why we are here? The *Underground River of Unmindfulness* us lulls into being asleep on the job. Unmindfulness is not the same as rest or tranquility.

In Greek mythology, the River Lethe was an underground river and part of the underworld. Lethe is the River of lethargy or Unmindfulness in modern terms and it flowed through the cave of Hypnos, a word originally meaning “sleep” and later becoming “hypnotise” referring to going into an induced trance of sleepy suggestibility (the word *lethargy* is from the Greek *lethe* meaning “forgetting, forgetfulness”). Plato’s *Republic* goes even further describing the dead arriving at a barren wasteland called the “Plain of Lethe”.

Are unmindfulness and lethargy starting to sound like some fairly lethal stuff that needs to be wrestled with?

## **Underground Lethargy**

Have you ever had the feeling that things aren’t quite right in your life? That somewhere in the back of your mind there are rumblings you don’t really hear because you know if you listen they will speak a truth or ask a question that could lead you into new and unfamiliar realms? They could change things in ways you haven’t anticipated and maybe you won’t be ready.

Many people have such disconcerting rumblings, which tend to grow louder as we grow older. On one level we continue on with life regardless, getting on with our various activities, work, relationships, friends, interests and enjoyments. But on another inward level, the background rumblings become more distinct, and when we listen carefully, to our dismay we realise what they are saying.

Every now and then during quiet times and self-reflection, a crystal clear awareness comes to the fore that brings great insight. For instance, there is a realisation that you are a distinctive, never-to-be-repeated human being with a unique contribution to make within a finite lifetime. There’s a lot in that when you think about it. Although aspects of life are shared, we each live a life with adventures and trials that are essentially our own

individual experience. That scares some people and delights others, depending on your perspective and assumptions.

Do you regard the world as basically hostile or as benevolent? The way you answer depends largely on early life experiences because they colour interpretations of all further life experiences. However, whatever cards you were dealt initially, it is the way you respond to them now that will influence your happiness. To change early negative experiences calls for current new perspectives and awareness. For example, you could realise now that you don't know what you really want in life or if you do, you don't fulfil it because your life program has been to live for others, and you have been living out standards and ambitions on their behalf more than your own values and dreams. This is just one example of how such recognition can come as a shocking revelation yet one that is vital in order to become more yourself. Clear awareness with a fresh interpretation is often a revelation.

But we all know what it is like. Thoughts and awareness like these can be fleeting in nature and get lost or pushed out of mind in the day-to-day activities of life. We become caught up in practicalities and the world we know that calls for attention. That is, until the time these thoughts become too insistent; then curiosity and a sense of urgency is roused, and we get ready to investigate and risk having a look at ourselves to find out what is missing or out of sync.

During midlife, unrest or upset can precipitate a search to find or uncover something missing or infringing on us. Sometimes the search is for what has been missed out on in life; or sometimes a notion that something has been taken away; or a spirited, restless drive to find personal truth and an aligned vocation.

## **The Lawyer Who Started to Search**

This is a true story, perhaps not unfamiliar to you in its theme. David had spent his adult life in the law and was a diligent lawyer in a suburban firm, at times producing clever solutions for his clients. Eventually he was made partner in the small firm, to his family's great approval. When he retired, David slipped down into depression. Without being a lawyer and without the firm he had no sense of who he was, of what he wanted; no energy and direction from within or from his values to point the way, no personal goals or interests sprang to the fore that motivated him and gave him direction. He also lost his only community outside the family which these days was just he and his wife now the two kids had left home. He sat around and watched a lot of television with no structure to his day except meals and a few weekly tasks.

As he thought back on his life to this point, he remembered when he was a teenager wanting to be a cricket star and a football player. His father had other plans for him and forbade him joining either of the teams or even going to football training and cricket practice which was open to all the boys. Father told him that football and cricket were only for boys who had no brains, no good prospects in life. "They will all end up as clerks

somewhere in low-paying jobs. You're my son, David. That makes you different. You are better." David's future was laid out as far back as he could remember - he was going to university to do law, like his father, and have a profession to be proud of that would last him for life.

Young David was intimidated by his formidable and overbearing father, a man not to be crossed who was ruthless in cutting down those who did, so the young David learned to comply. After school and at university he would go to the grounds to watch the football team, yearning to be out there with them. He was wired for physical activity, stocky and strong. In his mind he relived a secret daydream over and over again where he saved the day by kicking the winning goal of the match and became the university hero. But there he was, doing Law which he found tedious and a burden. In an effort to numb his low mood and compensate his crushed aspiration, David started to eat. A lot. During his years at university, he went from being a little overweight to become fat, and then fully obese.

Now at sixty-two years old, pining for the lost opportunity of his youth and thinking it was gone forever, David considers what his life could have been if he had followed his natural drive for sports and the outdoors — really, to be an athlete instead of a lawyer. He could have gone on to become a gym instructor, a physical education teacher, a sports coach, a bush walking guide or anything active that was out in the fresh air. Sadly, he realised that apart from the physical education teacher, none of those jobs existed forty years ago. So was he forever doomed to live this bland life as the ageing fat man? Yes, he had become a lawyer, but the work consisted mainly of conveyancing and routine matters. In the end, was he any different to the clerk his overbearing father insisted he should avoid?

For fleeting moments, David saw he could make a choice now to live life differently. He could resurrect the budding athlete and the dream of his youth, allowing the aspiration and exuberance to rise afresh. The idea started to take root. Although he would never be the youthful hero and football player, surely he could find something physically active and enjoyable to fulfil himself now and become a kind of hero, which he decided boiled down to helping others.

After many months of his dreary retirement, he started to imagine various scenarios. These imaginings were infrequent at first, then slowly gained some momentum. David dared to consider this as a real possibility. It sometimes lifted his spirits. This could be the most meaningful project of his life. It would take grid-iron willpower and self-management to make all the needed lifestyle changes. Over time as he warmed to the idea and entertained the huge challenge it would mean for him, he felt uplifted. He got up out of his big leather recliner armchair and walked to the window, looking out to the green garden, lost in thought. Positive thought.

Over the next year, rather than hold onto his dream and the uplifted feeling, even by simply writing it down, the dream paled and was eventually thwarted. Yet again. That was the pattern. He crushed it with his own negative and critical thoughts. "Just look at

yourself. It is hopeless. You're so overweight you have trouble getting out of your chair. Don't kid yourself. You've missed the boat Davey boy. Forget it!"

David had become his father. The dream faded into his unconscious, he let it slip away into the River of Unmindfulness and be forgotten while he got on with things that distracted and amused him, like indulging in good food, wine, films and his favourite book genres, murder mystery and thrillers.

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Was David going to stay in his state of unmindfulness and lethargy? Or would he wrestle with his attitude of defeat to reclaim his awareness and will, enabling him to see what is possible and that he is in charge of his life?

When hope returns, even just a glimmer, things become possible again.

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