

Reflection – June 25, 2023
The Spiritual Journey of Harold and His Purple Crayon

Harold and the Purple Crayon by Crockett Johnson has been one of my favorite books since even before purple was my favorite color. I read it as a child, and I read it again many times as an adult to my four children. I read it to my grandchildren. One year I even gave a copy of the book to each of my children and grandchildren for Christmas. I read the book so many times that I had it memorized.

Then I grew into my fifties, and, for some reason, the book took on a whole new meaning. Maybe it was because I was embarking on my own spiritual journey and don't we just find resources in the most unusual places? Who would have thought that a children's book could be so meaningful? This morning I am going to share with you four reasons why I believe Harold and the Purple Crayon is really a story of a spiritual journey. I often wonder if Crockett Johnson really had that intent, or if this book only speaks to *me* at the metaphorical level. I decided to look it up on the internet to see what I could find, and I came across a very interesting biography of Crockett Johnson by Philip Nel. Let me share some of it with you:

“On October 20, 1906, in New York City, David Johnson Leisk was born to David and Mary Leisk. He wrote under the name "Crockett Johnson" because, he said, "Crockett is my childhood nickname. My real name is David Johnson Leisk. Leisk was too hard to pronounce -- so -- I am now Crockett Johnson!" According to the Third Book of Junior Authors (1972), he was "six feet tall, tan, husky, and blue-eyed". Like Barnaby and Harold (his two most famous characters), Johnson was bald. Referring to his hairless head, he once remarked, "I draw people without hair because it's so much easier! Besides, to me, people with hair look funny".

For a man who described himself as "the laziest man in the world" and claimed that he never intended to be an artist, Johnson had a remarkably productive artistic career. Before Johnson became a well-known writer and illustrator of children's books, he created some of the most beloved comic-strip characters of the twentieth century. "Barnaby" was a comic that chronicled the adventures of a little boy named Barnaby Baxter and Mr. O'Malley, his bumbling Fairy Godfather. Barnaby's parents never saw the Fairy Godfather, but readers knew he existed.

If "writer of comic strips" characterizes the first phase of Johnson's career, the second phase is clearly "author and illustrator of children's books." Starting with *Who's Upside Down?* (1952), Johnson wrote and illustrated over 20 books for children, providing illustrations (but not the story) for 7 more. He described his style of illustration as "simplified, almost diagrammatic, for clear storytelling, avoiding all arbitrary decoration". Like Harold, the small boy whose purple crayon leads him through many expeditions, Johnson's style is clear, minimalist, and very effective. Harold, the protagonist of his best-known series, began his many journeys in *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955), which was followed by *Harold's Fairy Tale* (1956), *Harold's Trip to the Sky* (1957), *Harold at the North Pole* (1958), *Harold's Circus* (1959), *A Picture for Harold's Room* (1960), and *Harold's ABC* (1963). In appearance, Harold could be a cousin of Barnaby; but, instead of a Fairy Godfather, Harold's accomplice is his purple crayon. Harold draws his universe and walks through it, using his purple crayon to create and escape from his adventures, always ending up safe (usually at home) by the book's final page."

Now, I'd like to start with the color purple because it is, of course, my favorite color so why wouldn't I like the book. Harold carries that purple crayon around with him wherever he goes. Let me share with you from a website called "Empower Yourself with Color Psychology" some information about the color purple:

The color purple relates to the imagination and spirituality. It stimulates the imagination and inspires high ideals. It is an introspective color, allowing us to get in touch with our deeper thoughts.

The difference between violet and purple is that violet appears in the visible light spectrum, or rainbow, whereas purple is simply a mix of red and blue. Violet has the highest vibration in the visible spectrum.

While violet is not quite as intense as purple, its essence is similar. Generally, the names are interchangeable, and the meaning of the colors is similar. Both contain the energy and strength of red with the spirituality and integrity of blue. This is the union of body and soul creating a balance between our physical and our spiritual energies.

Purple or violet assists those who seek the meaning of life and spiritual fulfillment - it expands our awareness, connecting us to a higher consciousness. For this reason it is associated with transformation of the soul and the philosophers of the world are often attracted to it.

There is a whole lot more on the website, but this last paragraph is the most important to me. Let me read that to you again:

Purple or violet assists those who seek the meaning of life and spiritual fulfillment - it expands our awareness, connecting us to a higher consciousness. For this reason, it is associated with transformation of the soul and the philosophers of the world are often attracted to it.

Here is the first reason I think this book is a metaphor for Harold's spiritual journey – the color purple, which signifies transformation and assists those on their spiritual journey.

Let's move on to the moon. For those of you who don't know, I identify as a Unitarian Universalist Pagan. The forces of nature are very important to my spirituality and, as we travel along with Harold, we find that the moon always travels with him. This reference to nature appeals to the Pagan in me. Harold looks to the moon for his guidance

and the moon is always there to guide him along. In fact, the moon is what guides him home. In a spiritual journey, it's important that we have a guiding force to keep us on the right path as we travel and that's just what the moon does for Harold. So, there's my second reason why Harold and the Purple Crayon is a metaphor for a spiritual journey – the guiding nature of the moon.

Next, and this is my favorite one, is Harold's crayon and how he uses it. Harold, even at his young age, understands that he is a co-creator of his universe. He uses that purple crayon to create his own reality. Remember when his hand was shaking so badly, and he inadvertently found himself under water? "But he came up thinking fast and in no time at all was climbing aboard a trim little boat." Or how about the time he climbed up the mountain to see if he could find home, "but as he looked down over the other side he slipped and there wasn't any other side of the mountain. But, luckily, he kept his wits and his purple crayon." He draws a balloon and saves himself once again.

On my own personal spiritual journey, it has taken me awhile to fully wrap my head around the idea that we co-create our own realities. But Harold understands it quite well, doesn't he? I really admire him

for that, and I have learned that lesson from him that he does it so easily. The purple crayon as the externalization of the inner strength and wisdom we carry within us to keep us on our path on this journey we call life and the symbol of our ability to co create our own realities is reason number three I see this book as a spiritual journey metaphor.

Finally, we get to the quest itself. Joseph Campbell, in his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces, writes about the Hero's Journey found in myths from around the world which he calls the monomyth. From a site called changingminds, I found this definition of monomyth: *The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation--initiation--return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.* In more explicit terms, the monomyth has a series of components which include, among others: 1) the call to adventure; 2) crossing the threshold; 3) helpers; 4) tests; 5) climax; and 6) return. William J. Bausch, author of The Yellow Brick Road: A Storyteller's Approach to the Spiritual Journey, states it yet another way in his book. He calls the elements of a spiritual journey "the holy discontent, the

call, the beginning of the venture, insight and allies." Here is how I see some of all of these elements in Harold's adventure.

First, the call to adventure or "the holy discontent": "One evening after thinking it over for some time, Harold decided to go for a walk in the moonlight." He was called; he thought about it, he decided to go. Thus starts the separation phase of his quest.

Second, we have "crossing the threshold" or the beginning of the venture: He draws the moon, he draws his path "and he set off on his walk, taking his big purple crayon with him." Crossing the threshold means going out into the new frontier, which is exactly what Harold does when he draws his path and sets off on his walk. This is the beginning of his venture.

This leads us directly to the third element: "helpers or allies". I see both the moon and his big purple crayon as his helpers or allies in this adventure. They are with him the whole time and they certainly aid him on his journey. You may consider the policeman a helper on his journey, although he pointed the way Harold was going anyway.

Another element is tests. I mentioned a couple of them previously when Harold was co-creating his own reality; 1) finding himself over his

head in the ocean and 2) falling into the nothingness of no other side of the mountain. In both of those we already learned how he passed the tests with his helper crayon. The final test is finding home, of course, and in the end, he does that as well, which I believe qualifies for the initiation part of the quest.

This leads us to the last two elements, the climax and the return. This is when Harold finds his bedroom window, right around the moon, and then he makes his bed. My favorite line from the book has always been, “He got in it and he drew up the covers.” I was not always very good at double entendres, but even as a child I understood that one. To this day it still makes me laugh.

There you have it, four reasons why I consider Harold and the Purple Crayon to be a metaphor for a spiritual journey: 1) The color purple, which assists those who seek the meaning of life and spiritual fulfillment; 2) The guiding force of the moon; 3) His purple crayon, with which he co-creates his own reality; and 4) The quest itself which follows the Hero’s Journey. Coming to this conclusion about the book has made me like it even more. I feel like Harold is one of my allies on my spiritual journey. He is someone I can take a lesson from, gain some

insights from, and learn how to have some fun on this adventure we call life.

I hope you all will continue to enjoy Harold and His Purple Crayon as much as I do and, I thank you for letting me share my thoughts with you this morning.