

Codependency and Karmic Debt: What Can We Learn from Maria and Johannes Thomasius?

In 2011 I had the fortune of acting in Scene 2 of Rudolf Steiner's second Mystery Drama, *The Soul's Probation*. It was a layered experience for one like me, little used to acting. The role itself didn't make things easy. How do you acquire a real feeling for the being of the initiate Benedictus and how to play it? While that was constantly on the back of my mind, something else occurred.

Although I had read the four plays at least three times and seen as many productions of *The Soul's Probation*, the scene I was playing grew in a way only possible through sheer repetition, memorization, and impersonation. I was deeply grateful that, of all scenes, this one contained a theme I had explored with great interest in the past, that of codependency. It now opened to further, probably ultimate aspects of it.

In the scene Maria seeks counsel from Benedictus because she is deeply troubled by the way her relationship with Johannes Thomasius—the most important person in her life—has evolved, and is at a loss as to what to do to bring change. What Benedictus offers as advice is only apparently at odds with what you would hear about counseling. Here the initiate not only listens very deeply but tells Maria what to do in very pointed ways. What would look like a prevarication on the part of the counselor becomes understandable from the perspective of one who sees more deeply in the mysteries of life—in concrete terms, the truths of previous incarnations—and thus can direct Maria to the objective ground upon which relational challenges lie.

The scene in which Maria calls on the help of Benedictus brings to light the ways in which mutual love is marred by dynamics that limit the free expression of the individualities of Maria and Johannes Thomasius. How this is so emerges in the scene and in the ones immediately following in ways that cannot but echo the idea of codependency. So let's turn to this first.

What Is Codependency?

In a classical definition of codependency we find a dysfunctional relationship, romantic or not, in which one person sacrifices her needs to support another one. Such a dynamic emerges clearly in situations of substance abuse. The person who sacrifices her needs in this case enables the other's addiction.

It is in the realm of recovery and Alcoholic Anonymous that a famous example has been recorded of what such relationship looks like. Bill Wilson,

the founder of AA, grew up in very trying situation of neglect from both biological parents. It was his uncle, Fayette, who did most of his upbringing. Soon upon leaving home, Bill found a place in society through alcohol, allowing him to overcome his sense of inferiority. Added to this was his relationship with Lois Smith, a woman of higher social standing, a child who had a much more sheltered childhood, from which she derived a sense of security and optimism.

It was Lois who helped Bill out of the depression caused by his girlfriend Bertha's death. Bill later recognized: "At the unconscious level, I have no doubt she was already becoming my mother."¹ Lois could not help but see Bill's incipient alcoholism, since he would often pass out from alcohol overuse. But she candidly believed that "Living with me would be such an inspiration, I was sure, he would not need alcohol."² Lack of self-esteem on one hand, naïve self-aggrandizement on the other, painted the full picture of codependency.

By constantly enduring, Lois played the role of caregiver, while at the same time enabling Bill not to face the full consequences of his choices. This misguided posture perpetuates the problem of addiction, delaying the day of reckoning and the slow process of recovery. This stance may derive from a variety of personal challenges, ranging from low self-esteem to poor interpersonal boundaries, which manifest as an excessive need to please others. The soul of the caregiver unconsciously recognizes that giving up his role will also entail a change and a loss for himself. He may also fear what the transition to a more conscious individuality may mean.

In a larger sense: codependency enshrines dynamics through which I limit the expression of my being because I fear losing the other person—or simply fear losing what I can get from her—if I were to express everything that is in my heart. It's a deeply held belief that relationships only exist in a space of limitation and constant compromise; in a wider sense that we cannot be truly ourselves except, maybe, in some rare circumstances; that the world doesn't welcome the full expression of our being. And while it is true, according to the circumstances, that we need to choose how to behave and what to say, it does not ensue that we cannot try to be true to the mandates of our higher selves, even if at times we only hear them faintly and may confuse them with other, contrary voices.

A friend of mine, pressing me to say what was on my heart in my late twenties, said, "Choose your words, don't choose your thoughts." That has remained an ever-present motto in my mind. Choosing my words, including choosing to be silent at times, allows me to preserve self-integrity, while negating the need to choose my thoughts, meaning profess thoughts to

¹ *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A. A. Message Reached the World*. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 40.

² *Pass It On*, 58.

which I don't really subscribe, in order to ensure surface harmony or what I perceive as my self-preservation. The price of following this motto is worth paying because it leaves doors open to karmic reconciliation. If I accept other people's positions and choices while taking full responsibility for mine—in the best way I know of—then something can happen in the future, in the worse-case scenario in a future incarnation, which will allow movement forward.

What psychology shows of external workings and dynamics becomes through spiritual science the working of soul forces and beings. We lift the maya of external human relationships to reveal the tapestry hidden from sight, that of karma and previous lives, through which codependency acquires a deeper texture and can be explored in a more encompassing manner.

The Soul's Probation of Johannes Thomasius and Maria

Rudolf Steiner has explored the deeper aspects of relational issues in what are his Mystery Dramas. For the first time on a theater stage, individuals were portrayed who follow a disciplined spiritual path, one of the consequences of which is to be able to recognize karmic backdrops to present situations. In the play we see the individuals interacting with each other in waking consciousness, having spiritual experiences in meditation, and gaining experiences of the times between incarnations and the times of previous incarnations.

At the beginning of the first drama, *The Portal of Initiation*, Johannes is, among a dozen participants, the one who takes in with most intensity the teachings of the initiate Benedictus and the interactions with his other pupils. This is due in part to the fact that he has recently abandoned one who loved him, one of the reasons that brought her to committing suicide (Scene 1). On the other hand, much as he appreciates and grows from his friendship with Maria, part of his will is undermined, and this is what I call here codependency.

Later in Scene 3 the initiate reveals that Maria has a seemingly devastating impact on those around her—Johannes on one hand and her adopted child on the other—because in her lives a spiritual being whose role is to prepare the human being to develop organs of spiritual perception. This presence in her exposes and dislodges what must die or be transformed in the soul of others, causing pain in the event. When she understands this, Maria, in a state of lowered consciousness, is briefly possessed by Ahriman, and curses the initiate.

The background to Scene 3 is further revealed in Scene 7. In the same scene the seeress Theodora beholds a previous incarnation of Maria and Johannes. This is a vision of their previous incarnation, in which Johannes, then a Germanic woman, is devoted to a holy man (the then Maria) who

carries the new teachings of Christianity from Ireland/Hibernia. The child, whom Maria has adopted, is revealed as one who resisted her teachings at the time.

By the time of *The Soul's Probation*—the second Mystery Drama—Maria and Johannes have formed a deep bond of friendship and an intimate relationship. They have even recognized—Maria probably more fully—that something of the quality of the Hibernian lifetime has carried into this lifetime, which has changed the nature of the relationship for the best but also created new temptations.

In the previous life Johannes had a relationship of pupil to master toward Maria. What had a place at the time, in the pursuit of the Christ Mystery and new evolutionary impulses, forms a hindrance in the present. Maria lives it as an inner tug of war. She presents to Benedictus that a voice she inwardly resists, nevertheless clearly speaks:

“You must give up Johannes, let him go:
you cannot keep him at your side
if you would not do harm to him.
Alone he must pursue the path
which leads him onward to his goal.”³

And Benedictus resolves this false dilemma between love and individual independence thus:

“The will of destiny does not decree
that you should break your outer bound of friendship;
but this it does demand, severely:
Johannes' freedom in the spirit realm.”

To Maria, who protests that she has acquired her present insights from the revelations of the spirit, Benedictus indicates that one previous life alone cannot give a full picture, that “This image is not yet complete reality.” And further “You have beheld a picture. ... Your power of will alone, however, is able to transform it to reality.” As Maria continues in her perplexity, Benedictus more pointedly explains:

“But you should not forget to ask yourself
if you are also certain
not any of your paths of life conceals itself from you
when backward you direct your spirit eye.”

³ All references to the Mystery Dramas in this essay come from Rudolf Steiner, *Four Mystery Dramas*, translated by Hans and Ruth Pusch, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1997.

Maria understands that her spirit perception, much valued as it may be, has come at the cost of strengthening her arrogance. The place that arrogance has in her soul leads her to understand clearly how she is limiting her friend's growth:

"My friends so richly gifted soul
can only grow and then unfold in freedom
when he can find such paths
as are not drawn by me beforehand."

It finally dawns on her that what she seeks in guiding Johannes's artistic initiative is

"satisfaction which I can feel in my own self
and live in the delusion that I'm selfless.
It has remained concealed to me
that in my friend I mirror but myself."

Maria has fully realized the nature of a codependent tie. While Johannes is rapturously believing that Maria is his muse, without whom his art is but of little importance, Maria has reinforced this dependence by aggrandizing herself. Now she knows that she needs to change her behavior, while maintaining the bond of love intact. Because this striving is pursued along a spiritual path, Maria intuits "a hard probation of my soul draws near." Johannes is about to find out the same. This is the central theme of the whole second drama, to which Capesius is also closely bound.

Already in Scene 3, when Maria withholds her advice on Johannes's painting, the latter reveals:

"As little as I trust myself to judge
whether my art fulfills the inspiration
that flows out of spirit teaching,
so much I put my trust in her."

And to Maria he admits, "You know that I myself cannot create one picture that is not blessed by you," giving us an almost textbook characterization of codependency. Maria must painfully reveal to her friend that

"The moment has arrived for us
when we must test our souls
in how to guide their further steps
on spirit paths for each one's separate good."

Johannes will now confront forces within his personality that hinder its expression. In spiritual immersion appears to him his Double. This Guardian figure appears to mock Johannes's feelings for Maria, confusing lust for

love, but in reality also showing the deeper nature of this bond. Johannes has the first dim inkling that "It is the image of my Self" (*The Soul's Probation*, Scene 5). But to the conscious Self, still resisting the full realization of this encounter, the Double impresses:

"I will not leave you
till you have found the strength
to shape me to a likeness of the being
that you will someday be
but are not yet."

What follows in Scene 6 is Maria's awakening to another previous life, which will bring forth another aspect of her relationship to Johannes. The incarnation, which takes place in the Middle Ages, is one in which Johannes and Capesius had been son and father. Capesius had abandoned Thomas (the present Johannes) to join the Templar knights. In so doing, however, fate later brought him close to his son. It is Maria, then a Dominican monk, who drove a wedge between Thomas and his father, the First Preceptor of the Templars. She did so, driven by a fanatic attitude of opposition toward everything the Templars stood for.

Maria has been following the work of the teacher of her order, the then incarnation of Benedictus, who misunderstood the Templars' impulse, but revised his views once he crossed the threshold and tried to guide his pupil, the monk in question, to a new understanding of the matter. Thomas in that incarnation followed with trust the guidance of the monk when the latter could not revise his strongly one-sided views.

Maria realizes that in that life she separated the father (the now Capesius) from his then son (the present Johannes). This is the debt that she has to repay, which she expresses thus in Scene 13:

"I saw Johannes' soul within its former body
Withdrawing from his father
and so the powers which compelled me
to estrange the son from his own father's heart.
Thus does the father now confront me,
reminding of my ancient debt to him."

Maria realizes she needs to help not only Johannes, but also Capesius, along his path of development. These are the main milestones worth recounting for our purpose. Needless to say, the growth of Maria and Johannes, even in relation to this single issue, continues. Maria will maintain her resolve for self-sacrifice; Johannes will encounter another important soul figure of a Luciferic nature—the Spirit of his Youth—which he will transform (Scenes 6 and 10 of *The Soul's Awakening*). In addition other individuals, tightly united through karmic bonds, will appear, and with them other complex

layers of entanglement. The ordeals of soul will find another layer of resolution when the awareness of an Egyptian incarnation arises, one in which Maria, Johannes, and Capesius were present.

With this short review of Maria and Johannes' relationship, we can realize that our patterns of codependency come from unresolved karmic episodes. They are almost unavoidable and ever present in our lives. When we lift the veil of maya, we discover unique, objective situations, which will never be repeated in the same way by any other individuals ever. This does not detract from the use of just recognizing the signs when we behave in a codependent way. Simple soul hygiene and discipline can help us withdraw our projections upon others, take responsibility for our lives, and change our behaviors over time.

On the path of anthroposophical spiritual development, codependency leads us to the understanding of karmic debt. Even as highly evolved an individual as Maria has carried karmic debt. In her case, the recognition of the causes in previous lifetimes signifies not only the desire to withdraw her codependent behaviors—e.g., leading Johannes to believe he can only receive inspiration through her—but also to taking a further step. Following the inspiration of her beloved master Benedictus, she can say something like “I will gladly sacrifice myself for the advancement of those souls with whom I was karmically united,” thus affirming her prebirth intentions. Hers is a path from codependency to cocreation in the spirit.

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