

Isabella Ulrich

THE INNER PATH

A Humanistic Approach to Pastoral Care
in Times of Crisis, Insight and Change

VIARUM VERLAG

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabella Ulrich, born in Salzburg in 1980, is a co-founder of the European Federation for Humanist Pastoral Care. She works as a humanist pastoral counsellor, celebrant, spiritual mentor and author. Her work combines philosophical depth with lived inner practice and a clear-eyed view of the challenges of modern life.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In this book, the author describes the journey through crisis, insight and transformation from the perspective of humanist pastoral care and spiritual guidance. The hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell serves as an inner guide – a kind of map for the process of descending into the inner world beyond everyday consciousness, into the untamed wilderness of the soul. She shares with us her many years of experience as a spiritual companion. In doing so, it becomes clear how, even beyond fixed belief systems, a form of guidance can emerge that leads to deep spiritual insight and takes one's own unique path seriously.

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This book is intended as a guide to help you navigate inner crises and processes of change. It is not a substitute for medical, psychotherapeutic or psychiatric treatment or counselling. If you are experiencing mental or physical health issues, you should always seek professional help. You use the contents of this book at your own risk. No liability is accepted for any direct or indirect damage arising from the use of this book.

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For my sons
Balthasar, Joshua and Noah

A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO PASTORAL CARE – Foreword on the English Edition

Dear readers,
when I first heard about humanist pastoral care, I wasn't entirely sure what the difference was supposed to be between humanist support and 'non-humanist' support in pastoral care. After all, in both cases, it was about supporting people as they journey through life. I asked myself: "Can pastoral care ever be genuinely for the person and not be humanistic?"

When I read the first book on the subject, it initially seemed as though humanistic pastoral care simply omitted the word 'God', and instead of biblical quotations, one selected analogous quotes from modern popular literature – which almost everyone is familiar with today – that relate more strongly to the human condition than to a transcendent reality. To be honest, it initially struck me as a massive case of false labelling.

Yet a humanistic approach to pastoral care actually entails a profound shift in perspective. It leads us away from the notion that human beings need an external power to guide them and deliver them from the suffering of the human experience. Rather, humanistic pastoral care accompanies people deep into the human experience itself. It regards human beings as beings capable of shaping reality, who can develop consciousness through self-knowledge, and this consciousness enables them to understand and shape their own lives in a meaningful way through interaction with others. This perspective does not call a transcendent reality into question. It locates it within human consciousness and in the depths of human experience. When I

truly grasped this for the first time, it changed not only my view of humanity, but my entire perspective on life itself.

With this book, I wish to bring this perspective to life in a vivid way, by delving deeply into the archetypal experience of crisis, insight and transformation, and examining what it can effect in human consciousness when we accompany it with a humanistic mindset. It not only opens up access for people to their own more conscious influence on reality, but at the same time creates a solid foundation for peaceful co-existence beyond religious tensions, such as those often arising from conflicting beliefs.

The humanist path is a peaceful path. It leads people towards their need for self-knowledge and self-efficacy, and it respects their striving for inner maturation and integration into mindful coexistence. It reminds us that meaning need not be imposed from outside, but can arise through a conscious engagement with one's own life.

The great task of humanist pastoral care is not to lead people away from themselves, but to gently guide them back to themselves. To a place where responsibility for one's own path, deep compassion for oneself and others, and awareness can grow. For wherever people learn to understand themselves and one another more deeply, the possibility of a more peaceful coexistence as humanity arises.

This book is therefore not intended as a distinction from religious paths, but as an invitation to view people anew in their dignity, their freedom and also in their comprehensive capacity for inner transformation. For every conscious encounter with one's own humanity can become an inner foundation on which healing and peace can grow.

Isabella Ulrich

Mondsee, May 2026

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

When one embarks on a journey of insight and reconnection within a wisdom tradition, one usually follows clearly defined paths. In religious and spiritual traditions, guidance is provided through parables and stories. One follows a path that a prominent figure has already trodden. This is usually a key figure who makes the inner path visible. This path is signposted by doctrines – so-called dogmas.

More and more people are distancing themselves from spiritual systems and wish to embark on a wholly individual path of realisation. This is primarily because they are beginning to mistrust the worldly institutions that underpin these paths – not necessarily the teachings themselves on which they are based. For many, the dogmatic paths are becoming too narrow and too exclusive. Beyond these familiar forms, however, the path of realisation becomes an untrodden path for many.

Anyone who embarks on an individual path of realisation today stands more directly before themselves as a human being. One usually walks without communal support and without guidance. And yet the path does not necessarily lose its direction as a result. The path of insight and becoming human repeatedly follows the same archetypal inner movements. It leads through experiences that every human being knows and that bring us closer to ourselves and reveal what lies hidden within us. Yet the inner map of this path usually remains hidden. It does not reveal itself all at once, but emerges gradually from one's own experiences.

Almost 23 years ago now, a dear friend placed a book on my bedside table. With a little note: "You wanna read this!" The author of the book, Joseph Campbell, had studied this inner movement of the human being in depth. As a mythologist, he had collected stories from a wide variety of

cultures and spiritual traditions and recognised a recurring structure within them: the archetypal inner path of self-discovery as an expression of a highly personal journey of individuation and transformation. In this book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he describes this journey through stages that are familiar to many people from their own experience. It is about the call that leads us out of the familiar and the daily grind. About thresholds that need to be crossed. About encounters with inner forces that challenge us and confront us with our life's wounds and unfulfilled potential. And about a transformation that opens up a new relationship with ourselves and with life.

I read this book and couldn't put it down. It was as if it were articulating something I was going through myself at the time. I had long struggled to situate myself within my own process, and suddenly I recognised more clearly the inner path I was on.

Today, I encounter this inner movement time and again in post-religious spiritual guidance and in humanistic pastoral care. People find themselves in crises and lose their previous certainties. They suddenly stand at an inner transition that they can scarcely name. And yet, in this, there usually emerges something that people experience as a deeper order of their becoming human, and which unfolds through processes of transformation. It was therefore important to me to put these inner movements of the human being into words and to find a language that remains open to the experience itself. A language that does not dogmatically define the path of becoming human, but makes it comprehensible as a living inner process.

In recent years, I have also engaged intensively with the teachings of Carl Gustav Jung and Viktor Frankl, who, like

Campbell, have dealt extensively with the human capacity for insight.

Jung describes the inner journey as a process of individuation and maturation. In this process, the conscious self enters into a relationship with deeper layers of the psyche. Archetypal images come to life. Inner dynamics begin to reveal themselves. And from this, a more comprehensive form of wholeness can unfold.

Frankl focuses primarily on the human search for meaning and describes it as an inevitable existential experience. In Frankl's understanding, the human being does not simply appear as a passive supporting actor in their own life, but as a responsible being who answers life's questions and can give direction to their existence.

The insights of Campbell, Jung and Frankl open up a multi-layered map of human developmental processes, as echoed in many spiritual traditions. And at the same time, this approach remains undogmatic and open. It invites us to turn towards our own inner path and to trust it.

This book gives this map a clear and accessible form. It reveals why, in our search for meaning and self-knowledge, life leads us to points that feel challenging. Why we stand at thresholds that demand something of us. Why maturation comes through experiences that touch us deeply.

And yet every map has its limits. On the journey to ourselves, it is not enough to simply observe the path. We step onto it. We engage with the immediate experience. In this book, this experience and its challenges are once again made very clear and fully visible. It describes the departure into a reality that leads beyond our familiar everyday consciousness. It is dedicated to the movement beyond the familiar framework of the mind. It guides us into an encounter with inner spaces that seem vast and untamed. And it

encourages the discovery of what often remains hidden in the events of daily life.

At the same time, I see this book as a guide to humanistic pastoral care and non-dogmatic spiritual guidance. In this sense, guidance means holding a space in which a person can encounter themselves. A framework that offers good orientation and remains open to whatever wishes to reveal itself within the person. Development is allowed to unfold within it at its own pace and to its own depth. It is a form of guidance that trusts the inner process. It perceives what reveals itself and remains at one's side with a quiet certainty, without significantly intervening in inner processes.

This book is intended for those who feel an inner calling within themselves and who are struggling to find the courage to follow that calling. It is for those who stand at thresholds and do not yet know what awaits them on the other side. It is also intended, in particular, as a guide for those who feel called to accompany others on this inner journey.

It is a roadmap for all seekers who sometimes doubt whether their crisis-ridden path is leading them anywhere. If it is truly a path of realisation – one that brings you closer to life – then it emerges as you walk. Then it is a path that remains indescribable until it has been walked.

I wish all readers much courage and joy on this path.

“The Way
that can be named
is not the eternal Way.”

Dao De Jing

“I am the Way,
the Truth
and the Life.”

- John 14:6

“What you seek,
seeks you too.”

- Jalal ad-Din Rumi



1 THE CALL
TO THE JOURNEY

2 THE FEAR OF THE ABYSS —
REFUSING AND AVOIDING
THE INNER CALL

3 THE ENCOUNTER
WITH THE MENTOR

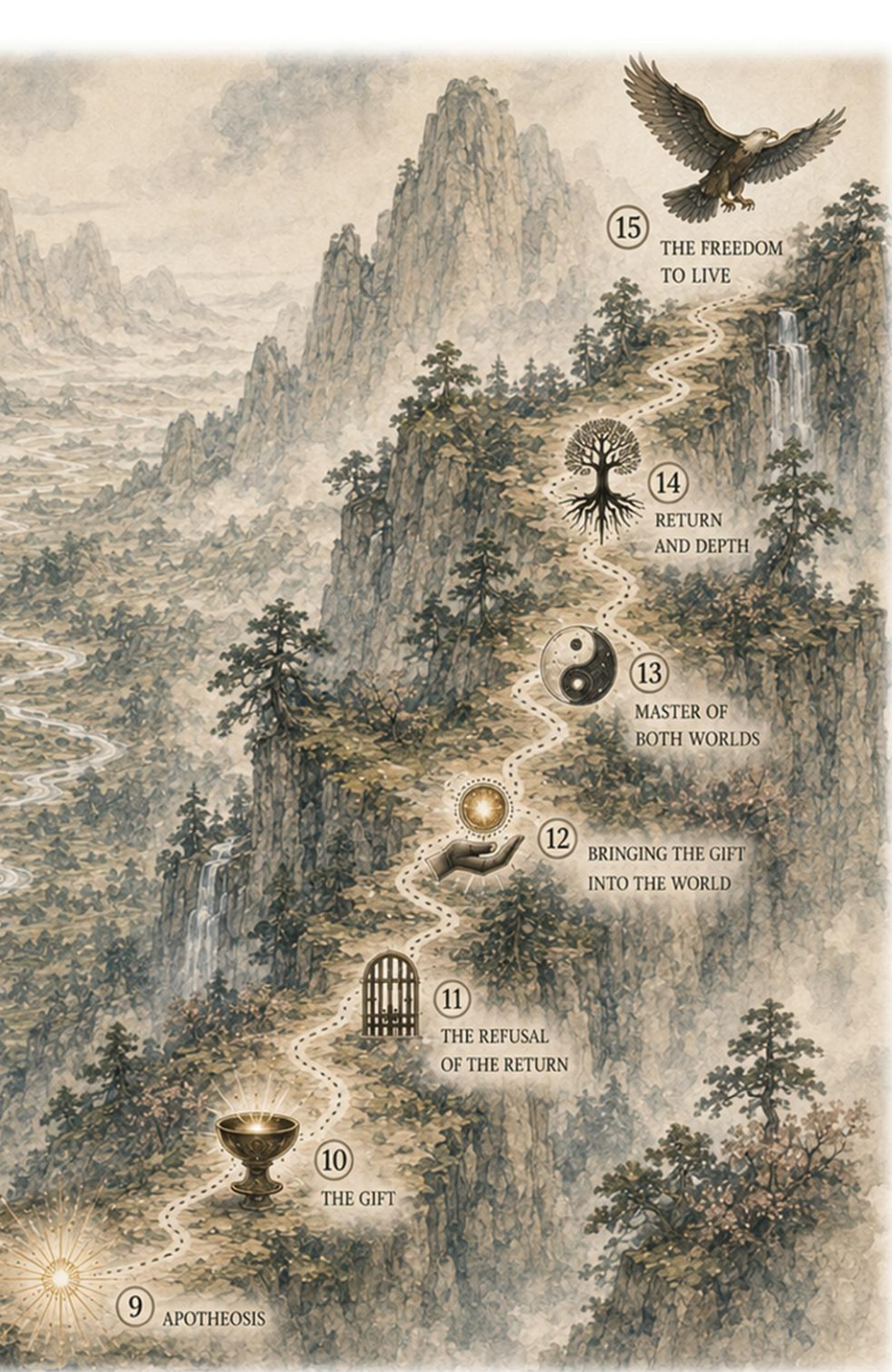
4 CROSSING
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5 TRIALS, ENEMIES
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6 DEEPENING
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9 APOTHEOSIS

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THE REFUSAL
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12
BRINGING THE GIFT
INTO THE WORLD

13
MASTER OF
BOTH WORLDS

14
RETURN
AND DEPTH

15
THE FREEDOM
TO LIVE

INTRODUCTION

We are all familiar with that feeling of being called by something. We sometimes feel an inner restlessness that prevents us from finding peace in life. We feel as though we are missing out on something. Something is missing from our lives. There is an indescribable longing that cannot be satisfied.

Usually, we try to satisfy this longing with something external. Perhaps we are drawn to distant horizons. So we set out in search of new paths in the world. Or we interpret this inner longing through our understanding of our roles and decide to have another child. We embark on a new course of study, or leave a well-established partnership or marriage in order to satisfy our longing through a new, more interesting partner.

Sooner or later, we realise that the answer to this longing cannot be found through external changes and achievements. For the call we feel here comes from the depths of the soul. And it can only be answered if we tread the inner path.

The inner path is the mystical path. At first, this path is not an adventure in external reality. It is a descent into an inner reality. It leads us over the garden fence of our previous understanding of life and ourselves, and into the unknown wilderness of the inner realm. This path unfolds in its own unique way for every person.

What sometimes prevents us from crossing this garden fence and embarking on the inner, mystical path of the soul is the fact that here one cannot book a ticket, nor does one know exactly where the journey begins or at which stop one must exit in order to arrive where one wishes to go. This is where our control ends. This is where we begin to open ourselves up to a broader existence and a deeper, more multi-

layered reality than the one revealed to us in our everyday consciousness. Those who tread this inner path must leave their old form behind. What one believes oneself to be loses its fixed shape. One cannot delve deeper into the mysteries of existence and yet remain who one is. This path transforms you from the very core. And a part of us, as yet unconscious, knows this. And that is why it shrinks from it.

With this book, I wish to encourage you to heed this inner call of the soul and to tread the inner path nonetheless, even if it is challenging. This book offers a map to help you find your bearings on this path. To understand why we encounter certain challenges on this path, and why it makes sense to face them.

We grow and transform with every stage of this journey. It leads us back to our true nature, and the very special gift it can bring into the world. This is no easy path. But walking it satisfies that deep longing of the soul that we all know. It is the answer to that. And it leads us to inner calm and peace within our very core. And through this, we become *fully human*. And we discover what it means to be fully human. Find out for yourself.

Walk with care, and with slowness.

Walk cloaked in dignity.

And have the courage to face the truth.