

The Naked Eye

Fall of the Colossus

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*In a year of emotional crises,
the hero had to die before a true
awakening could begin.*

FROM AN EARLY AGE, I WAS FASCINATED by the Colossus of Rhodes. One of the Seven Wonders of the World, built 300 years before the birth of Christ, the hundred-foot statue was a bronze depiction of the muscular sun god Helios, a stupendous monument to Apollonian beauty that, legend has it, straddled the bustling Aegean harbor, forcing incoming ships to sail through its legs. As a boy who spent most of his time feeling lost in the dark, fishing around for a role model, I could find no better image of victorious manhood—however grandiose. This was the kind of hero I needed to become, it seemed, in order to overarch the family swamp and save my life.

I constructed my colossus with a vengeance, arming my insides, marching through my teens and 20s obsessed with strength, appearance, triumph. I set about to conquer the world the way my golden hero would have, cultivating an idol's vices—ruthlessness, arrogance, vanity—and for a long time this impersonation succeeded, protecting me from too much pain, winning me battles in the world. When I turned to the dharma a decade ago, this heroic myth continued with a change of clothes, the fruits of self-inquiry substituted for the ideals of fame and fortune. I fell in love with the seeker-colossus, with life as a glorious quest for the Grail: an oversized morality play where holiness conquered ignorance and I, the invincible pilgrim, rode into the sunset wearing a banner of enlightenment.

I was far too rapt with the hero thing to let go of it voluntarily; nothing short of disaster would have done the trick. *Samsara* struck in 1994—my *annus horribilis*.

For most of last year I was pinned against the wall by crisis, holding my breath, waiting for the ongoing deluge of terror and grief to end. I didn't know if I would survive it. Now that the worst of it is in the past, I see that—fortunately—a part of me didn't.



That year is broken down into moments of awful intensity: my dying mother, one-third of her former self, spitting blood into a plastic bag at the mall; my mother crawling naked around the bed a month later—her body unrecognizably shriveled—glassy-eyed, moaning, trying to escape; my sister's face as she dropped dirt onto the casket barely two days later. In another city, I'll never forget how scared my ex-lover Robert looked when I came into the hospital room where he lay with an oxygen mask over his face, or two weeks later, the expression on my own doctor's face when he told me that my blood work had changed for the worse, that preventive drugs and bimonthly visits would now be part of my protocol. For the next six months I ran to specialists looking for answers, get-

ting riddles, panicked, depressed, waiting for the floor to drop. When I couldn't pull out of it, a psychiatrist gave me drugs meant to balance my mind, but all they did was stop me from being able to cry. Deciding I'd rather be griefstricken than numb, I threw the medicine into the trash. Through the worst of this,

I was struggling to shape a thousand-page manuscript, a memoir of my soul's journey, due to be presented to the publisher in a few months, at a time when my soul—whatever *that* was—felt too stunned to speak.

Art, Death, Mother. Had I been hit by only one, maybe two terrors, I might have been able to keep my head. But the big three all at once were overwhelming, the shock of vulnerability and helplessness too powerful to manage in any way that I knew how. Until then,

I had prided myself on outmaneuvering my fate, ducking, feinting, leaping to solid ground in shaky times. No matter how deep the shit got, I could always find the pony, and this optimism carried me through many dark periods. Now, for the first time, I could not cope. I was on my knees, and without the ability to stand up tall I didn't have a clue who I was.

This confusion called every aspect of my life into question, but none more ruthlessly than my relationship to the dharma. I had been to India, had met a Master, had written extensively about the path and specifically about death as a catalyst toward enlightenment. But *in extremis*, I was finding that the fruits of that inquiry—equanimity, balance—were nowhere to be found. Was I just “Narcissus in drag,” as the crazy wisdom teacher Da Free John described many
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spiritual seekers—a vain poseur in religious clothing? This seemed highly possible, at least in part, and reading Mark Epstein's fine study of Buddhism and psychotherapy, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, confirmed my diagnosis. In it, the New York analyst describes the existential trap of the narcissistic personality, the tendency to veer between grandiosity and emptiness—equally distorted images of the self—in a desperate search for its own reflection.

The book helped me understand exactly why I had smuggled my grandiosity onto the path, and with it a related fantasy I was almost too ashamed to admit: that spiritual life would somehow save me from suffering as "ignorant" people suffer, that the dharma would stand as a shield between me and "them." It helped me admit that although I could be compassionate, my kindness masked a secret belief that I would never break completely. I hated myself when I was broken, and my greatest fear was of losing the pride that protected my fictitious hero from final humiliation. Now, with the breakdown already underway, I was forced to admit that the campaign to save myself from the full catastrophe was doomed. I had no choice but to find a place in my heart for myself as this new, unheroic person.

As I worked to relax this terror of weakness, my hard shell began to crack; the oversized hero began to crumble. With each successive month of pain, each failure to vanquish my fears, every collapse and setback and disappointment, I sensed another piece of his shiny surface falling into the sea. The more my weakness was exposed, the more tolerant I became toward those unheroic qualities I'd most despised in other people: frailty, victimhood, negativity, complacency, inertia. Opening to weakness was completely new to me and made me feel that I was joining the human race in a way I never quite had before.

This blessing surprised me—it was liberating to be a mess—and followed me into my work. In an epilogue to my book, I attempted to describe the breakdown of this year as authentically as I possibly could, not in the old heroic way—in which the demons are slain once and for all—but as a fragile, wandering soul, a real

person in real distress, with no ultimate solution. As I did so, I grieved about what it meant to bury my mother. I grieved about my ex-lover's illness (although he survived and came back healthier than before) and about my own mortality (although my lab tests improved dramatically and took me out of the panic zone). I was discovering, to my amazement, that grief is the antidote to Narcissus and the door to another vision of spirit—stripped of ideals, fabulous images, superhuman power, absolute postures, and rapturous talk of enlightenment—with less emphasis on *getting it* and more on *getting real*.

I have my *annus horribilis* to thank for that. As for the Colossus of Rhodes, another kind of earthquake got him. Closing my eyes, I can almost see him falling: 20-foot arms shaken from the monolithic torso, bronze dust flying everywhere, settling on the harbor like a shimmering skin. I can imagine the feelings of the citizens whose lives were spent gazing up at him, believing that this giant was their protector. I see them walking by his enormous footprint and, for the first time, not feeling dwarfed, adapting slowly to the empty space he left behind. Peering inside, I know their experience, the freedom of it, the pain and relief of letting a monument finally die. ~~Knowing~~ knowing that I'm still on deck.

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