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THE EYES OF OEDIPUS

You are Oedipus at the crossroads. Far behind you lies the city of your parents. Just ahead your road makes a crossing with two new roads. Toward you along one of them comes an open carriage escorted by several servants. It carries a man of importance. Even from here you can see his proud bearing and the gold pin fastening his robe.

You are Oedipus. You see so well. You see who you are and who you are not. When Apollo's oracle said you would kill your father and lie with your mother, the picture sickened you. You are not the criminal Apollo meant. He cannot make you be something you are not. You have the freedom to choose. The power of your choice will protect you from the crime. You know right from wrong, and you choose the right.

In a few strides you have entered the crossing. The carriage enters from the other side. With the servants around it, it holds to the middle of the narrow track. The man in the carriage makes no move to give you room.

This man has no right to block you. You will fight him as you fought Apollo by leaving Corinth. You walk on the way you were going. One of the servants shoves you. Your anger leaps, and you push him back. Just then something hits you hard in the back of the head. As you turn, you see the man in the carriage raising his goad for another blow. You chop at him, two-handed, with your heavy walking stick. When the servant springs at you

again, your stick finds his face. A king's son trained for war, you know how to hurt men coming at you. Other servants close in. You must cut them down, or their number will overpower you. A few minutes later they are all dead. All but the single one running like a frightened sheep down the long slope below the road.

You are Oedipus, in command.

These men on the ground thought they could interfere. What they tried to do was wrong. No one had the right to force you from the road you chose for yourself. They moved at you. They came too close. It was dangerous. You had to defend yourself. You had to throw them back.

The one running has dwindled in the distance. You can hardly make out his form, dark against the dark shapes of tree and rock. He is too far away.

You have put them all far away. These men. The dark sayings of the god. The parents Apollo spoke of. Distance defends you from the crime Apollo imagined. It will never come. You have banished it into a vague future you will never allow near. Distance of time protects you together with distance of place. You buckle them on like plates of armor.

You are here. The threatening trouble is somewhere else. You will never kill your father and lie with your mother. You are innocent. Guilt will not touch you, because you can keep it far away. You are free from it. As long as you can preserve the distance between being yourself and being someone else, you are safe. You need distance. Here must remain unconquerably different from there. One road must lead away from any other, since the way you choose may never entangle itself with another way that you did not choose. There have to be alternatives. Without them you cannot defend yourself.

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You are Oedipus, free and innocent. The Oedipus with power to strike down interference. Oedipus the ruler. Every moment is for you a crossroads on a journey. Anything you meet acts as one alternative diverging from all others. You populate the world with things which must keep apart. When one thing lets in another, it can no longer be a separate alternative. You will not allow it to contradict itself that way.

Give your decree a name. Call it 'the law of non-contradiction.' It is the way your eyes see.

You discriminate so finely between the same and the different. Identity, like your own, must stay protected behind distinct boundaries. Anything not yet identified threatens to wander across boundary lines, dissolving the separation so important to you. Anything unknown endangers your power to separate clear alternatives from each other. You do not tolerate mysteries. Arriving in Thebes, you are quick to solve the Sphinx' riddle with the strength of your discerning mind.

Your power to discern is as clear to you as to everyone else. When people give you the prize of a city and a queen, you accept. Why should you refuse? You know your strength has earned them.

You are Oedipus, riddle-master and king. Free. Far from the danger thrust at you.

Safe.

Safety depends on that freedom of choice which insists on distance between things. Anyone choosing something puts himself with that thing

and keeps its rivals away. The free individual shares Oedipus' power to set himself where he wants, not where other people's stories put him. He can isolate himself. In this power to be one's own person I recognize myself.

I look after myself. If I don't measure up, no one else is to blame. I watch for anything horrible or demeaning and stop it from coming close. My dignity is my own. Nothing will threaten it as long as I keep my defenses solid. Defending myself, I am responsible. If I chose some way to act which did not keep me secure, it was no one's fault but mine. I wriggle in guilt when I am naked of any distance setting me off from something I am ashamed of. When I know myself in the protective shelter of doing well, it means that I am distant from any threats. My identity is safe. I am isolated. I'm me, thank God, no one else.

If I am confident in my success anywhere, then I am separate. Isolation and distance are my way, a winter huddle against intrusion into my decisions. This is my freedom. I can go anywhere I want. I can do anything there to do. Again like the country of Oedipus, my land is forested with alternatives all resisting each other. I choose one in the confidence it will not turn into another one. I can be with any particular one I pick.

As freely as the wind I can move from choice to choice. What holds me then together with anything I have picked out? What sticks to wind? It has no place of its own. No body. Like me, as my mobility of mind. I can call up images before me and in them be anywhere I want. I am as much a traveller as Oedipus. My distinguishing, separating, choosing mind exiles me to freedom. I travel from choice to choice, natively at home nowhere.

In my power to decide for one place over another, I have only the rigid scepter of rule whose metal I tighten around like a clenched hand. I feel lost without it. I have nothing but control. Without its discipline anything

might happen. Any horror could take me over. So I build myself more solidly into a ruling individual who masters any threat of uncertainty.

I am afraid. But of what?

I don't know. Sensing it would take a more intimate contact than I have. I touch nothing because I have set myself too far away. Close to nothing, without any sort of nearness, I cannot find where I truly belong. My own home would be unfamiliar to me. I would not know my father if he struck me, or my mother if she took me in her arms.

My freedom puts out my eyes.

Wait a minute. 'Puts out my eyes'? As Oedipus' eyes were put out? How can anyone say that seriously? People single out Oedipus for the special horror of his act. He is far away. The certainty in me goes deep that he lived, if at all, in the long-ago Greece of ancient myth. The legend of Oedipus belongs there. Not here.

Oedipus has nothing to do with me. The unique circumstances of his case bring about the strange events of his life. His particular personal character shares the blame. He had a temper too quick for his own good. I shut him up in a literary genre. 'Tragedy' I tell myself. 'Oedipus had a tragic flaw. His pride. If only he had learned to submit.'

Then I remember. Oedipus could think as clearly as any reader. He knew what Apollo spoke about and refused to accept it. Like the scholarly side of me, Oedipus removed himself in time and place from scenes which repelled him.

How different from him am I? As a free individual, deciding for myself, where do I recognize my parents? Where do I feel contact with those who gave me my life? Am I that close? Do I feel I owe anyone else so much? As my own person, free from others, I stand on my own, owing

nothing. Since others have to tell me who my father and mother are, their testimony is outside me. I do not see the truth for myself. The ones I have loved as parents treated me as the king and queen of Corinth might well have treated Oedipus.

Oedipus would only have had to know his parents to avoid his crimes. But how could he know them? How could he overcome the distance which blinded him? Can I avoid crime any better? I see things from as far off as Oedipus did.

Yet since I do not let the danger get close, I cannot see in detail the facts of the matter. Fear paints for me shadowy scenes in which I am hurt, robbed, abandoned. My sense of being invaded from the outside is so clear that the danger seems to have a source in other people and outside circumstances. Yet they are after *me*. I am central and vulnerable. I am a citizen of this night roamed by dangers coming for me like Gestapo agents. I belong here so intimately that I do not question the brutal way of things. In moments when I am provoked, I know a similar savagery in myself, but I cannot bear to notice it for long.

To overpower this darkness and the threats hidden in it, I take refuge in the well-lit streets of an organized community or religion. In submitting myself to its discipline, I get back the control I feel slipping away. Nothing can take me over. The laws hold off anything trying to break into me. I am no longer defenseless. Discipline supports my freedom. It keeps me from being a helpless victim.

The ruling decrees bring me away from the fears I am so intimate with. I leave these places familiar to me, guided by the rules. They protect me in a way that I cannot do for myself. So the rules are not my own. They are somehow foreign, though I learn to use them fluently, like a mastered

foreign language. In the country of this language, I am an alien who has travelled to get here. Since the local laws have no native, obvious ring to me, something has to enforce them. The authority of a ruler-god, or a king, or a king-like will inside me must overpower any opposition.

Force keeps back the uneasiness drawing nearer now like nightfall. A force like my power to choose. That is my final weapon against any invader. That power is all I have. What will happen if it is ever taken away? The question frightens me. I clutch my power tighter and say I *can* decide for myself. Choice, I say, belongs to me so essentially that I am not part of anything I did not choose. If I did not choose it, it had to happen by itself. Circumstances outside a person's control have a life of their own which frees that person from any responsibility. At this moment Oedipus seems innocent.

Circumstances ambushed him. How could it be wrong to defend yourself from being pushed off a road you have a right to travel? What harm could it do to marry someone? I claim innocence for Oedipus, betrayed by a string of accidents. Any guilt belongs to the events themselves. As causes and effects they are responsible.

They, not Oedipus. I hold them at a distance, looking at them with the detachment of objectivity. My objectivity stops anything frightening from getting close. Now I have the mastery Oedipus had solving the riddle of the Sphinx. I take up part of the shield protecting him from horror.

But the shield, like the force of a single life, is not big enough. Already, asking my questions, I have felt the dangers I am exposed to. Darkness waits for me like the curse on Oedipus' Thebes. All his tricks for escape do not save his father's life or keep his mother from having children

with her son. Oedipus feels the trouble as the pain of his people, wounded by the barrenness in their land.

Exposed, Oedipus must search into the ambiguity. No one is safe until his perception can isolate the wrongdoers from everyone else. He tries to rule as he ruled before. Instead, his own distance from the crime dwindles with each piece of revelation. He is hunted and caught. Discovery shows him there where he did not choose to be. The truth batters aside every protection, even the one he clings to hardest, his freedom. He is found beyond choice.

Oedipus thought he could put the crime in one place and escape to another. He dug himself into a present time distant from the future and from the past moment when the prophecy was uttered. The truth takes this distance from him. He cannot hide between past and future, eluding them both in a present free from either one. Oedipus' story was already over at the beginning. He had already reached the end. His life was destined. His story had no real beginning. The play we read retells a tale older than Sophocles.

And me? What in me resonates so with Oedipus afraid and trying to run away? Moving with him, I have found crime's violence near me. In my fear I realize some crucial center of myself. Recognizing that I defend myself as Oedipus did, I am jolted by the unfolding of his story. What if my barricades have no more solidity than his? He could not plant himself as a free individual, separate in place and time. Can I? My independence becomes less certain. By dissolving my ability to separate myself, the truth of Oedipus takes me in. I may stand so near guilt as to be Oedipus himself.

Why do I feel so open to the images of someone's violating the parents who gave him himself? What in me feels so vividly the nightmare? Is it the

nightmare of my freedom, that I could invade the very people I am closest to, who have given me the most, who are in their way the most familiar? Their familiarity is like being at home, where I least need to hide. Why do I so respond to the suggestion of entering here, as though from outside, to twist and murder?

Does my freedom of choice have within it something terrible? My independence reverberates to questions deeper than quotations from Freud. Is it in my separation that I am frightened? Has my freedom made me so blind and swaggering that I might defile my own source? Could I kill that which is father to me and share my will with that which is mother? Questions like these take away my safety.

Why do the images of Oedipus call so loudly? Why do I listen? The mood of the drama now draws me in. Tall, archaic figures move through the story as if by firelight. Words fall, heavy as stone. Winds blow through darkness, finding every opening in garments worn to shut them out. There is loneliness everywhere, and a tightening dread.

I have no distance from the mood. It gives the crime its setting and finds a place for me. I feel the mood the way I feel cold. The drama is here. I suffer it right now. Stripped of independence, I lose my individuality and its freedom. Place and time no longer set me apart. Place and time have become as flimsy as falsehood. Oedipus faces their wreckage as he faces the failure of his efforts to escape the acts foretold for him. I can be no freer. The center of me close to crime knows fear. In that fear grow all my tactics for evasion and control which collect as my independent self with its will. Somewhere now beneath all that emerges a life of me that cannot escape. It cannot, because it finds no distance. One place cannot cut itself off from another place, nor one time from another. Past and future show

themselves as illusion. Like Oedipus' story, my life is over. I endure the ancient book telling of Oedipus as I endure a prophecy about myself which will seek me out wherever I go.

When one place no longer keeps its distance from another, real events have no location different from images which come like dreams. I cannot protect myself from inner fantasy by planting myself among so-called outer facts. Efforts to keep the two regions apart promise no sanctuary. I am in the crime. Its blood stains me.

It was always this way. Every construction of moral distance fooled me like the trick of a stage magician. Thinking I could do anything myself was ignorant. If I dreamt of great discipline over myself or of achieving great things, I made myself powerful against humiliation. Whatever happened, I could justify myself. In my need to justify, I clung to my own strength of deciding and of enforcing my decisions. When I resented interference, then I was Oedipus. No one else. I have felt near him. My weakness, like his, is plain. I can go no further.

What does this conclusion mean? Do I and all of us have to let ourselves be raped by every approaching horror? There has to be something we can do. There has to. We simply cannot bring ourselves to sit still. We stiffen in defense, whatever a Greek myth or present-day lecture may say. Our fear of the savagery is too strong. It throws us into defending ourselves without any deliberate decision on our part.

What measures will help against invasion? To keep from being broken into like a house, we look at the problem. The problem shouts for a solution. We call on the strength of our minds and wills to bring us the answer. There has to be an answer.

The challenge to us resembles the challenge to Oedipus of the riddle he mastered. The problem waits like the ordeal a resourceful hero must offer himself to and overcome. As Oedipus did. Oedipus the hero.

No hero submits long to being defiled. He holds his own against the forces trying to take him over. Throwing back enemies, the hero wins. He defends himself. Oedipus defending himself travelled the road on which he met his father and killed him. His triumph of mind in far-off Thebes brought him the queen his mother with whom he had children. In Oedipus' heroism lives his crime.

Oedipus has come too close. I cannot feel superior to him in my ability to avoid trouble. The trouble is all around me. I hear it. I feel acts of defense as I feel Oedipus and the way he separated alternatives. He kept his distance, or tried to. When I keep mine, I lose touch. Without intimacy with things and with other people, I destroy as readily as Oedipus. I am brutal when I cannot participate with the pain I cause.

How much suffering in the world comes from independent individuals who shut out interference?

How much horror comes from heroes?

Finally together with his crime, Oedipus stabs out his hero's eyes. Those far-seeing eyes saw danger. Oedipus travelled with their help. Sharp perception guided his stick at the crossroads. Similar vision laid bare the riddle of the Sphinx. The insight lifted him to his throne and his queen. Repelling invasion and preserving his distance, the hero is most destroyed by intimacy. Closest to Oedipus in all the drama is the woman next to him in the marriage bed. Her brooch pins put out his eyes.

No one can look the deed in the face. It blinds everyone. Told of the threat close to him, Oedipus' father sent his baby son away. He gave birth to

the ignorance which enabled Oedipus, blindly, to strike. Oedipus' mother, closer to the crime, takes away her own life. Oedipus himself falls back, unable to stand the perception of what he has done. In its unendurable nearness, the deed destroys the position he has won for himself in Thebes. It takes away his place, leaving him nowhere. He becomes once more a traveller.

With his eyes and his hero's cunning gone, Oedipus is left weak. He has no more skill to evade the fate which he finally allows to be his. When he can no longer retreat into distances of any kind, he loses the main weapons making him a danger. He gives up the aloofness no one may violate. His isolation withers, and with it the urgency of guarding his own power to decide. Around him roads cease to fork into alternatives opposed to each other. There is no chance for warfare between them. Oedipus cannot make war. His fighter's eye, and mind, and hand have lost their strength. Like a baby he can no longer take care of himself. Like a baby he can hurt no one. He gains an innocence which purifies him. It purifies those around as well. No more a hero, Oedipus is distant from no one.

Feeling his fright, I know his contact with me. There is no crime of an Oedipus separate from me. I share it. Thrown back by the horror of the revealed act, he takes me with him. I leave it, knowing Oedipus the criminal is with me. I am Oedipus.

What is this unheard-of blending of things so seemingly different? I have never seen anything like it. Knowing from within the horror of a crime, I participate in it. Its act becomes mine. By letting it in so close, I take its full impact. It moves me close to the one apparently most guilty. The crime in me brings about compassion. It makes me one with someone not me.

Oedipus fought the approach of the evil prophesied for him. The space he put between the evil and himself was too great to see across. His ignorance let him kill and marry in the way he did. From those ignorant acts springs finally the revelation. Ignorance brings about the truth.

When he goes away from the crime, his going defends against the prophecy accusing him. It is an act of aggressively keeping his distance. In exactly that respect has arisen the lethal ignorance opening his way to the deed. When Oedipus goes away from the crime, he draws near it at the same time and in the same respect.

The beginning of the story is its end. No difference. Oedipus the hero said, 'I am not guilty. I will never be guilty.' In exactly that sharp asserting of himself as innocent lies his guilt. The truth overturns Oedipus' law that a single thing may not contradict itself by joining something else opposed to it. Working to guarantee isolation, Oedipus finds company.

With Oedipus, I lose the ability to separate. The things I thought were separate mingle with each other. In heroism grows crime. In contradiction there is sameness. In isolation arises companionship. All these merge, and I cannot tell them apart. I cannot tell myself apart from Oedipus and his story. Unable to set out anything distinct, how can I even say anything definite?

All my certainty leaves me. In the places I was secure, now I find myself surprised. I have no strength to define anything, especially myself. Even this body of mine cannot be the separate object I have taken it for. Instead, it gives me my sense of touch. Letting me feel, it exposes me to everything. When I am tears or a thudding pulse or a smile out of control, I am a one who is reached and moved. Isolating barriers fall away. My awareness goes beyond the boundaries of those distinct alternatives seen by

people still at work separating. Alternatives break open like seed husks, freeing the wider truth within them. An importance grows which includes my own concerns, though I may never have noticed them. The truth, like a prophecy, teaches me what I am.

I endure the portents as I endure a book like the *Oedipus* Speaking past any limitation of separate time or separate place or separate person of an author, the book is what we call 'great.' Its words have impact, as they had on Oedipus. They touch, whether like a hard-swung stick or like a hand helping someone who has fallen. If the words from me to you speak the truth, they touch in this way.

In truth I am not by myself. My presence grows out of more than my own independence can construct. Whatever is here comes like the body of a baby from the merging bodies of father and mother. I grow from touch. Trying to replace my father with myself raises horror in me. My will and its achievements commit crime when they force themselves on the stream of my life, claiming to be its source. Now I shrink before the crime. I have come close.

Close to the nightmare of hurting my father and mother, I am close as well to them. They are near beside me in the same way as the prophetic hints telling me of myself. These signs wait in all the things which make the earth I live on. I grow as the meaning they hold. I have joined them.

Oedipus joins too. When he penetrates to the heart of his destiny, he penetrates beyond his division from it. He goes beyond division at all. As undivided and deep as the earth, he stretches beyond weakness. A power reaches out from him like sound from a bell. Shuddering and wondering, people listen.

What is this power? Though it comes like a surge of the earth itself, what guarantees that it will hurt no one? Can we trust it? Could we not find even now a hero somewhere within us who will make sure we stay safe? We want to isolate ourselves from harm. At a safe distance from the danger, the hero in us would catch sight of the growing strength near Oedipus and teach us its boundaries. We would know where to put it. Knowing whether to resist or accept, we could decide responsibly.

Where is the vision to give us that sight and that mastery?

I don't know. For me everything has gone dark. Where my eyes were there is only pain.

Here at the end, has anything changed? At the beginning with Oedipus, I was blind. I am still blind. Fear before the unspeakable stirred in me. It still does. I moved away from a crime, and I still do. There is no present for me different from a past. No future in which to escape from what I am now. I see no other alternative to choose. Nothing to try for. My heroic independence has shown itself imaginary and trivial.

My story is over, as it was from the beginning. Moving, I do not move. Unshakably myself, I stand apart from no one.

Without my eyes I cannot see where I am. I wait for the touch of a hand to lead me.