



When the goddess Isis, 'the great enchantress at the head of the gods', yearned to reanimate the mutilated body of her husband Osiris, she was taught the

When the Gods were Intelligent, and Education was Enchanting . . .

Marie Angelo

necessary words and ceremonies by the god Thoth, 'Lord of Divine Words and Scribe of the Gods'. Reading this story from ancient Egyptian mythology in Ernest Wallis Budge's *The Gods of the Egyptians*, my imagination was intrigued by the idea of the goddess being taught, and in this article I'd like to reflect on what is surely a most unusual educational experience.

The story does not in any way portray the familiar classroom stereotype, in which knowledge and ignorance are embodied in the opposites of wise old senex teacher and puerile young student. What is taking place between Isis and Thoth, in that mythic time 'which never happened but always is', is a quite different kind of teaching and learning. The two gods are both adults, both highly sophisticated and knowledgeable: two powerful deities, whose relationship is not based on superior and inferior positions literalised as age and youth. They are lovers of learning, friends connected in a union of sames,

Marie Angelo lectures in Psychology at Richmond College, the American International University in London, and is a 'founding friend' of the London Convivium for Archetypal Studies.

rather than a union of opposites. At a time when interest in personal development is dominated by therapeutic metaphors, their relationship is one which I think describes a much needed *educational* archetype by which to imagine new and more egalitarian forms suitable for the growing field of adult education. This imagining can begin by looking more closely at the experiences and attributes of the gods themselves, particularly at the powerful figure of Thoth, the teacher.

Thoth brings Isis her extended power by his teachings, not by the brute force with which power is so often identified. His power lies in the generous exercise of sophisticated intellect, not in the use of mental or physical prowess to dominate or manipulate. This is the heart of the matter: intellect among equals. There are many gods with many attributes, all of importance. The special characteristic of Thoth is that he is the personification of the intelligence of the entire company of gods. Just as we would talk of needing to 'summon up' our intelligence in order to solve a problem, this Egyptian picture speaks of summoning Thoth, for without his subtle and complex presence it is not possible to act intelligently. It may seem strange to embody intelligence like this, as personification, but the imagistic way is Thoth's secret. In this mythic scheme of things, Thoth is Intelligence, but it is an imagistic theory of intelligence, rather than a conceptual one.

Modern ways of thinking about intelligence are dominated by conceptual models. They provide coherent ways of accounting for and explaining the phenomena of intelligent activity solely in the language of scientific abstraction. Yet each theory operates, as Robert Sternberg de-

scribes in *Metaphors of Mind*, through its own set of assumptions or root metaphor. There is, for example, the computational metaphor, which views intelligence in terms of software; the geographical metaphor, which seeks to map out the various mental processes, structures and representations; and the biological metaphor, which reduces mental phenomena directly to brain function and works down to the molecular level. As it is unusual to talk of metaphors quite so directly when developing scientific theories, there is the tendency to take the assumptions literally, rather than to appreciate them imaginatively. As a result the images remain in the background, unseen, for Thoth has become invisible.

Yet this god who so ably taught Isis her new enchantments has many attributes and titles, offering a whole range of imagistic metaphors to contribute to our understanding of intelligence. To our understanding of education, too; for traditional Western schooling only educates what it defines as intellect. The thinking abilities are defined as intellect, and so thought has been initiated into wider domains, through systematic encounters with information, discipline and practical enhancement. Other abilities are defined as complementary, and are treated as such — the feeling abilities of emotion and relational life, for example, which are neglected except in the field of the arts. Despite recent calls by Peter Abbs and others for a new understanding of the living powers of the arts, and what they could contribute to a more complete curriculum, emotions have not been considered intelligent, and have been left essentially uninitiated. As a result, we leave school and college with the limited view that in-

tellec, Thoth, resides only in the head. We have forgotten that there is also an intelligence of the heart.

In Egypt the heart was considered the seat of intellect (an idea reclaimed by James Hillman in his beautifully crafted piece of archetypal psychology, 'The Thought of the Heart'). Since intellect is at the heart, Thoth is known as the 'Heart of Ra' (the great sun-god). He is not fixed into one form or image, but is a flexible, multiple theory of intelligence. He can appear as a person to Isis, but at other times operates as the heart of another god. As the Heart of Ra, Thoth is known as the 'mind, reason and understanding of the great illuminator, the sun', and is given the title 'Three Times Great, Great'. In Greek translation, in which Thoth becomes known as Hermes, messenger of the gods, this role as 'thrice-greatest' leads to the title 'Hermes Trismegistus'. This is the name, more familiar perhaps than that of Thoth, which brings some of Thoth's attributes to us down the centuries, via the Italian Renaissance, mythology and occult studies. The mystical and magical teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, embodied in the writings called the *Corpus Hermeticum*, inspired the Renaissance vision of 'Man the Magus', able through divine intellect to perceive the workings of the cosmos in his/her own psyche, to participate therein, and become a 'co-operator with the archetype itself'. It is a vision which can still enchant the mind, particularly the mind of the psychologist concerned with human potential and its mythic expression.

It is difficult to find a place for such a vision today, however, because the re-imagining of Thoth as Hermes Trismegistus altered his status from that of god to that of a man, and gradually the gods were

cast into shadow, leaving man alone. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was said to have been written by an Egyptian priest, philosopher and lawgiver. Whilst the Renaissance mind was inspired by the suggestion that humans, too, could summon the gods to aid our investigations, the Enlightenment mind sought literal evidence, rather than imaginative understanding, and was swift to dismiss this priest and his intelligent gods as mere fiction. It is only more recently that we have come to understand that the gods are archetypes and cannot be dismissed so easily. Thoth is an archetype of intelligence, an imaginative reality, and hence a psychic fact. You cannot tell Thoth that he doesn't exist; all you can do is to imagine him differently. He may become invisible, disappear into conceptual abstractions or take other forms, but wherever there is a theory of intelligence, there is part of Thoth. The problem is that the concepts and abstractions seem to present only a partial and one-sided view of intelligence by comparison with the multiple characteristics and attributes of the imagistic Thoth.

For in the god Thoth we have a theory of intelligence which is arguably more comprehensive than any of the modern ones. It is certainly less elitist, for it includes the animal kingdom in its vision in a way which is almost unimaginable to today's consciousness. In personifying intelligence, Thoth does not only remain in human form; one of his attributes and qualities is to appear as a dog-headed ape, skilled in the art of computation, the science of numbers and the measurement of time. How insulted we would be today, to be called a 'dog-headed ape', but this is because we have lost our understanding of Thoth and thereby limited our images of

intellect. To the Egyptians, animals were not considered inferior species, primitive and gross. Such a way of seeing has come about by looking with an exaggeratedly Darwinian eye that places all beings in a hierarchy. This is the kind of thinking which informs a theory like Piaget's, whose developmental ideas of intelligence, still enormously influential, suggest that a child's mental processes of growth recapitulate a centuries-long cultural evolution from primitive iconic processes or picture-thinking to formal abstract ones. Strictly applied, the theory prescribes the nature of intelligence in such a limited way that not only are many rich and subtle cultures denigrated, by virtue of their imaginative, picture-thinking capacities, as 'unintelligent', but the very possession of 'intelligence' is restricted to scientists in Western cultures.

To understand the Egyptian view we also have to summon Thoth and re-imagine intelligence in a way that does not encourage us to look down on animals as somehow earlier and primitive. For the Egyptian, the special characteristics of animals meant that they were more likely to be revered than disparaged. In this view, each animal species is understood to embody a specific and supreme ability which it expresses to the full, and which is used as a symbol in the hieroglyphs denoting the gods. In its speed, or stealth, or beauty, or cunning, or fecundity, or ferocity, or protection of its young, or knowledge of how to live in harmony with its environment, an individual animal far exceeds a human, just as does a god. Indeed, as philosopher Roberts Avens points out, animals, like the gods, live an immortal life, for they live in the eternal present, and hence live an immortal moment. When one body dies,

another takes its place, the great oversoul of the animal finding expression in form after form. This, too, was the pattern of the Egyptian gods, for a god could die in body, and there is a place for the souls of the dead gods, just as there is for those of dead men and women.

With animals imagined as mysterious, immortal powers, often beautiful and terrible, it becomes easier to understand how they were symbols of sophisticated gods, rather than the primitive totems of an unintelligent culture. This is an important insight to sustain and explore, for it celebrates picture-thinking rather than following the traditional hierarchy that privileges abstract thinking over image. There is clearly a prejudice to overcome, for, as Martin Bernal has pointed out in his important work, *Black Athena*, the reason Thoth, in his incarnation as Hermes Trismegistus, was dismissed as a fiction was because later scholars, convinced of their own cultural superiority, could not believe that Egypt, a 'primitive, black culture' aligned with Africa, could possibly have developed such an elevated philosophy. Only white, Aryan Greek culture could have achieved such heights, for the Greeks developed abstract thinking, whilst the Egyptians were 'merely iconic'. With picture-thinking labelled 'the other domain' from the superior rational and thinking mind, it became aligned with whatever the culture labelled as inferior. Race is only one example, for it is easy to recognise how picture-thinking has been identified also with the 'unintelligence' of the unconscious, the childish, the feminine and the arts.

This makes it all the more ironic that Thoth, an imagistic theory of intelligence, is best known for attributes which lie at the

heart of conventional education. As Scribe of the Gods, Thoth is the inventor of languages and the art of writing; the essential cultural acquisitions. But a complete education, rather than one-sided convention, would learn the languages of image as well as those of concept, and the broader and more generous understanding that Thoth brings emphasises the realities of that educationally neglected 'other domain' we now call dream and fantasy. One of his functions is to operate as the heart or guiding intelligence of the great artificer god, Ptah, who takes the plastic substance of life itself and forms the worlds and all they contain. Read mythically, we can see this as the daily forming of new worlds of experience from the substances of the dream, giving rise to the myriad images and symbols which the dreamer, on waking, finds so hard to recall, so chaotic. Sensing that the fault does not lie in the dream but in our lack of understanding, we may acknowledge that we have need of the Scribe of the Gods, to teach us how to write and speak this oldest of languages.

Yet if we are sufficiently distressed by our lack of understanding to seek help, it is to therapy we must turn, not education. There has been no imaginal education to teach the grammar and structure of that language, and without such knowledge all we have is a 'heap of broken images' from the modern Wasteland, labelled as pathology and pain. Without the means to discriminate amongst the images that come to us, we have no way of learning the language of Thoth. Without a guide to teach us the great stories, we have no way to appreciate his work as the Heart of the Artificer, forming the deep intelligence of the archetypal patterning by which images elaborate the mythic narrative of the

individual, and tell the story of his or her life.

Thoth, the missing imaginal teacher, can be the guide for such an educational quest. One of his most solemn functions is just this, to be a guide to souls on their journey to the light. Thoth travels with gods and goddesses on the Boat of Ra which must navigate a nightly path through the Tuat (the valley of the dead sun). It is his role to set the course, because he has knowledge of the names and passwords which permit safe passage through each of the many and complex regions of the night. This is the intelligence of the rites of passage, which ensures the initiatory function of such journeys, making of them a true education into a new domain of understanding. In the West we have perhaps become too used to a mythology which makes a virtue out of ignorance and is quick to see the sin of pride in a desire for knowledge. To rediscover the invisible Thoth would be to reclaim a context which *delights* in further knowledge, and sets a canon and tradition for the disciplines of the imaginal which form the ground of a more comprehensive and imaginal education.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on what might have happened if the sorrowing Isis had called upon a therapist rather than a teacher. Would she have been helped to 'work through' her bereavement, to 'come to terms' with her childlessness? This would have led to adjustment and adaptation, rather than to action, and the murder of Osiris would have gone unavenged. By calling upon a teacher, a different archetype was invoked; that of intelligence, rather than healing. Through Thoth, Isis learned new powers of ritual and ceremony which

brought forth life from death. They enabled her to give birth to the child who would battle with Set, the perpetrator of violence and darkness in society. Thoth, the multiple and many-coloured theory of intelligence, brought Isis power. Through learning to know the intelligence of the

Heart, of the dog-headed ape, of dream languages and the rites of passage (and so many other attributes I have not had time to mention) Isis furthered her imaginal education and had power to act. Truly, if our gods could reclaim their intelligence, we might once more find *our* education enchanting.



Further Reading

Peter Abbs (ed), *Living Powers: The Arts in Education*, Falmer Press, 1987

Roberts Avens, *Imagination is Reality: Western Nirvana in Jung, Hillman, Barfield & Cassirer*, Spring Publications, 1980

Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation*, Vintage, 1991

Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 1904; re-issued Dover Publications, 1969

James Hillman, 'The Thought of the Heart', *Eranos Lectures Series 2*, Spring Publications, 1984

James Hillman, *Puer Papers*, Spring Publications, 1979

Robert J. Sternberg, *Metaphors of Mind: Conceptions of the Nature of Intelligence*, Cambridge University Press, 1990