

dLulamitri

A first-person view of an Englishman's Zulu name

Keith Ventress

The strange-sounding title that I have chosen for this article, pronounced 'dloolameetri', is a Zulu animal name that was conferred on me in an informal ritual earlier this year, 1997, in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. It was a unique experience that opened up a whole range of insights into personal growth and healing which I would like to share with you, as it revealed that the 'enchantments of the gods' that we read about in ancient Egyptian mythology are still accessible today. Also, I would like to re-examine some aspects of the use of animal imagery in psychotherapy as a means of summoning and harmonising emotional energy.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised when a sequence of events takes place to create a synchronous pattern, as happened to me. I had just finished reading the January issue of *Self & Society* on stories, myths and legends. The article by Marie Angelo, 'When the Gods Were Intelligent, and Education Was Enchanting' held a particular significance for me at the point where she drew our attention to the value of an imagistic theory of intelligence, rather than the prevalent conceptual one. In Egyptian mythology, the heart, the seat of intellect, is personified by the god Thoth, who, as scribe of the gods and Heart of Ra the Illuminator, the great sun-god, is the essence



of mind, reason and understanding. He remains invisible if we limit our thinking to conceptual abstractions, but if summoned by the heart he can appear as an imaginative reality and present himself to consciousness in many forms, as he is the archetype of intelligence. These forms are not limited to humans, but include animals as well.

For the therapist who embraces the imagistic metaphor, the classic dilemma of separating the intelligence and rationality of the head from the emotion of the heart is thus overcome. I have myself acutely felt this dilemma, in that the rational cognitive therapies, while seeming to give the client an elegant description of their condition,

Keith Ventress is a chartered clinical psychologist and person-centred psychotherapist.

lack the power to transform. The client becomes more *aware* of their irrational or self-destructive pattern of thinking, but whence do they obtain the strength to change? On the other hand, focusing on the client's feelings can be very effective in releasing emotional energy, but how can we help them to integrate overpowering urges or passions? The imagistic metaphor permits the wisdom of the heart to be expressed in a way recognised by both intellect and emotion, and can facilitate healing and personal growth.

In the therapeutic process I have often encountered moments when I sense that the client is grappling with an emotion that is seeking expression, but which remains elusive and uncontactable, like an energy needing shape and form. In my attempts to facilitate I would often find myself searching for words or images to connect with the emotion. This is where summoning the aid of Thoth as an animal archetype can be so helpful. I recall the first time that I stumbled upon his enchantment, which at the time I explained to myself as fantasy role-play, but whose outcome took me by surprise.

I was battling to make contact with a particularly difficult young client. Little Tim was a frail eleven year old with a severe disabling stutter. Not only were his feelings blocked up in his throat, but he was unable even to use words to express them, and would nod glumly to affirm his acute frustration and repressed rage. I sensed that it was his identity as 'inhibited Tim' that was not permitting him to express himself, and that we desperately needed some other vehicle, such as a different identity, even for a short while, which could bypass the well-entrenched blocking. Possibly a fantasy role-play would

help? What could we draw on from his limited experience that would be effective but non-threatening? This was the first time that I intuitively drew upon the archetypes of animal images and offered them as gifts to my client.

'Let's play a game and become different animals. What would you like to be?'

'A mouse,' he managed to say.

'OK, let's become timid little mice.' Which we did. We both sat under the table together and squeaked softly to each other. I noticed that as Tim changed his identify he was no longer stuttering.

'Let's try another animal,' I suggested. 'What about a lion?' I was amazed to see Tim rapidly transformed from a helpless depleted figure into a powerful roaring lion as he strutted on my table and bellowed down at me as I sat on the floor. With delight and excitement he had so readily taken on the strength, courage and power of the lion. There was no hint of the stutter. He communicated with me in a clear resonant voice. At the end of the session when his father came to fetch him, he became meek little Tim again and the stutter returned, but it was not quite the same. He retained a twinkle in his eye. He had discovered that he could summon the lion within him.

The final outcome of the course of therapy was not altogether to father's liking. He complained that although the stutter had deteriorated, Tim's behaviour had deteriorated with it, in that he was no longer submissive and obedient; that one problem had merely been substituted by another!

An understanding of the ancient Egyptian mythological perception wherein each species of animal is revered as a god with supreme attributes of speed, cunning,

tenacity, strength, courage, ferocity, loyalty, to mention only a few, would open up all sorts of possibilities for human growth and personal development if we could only allow ourselves to believe that we too can draw on these godlike properties. The specific characteristics of each species of animal are archetypal metaphoric representations of psychic attributes so constituted in recognisable image and name that they are able to evoke or strengthen these same attributes within us. Hence the 'enchantment' of the gods.

I have tentatively explored various ways in which this enchantment can be accessed in different therapeutic contexts and the effect it has on the personality. I have noticed, for example, that when clients are given a choice of materials, either modelling or painting, and invited to depict a significant emotion they have been carrying with them, they will often choose an animal. What is interesting is their explanation of why they chose that particular animal and what it means to them. They seem to have grasped that the archetype of the animal either facilitates the release of a blocked emotion that has been causing them pain, or conversely symbolises an element missing or hidden in their lives. It appears that the enchantment can facilitate a flow of energy in either direction, outwards or inwards.

If a sequence could be identified in the healing process, the first phase would be the outward release of emotion, finding expression through the characteristics of the chosen animal. In the case of Tim, to his relief he initially found the shy little mouse an appropriate representation of his negative emotional state. I have noted how often seriously damaged or wounded people spontaneously depict small, weak,

helpless or trapped creatures 'That's me. That's my condition,' they are saying. Their vague and unexpressed emotions have now taken on shape and form and have become accessible to shared consciousness and can be worked with in therapy.

At a later stage the client becomes amenable to inward flow, or the incorporation of more positively perceived animal attributes such as strength, courage, speed. When I look with amazement at the beautiful Bushman rock paintings and allow myself to become immersed in their message, I recognise that they were not painted for my benefit or for someone in the future, but were probably exercises in focusing the mental energy of the hunting group on the task that lay ahead of them. The painted wildebeest surrounded by the men with poised spears represented a ritual of imagistic enchantment. The successful hunt of such a powerful and fearsome creature demanded a clear focused picture in each hunter's mind, in order to release group synergy.

If energy flowing inwards is empowerment that will enrich or strengthen us, then we must find a way to be open to experience the wisdom of animal attributes — to be possessed by the animal's spirit, as it were. A sudden and transforming effect can take place when the animal archetype is voluntarily taken on or incorporated into the psyche in an active and directed way, usually through acting out, dance or some ritual. Rites of passage and many tribal dances in traditional cultures involve the invoking of and possession by the animal spirit. The detached Western intellectual observer too readily dismisses this practice as mere primitive pagan ritual or, more ominously, as demonic posses-

sion. Today, however, there seems to be a greater willingness to recognise that such rituals are psychological processes of psychic or spiritual empowerment in which the archetypal attributes deemed necessary for personal development are taken on and affirmed.

I would now like to describe a unique and totally unexpected personal experience which brought all the above considerations into a clear perspective: I had arrived in KwaZulu and was a guest of my two brothers who lived in the same area and were both known to the local people. My elder brother Darryl is an engineer and my younger brother, Robert, a builder. It was one of those hot tropical autumn mornings and I was joking and laughing with a group of the local black people who were curious to meet the 'brother from England'. I became somewhat self-conscious when I realised they were making personal comparisons between us among themselves in Zulu. With the help of an interpreter, my interest was aroused when I discovered that unbeknown to my brothers, they had animal names for them: Darryl the engineer was 'the Eagle' and Robert the builder 'the Monkey'. These animal archetypal descriptions were so apt that I was stunned. In case I was offended by their candidness (which I had myself invited) they explained to me that these were not physical caricatures but descriptions of each brother's spirit or soul. The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became that there could be no other names for them. Darryl was socially quiet, and very observant. I always had a feeling that he was looking at things from some distance and that he had a remarkable capacity for pulling things into perspec-

tive; useful qualities for an engineer. He lived at Kloof ('the Cliff') and had shown an interest in and could identify the eagles that nested in the crags above his home. Sometimes he would point out a solitary eagle sailing upward on a hot thermal wind. 'I know how he feels,' he would comment, 'I have done the same in my hang-glider'. And I laughed to think of Robert 'the Monkey' — his home is on the slopes of the hill, covered by trees. So warm and gregarious is he; there is always plenty of food and drink and much chattering and laughing and playing to be shared with the endless number of guests who enjoy his hospitality. And, needless to say, he has a banana plantation behind the house which is frequently raided by troops of monkeys from the forest. These Zulu people who were sharing their perception of my brothers with me were enabling me to look through their eyes, from an imagistic metaphor, to see and understand something so familiar, yet in a refreshing new way. Thoth, the ancient Egyptian scribe of the gods, is indeed alive and well in Africa today.

Such richness of spontaneous perception humbled me. The African image-name is actually a 'soul name'. It encompasses a whole way of being, perceiving and relating to the world. It is a living metaphor. To be true to oneself, one actually acts out the attributes of the archetype. Even in the smallest details, which could so easily go unnoticed, the pattern is consistent: it is the Eagle brother who recently obtained a powerful set of binoculars, not the Monkey. However, it was the Monkey brother, not the Eagle, who took out a lease on a spectators' box at the rugby stadium for up to fifty people as 'it was more fun to watch rugby in a party

atmosphere'.

Reflecting on my own European name, Keith, I felt a sense of deprivation that it did not conjure up any images; it was merely a sound, a label that referred to me. It came from a different tradition. Was it possible, I asked myself, to be given an African name? After all, like my brothers, I too was born in Africa. Although I had not previously given much thought to it, I was aware that Africans often took on English names for convenience in employment and so had two names, an African one and an English one. Could I do the same? But who would name me, and what would the name be? Would it enable me to access an unacknowledged aspect of my psyche, or to fill in a missing element? That would be useful and certainly interesting. But more importantly this would be a 'soul name' with which I could identify; a name with an image that I could recognise and that would connect me to my African roots. I began to feel a sense of excitement and anticipation that it might be possible to step into a living metaphor in the same way that little Tim took on the confidence of the lion.

I put my problem to the group of Zulus. I told them that I had an English name but not an African one, that they had identified my brothers as Eagle and Monkey and would they be so kind as to do the same for me? They expressed amusement and incredulity at my unfortunate predicament, once it had been carefully explained to them by one of their members who acted as self-appointed interpreter. Then the ceremony began. As they examined me, turning to each other in muted discussion, I felt my soul was being pierced. Finally they seemed to have reached agreement among themselves. A man called nGlovo

(pronounced 'nGlorvor') came forward. He was introduced as a Zulu Rasta priest who apparently was entitled to perform such tasks as this 'naming'. He took my notebook and formally wrote out the name 'dLulamitri' in large letters across it, dated it and signed it 'Rasta', while the group smiled and nodded their assent. This was my name. But what animal was it? What did it mean?

'You — Giraffe,' he said in English. 'A good name — is right for you,' he added. They all laughed when they saw my disappointed reaction. It was not that I was ungrateful, but that I had been secretly hoping for some powerful animal like Lion or Elephant. But Giraffe! How could I live with that? 'dLulamitri is good name for you. You tall man,' he said, reassuringly.

I knew that I had to work on this, to get to understand an African perspective of the giraffe and overcome my limited image of an awkward tall creature which did nothing to empower me as I had hoped, and only made me feel self-conscious. I began to believe that I was only given the name because I am tall and thin, and that was the end of the matter. However shortly after the naming ceremony, a somewhat sinister experience in an unusual setting opened up the deeper meaning of the animal metaphor that I was searching for.

I was in the rural coastal village of Umhlanga in northern KwaZulu. It was Sunday night and I was walking through the deserted town to the village green where I was told there was a beer festival being held in a marquee. I had obviously followed the wrong directions and found I had walked right through the town to the outskirts without any sign of festivities. On the way back I met someone who said the village green was next to the bus terminal

and not far off. By the time I approached it, it was almost midnight. I did hear music from somewhere and in the dark could make out people standing near the bus shelters. This was not the festival crowd, however, but a collection of vagrant men who eyed me suspiciously and began to sidle up to me. I suddenly felt very alone and vulnerable and realised this was the perfect place to be mugged, or even murdered.

'What do you want?' they asked me ominously as they closed in around me. 'You want ganja? You want beer?'

I explained rather lamely that I was looking for the beer festival. I gave one man who was pestering me, money to go and buy beer, knowing that it was unlikely that I would see him again. The others demanded, 'Who are you? Where are you from? What is your name?' I decided it would be best to act cheerful and relaxed, knowing full well the danger I was in, and sat down on the bench as they stood around me.

'My name? Which name — my English name, or my Zulu name?' I found myself saying.

This seemed to take them completely off guard and they stared at me in surprise.

'You have a Zulu name? What is your Zulu name?' they asked, curiously.



'dLulamitri', I answered. Suddenly the tension melted. The men all broke into smiles. They clapped their hands and laughed. 'That is a very good name. A very nice name. You are a very lucky man.'

It was now my turn to be curious. 'Lucky?' I asked. 'How am I lucky?'

'You are lucky because dLulamitri can eat all foods. dLulamitri is tall and can reach right up and eat the very best foods at the top of the tree where the other animals can't reach.' It was then that it dawned on me that these people were using a spiritual metaphor.

'What about you?' I asked. 'Can't you eat all foods?'

'Oh no,' they said emphatically. 'Not us. We are the Pigs. We can only eat the food that falls off the tree on to the ground. We eat only what we can get, just the scraps that the other animals don't want.' I was amazed that they could describe themselves in this way with such acceptance and without any hint of bitterness. Would they not benefit from a renaming ceremony and a change of identity? Or does nature determine a place for humans in the ecological scheme of things as it does for animals? In spite of a long discussion, I was unable to persuade them that they had choices, that they could become birds and fly. If anything, they were telling me that they were happy to be pigs.

I feel enriched by the possession of my African name dLulamitri, the Giraffe. It is a name with a living image that I can identify with. I see a gentle creature, the feet firmly on the ground supporting the body, the tall neck and head reaching to the stars, where it feeds on celestial food yet remains one of the animals of the plain.