# The Dragon & the Cosmic Egg

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Last Christmas my wife made me a present of this wonderful carved Dragon from South-East Asia. He clutches a large sphere, inside which his creator has carved a smaller one - just too big to escape through any of the openings. A kind of Cosmic Egg, I thought, held captive forever - but also protected from the unwelcome attentions of its fierce-looking captor. He stands as a powerful symbol of an inner relationship which I find everywhere, in myself, in my clients, and in the world outside. In its extreme form it is called schizoid splitting, but its origin lies in the way we experience reality - or constitute it, depending on your point of view. I am referring here to the observation, most often associated with Jung, that we can't be fully human without accommodating the opposites: good and evil, light and dark, conscious and unconscious, etc. I have been exploring this 'from the inside' using the practice of Focusing, so I should start by saying something about that before explaining what this Dragon means to me.

Focusing is a way of articulating the meaning hidden within one's obscure body sense of a situation (what Eugene Gendlin, who first described this method, calls a *felt sense:* see his book *Focusing*, 1978). The way we experience any situation is potentially very intricate, but we have programmed ourselves to screen most of it out, retaining only a limited set of stereotypical reaction patterns. In most common situations (washing our face, eating our breakfast, driving our car) this is OK, but in some situations where we need to be more deeply engaged - especially where our feelings are involved - we need a different kind, or level, of awareness. Our capacity to understand these more complex, 'charged' situations depends on how deeply we are in touch with our bodily felt sense of them. We aren't normally aware of this, because of the reductive cultural paradigm which insists that we think only in our heads. The neurobiologist Antonio Damasio has shown convincingly that thinking is not just a function

of the brain, but is actually embodied (see *Descarte's Error*, 1994 and *The Feeling of What Happens*, 1999).

In therapy, the inner consultation of the Felt Sense becomes crucial. If we experience something as an 'issue', our feelings will probably include fears which are left over from difficult situations or traumatic events in our past. Such 'leftovers' tend to be unconscious, and well defended, so it is difficult for us to think or act entirely rationally while they are, so to speak, driving us. This is what we work with in psychotherapy, and Focusing is a very useful and entirely safe 'self-help' method of looking at the same issues. It can be helpful for people who find therapy either too difficult or too expensive. It is also used by many therapists (including myself) in their normal client work.

I have been fortunate enough to be able to study Focusing with Barbara McGavin in Bath. Together with Ann Weiser Cornell in the U.S.A., Barbara has developed Gendlin's work into a form of mindfulness practice, which centres on what she calls *being in Presence*. This practice occupies the vital middle ground between psychotherapy and meditation. There is an extended discussion of the relationship between these two by John Welwood in his new book, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* (2000). I believe that the McGavin - Cornell practice goes a long way towards bringing them even closer together.

I would like to show how my own Focusing experience has informed my practice as a psychotherapist. This story weaves itself around the Dragon metaphor, as it brings together some common dyads, like body and Spirit, aggression and terror, personal gods and personal demons.

Felt senses can be very quirky, and can come in a huge variety of shapes and forms. Last year I went through a period of intense inner exploration during which my 'sense of myself' tended to cluster around two opposite poles. The first pole, down in the belly, was dark, childlike, and mystical. It had to do with terror, vulnerability and neediness, as well as humour, playfulness and the desire to merge or be part of something greater. I called this 'The Frightened Part', because that is how it often showed itself, and I think it's close to what Transactional Analysis calls Inner Child. The second pole, up in the chest, was often associated with feelings of anxiety, panic, rage, hatred and destructiveness, so I called it 'The Angry Part'. In a less angry form, it is also associated with meeting the world and being competent and constructive. Around the heart, it is different again, having to do with hopes, aspirations, ideals, and also caring for other people. In TA terms, this has elements of both Parent and Adult.

What I found was that these polarised feelings commonly arise together, in the form of a dyad. Some kind of actual or perceived threat brings out an active energy, but alongside that (or underneath it?) there is also a fearfulness. Before I became aware of it through Focusing, the fearfulness had been denied, so that it was out of awareness. What I discovered was that the active part tries to 'deal with' (mask, suppress, obliterate) the underlying fear, but succeeds only in making it worse. The active energy is immediately frustrated, and if the perceived threat is big enough, the dyad can turn into a vicious cycle in which the fear feeds the rage, which feeds the fear, which..... The 'centre' of this

experience is identifiable as a *trauma vortex* in the sense intended by Peter Levine in *Waking the Tiger* (1996). I think this may be a common pattern in people who suffered the early trauma which gives rise to schizoid splitting.

I find similar — but not identical — dispositions in my clients. For example, they almost always experience their most vulnerable place as being in the belly, where the worst terrors are felt. But I'm not making any claims to universality here. The important thing with Focusing is that there is a correlation between a bodily felt sense and a felt *meaning*, which may be unique to each person, and even to each session.

The 'meanings' which unfold from within a felt sense can express themselves in words, images, or gestures. My mind works best in images, and my 'frightened part' often appeared, both in dreams and in Focusing sessions, as a small, damaged animal or a flightless bird. My 'angry part', meanwhile, often appeared in the guise of a big, hungry Alsatian guard-dog. Sometimes when I was just beginning to sense something vulnerable or frightened in myself, the guard-dog would come roaring up and insist on being heard first. As far as he was concerned, the frightened part was under his protection. From the 'little bird's' point of view, this 'protection' was experienced as both terrifying and violent – but he still ran back for more whenever he felt threatened. This is similar to many of the abusive relationships to which people become addicted.

My formal training owes much to Object Relations, and it is interesting to see how these inner *dispositions* correspond to some of the psychological *structures* envisaged by the O.R. theorists. The flightless bird and the guard-dog form a pair of nested dyads. The dog is both powerful protector and tyrannical persecutor, and in both cases it is locked into an ambiguous relationship with the bird (victim). This double split has the same 'sense' as Fairbairn's picture of the splitting of the ego and the subsequent repression of the split-off fragments (idealising, angry and needy parts). It has been externalised in the form of the well-known 'Drama Triangle' (Victim / Persecutor / Rescuer), where these inner relationships are acted out in the 'real world', often with the same people swapping roles according to the circumstances. Jungian therapist Donald Kalsched finds the same inner relationships in what he calls 'the archetypal self-care system' of the victim of early trauma (see *The Inner World of Trauma*, 1996). The 'internal carer' takes the form of the Trickster: one side is protective, the other harsh and tyrannical.

Kalsched is particularly interested in the archetypal derivation of these Trickster figures, and their relationship with what he calls the *inviolable personal spirit* of the traumatised patient. He points out that a weakness of Object Relations is its failure to give proper recognition to the numinous or spiritual aspect. I have found in practice that what Kalsched says is true even if the client has a poorly developed sense of spirituality, and no awareness of any archetypal figures. There is still a deeply held sense of values, which are experienced as being highly personal, and also as vulnerable to violation, either (by projection) from somewhere outside, or (by previous introjection of an inner Critic) from inside. These values are upheld by a sense of 'resistance to

violation' or 'being inviolate', but they can be decoupled from their schizoid associations by grounding them in a corresponding 'good' body awareness and symbolising them in images, so that they can be used by the client as a resource. I think it is both arrogant and harmful for a therapist to dismiss such values (or beliefs) as just 'a defence'.

My Guard Dog is a kind of Trickster figure, both protecting and oppressing the little bird. He will find enemies in places where they don't really exist, because the landscape reminds him of bad things that happened a long time ago. This means I have had all kinds of problems with (for example) institutions and authority figures, because I have tended to see them through the eyes of a wounded Alsatian. If I wish to act responsibly, I have to be *in Presence*; but in the heat of the moment I can easily fall back into my old habit of identifying with my inner Guard Dog, so as to avoid feeling like a victim.

But my Guard Dog is not exclusively tied in to this drama. He is a resource - when decoupled from his schizoid frenzy. In this mode, he can act as a powerful ally, sniffing out every kind of deceit and hypocrisy, making sure he knows his territory, keeping watch all round, being a loyal support. By dwelling on the body sense of Dog, I realised that he practically saved my life when I was a boy at public school. He refused to accept those values, and preserved the knowledge of their falseness even when I gave up struggling because of some terror which I couldn't stomach at the time. One could argue that he only became 'a problem' because of another player in this internal drama, less visible and notably hard to locate as a body sense: the Critic, harsh Superego, or Internal Saboteur.

If the Critic were a recognisable figure, he would be the one who whispers 'You're not good enough', which (in my case) Dog finds unbearable and will do anything, however desperate, to disprove. If he can't succeed in this, Dog will identify with the Critic and beat me up instead. Psychoanalytic theory gives the Critic a form of semi-autonomous existence as the Superego, but from a Focusing point of view, the interesting thing about him is that he's so hard to locate as a body sense. There is a definite sense of something critical, but it seems to come from 'out there' or 'somewhere behind my head'. I think this is because he doesn't really belong inside: he's an introject, a foreign body, an invader who knows how to manipulate our inner figures for his own ends. All he has to do is to whisper, and we end up killing someone or jumping off the bridge in our anguish.

When the Critic says 'You're no good', he is not using any force, but his insidious whisper triggers off the whole schizoid drama. The vulnerable, childlike part is instantly terrified. The protector / abuser identifies with the contemptuous voice of the Critic. He seizes the Child in his vice-like grip in a clumsy attempt to protect him. Now he has the power, and from his point of view, *he thinks he is using it to protect me* from the danger of being shamed, exposed, or bullied.

A good medical analogy for the Trickster's bullying is found in disorders of the immune system, as Kalsched notes: 'Like the immune system ..., the self-care system

carries out its functions by ... attacking what it takes to be 'foreign' or 'dangerous' elements. Vulnerable parts of the self's experience in reality are seen as just such 'dangerous' elements and are attacked accordingly. These attacks serve to ... drive the patient more deeply into' [schizoid] 'fantasy. And just as the immune system can be tricked into attacking the very life it is trying to protect (auto-immune disease), so the self-care system can turn into a 'self-destruct system' which turns the inner world into a nightmare of persecution and attack.' (*The Inner World of Trauma*, p.24).

How does the Dragon express all of this? Psychologically, he represents what I have called 'Dog' or the Angry Part. The imprisoned sphere, which he guards, represents 'Bird' or the Frightened Part, but this time in its positive, spiritual nature (see below). His posture, or if you like his gesture, which is defiant and defensive rather than attacking, shows that he is reacting to an invisible 'something' lying above and beyond him, which I take to be the Critic. Overall, he represents one version of a stack of nested dyads which are characterised by fear on the one hand, and aggression on the other. This is comparable with Winnicott's developmental dyad, which starts with symbiotic/(fearful) merging and goes towards creative/(aggressive) separation.

On a physiological level, this mirrors the dyads which are expressed in the balance between the two branches of the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic (which prepares us for fight or flight) and the parasympathetic (which calms us down, and in the natural world, prepares a creature to give up its life to the predator). Trauma studies show that an excess of both at the same time leads to the potentially traumatogenic situation of 'freezing'. Animals can usually shake themselves out of this, if they survive the attack; but we humans, because our survival depends so much on the *meaning* we give to what happens to us, can get caught in a 'time warp' of frozen trauma which can take many different forms, according to the severity of the attack, its timing, and how often it was repeated. These include psychotic, manic, obsessive, phobic, depressive and many other delusional forms, all of which have a dyadic or polarised structure of one kind or another. In all these forms, certain situations are perceived as threatening, (that is, their original meaning is preserved in a frozen body sense) and the perception re-enacts the basic split. One part responds actively, and at the same time another part, strongly linked to the first, responds by contracting inwards in fear. The result is a neurotic or psychotic drama, which takes place between these two poles of the dyad, and consumes a great deal of energy. It is perhaps no wonder that the symptoms which appear on the outside — the dysfunctional beliefs and behaviours — can look so anguished and intractable.

The element of meaning represents something exclusively human, the 'third term' with which we *could* reconcile the original dyad. But any attempt at mediation tends to get sucked back into the original polarity — now greatly sensitized by fear, its meaning 'fixed' in a paranoid frame. There is even a sense in which schizoid splitting is a collective phenomenon, a kind of pre-historical trauma that runs very deep in human civilisation. One can argue that the

basic tragedy of the human condition comes from the fact that we are spiritual beings living in animal bodies. (See Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (1999), and the work of Rudolf Steiner.)

The Dragon could be said to stand for the cultural edifice that we, as spiritual beings, construct as a defence against the vicissitudes of embodiment, including the certainty of Death. He looks magnificent, but he is also a sham, just like the made-up dragons which the ancient Chinese used to try to frighten their enemies. On the other hand, without him we would still be cowering in our caves, begging the gods for deliverance. Thus he is the archetypal Transitional Object, both real and also a fantasy. The Cosmic Egg which he guards, stands for our ancestral *participation mystique*, which is still active in childhood and remains present in a hidden way all our lives, although we may try to deny it. Unfortunately it also represents our only hope for a living connection with a spiritual source, which depends on our being open, and therefore vulnerable: a state which our defensive Dragon will not allow in us, at any cost. Hence the poignancy of Jesus' saying: 'Truly I tell you: Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God *like a child* will never enter it.' *(Mark XI, v.15., Revised English Bible.)*

Such a degree of vulnerability simply terrifies us. So our civilisation is governed instead by the Critic, who stands for the negative side of the moral law which drives us to try to propitiate our gods in the Old Testament manner. Even the harshest and most bizarre behaviour can be justified by reference to some kind of 'integrity', in terms of maintaining a sense of moral values against hostile external influences.

I find myself dwelling on the metaphor of the imprisoned sphere, which I also call the 'Cosmic Egg'. It reminds me of a Focusing experience in which I accompanied myself all the way down into the horrible feeling of badness which inhabited my belly. Down in the depths I found a terribly distressed Baby. He was unbearably hot, unable to move, ashamed, hungry and covered in shit. I stayed with him in his distress, which the practise of Focusing helps one to do, and then something very strange happened: he recognised me looking at him 'from the future', and he knew that he would be all right. Maybe this was the slender thread that kept him from psychotic disintegration.

Once when I stayed with him like this, he changed again. He went back to what he had been before he was 'me'. He became in a sense 'angelic' — that is, what I imagine an angel might be like. I sensed in him a quality which was 'out of time'. Perhaps he represented a form of my personal spirit.

In *Waking the Tiger*, Peter Levine shows that trauma, as it is healed, gives us back its energy as a gift, in some form of enhanced perception. If this is true, then the kind of experience I have outlined above may have had a direct influence on my way of being with a client. When they are close to their feelings of intense distress, my experiential link with them can feel like a very intimate, maternal kind of holding, in the sense described by Winnicott. The body sense of it is complex. Part of it, which I experience down in the gut, is quite childlike, insofar as I need to feel as vulnerable towards my client as he does towards me. If it were otherwise, he might resist my suggestion that he should go somewhere difficult

inside while I am, so to speak, insulated from the pain of it. He needs to know that we are both companions on the same journey. The part that does the suggesting, however, is up near the heart. This is the seat of a more active kind of 'loving' which perhaps honours our separation more than our togetherness. It seems that in these difficult moments *we need to maximise both our intimacy and our separateness.*

A consequence of this is an awareness of the different energetic 'distances' at which different clients, at different times, need holding. Some need to be 'up close', while others need much more space. Holding, at the right distance, nurtures trust. It seems to me that our deepest sense of trust is derived from our spiritual ancestry: it has become an archetypal memory, like the Cosmic Mother or positive anima. But when a traumatically deprived person attaches their sense of trust to another, they can become dependent, and this blocks the capacity for mindfulness. To compensate for this in my clients, I try to stay in touch with a sense that the Universe is looking after both of us; but I need to do this from Presence. Otherwise my Rescuer kicks in, and I start identifying with my Trickster/Dragon, who wants to hook the client into the role of Victim. When this happens, the energy field collapses and an essential connection is lost.

As a more robust counterbalance to dependency, I like to work on resourcing (see Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, 2000). This means helping my clients to find their own place of safety, or to strengthen their capacity for self-assertion, by accessing their own inner resources. Again, they need to experience the process as a body sense, because this is the easiest and surest way to separate out the positive attributes of their inner figures from the negative ones. For me, it was a revelation to discover that my Guard Dog has such positive strengths — that he is not only the hungry, abused, frantic animal which I experience when he is hooked on his inner co-dependency. This discovery sometimes helps me to avoid being sucked into my own psychological Black Hole when something goes wrong.

I think we need to look our Dragons in the eye, and to separate them from the Cosmic Egg, which they have appropriated, but which really belongs to us. Only mindfulness, *Presence*, can provide the right conditions to carry out this rather delicate task. If we want to be in touch with the vulnerability of our Child, perhaps we should also respect our Dragon and appreciate him for the extraordinary way he looks after us when we need it.

*Even if he is only a Transitional Object, in the grand scheme of things.*

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