

Eclectic Mishmash

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*'To be sane we must recognise our beliefs as fictions,
and see our hypotheses as fantasies.'*

James Hillman

In the early 1980's our profession was less publicly accountable than it is today. Back then, as I recall, it was not uncommon for some psychotherapists and counsellors to shamelessly and brazenly describe themselves as 'eclectic'. They meant of course that they drew on a number of different theories and used them as and when they found them fitting. Soon this word 'eclectic' began to be coupled with unflattering qualifying words. We heard more and more about 'mere' eclecticism, 'woolly' eclecticism and eclectic 'mishmash'. Eclecticism began to sound like a carefree romp through the woods plucking at the brightest shiniest fruits to add to the exotic mishmash.

Increasingly we were asked 'What is the recipe?' 'What is the overall plan?' 'How does it all fit together?' For surely things must and ought to fit together if they are to be taken seriously. Of course they should. How do we know? The Bible tell us so. There is only one God. There may be many paths but there is clearly only one mountain. And of course each of us is without doubt a fundamentally unique individual. Many of us are unquestioning monotheists. 'Oneness' is good.

Plurality is bad. Pluralism is only excusable if deep down it is integrated into oneness. Hence we have the contemporary term 'integrative'. It may appear that I hop from cognitive behaviourism to gestalt in a haphazard way but I assure you that deep down I have a damn good reason. It is all part of a whole. We feel a need to convince ourselves, our authority figures, our peers and the public at large that we and our ideas are integrated. Then we can sleep soundly in our beds knowing that God is in his Heaven and all is right with the world.

Contrast this with a statement by Hindu scholar Professor Max-Müller:

'When these individual gods are invoked, they are not conceived as limited by the power of the others, as superior or inferior in rank. Each god, to the mind of the supplicants, is as good as all the gods. He is felt...as supreme and absolute, in spite of the limitations which, to our mind, a plurality of gods must entail on every single god. All the rest disappear for a moment...almost every single god is represented as supreme and absolute.'

Eclecticism may be met with less disapproval by someone brought up in a culture which is polytheistic. Yes, Ganesh may be but one of a pantheon of gods but when I pray to him he is the only and the absolute. Tomorrow perhaps I will go the temple of Kali and she too will be the absolute. What is the problem? It may seem outrageous to some, but if today you offer me a session of transactional analysis and next week you are an existentialist why should this be a problem? Perhaps psychotherapy and counselling remain embedded in the long tradition of Western imperialism? Only this time we oppress with a mental health guise. In the main, our training and accrediting bodies are strong and righteous when it comes to enforcing the notion of a clear and consistent theoretical model or an 'integrated approach'. So far such bodies can merely cluck their tongues disapprovingly at seemingly woolly eclecticism who have a polytheistic disposition. Statutory registration, however, will in effect kick such miscreants out of the profession by making them unemployable.

Psychotherapy and counselling have had success in reaching beyond the white middle classes and into the ethnic communities. So did the Christian missionaries. Some of the communities we try to reach are not a part of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic (Abrahamic) tradition. Presumably we wish to reach out to other cultural groupings in order to make the benefits of psychotherapy and counselling available to them. Are we equally willing to allow ourselves to be touched at the core by such an alien perspective as polytheism? Can we tolerate diversity that does not concede to our need for unity? Or, like our forefathers, do we imagine that

we know better and reenact our Western tradition of cultural oppression in the name of mental health and personal development?

We are in the grip of the archetype of oneness. By archetype I mean a mode of experiencing or stance from which we look out at the world. Religious systems name this god of oneness or 'one' God in various ways: Zeus, Yahweh, Brahma, etc. From the point of view of the 'one' god the ultimate reality is of course all about 'oneness'. Zeus says that there may be diversity but we must realise that the other gods are his children. However, the other gods do not see it this way at all. Aphrodite insists that it is all about sex. Hermes says 'No, it's all about communication.' Each archetypal perspective is a law unto itself. It is absolute and supreme as the Hindu scholar observed. 'Oneness' has its truth, but paradoxically, it is only one truth amongst many. When we insist on 'integration' we pay homage the 'one' god. There is no harm in this, but when we insist that our way is the right way and that others are mistaken, deluded, undisciplined, ill informed, ignorant or lawless, we overstep the mark. When we crystallise our prejudices into monolithic institutions that exclude others, we rip down the pagan temples and build churches to the one god as surely as did our ancestors.

If we are eclectic our ideas do not necessarily integrate into a whole. There is not necessarily an overview. But this does not automatically imply that our ideas have not been fully grasped or that our work is superficial. Eclectic work achieves depth by building relationship to differing points of view. Disciples of the 'one' god ignore what the pagans

felt they knew: namely, that the gods do not get on. They are forever squabbling amongst themselves. They do not 'integrate'. As a model of human nature this implies that we too do not integrate, however much we may believe that we 'should'. Of course eclectic work may be superficial but it may also be deep, subtle well informed and reflective. There is no guarantee that 'integrated' work will in any sense be better than an eclectic approach. It too may be superficial or deep. 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds' warned the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In my experience there are a lot of eclectic practitioners out there. When they are called to account for their work many of them feel bad about it. They feel obliged to tailor their experiences to fit the Procrustean bed of their theoretical model. They stretch points to fill gaps or lop off inconvenient experiences that are not adequately accounted for by their chosen approach. If they are 'integrative' they create bizarre and improbable hybrids stitched together with enough psychological terminology to pass as 'integrated'. If they are skillful, they succeed in getting the recognition that they, as eclecticists, deserved all along. I think it would be a lot more honest to come to terms with what I believe is probably a fact. Namely that we all have different predilections. We have different approaches that make sense to us. We have experiences that we have personally found helpful. If we are experienced and responsible practitioners we will have studied them in depth. We will have a good grasp of what they mean and how they work.

We worship at the temple of the god or gods who are most meaningful to us. From time to time, both in life and in professional work, we feel a need to go elsewhere and we do so. This does not necessarily come from the head or the mountain top (be it Olympus or Sinai) although on occasions it might. The impetus to take another view need not come from the unitary, controlling, overseeing ego. There is not necessarily a rationale, nor should we expect one. There are other forces at work when psychotherapy and counselling are successful. There are helpful impulses and intuitions which do not account for themselves to the rational mind. We can learn to trust them. Eclecticism is not a weakness. It is not a professional misdemeanor. It is an option. In some cases it is an enlightened and preferable option.

Further Reading

Hillman, James (1983) *Healing Fiction*, Spring Publications

Wilkins W J (1991) *Hindu Mythology*, Heritage Publishers, New Delhi

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