Animistic Psychotherapy

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Dream

I am in an underground chamber in Cornwall filled with immense ancient statues of meditating Buddhas. I am awed. I never knew such a place existed. I realise now that I am mistaken. These are no statues but actual ancestors of the land who are very much alive and deep in meditation. They have become aware of my presence. I listen as they discuss how they feel about me. I fear I have been disrespectful to have interrupted their meditation. They seem, however, to approve of my presence. I am lying on my belly on a pile of boxes. A woman's voice speaks to me from deep below the ground through my navel. She tells me I must not stop thinking.

Waking and Sleeping

I am inside a 4000 year old pre-Celtic tomb. It is night. The interior granite wall disappears into pitch blackness. It could be infinite. It could, for all I know, open into another world. The sweep of lighthouse beacons brush across the entrance to the tomb. The occasional thud of waves on rock punctuates the silence. The night outside is calm, clear and beautiful. I sleep fitfully in the airless chamber.

Legend

Hundreds of years ago a beautiful and richly attired lady attended service in Zennor church occasionally. People wondered how it was that after the scores of years they had seen her, she continued to look so young and fair. No one knew from whence she came nor whither she went. She took some notice of a fine young man called Mathy Trewella. One day he followed her. But he never returned; and she was never more seen in Zennor church.

One Sunday morning a vessel cast anchor about a mile from Pendour Cove near Zennor. Soon after a mermaid came alongside and hailed the ship. She told the captain that she was returning from church and requested that he trip his anchor just for a moment as the fluke of it rested on the door to her dwelling and she was anxious to get in to her children.

Her polite request had a miraculous effect upon the sailors, who immediately hove anchor and set sail; not wishing to remain a moment longer than they could help so near to her habitation. Seafaring men regarded the appearance of a mermaid as a token that bad luck was near at hand. It was believed they could take such shapes as suited their purpose and that they often allured men to live with them.

Zennor folks believed it was this sea lady who had visited their church and enticed Trewella to live with her. To commemorate these somewhat unusual events they had the likeness she bore, when in her undersea home, carved onto a bench end in their church which may still be seen to this day.

Dream

As I explore the land and learn to recite some of its myths and legends, I dream that valuable and curious old coins are pouring from my mouth. I am amazed. I have no idea of how this is coming through me.

Thinking

Can the land be conscious? Can the land be sentient? Can the land tell a story?

If you have borne with me this far, I politely suggest to you that you are an animist. Somehow you have heard

a voice merely by looking at black marks on a page of paper. Words are sounds, yet I imagine you have not felt the need to hold the page to your ear. You have 'heard' with your eyes.

'Synaesthesia' is the psychological term for the 'subjective sensation of a sense other than the one being stimulated'. It is an experience we perhaps more often associate with smoking or swallowing certain illegal substances than with reading hour at the primary school. Yet once we can read without moving our lips, we have learned an extraordinary psychic art.

Etymologically we recognise that a 'spell' is cast when we learn to 'spell'. The writer David Abram suggests we have transferred our natural sensitivity to the voice of nature onto the printed page. 'Our senses are now coupled, synaesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens and the moon. As the hills and bending grasses once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so these written letters and words now speak to us.'

This magical art of literacy enjoys the status of an almost unquestioned virtue in our culture. Our valuing of the written word is, however, by no means universally shared either geographically or historically. The Druidic priests of Britain, for example, at the time of the Roman invasion refused to use the written word. They believed that the written word would damage their link to the sacred Otherworld from which they drew their strength and authority. Similar dilemmas have been felt and expressed in our own times by spokespersons for non literate cultures with oral traditions, which have had to come to terms with the modern world. Examples of this can be found in the writings of West Africa's Malidoma Somé and in Marlo Morgan's book about her encounters with Australian Aboriginals.

What is it that these people feel they are losing? It is the link with the land as a spiritual force. In Australian Aboriginal culture, for instance, every clan member has a totemic identity. This 'is usually an animal or plant, but it can also be a natural phenomenon such as water, cloud or the wind' writes James G. Cowan. The conception of a new human life in this culture is not regarded as a biological process but as a spiritual one connected to the land. 'Conception is usually precipitated either by a visit to the totem area with a view to becoming pregnant; or by acknowledging that quickening has occurred after a visit to a particular totemic area.' It is this place and its associations that forms a part of the identity of the child throughout its life. The totem 'acts as an Ariadne's thread, allowing a man to find a way back to his preconscious existence in the Dreaming.' To lose this connection is, they believe, to be only half alive.

Carl Jung was sympathetic to such a view of life. In 1930 he wrote that 'Certain very primitive tribes are convinced that it is not possible to usurp foreign territory, because the children born there would inherit the wrong ancestor spirits who dwell in the trees, the rocks and the water of that country. There seems to be some subtle truth in this primitive intuition.'

Without a totem and without sensitivity to the spirit of place we become out of touch with a great part of what we actually are. We then live a life limited and bound by the separated conscious ego. James Hillman puts forward the radical idea that, in our time, the unconscious is 'outside' of us in the world. 'We still locate the psyche inside the skin.' he writes. 'You go *inside* to locate the psyche, you examine *your* feelings and *your* dreams, they belong to you. Or it's interrelations, interpsyche, between your psyche and mine. That's been extended a little bit into family systems and office groups - but the psyche, the soul, is still only *within* and *between* people. We're working on our relationships constantly, and our feelings and reflections, but look what's left out of that.'

What is left out, of course, is nothing less than the whole world. A glance at the DSM IV will confirm a total lack of awareness or interest in this dimension of the psyche. The environment in our era could be thought to produce what we may regard as compelling symptoms. These are such as dying species, climate change, poisoned air, land, water and so on. These could be thought of as symptoms of the repressed and denied totemic self. They demand our attention as surely today as did the cases of hysteria that drew Freud's attention to the repressed and denied sexuality of his era.

Jung stressed that we are in the psyche rather than the psyche being within us. He said we are like fish in an ocean. Our thoughts, dreams and fantasies are not just ours. They belong to a shared environment that encompasses the whole world including the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms. The term *anima mundi* or 'soul of the world' has traditionally been used to describe this awareness. If we can realise this awareness our approach to psychotherapeutic work may be quite a different one. Then, says Hillman, 'alterations in the external world may be as therapeutic as alterations in my subjective feelings. The "bad" place I'm "in" may refer not to a depressed mood or an anxious state of mind; it may refer to a sealed up office tower where I work, a set-apart suburban subdivision where I sleep, or the jammed up freeway on which I commute between the two.'

If we experience the environment as a mere inert backdrop to our psychological issues rather as a part of them, we are partially unconscious. When we are not aware of our natural involuntary responses to a toxic, ugly or otherwise stressful environment these feelings become displaced into the personal sphere as if it were all to do with 'just me'. The well articulated conventional language of psychotherapy is then at our service. We respond to environmental stresses *as though* they were personal or interpersonal ones. Psychotherapy can inflate of the importance of the personal and deepen our unconsciousness of soul in the world.

Hillman argues that we may need to get accustomed to the idea that a weed killer can be as 'repressive' and damaging as a narrow minded morality can be. Maybe we can recognise that the abuses we lay our

the environment may outweigh the abuses we have suffered to our persons and respond accordingly. If we can become conscious of a part of ourselves that corresponds to the totemic self we feel this in our hearts and bodies, immediately and directly.

If we follow this line of thought it seems evident that we need more than a political and practical approach to the troubles of the planet. Our response may well include these dimensions but it is primarily a psychological and spiritual shift of awareness that is needed. But how exactly do we begin to 'hear' the world? First it seems we must be open to the possibility that it is alive and 'speaking'. Dead men don't tell tales and neither does a dead planet.

In Aboriginal culture every geographical place has its story. 'Language here is inseparable from song and story,' writes Abram, 'and the songs and stories, in turn, are inseparable from the shapes and features of the land. The chanting of any part of a song cycle links the human singer to one of the animals, plants or powers within the landscape...it binds the human singer to the land itself, to specific hills, rocks and streambeds that are the visible correlates of these sung stanzas.'

In Britain too, as in other industrialised countries, we have the remnants and traces of a lore of the land and the plants and animals that inhabit it. This lore may be hidden in the names of places or the songs, stories and myths associated with them. In Britain these memories are best preserved in the Celtic fringes where the languages, monuments and lore of the pre-Saxon, pre-Roman and pre-Christian eras are still in evidence. The study of these traces can help to awaken our dulled senses.

If we are prepared to entertain the idea that there is a part of our being which extends beyond the limits of our physical bodies (the totemic self) and recognise the *anima mundi*, we move beyond the accepted limits of psychotherapy. Conventionally we might think in terms of 'projecting' personal phantasies into the environment where we experience them *'as if'* they were external. With this broader view, we can consider that our experience may be the voice of the earth itself as heard and seen through the human imagination.

When we learn of the fairies, mermaids, giants and other supernatural or apparitional beings which inhabit place, or of the mythological deeds of animals, we are learning rather more than pretty and childish stories. These things have been taken quite seriously by pre literate cultures and, it must be said, by certain modern literate cultures such as that of Iceland. These people were and are perhaps more in touch with the life of the planet. Indeed Barbara Walker points out that 'An English law, still on the statute books in the 19th century, officially claimed for the Crown, 'all mermaids found in British waters''. In learning the lore of the land we are becoming sensitive what the writer Patrick Harpur defines as 'daimonic reality'. He says;

'Never quite divine nor quite human, the daimons erupted out of the Soul

of the World. They were neither spiritual nor physical but both. Neither were they, as Jung discovered, wholly inner or wholly outer, but both. They were paradoxical beings, both good and bad, benign and frightening, guiding and warning, protecting and maddening.'

Our modern, post-Christian, industrial, scientific mindset is the result of a long process of deadening the planet. It began long before acid rain or the mass extinctions of species. It goes back at least to the time of Plutarch who reported, in the first century of the Christian era, that 'Great Pan is dead'. Pan was a Greek god of nature whose name also had the meaning of 'everything'.

We have convinced ourselves that the earth is dead, objective, unfeeling and unaware. Perhaps this says more about us and our own response to the earth than it does about the earth itself. The notion that the world is subjectively alive and conscious can seem primitive or touchingly naive to us. Or it can suggest frightening states of madness and psychosis.

Even if we wanted to, we cannot undo our history. We cannot go back to the early days of Greece. Nor can we return to the jungles or the great forests that once covered Europe. We can, however, put our intelligence to the task of achieving a fearless and respectful understanding of the insights these cultures held. The modern eco-crisis may, in fact, be demanding exactly this kind of response from us. It may be that cleaner technology and political change are not adequate to address the crisis. At heart the change required is one of self awareness and self understanding. We are more than we have dared to imagine.

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