

A Mythological Reflection on Natural Disasters

Jacqueline Dell

I was listening to two eminent professionals on the radio discussing the subject of the generosity of peoples around the world in response to natural and international disasters. Mention was made of the fact that the amounts donated to charity appeals for the tsunami in south east Asia had outstripped all previous donations for any disaster, including the Ethiopian famine, by many times, and the amounts of aid promised by governments from all over the world likewise.

The spectrum of reasons for this magnanimity, particularly in the United Kingdom, ranged from natural empathy at one extreme, through the feel good factor gained by the act of giving, to the assuaging of guilt on the other extreme. As far as it went this was fine; unfortunately it stopped there. What I was left with was a deep sense of disappointment that the discussion did not go beyond these narcissistic viewpoints. It was our natural empathy, our generosity so that we could feel good and assuage our guilt. The image was of a tidal-wave of money being poured on the people in response to the tidal-wave of water. A grandiose image indeed.

From the Christian viewpoint these events can be explained in a purely literal and concrete way. It was a disaster for the results of which we should ask God's mercy. The giving is seen as a demonstration of God's love reflected in humankind. On BBC Radio4 a religious spokesman on 'Thought for Today' blamed the disaster however on 'nature'.....

Let's contemplate the image of this tragedy for a moment. The truly catastrophic phenomenon of an undersea earthquake and resulting tidal wave followed by a tidal wave of giving, of sacrifice if you like. To someone from another age this could appear remarkably similar to a superstitious people's sacrificial appeasement of their gods. Most religions demand some form of sacrifice. Christianity is based on the ideal of human sacrifice. Is it really such a stretch of the imagination to see this massive giving as a mass sacrifice to the god of nature? The truth is the human race has worshipped nature for longer than, and has more in common with, the many supernatural religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the west; Hinduism, Buddhism and Shinto in the east, represented in the donating countries. It is as if humanity has

unconsciously reverted to a much earlier, pagan state of being and reacted to nature accordingly.

At the same time we live in an age of mass emotion. By this I mean our emotions are manipulated en masse by the likes of TV, advertising, and Hollywood. The results can be seen in what has been described as the almost hysterical reaction to the death of Princess Diana. It became almost de rigeur to leave a bunch of flowers somewhere. A car accident is seen as almost a natural (however unfortunate and tragic) way to die. She was blameless. Could it be that by contrast the suffering caused by genocide committed during, or a famine in a country plagued by, a civil war is seen partly as avoidable ('why are they fighting when most of the country is starving?'), that it is not somehow natural? And it is at least interesting, as stated earlier, that donations to charity from people in general, and from governments, have far outstripped anything donated in the past for any other disaster. There will surely be no financial shortfall.

Eventually the concrete practical needs of the dispossessed will be taken care of. At least, there will be sufficient funds to do so. But what of the psychological trauma? Alongside the physical traumas, the injuries, the resultant illnesses, diseases and starvation that are the direct consequences of the tsunami, what the people are also suffering from is the idea of the tsunami; the story of the tsunami itself. The gods are in the story. They want to be mediated and noticed. If not they will plague the minds of these people for years to come. These gods belong to us, and affect us every day. Sadly it is only when they rear up with such magnitude that we startle ourselves into a collective unconscious homage toward them. Could this be why the interest in Diana was so huge, and why the

reaction to her death was so enormous? Why so many flowers? Is it only when we are affected by the myths do we realise our hunger for them and the need to worship the very god-ground from which the image grows?

Jung discovered when he treated patients from different cultural and religious backgrounds that what their dreams had in common were what he called mythological motifs. He termed this phenomena the Collective Unconscious. For James Hillman the essence of the psyche is myth, consisting of mythological motifs. He says that 'the whole of mythology could be taken as a projection of the collective unconscious.' Oswald Spengler says that today we simply no longer know what a myth is. 'A myth', he says, 'is no mere aesthetically pleasing mode of representing something to oneself, rather it is a piece of the most lively actuality, an experience that shakes the innermost structure of being. By this description the people of Aceh, The Maldives, Thailand and Sri Lanka have lived through a mythological experience. The gods can clearly be seen. If the activities of the Christian god can be absolved, by its adherents, of any causal responsibility for what are then termed natural phenomena, the opposite is true in any polytheistic sense. When the Greeks saw a rough sea, they would say 'Poseidon is angry'. In this way respect was paid to the ocean. What has been being paid by the western (or westernised) countries, in a collectively unconscious way, can be described as respect for nature. What saddens me is that if we more consciously 'worshipped' the god of nature on a day to day basis, we would be more in tune with its shadow side, and consequently less traumatised by the consequences.

It was reported on an item of BBC news that because they had received more money in donations that they actually needed, the charity Medicines

sans Frontières had asked its donators if they could use the extra money for other causes which needed funds equally urgently. The majority refused.

The New Orleans experience appears to be the opposite of the tsunami in respect of the humanitarian response. What we heard was that the government of the world's largest economy, the richest country in the world, and its only 'superpower' was not able to respond quickly enough. We heard that there was looting and crime, but much of this has turned out to have been exaggerated, if not 'black propaganda'. What we do know for certain is that one of the survivors, a black woman, spoke personally about how the community helped each other by using their own boats to rescue and help their neighbours, about how they had to break into shops just to be clothed and fed, and how it became necessary, due to the seemingly slow response of the authorities, to 'steal' a bus to help to drive their neighbours to safety.

What I am leading up to is that, as with the tsunami, mythical motives in the tragedy are rising up looking for healing through consciousness. Let's examine them briefly. Historically, the city of New Orleans was built on the proceeds of the slave trade; on people who were taken from their homes, put in chains and transported in the wet, overcrowded and smelly holds of ships, with little food or water and where the sick were often left to die.

In today's New Orleans, the woman went on to report, the military rescuers in their helicopters flew over waving to them on their way to rescue first the rich white community, followed by the poor whites and hispanics. The black people were told to go to the Dome.

The resemblance of the Dome to a gigantic slave ship has been noted. The chains were no longer there, but the wet, smelly and overcrowded conditions, in which people were

actually dying could only have reminded many of those there, as it should surely us, of the treatment of their ancestors.

The question that needs to be asked is, could any of this have happened if there had been any real soul-searching and atonement for our role in the past. Would we have left these people in such similar conditions as their ancestors had experienced on first being bought, by force, to the United States? I don't think so.

If we consider, through our experience of working with people therapeutically over many years, that the psyche, in order to be healed, takes every opportunity to repeat the past in order to obtain a different outcome, what a lost opportunity it has been to have put these people through such a comparable experience. The other tragedy is that we are so cut off from the images of our past that we are consciously blind to the obvious.

Finally, some reflections on the Pakistan earthquake, and why they have yet to receive anything approaching the amount of aid that was promised, and of course nowhere near the amount given to the tsunami victims. The tsunami occurred near to Christmas when the image of the mother and child is always subliminally present, and in a place or places commonly associated with western ideas of paradise. 'Paradise Islands', the holiday ads. say.

I was therefore put in mind of the therapeutic notion of mother and child as the perfect omnipotent state for the baby before the conflict of separation; the blissful fusion that is the archetypal expectation. Could the disaster that rained down on this world so have disturbed this image that we wanted immediate reparation for our paradise? Could it be that we needed our paradise made whole again so that we could resume our holidays? Few people holiday in the north of Pakistan, and didn't those bombers have Pakistani names?

Further Reading

Jacoby, Mario A. Longing for Paradise. Sigo Press 1985

Sell, Benjamin (Ed). Working with Images. Spring 2001

Cobb, Noel. Archetypal Imagination, Lindisfarne Press 1992

"The Mythological Unconscious" *Michael Vannoy Adams*, Karnac 2001

Jacqueline Dell is a U.K.C.P. registered. Humanistic Psychotherapist, now living in Brittany France, exploring further her understanding of working and living with the image through painting, sculpture and writing, and also the idea that the images that attract us are implicit as a metaphor for change and transformation.

S&S and AHP(B) AGM & WORKSHOP

Saturday 20 May 2006

Non-members very welcome

10.30am-5pm

Connaught Hall

36-45 Tavistock Square (SW corner)

London WC1H 9EX

Morning Workshop

Being and Becoming: a Celebration

We will take a creative and positive look at who we are, what we do and why we do it - leading to a celebration of the humanistic way of living and being; and of AHP(B) and the ways in which we would like to move forward.

Buffet Lunch

Afternoon

AGM and the results of the Membership Survey

Discussion on future plans for S&S and AHP(B)

The whole day is free, with donations towards costs welcome.

Full details will be mailed to members in April