A Tribute to James Hillman

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> I don't know what life will be like now without James Hillman in it, but I know that he left us a rich treasury of writing that needs to be read, understood and appreciated.
> Thomas Moore, Remembering James Hillman in the *Huffington Post*, 31 October2011

> He leaves behind a used pair of tap shoes, a yard full of exotic chickens, mornings in Thompson, nighttimes in New York, friends from all over the world....
> Published in the *New York Times*, 30 October 2011

Sadly I never met James Hillman, nor heard him speak, though he felt close by when I experienced the work of his colleagues – Robert Bly, for instance, and Thomas Moore. During my ten years with a US Jungian analyst, I was told a few whisky-in-the-bar stories about the man 'Jim'. The stories were often used to illustrate that therapy – like life – was full of uncontrollable twists and turns, and that what thwarts us forms us.

A revolutionary and expansive worldview carries with it many risks, and James Hillman seemed to work fearlessly at the edge, stretching it and refining it and dreaming it and living it, laughing in the face of the Shadow. David Tacey comments in his obituary (in this issue) that Hillman was more influential outside of the clinical setting, as a creative thinker, writer and speaker; that he preferred to operate outside of institutions, on the edge of belonging, in the doorways. This liminality allowed him to shed light on many of our basic assumptions, and question our therapeutic mores. Indeed, were it not for this he might have passed us by. Yet through his writing he spanned the disciplines and reached across the generational and cultural gaps. He was a maverick, and for this we loved him, and adopted him into our humanistic world. He spoke to us in our language, a language of experience and action, as well as myth and legend; of gender and politics, as well as history and society. Real life outside the therapy room.

But his challenges to the therapy world – and in particular to Humanistic Psychology – were vigorous and at times harsh, and call for a response.

Hillman would not endure our positive notions of an 'inner child', and saw the domination of the child archetype as disempowering and apolitical. He replaced the developmental theories which commonly inform our practice with his notion of 'growing down'. Our souls have been hanging around in the mythical world, having arrived there from previous lives; as in the Kabbalistic tree image, they must move down into the earth to take root. We have to grow down into our bodies and walk on the earth to fulfil our destiny, and this takes a lifetime. He also took strong issue with the notion of growth in New Age therapies – he quips to Michael Ventura that if anything grows after a certain age, its cancer. Growing is for vegetables. We humans should simply become more and more ourselves. Hillman's acorn theory tells us that there is an image calling us into being, and this image, which arrives with us, acts as a personal daimon, a guide who remembers our calling, and leads us – sometimes by blocking us with illness or accident, obstructing us in all kinds of ways until we remember the path we should take to fulfil our destiny. The desire to overcome obstacles is an egoic desire, which represents a refusal to accept our Fate. Likewise any idea of transcendence, repair, problem solving or change. In *Revisioning Psychology* he described Humanistic Psychology as 'shadowless,

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a psychology without depths, whose words remain shallow because transcendence is its aim’ (1992: 65).

Parents and family as the cause of our problems is also debunked. Hillman told us that ‘the more we cling to the overriding importance of parents and the more cosmological power we accord them, the less we notice the fathering and mothering afforded by the world every day in what it sends our way’ (1996: 86)… – and ‘Psychotherapy compounds this fault’ (ibid.88). But his more serious criticisms of a humanistic standpoint were neither clinical nor even ideological, but rather they lay in the philosophical challenges to a view of human nature as innately positive. In *The Soul’s Code* (1996) Hillman offered his acorn theory to explain the Hitler phenomenon, describing Hitler’s character as possessed by his daimon (which was demonic) and ‘a bad seed in a personality that offered no doubts and no resistance’ (1996: 216). He said that ‘the idea of a demon or evil genius helps account for his appeal to the substrate of shadow in the GermanVolk…’ (ibid.).This is perhaps where Hillman diverged most strongly from a humanistic world view. He said that the demonic is always among us, and denial of it will only make it worse – ‘Innocence seems to ask for evil’ (ibid.: 239).

So did Hillman offer us any solution to the problem? Prevention will not work. We cannot and should not lock it up, or use behaviour modification to try to change it. Recognition seems crucial. He advocated increasing awareness about the Demonic. We must meet it in ourselves and others, and recognise the soul’s call within the ‘bad seed’. Might therapy have a function? There is no final verdict from Hillman, though at times therapy is dismissed:

> To what does the soul turn that has no therapists to visit? It takes its trouble to the trees, to the riverbank, to an animal companion, on an aimless walk through the city streets, a long watch of the night sky…. We breathe, expand and let go, and something comes in from elsewhere.
> (1996: 88).

Surely the therapist aids the recognition, adds another consciousness to the process of awareness, offering support to the struggling personality? A Hillman-inspired therapist might consider themselves less important, and less responsible. The knowledge that ‘what we live is necessary to be lived’ – Kant's German equivalent Notwendigkeit, meaning ‘that which could not be otherwise’ – makes understanding our lives much easier. If whatever we are we could not have been otherwise, there is no regret, no wrong path, no true mistake –‘to understand necessity in this way makes mistakes tragic rather than sins to be repented or accidents to be remedied’ (ibid.: 210).

If this makes Hillman sound like a passive spectator, read his writings on social and political matters. The title alone of ‘We’ve had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World’s Getting Worse’ challenges therapists to step up on to the World stage. If we are not changing the world, then who and what are we changing? He calls us to attend to the sickness out there, reminding us that soul is in the world as well as inside the person. He asks ‘if personal growth did lead into the world, wouldn’t our political situation be different today?’ (1993: 6). He tells us to ‘First, protest!’ He says, ‘You take your outrage seriously, but you don’t force yourself to have an answer. Trust your nose. You know what stinks.’

Hillman articulates the dilemma, which many of us feel, that we know something is wrong with the system and we want to protest, but we don’t necessarily have a better plan to put forward. It’s easier to be in opposition than to create and carry forward policy into action. But Hillman takes this ‘not knowing’ forward as a principle to uphold. We can take our ‘not knowing’ out into the world and express our ‘no’ without the need to resolve it and have it all worked out. He uses the term kenosis

– the idea from Greek means vain, hollow, fruitless, void, empty – to support the idea of 'empty protest'.

To me this brings together the personal and the political because it gives credence to the 'being with' and 'not knowing' of the therapeutic dialogue, which allows a deeper knowing to emerge. If we could allow more of this in the political arena, perhaps we could grow some wisdom out there in the world, instead of the puerile hubris we witness in the political rhetoric of our world leaders. It also addresses the conflict between being and doing. There is a place for both in Hillman's notion of Empty Protest. But Hillman says that therapy blocks this kind of protest, because it asks us to think before we act. It tells us that we need to find the meaning before the action, rather than finding the meaning in and through the action. The expression 'acting out' used in therapy circles has always riled me a little, perhaps because it is too pat, and easy and generalising, and it doesn't want to examine an action on its own merits, the particular. It prefers to dogmatise. It is used to judge and condemn actions.

Hillman gave us the expression 'radical negativity'... protest for the sake of the emotions that fuel it.'It's what the Hindus call neti, neti – not this, not this, not this. No utopia, no farther shore toward which we march, only the march, the shout, the placard, the negative vote, the refusal.' (ibid: 106).

He was clear in supporting action for the sake of taking action, to record it as political memory – the memory of our political ancestors forms our soul.

> Passing on what you love can also mean taking action – political action, civil disobedience, *even if you know you're going to lose*. Because memory of actions taken is an important way that things get passed on from generation to generation.
> (1993: 236, original italics)

Hillman inspired us to value the archetypal and transformational power of stories. He altered the course of people's thinking, and many have said he changed their lives through his work. But his strongest message, and what will remain alongside the challenges to psychotherapy, was his call to us to respond to our daimon, to listen to the whisperings and signs, to follow our destiny. My feeling is that more than most, James Hillman followed his daimon and achieved what he was called for, leaving us with much to think about, and with much gratitude in our hearts.

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