Hungry Ghosts: Psychotherapy, Control and the Winds of Homecoming

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The heroic myth of domination and control of outer and inner nature is fraying at the edges. This article explores the mis-location of collective phenomena to individual experience and the place of psychotherapy at this cultural junction. Psychotherapy can continue its domesticated adjustment to the paradigm of control that leaves clients as hungry ghosts – scapegoats for cultural malaise. Or it can attempt its own painful emptying – a deconstruction or even an exorcism of its own hauntings that open the space for radical renewal. A brief excerpt from the clinical work around a significant dream highlights this exploration and offers a sail to catch the winds of homecoming.

What makes a desert so beautiful is that it hides a well.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

My client is struggling to acknowledge the needy child within himself. There is so much shame attached to this and so much historical effort to be 'not-needy'; to be independent; to be a man; to be a hero for those in real need, and yet this needy part keeps asserting itself in often embarrassing ways. He muses with me on the alternative scenario of what if he had succeeded in being un-needy? What if he had managed to establish an impenetrable fortress?

The insight that he would be starved is easy enough, but the work to befriend this sensitive side of him and give his needs a place in his everyday life is a longer journey. This difficulty stems, in part, from his childhood wounding and the insecure attachment with his mother. Rather than suffer the intolerable betrayals of trust, his defence was to disallow nurturing possibilities; a pre-emptive strike of orphaning himself so that he would not suffer these humiliating disappointments. Like Kalsched's (1996)

notion of *archetypal defences*, this self-care system gave him protection against further trauma. The consequence of this defence is then an attack on anything nurturing, or even possibly nurturing. He was emotionally starved but defiantly denying his need.

This seems to me to be a parallel with our own cultural complexes of today. We live in an escapist culture that desperately looks for gratification but, in Mick Jagger's words, 'Can't get no satisfaction'. The compensatory toys that our culture offers, the many dummies rather than breast, cannot carry the instinctual demands for being securely held, for comfort, warmth and for being the gleam in the parent's eye. These have to go underground. They become like hungry ghosts haunting our waking ego's reign, and leading to multiple addictions. Despite the cultural emphasis on becoming a fully separated individual, we are interdependent and ultimately at the mercy of others, both human and other-than-human. The idea that we can be in control, be the master of our ship, exist in a separate germ-free, risk-free bubble,

is being severely deconstructed. The environment suddenly seems hostile, as if we have angered the old gods. Whether it is the terrifying tsunamis, wild fires, cataclysmic floods, or epidemic diseases resistant to antibiotics, the human species no longer seems so self-assured in our technological dream of domination.

Within the consulting room, these hungry ghosts are often taken personally. The issue is not so much projective identification but collective introjective identification. The grief I may suffer through my sensitivity to a collective or trans-generational trauma can be confused with my personal loss – I take personally what is not solely mine. The desperate terror at feeling lost, dysregulated, uncontained gets placed at the feet of my personal mother. Because of our culture's ideological bent to individualism, we can easily take such symptoms as belonging to personal history. Naturally, as with my client, there is enough personal history on which to hang these collective introjects, but attempting to locate collective trauma within my own life story exacerbates difficult, painful personal experience into a torture.

This mis-location of collective phenomena has been pointed out by Jerome Bernstein in his book *Living in the Borderlands* (2005). With a client who felt overwhelmed by the pain she felt about the cruelty to cows, he started by taking a classic psychoanalytical approach, treating this as her internal world. She had to correct him forcibly by saying, 'It's the cows, stupid!'. Bernstein's work exposes how psychotherapy can be part of the problem by focusing extensively on the 'inner world', as if it existed in separation from the environment. Through his experience with the Navajo, Bernstein also shows that we might learn from marginalized cultures how to offer restitution to the land.

The place Bernstein gives those with particular sensitivities to the effects of Western violence offers a new context for understanding cultural malaise – that deep sense of being alien, not belonging to the social order. Those alienated from social norms may betray their inner feelings, their sense of authentic connection in order to accommodate and belong to a group. Their troubles may be pathologized as failures of early attachment, poor parenting or having narcissistic and borderline characteristics. Bernstein suggests that healing comes not from within the individual but in the junction between society and its environment. Those marginalized who feel unable to partake in modern culture may provide a much-needed mirror for our social ills, ecocide and potential species suicide. Those who fail to successfully

identify themselves with a skin-encapsulated ego may be catalysts for cultural renewal.

Such cultural renewal requires the relinquishing of old complexes that have bound the collective ego-mind to habits and beliefs that are dysfunctional as well as opening to unborn thoughts that need welcoming minds to incubate them. This article attempts a brief exploration of the place of psychotherapy at this cultural junction. It can continue its domesticated adjustment to the paradigm of control and normalize the dangerous dilemmas clients face lest they fall into an underworld – not so much a mythical hell but a suffering of the collective underbelly of socio-cultural norms that make them hungry ghosts, scapegoats for cultural malaise. Or it can attempt its own painful release and emptying – a deconstruction or even an exorcism of its own hauntings that open the space for radical renewal.

The underpinning of a system of thinking was described by Bateson (1972) as an *epistemology*. This is not the same as a paradigm. Bateson points to something wider – the very way we make meaning of phenomena. In psychotherapy, in common with many other disciplines, the way we make meaning is exclusively attributed to relationships between persons. This excludes other animals, plants and objects that do not communicate in concepts. Yet in the process of working psychotherapeutically, things often become totemic. They are a source of meaning, and participate in the meaning-making process. Examples of this can be natural, such as trees and places, or man-made, such as chairs, art objects, or even the consulting room. While the idea that things have intrinsic meaning is entirely accepted within indigenous cultures, we explain it away with the notion of projection. Having withdrawn our sense

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of belonging and participating within an animate world, we then attribute any meaningful external experience to the process of projection.

The interesting exception to this is in working with dreams. In dreams, people do converse with animals, plants, mountains, daemons and we, psychotherapists (at least those who treat dreams as significant) are happy to explore the meaning and, in the case of Gestalt approaches, dialogue with these dream elements. The prejudice of our waking ego is sidelined, as the dream gives permission for a deeper sense of meaning to be perceived.

Problems, as Bateson pointed out (1979), do not arise within individuals but through a network of relations that certain behaviours and beliefs establish themselves. Psychotherapy, through limiting the networks to the human realm, leaves us with an impoverished epistemology. For instance, empathy is often defined as the ability to feel and share another person's emotions. We easily extend this to pets and herd animals such as horses that read us emotionally, although once again this can be challenged as anthropomorphizing. It is difficult for us not to put humans at the centre of our epistemology.

In working with clients over a 35-year period, I have seen that many have found nature an empathic resource in childhood when their own parents had failed to provide a 'facilitating environment'. I now enquire into this during an intake as a necessary part of their history. It is difficult enough for an isolated Western family to offer all that a tribe embedded in its local environment has done for thousands of years. The parents are attempting to manage a cultural complex of alienation that almost by definition creates loneliness, frustration and unmet needs – hungry ghosts showing themselves as symptoms. If psychotherapists discount how children compensate for parental failures by accessing an older form of nurturance, we are failing to recognize that the problem is not with the child's internal world but with the relationship of the family to its external environment. We may also fail to recognize that wounds of childhood resonate with the wounds of nature, and that a reciprocal healing cycle can form.

A further problem with clinical epistemology that Bateson draws from Korzybski is that the *map is not the territory*. In naming the phenomena that we experience, we are building maps and models. Much psychotherapy training consists of inducting students into these maps and models, as the means to understand and often to control the uncertainty of the therapeutic relationship.

There is no such entity as a 'victim sub-personality'. This is a classification of persons that may be useful as an explanation for a certain limited set of behaviours, but which never exhausts the depths of that person. The use of such abstracted language offers explanation and the illusion of control, apparently saving the student from the danger of overwhelm and losing their reflective stance. But what is sacrificed in this conceptual distancing is the direct feel of the interaction.

Kafka's story (1917) of the humanized ape called 'Red Peter' is relevant here. This African ape has seemingly successfully made the transformation into human society where he behaves much as other humans. However, when invited to report to the academy of science about his previous ape life, he is unable to do this. In submitting to domestication with his human captives, he has forsaken his original wild language and is without a means to re-present his ape self. However much he tries, he is now unable to remember it. This is not a matter of lost translation but of lost soul. Western human culture is in a similar position. We have forsaken our animal sensibilities in exchange for a world mediated by conceptual abstractions and distractions.

The last part of this article explores steps towards a re-integration of our instinctual wild mind with our reflective consciousness. Such a process requires a different epistemology that facilitates a participative and reciprocal practice. Nick Totton suggests (2005) that:

> From the point of view of the ecology of mind, our work as therapists is to interrupt purpose-obsessed consciousness and relax into *wild mind*, so as to facilitate the same process in our clients. In so far as therapy then has a 'goal', it is to let go of goals and settle down to what is.

As well as its obsessions with objective goals, psychotherapy has had a strong tendency to use abstract and objectified language, coming up with names such as melancholia, inferiority, abreaction, fixation, amnesia, compulsion. This objectified language was already current in psychology, but according to Bettelheim (1984), Freud's translators used Latin names such as 'Ego' and 'Id' to create a scientific formalism and distance. Such abstracted language can get in the way of practice and is in contrast to Freud's advice that, 'the analyst must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ toward the transmitting unconscious of the patient' (1912).

Keeping language in the sensory present is challenging for writing in journals. Following Jung, Hillman (1977) has distinguished between the written *language of psychology* and the *speech of the soul*. The

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objectified Latin names rob the soul of its mythic richness, whereas ensouled speech imaginatively evokes the feeling and connects the therapy partners. When I name *anguish* rather than 'anxiety attack', I am evoking the feeling – making it visible in the room. We might imagine psychotherapy rooted in an oral tradition, coming up with process names such as: 'sinks down into the underworld, heavy with grief'. Perhaps not as short as melancholia, but much more direct!

In the Chairs

I sit opposite my client Andrew. We have sat here before; like two persons come to invoke a presence or await a higher authority. We wait for that wind to blow through us. He sighs more in anticipation than resignation as the words find their way to his speech. I feel a slight tightening of my muscles, my animal senses reaching out for what may be emerging between us. It is as if we are on a tracking session together, smelling the wind and attempting to read the half-hidden signs.

It's a dream: a visitation during the night that wants a second appearance. He is on a cliff with his partner looking out to the sea. Immediately I am there with them noticing together with him a wave slowly building in the far distance. From previous dreams he recognizes that this is a potential tsunami. He points it out to his partner and as we watch, it is drawing the ocean up into itself. He tells her that they must get back from the cliff's edge – he knows the power of this elemental force. But she does not respond. Like a prey caught in a hypnotic trance, she is immoveable, ignoring his increasingly desperate pleas.

In a terrifying engulfment the huge wave breaks across the cliff and as the spray clears, she has gone. The slight imprint of her feet is still on the grass. After a

shocked silence, Andrew rushes to the cliff edge. Much to his surprise he sees her on the beach below and as he watches, he can see that she is moving. She is alive!

Back in the dry of the consulting room, we both tremble at the retelling of this visitation. Although the dream visitor has gone, she, like the partner, has left her imprint. There is the tang of salt in the air and a feeling of bewilderment. We might think that the psyche is inside of us or that dreams happen inside a person's head, but clearly we were inside this dream.

An early thought is to read the dream as a warning to those deniers who refuse the evidence of our senses that we are *not* in control of elemental powers. Even if like Shakespeare's Ariel some powers have subjugated themselves to us, they are now setting themselves free. Our technical wand has cracked and the illusion of our mastery exposed. I let this thought settle.

I invite Andrew to share what is reverberating with him. He is interested in his dream partner, a woman who is offering a different relationship than that of his daylight partner. Perhaps her rootedness comes not from fear but from the excitement of meeting this elemental power – like rushing out into a storm to bathe in the electrical excitement of this primary force. In contrast, the sensible withdrawal of his dream ego seems timid.

We do not attempt to define the elements in the dream, although linking them to climate crisis is tempting. We recognize the agency of the dream, and allow the interrelationship of its protagonists (personages and forces) to weave their own design. Following Andrew's curiosity, he engages in a dialogue with the now mysterious dream partner. He is concerned that she may have felt abandoned by him, but the dialogue reveals that it is him that feels left. She had a trust in the relationship with the elemental powers that he cannot match. It separates them.

Waves of sadness fill the room. This separation has deep resonance with him. Yes, part of this relates to his mother and the too-early demands on him to be independent and look after himself. As a young boy, he had to hold himself and his loss – a brutalization of his tender feelings. I notice that what is evoked in me is not this tender boy but that intimate sense of soul-making that includes deep yearning and the suffering of grief. Attending to this experience in myself catalyzes a similar shift in him without the need for linguistic instruction. Whatever words were exchanged, these were an affirmation of this dance between us rather than any directive. And the ghosts? They seemed to fade, as if the

soul-making had in some way satisfied their hunger.

This therapy story is not an instruction manual for an ecosystemic approach, or even a paradigm exemplar of wild therapy in practice. It is, a little strangely, the story that wanted to be written here. It came much of its own accord, like a dream. Its occurrence is not random and may offer some clues as to how agency, communication and presence can be construed differently from that of a domesticated psychotherapy. 'Agency' is perhaps the most significant name of the three. To what do I ascribe agency? Within relational modes of psychotherapy, agency is ascribed to both client and therapist, and also to the relationship. This is already significantly different from a medical model, which reserves agency for the professional in charge. Additionally, it seems that agency is felt in the dream itself – *it wanted a second appearance*. Although less evident, the consulting room also brings agency – a containing presence imbued with many years of story.

In the speech of soul, which is so close to that of dreams, all things are alive and have potential agency. Working in mythic space, causality becomes deeply uncertain. The world, including the animals just outside my window, seems to be participating synchronistically with the dance between the client and me. Something is being orchestrated, choreographed through all the participants. We have invited that *anima*ting principle, anima, to be an agent, and everything comes alive.

There are many times when a therapist may still need to be in control and offer that personal containment for a client. There are equally many times when attending to what is attempting to be spoken or enacted through the relationship without control, and with a humble respect for the elemental powers that surround us, catalyses so much more than the human therapist could bring.

Rilke writes of this magic far better than I:

Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars
The inner — what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming. ❺

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