

## *Panel Contribution*

# Ancestral and Mythic Themes in the Consulting Room

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### **TOPIC**

Jung's comment: '*[Indigenous people] live[d] in a period and in a milieu in which man was still linked by myth with the world of the ancestors, and thus with nature truly experienced and not merely seen from the outside.*' (C.G.Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, 1983, p.144)

### **EDITORS' NOTE**

This is Dr Judith Pickering's contribution to the second conference panel, held on Sunday 21st October, 2007. This panel was introduced by Dr John Morton. Other panel members included analysts Dr Leslie Devereaux and Dr Craig San Roque and academics Dr Jadran Mimica and Dr Bernie Neville. An expanded version of Dr San Roque's panel contribution can be found in the *Related Papers* section of this publication. Unfortunately there were no other written contributions from this panel available for publication.

### **JUDITH PICKERING**

Invited to participate on a panel featuring discussion between anthropologists, academic psychologists and Jungian analysts on the topic of ancestral and mythic dimensions of the psyche, I reflected on the idea of the analyst as anthropologist and the anthropologist as analyst. Both disciplines are con-

cerned with analysis of the human condition. Analysts focus on understanding the roots of the self, it's potential for growth and realisation, it's perversions, distortions, pathologies, and it's cure, restoration and flourishing.

Anthropological research has traditionally concerned itself with the social, cultural and biological analysis of the human condition. Dr Jadran Mimica, who was also a member of this panel, is editor of a book where anthropologists analyse the 'psychic depths of human cultural life-worlds as explored through psycho-analytic practice'. He writes: 'The unconscious matrix of the human psyche and of the intersubjective (social) reality of any given cultural life-world is a vital domain of anthropological and sociological inquiry and understanding'.

Inspiring this panel, the quote above highlights the overlapping domains of anthropology and analysis. In the original quote, Jung was defining neurosis as being divided against oneself, and he located this internal division in modernity's alienation from the mythological, the spiritual, and ancestral realms.

The historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, also located the crisis of modernity in the disconnection from the creation stories and rituals which ontologically give us meaning and being. Jung, interviewed by Eliade at the Eranos conference in 1952, talked of the crisis of the modern world being due to it being desacralised. The cure lay in rediscovering the deeper sources of our spiritual traditions and creation stories. Eliade argued that myths narrate a sacred history, a metaphysical revelation. 'Being real and sacred, the myth becomes exemplary and consequently repeatable, for it serves as a model' (Eliade, 1960, p. 23). Jung also spoke of how myths and stories, while clothed in their multitudinous forms and infinite variations, reflect psychological situations and are repeated endlessly in human life.

Myths and stories that capture our imagination may do so because they are paradigmatic of certain ways of being in the world, of intra- and interpsychic patterns of relating. While each person's story is unique in its detail, myths and stories that capture our imagination may do so because they encapsulate particular configurations of intra-psychic and inter-relational dynamics that we may, at some level, share.

In my clinical practice I have found certain stories being lived out in both the inner world of clients, in their dreams, and also in their relationships with others, including transferentially. Every analyst grapples with understanding and working through the complexities of early relationships, the inner representations, internalised family dynamics, introjects of parental figures and difficult relational experiences. Not only are early relationships vital for understanding the unresolved issues plaguing our patients, but so too are intergenerational ancestral patterns, histories, traumas, cultural and historical environments and religious beliefs.

I shall illustrate this principle with two clinical cameos, both concerning patients where the focus on intergenerational matters was urgent and central to our work: even though in both cases neither patient was at first aware of this dimension in their current psychic and relational predicaments.

Therapists working in the area of intergenerational transmission of trauma are acutely aware of how it is often the offspring of survivors of trauma who, without even knowing why, are unconsciously driven to enter therapy by the need to uncover past secrets, to piece together an ancestral and cultural history, before the stories and the keys to comprehending what they carry die with their forebears. As Jung wrote:

‘...the patient who comes to us has a story that is not told, and which as a rule no one knows of... It is the patient's secret, the rock against which he is shattered’. (C.G. Jung, 1963, p. 117)

A major therapeutic task for psychotherapists in our present generation is to be on the look-out for such ‘unthought knowns’— in dream imagery, somatic symptomatology, and in the transference-countertransferential material generated in the analytic space.

In the analytic encounter analyst and patient may find themselves in a unique imaginal and embodied environment, a dynamic, interactive space, in which there are fluid realms of experience between internal and external reality, conscious and unconscious communications, shared states of mind, bodily sensations, attunements and malattunements or, as Balint put it, a ‘harmonious [disharmonious] interpenetrating mix up’ (Balint, 1959, pp. 62-69). Analysts become attuned to how their subjective experience in the consulting room becomes like a resonating chamber, echoing and amplifying, tuning into nonverbal, presymbolic, unconscious material, transforming it into conceptions, thoughts, and myth. The analyst takes in primitive emotions, in a state of reverie absorbs unconscious communications, inchoate, fragmented psychic material, becoming an empty vessel for the incarnation of dreams and mythic elements.

As Grotstein puts it, the analyst must have *patience* while continuing to ‘observe and allow a mass of seemingly *random* or *chaotic* associations to settle in his mind’, awaiting the ‘emergence of the *selected fact* (Poincaré, 1963) ... that gives pattern, coherence, and meaning to the hitherto scattered elements’ (Grotstein, 2007, p. 85).

Myth in Bion’s conception refers to ‘the particular mythic template that may be found to organise and join together the analytic object, the O of the session’ (Grotstein, 2007, pp.82-3): the utter truth, reality. Through such subjective passion the patient is able to own their ‘hitherto unbearable’ emotional experience of O. Thus the patient is able to ‘become his lost, split-off, and projected self by re-owning his hitherto unbearable emotions’ (Grotstein, 2007, p. 107).

## FRANCIS

Francis dreams of walking in a forest with her grandmother. It would be frightening except for the warm touch of her grandmother's hand on her back leading her along a path. They find themselves on a precipice and the way forward means jumping a long distance, but there are huge spider webs forming a cradle. They jump and are held safely in the cradle of filigree threads.

Francis had not taken much notice of her ancestry when she first came to see me. Due to racial prejudice growing up in Australia she tended to deny it: 'my wog family' she tells me deprecatingly. I asked her to tell me a little about her grandmother. She said she hadn't much to do with her these days. The dream prompted her to visit: and deepen her relationship with her grandmother, who began to tell her all the stories of her ancestry, how her family came as migrants to a tiny town in South Australia from their tiny village, as seamstresses and cloth merchants.

Francis began painting a series of paintings depicting her dream. She discovered that the forest was highly reminiscent of the forest of her ancestral home.

She writes a thesis which traces her ancestral roots: notions of memory, loss, nostalgia, ancestral spaces and liminal zones are its inspiration. It features themes of displacement from ancestral cultures, her mother tongue and cultural identities. Through therapy and her creative outpouring she found an 'in-between world' which allowed access to a space which transcended time, memory, an eternal dreamtime present.

Francis was able to integrate the once disowned ancestral elements into her life through analysis and through the intellectual rigour of following a path through writing and study. It was vital for her to discuss the personal elements of her thesis in analysis. Both analysis and academia created comple-

mentary facilitating environments for her personal and artistic individuation. Here was an example of how vital it is that the academy provides a facilitating environment, a *temenos* for work which then is not experienced as in conflict with personal journeying to the land of the ancestors, but rather as a field that amplifies and is informed by the deeply personal and interpersonal ground of her being.

## RACHAEL

‘A word like “self” naturally knows more than we do; it uses us and can command us’ (Winnicott 1965, p. 158). An inexplicable sense of urgency propelled ‘Rachael’ into my consulting room, seeming to know more than we did, operating like a third presence, with its own directionality. We were taken into zones of experience that we did not want to enter, and did not know, at first, existed. It was in the intensity of the experience of the intersubjective analytic space that a mythic dimension connected with her ancestry revealed itself.

Throughout my work with ‘Rachael’, watery motifs, images of bodily plumbing, drains, and swimming pools kept surfacing in her dreams, became recovered memories, and generated the metaphoric vocabulary between us. It was as if the dream imagery and its metaphorical associations encapsulated an unknown intergenerational history. It became a conduit for the transmission of (and therefore eventual processing of) intergenerational traumatic complexes never fully worked through by her forebears, which haunted the analytic space until their origin could be located, avowed, thought about, and emotionally faced.

Harrowing and torturous experience revealed itself as through a glass darkly. Within our intersubjective analytic space, through bodily experiences, mental states, fantasies and images, an unknown, untold, but dimly sensed story was

slowly revealed. Uncovering its origins over four years of work allowed the co-creation of a mythic narrative which could encapsulate Rachael's development of a more authentic mode of being in the world.

The dream image conceived intersubjectively and given birth took in its train a stream of associations, images, emotions, and bodily sensations, which shifted and moved between us. Dreams became interconnected waking fantasies drew out further emotive images, memories, yearnings, fears etc. — all pouring into our mixed imaginal realm. This became a narrative history, our language-game, expressing our myths of origin, which give us our changing identities and destinies. This is an example of the uses of subjective experience as an analytic tool: the analyst's countertransference as resonating with and revealing the untold, unthought knows.

In her first session she said "it's been a watery year for me, full of tears. I suffer endometriosis, which gives me water retention". She went on to say "I'm really depressed, like I'm stuck in some kind of watery drain". A dark cloud, which she called her 'deathly mode', seemed to envelop her: she felt like she merely went through the motions of life, as if from behind a mask. She spoke of 'treading water' in her life, unable to enter the swim of things. When she entered a period of deep regression in winter, her imagery was of being submerged in a watery grave. A cancelled session led to a feeling of all the water running down a drain. A sense of immersion, sometimes swimming, sometimes drowning permeated the imaginal and affective space I was in with her: a necessary induction into her internal world.

She brought many swimming pool dreams which showed a terror and fascination with plumbing her depths, and trepidation about diving into life. A recurring dream of a concrete swimming pool emptied of water signalled a malignant 'heart of darkness', the full significance of which only emerged later— an 'unthought known' (Bollas, 1987) that she and I would be living and working through.

There was a sense of our feeling our way together into such zones: sometimes tentatively dipping our toes in the water; sometimes colluding in an unspoken fear and refusal to jump in; sometimes steeling ourselves to draw breath and take the plunge. We were both fully if asymmetrically immersed in a ‘harmonious (or disharmonious) interpenetrating mix up’ (Balint, 1987).

Her dream and waking images of drowning were, we gradually uncovered, linked to a terrible paternal ancestry. The paternal arena within her was compounded by the unresolved issues of her forefathers: an inherited load of unbearable proportions. Dim intimations of her father’s dark past began to float into awareness: a dream of Hitler as a child made her reflect on her own grandfather’s childhood:

“Hitler’s father was brought up to feel shame without any memory. That was how I was brought up with my family, no history, no understanding of that Eastern European side, and there’s a lot of shame around that...Like what all that stuff meant is a whole lot of horrible things.”

In the intersubjective analytic space we both entered horrendous, deadly, watery graves. My own body seemed to act as a container, holding her stuff in my digestive system. This embodied counter-transference experience enabled me to feel my way into what felt like a preverbal, primordial, dimension. A sense of unease continued to haunt me. I felt enclosed in some opaque veil through which I looked as through a glass darkly, as if suffering a ‘blindness of the seeing eye in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time’ (Freud, 1893, p. 117). I eventually broke through to see what had to be seen: a place of such intense intersubjective analytic experience. I was immersed, vicariously in a place of cold blooded torture, of razor-blade cruelties and genocide. The concrete swimming pool with no water represented a literal, non-metaphoric and psychopathic dimension, a state incapable of moving or being moved, transformed and integrated.

What also came to light was that transference-countertransference somatic symptoms were themselves metaphors: it was as if the sorrows, terror and traumas of the ancestors rose like bruises upon our bodies. We were haunted by a sense of knowing more about the past than Rachael was conscious of, this haunting permeating the analytic space. Such material was exposed and recovered to Rachael's benefit only when I allowed myself to really receive and face the implications of the underground sub-texts that neither of us was at first aware.

'When knowledge comes, memory comes too; little by little knowledge and memory are one and the same thing', says Gustav Meyrink (cited in Herzog, 1982). In the analytic space it is pertinent to ask, as did James Herzog in his analysis of the children of survivors, 'Whose memory? Whose knowledge? And, how might one person's knowledge and another person's memory become one and the same thing?' (Herzog, 1982 p.114).

## NOTE

1. This case was based on material previously published in Pickering, J. C. (2002), 'Moving metaphors of self', in R. Meares, ed., *The Self in Conversation*, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia: ANZAP, pp.123-143.

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