

## Is Something Mything: A Question Inviting Re-membrance

*James Hollis*

Ann Shearer's "On the Making of Myth" and its implications for training is a timely reminder as mythically grounded materials appear less and less frequently in our many curricula. On the one hand, analytic psychology is not frozen in time, and it is a testimony to its vitality that it grows and assimilates new information, theory, and competing metaphors. Nonetheless, one sometimes wonders if much of the current disregard for archetypal material does not come from a failure to have understood its radical psychological implications in the first place. We are in scant danger of ignoring the personal, the family of origin dynamics, and developmental agendas, for all my colleagues are keenly aware of these tributaries which flow into the widening analytic psychology stream over the last half-century. Yet the rich reservoir of mythic imagery informs fewer and fewer case discussions at which I have been present or have read.

Shearer serves us all well in reminding us of our own mythic Jungian origins. My only caveat, and it is truly minimal, is that the case for reappraisal needs to be made even more strongly. A better way to address this matter is to ask this elemental question: why, then, should we be interested in myth in order to do our clinical work?

To suggest that myth is little other than "a secondary elaboration of primary infantile experience" is a dismissal based on ignorance. Among many other things, myth is an elemental formative process which psyche brings to bear on the raw, chaotic materia of life. It is the epiphenomenal accomplice of consciousness, always precedes consciousness, often lies beneath and beyond consciousness, and may often usurp and dominate consciousness, as anyone who has attended a rock concert or a sports event will attest. Along with somatic states, myth is the deepest level of knowing which we are permitted to access. As we cannot know the unconscious directly, mythic material, personal or collective, is the most radical, most immediate opening to the hidden world. It is the symbolic expression of the soul. As Jung said directly, we study myth in order to know what is in the unconscious.

As we cannot know the divinities directly, consciousness can only appropriate those images in which the energies transcendent to consciousness have deigned to invest. So invested, such images are numinous and beckon consciousness without revealing all. The gods do not die—they depart the image and go into the underworld for awhile and reinvest elsewhere. During these interregna, such as we inhabit presently, we are still gripped by these energies even if we fail to render those images which bewitch or inspire us conscious. The gods are the

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energies which drive the universe, and the individual, and are personified through images which temporarily embody in soma, mind, affect, and personal and collective history. The true psychotherapy, or attendance upon the soul, requires reading through the image to the energies which drive it. Therapy is imaginal reading of what appears in material form, but to conclude that its meaning is found in that expressive form is a bewitchment of consciousness and the heresy of literalism. How could anyone who claims the mantle of depth psychology not require the study of myth, and the cultivation of an imaginative reading of the world?

Myth is expressed 1) through dramatized tribal value systems, 2) through personal histories, and 3) in symptoms and complexes.

No analysand will be unaffected—perhaps wounded, perhaps supported—by tribal dramas. Thus, juxtaposing the individuation imperatives of that person within the collective force field is a powerful therapeutic indicia for change, for choice, and for bringing psychic tasks to consciousness.

Who can work with the amanuensis without a sense of mythopoesis, without an awareness that this person swims in a value-laden force field which presents as concrete history but is captive to archaic dramas: the abandoned child, the wounded hero, the sacrificial lamb, and so on? Such acquired force fields usurp the agenda of the Self and bring about recurrent and predictable patterns. If both therapist and analysand are ignorant of such mythic materials, how can enlargement beyond fate occur?

Just as Jung called complexes splinter personalities, so one may call symptoms and complexes splinter, or fractile, mythologies. Each has a core energetic structure, each has valence, each has an identity, each has a fractionated agenda. When evoked, each has a tendency toward the repetition compulsion, and yet each is an opening to the dynamics of pathology and a clue to the healing agenda obliged. Again, how can depth psychology be performed without a knowledge of the essential mythopoetic process of psyche?

My experience of training has suggested that most candidates are hungry for this sort of work, because it does touch them in a place where they have always lived but for which little recognition is offered. The others are merely perplexed and opaque. I have often wondered how we as trainers can perform our office if we fail to examine: 1) our personal mythic substructure which has brought each of us to this place, 2) what Hillman rightly called “the myth of analysis,” 3) the mythic force field in which we move when we undertake training, and 4) where the gods really are in all this business.

As Jung observed, our work is the hardest of all, to be psychological about psychology itself. This epistemological task is most difficult and elusive for it asks us to reflect on that which consciousness with its limited capacity cannot itself envision. And that is where the study of myth, which originates outside the sphere of consciousness, but not outside the psyche, becomes necessary.