

On the Making of Myths: Response to James Hollis

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I'm grateful to James Hollis for his vigorous amplification of my thesis. While my focus is on the value of myth-making during training, he goes directly to an issue behind and beneath that: "the elemental question" of myth's place in clinical work. I'm grateful too for his emphasis on the *radical* nature of mythic material and engagement with it. For me, it is radical both in its reaching down to and drawing from the archetypal roots of psyche and in its essential place in defining Jung's psychological theory as radically different from any other.

From these archetypal roots, much follows. I am particularly interested by Hollis's characterisation of myth as "an elemental formative process that shapes the chaotic material of life," and an expression of archaic dramas which usurp the agenda of the Self to present themselves as fate when not understood and worked with, and his understanding of symptoms and complexes as "splinter mythologies." With definitions like this, myth must surely become our constant companion in the consulting room, and a knowledge of it becomes—once more, and as it was for Jung himself—a prerequisite to practice. So how indeed can training programs ignore it? Hollis has persuasively answered his own rhetorical questions and offers a fine four-fold agenda to prepare trainers (and candidates too, I'd say) to work with mythic material. The inclusion of "the myth of analysis" is an important one, and particularly germane to my own argument, as it helps us with the well-nigh impossible but still necessary task of trying to be, as Hollis puts it, psychological about psychology itself.

With support like this, any caveat on my part might seem churlish. But at one point Hollis and I seem to part company. "How could anyone who claims the mantle of depth psychology," he asks, "not require the study of myth and a cultivation of an imaginative reading of the world?" I'd guess the question implies and invites a resounding "Hear, hear!" But one thudding and very different answer to that appeared in this last issue of this very journal: Wolfgang Giegerich's "The End of Meaning and the Birth of Man" (*Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice*, Vol. 6., No. 1, 2004). Here are just a few reminders of this "answer" to Hollis's question:

Because consciousness has been born out of them, myth as such, religion altogether, higher meaning at large now possess only historical significance; they still exist but in the plural and shrunk into the reduced state of commodities—dead meanings. If they are nevertheless still used today to hold consciousness in their sway...and thus to create a new secondary mystique or aura, a new sense of in-ness, then they can function in this way because they now have the status of (spiritual) drugs used to benumb consciousness or to give it its highs.

Myth, religion, the grand narratives as a constituting *form* of consciousness *have* to be dead....The former symbols, mythic images, religious conceptions...can and now must be seen as products of the human mind, as “conventional signs,” not symbols in the lofty Jungian sense; indeed, as signifiers, ultimately as letters, as writing, *écriture*, to be read and interpreted, not to be believed in and to be given over to or enwrapped by. (p. 13)

Just as on a personal level one cannot go back behind puberty...so there is on the cultural level of consciousness no way back to the gods. Once the sugar cube has been dissolved in the coffee, it cannot be made undissolved'. (p. 22)

The gods have not become diseases, as Jung and Hillman wanted us to believe, they have become *memories*, memories of former modes of man's being-in-the-world. (p. 23)

This is most certainly not the place to engage with Giegerich's thesis (which I had not read when I wrote my own piece). But at the very least it's important to this present discussion in two ways. It separates “the cultivation of an imaginative reading of the world,” which Hollis and I both urge, from the study of mythology in the sense that he and I understand it: that Giegerich's thesis is surely the first and not at all the second shows that the work of the soul is by no means limited to one channel. And, relatedly and quite simply, it is a reminder of the most forcible sort that *other people see things differently*. They are seized by other myths and worship at other altars.

To live with this creatively and psychologically seems to me one of the greatest of contemporary challenges, in the small world of depth psychology and well beyond. So I can't follow Hollis when he dismisses as based in ignorance the idea of myth being “secondary elaboration of primary infantile experience.” For me, that is also a myth, a psychological story about “the chaotic material of life,” drawing on finally unknowable archetypal roots. To dismiss it as “ignorant” would be akin to marking down those candidates who are “merely perplexed and opaque” when offered mythological work without trying to understand where their own myth lies. Both reactions are inadequate primarily because they are *unmythological*. The study of myth is certainly for me imaginal nourishment and delight. I love the old stories! I suspect I am one of Giegerich's unborn, enwrapped still in the ocean of meaning! But more than this, as I hope I conveyed in my article, for me the study of myth also offers a *methodology*, a discipline of mind and imagination, an approach to psyche. If this study tells us anything, in its contradictory wealth of tales and bewilderment of appearances, it is that we cannot fix psyche in ego's understanding. We are caught in riddles just as much as was Pausanias all those centuries ago, and our psychological theories can finally be nothing more—a nothing less!—than ego's attempts to resolve them.

We may know this intellectually, but attending to myth offers an education in how to live with the unconscious and its final unknowability. The different myths attract and repel, credibility falters here or there, tolerance is strained to the breaking point at just this moment or that. In studying mythology, students (and teachers) make their own versions, and thus their individual myths of themselves.

By expressing a psychological “reality,” a myth that we are indeed all myth makers, the study of myth offers a framework within which to live with differences and similarities between psychological theories and the humans who make them and live them out.

