

Weaving Voices Article (Feb-July 2003)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

We are always on the lookout for material for Weaving Voices. If you would like to submit an article of 1700 words or suggest something, please contact one of the committee members.

Going Overboard

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These ideas were first presented in "Notions of Madness in Jungian Theory" for the Master of Arts in Cultural Psychology at the University of Western Sydney.

Ware the wanderers

A man holds a baby aloft, swaying on the crowded deck of a small ship at sea. The man is Middle Eastern in appearance and calls out vehemently to the watching camera; the baby appears to trust the hands that hold it.

Something arrests our attention. We see the vehemence of the man? The vulnerability of the baby? Or perhaps we know the footage is taken from an Australian naval vessel patrolling territorial waters to herd boats laden with asylum seekers out to the High Sea. Twelve months later no-one knows where that baby is and it is probable the man has been sent away.

In the context of the last two years, I think this image captures the essence of the conflicting principles of being played out in the Australian psyche around compassion and a fair go on the one hand, and prudent protection of national boundaries and the fear and prospect of terrorism on the other.

These are lythic forces. Three millennia ago, Antigone defied Creon's edict in Thebes to leave the corpse of her brother Polynices unburied, unwept, a feast of flesh / for keen-eyed carion birds. Antigone saw his edict as a disavowal of sacred obligation and a betrayal of relationship. In defiance of the edict she celebrated the funeral rites, igniting the final conflagration of the Royal House of Thebes.

Antigone's principles of compassion and right relationship confronted Creon's pragmatic political action. Each party was sincerely committed to the justice of their standpoint. In 1942 the myth re-emerged when Jean Anouilh's Antigone defied Creon in the midst of the Nazi occupation of Paris. The French audiences claimed Antigone's idealism as their own resistance to the invaders while the Nazis lauded Creon's strong-arm tactics and pragmatic dictatorship as their own mandate.

At stake in Sophocles Athens, Anouilh's Paris and contemporary Australia is the collective "Ship of State" and all who sail within her. Jung's reflections on the German occupation of Europe and the horrors of the Holocaust suggest that collective guilt is "a tragic fate...It hits everybody, just and unjust alike, everybody who [is] anywhere near the place where the terrible thing happen[s]." This notion that the individual is inescapably part of the collective lies at the heart of Jung's concept of the collective unconscious.

Mediating the threshold

Jung articulated his concept of the collective unconscious while working at the Burgholzi asylum in Zurich. He observed that patients classified with dementia praecox (later known as schizophrenia) lived in fantastic worlds of larger than life visions. Jung became interested in the content of the visions themselves and his researches brought him to the theory of a common human psyche – a wellspring of image, experience and potential that he called the collective unconscious.

The rawest manifestation of the collective unconscious is through image and affect – what Jung came to call the archetypes. Episodes of madness may present in a psychosis. Therapeutic attention to the psychosis may be able to strengthen the ego sufficiently to mediate the content and integrate it. This releases repressed energy as a new resource for the conscious personality. However people suffering dementia praecox are overwhelmed by manifest collective unconscious contents. Jung saw the role of the therapist as helping to create a possible vessel for the mediation.

Older cultures ritually mediated the threshold between the individual and the collective unconscious with an eye to the inner and the outer worlds. Sometimes the culture chose not to mediate the portal and expelled the unwanted and undesired to wreck whatever havoc further downstream.

Archaeologist Sir James Fraser in the mid-19th Century, recounted the story of gypsies in the south of Europe dispelling illness and afflictions by ritually consigning them to a small vessel, sealed and accursed, which they launched into running water after all present “touched it with their fingers”. They believed they would be freed of afflictions in the coming year and that anyone opening the vessel would suffer the maladies they had escaped.

What happens when the vessel reaches shore? Do the afflictions banished by one people truly afflict another? What if the cargo is unconsciously contagious?

French philosopher Michel Foucault followed the watery voyages of ships sailing home from the Crusades, unknowingly bearing the leprosy that would devastate the ports and trading towns of Europe and consume the cities with fear. Emotional anguish and physical torment stretched people to breaking point. The cities mediated the crisis on both physical and spiritual planes. Sacred rituals of expulsion banished lepers into Lazar Houses for both the salvation of the city and the spiritual reintegration of the individual. By the end of the Renaissance, when leprosy had dwindled, the Lazar Houses became institutions for the mentally ill.

Initially the Renaissance cities expelled their mad people beyond the city walls. Whereas the Medieval town had a place for “madness”, the Renaissance cities developing the ideal of the “perfect Man” rounded up their mad people and consigned them into the care of merchants, sailors and pilgrims to take beyond the city bounds. It is this period that saw Madness defined as an entity.

The powerful metaphor of the “Ship of Fools” captures at once the hope and despair of this changing era – the cargo of madness embarked on a journey by water. Madness becomes “a manifestation in [humanity] of an obscure and aquatic element, a dark disorder, a moving chaos, a seed and death in all things, which opposes the mind’s luminous and adult stability”. (Foucault). It can be seen in the context of the psychological transition between the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as Europeans overturned their ideas on how they lived in relation to their god, their world, and each other.

Over time, madness became anchored in the cultural psyche of modern Europe. It was no longer banished outside the city to take its chances on the “Ship of Fools”. It was now held solidly within the mental institutions emerging from the old Lazar Houses. In the 19th and 20th Centuries, manifestations of madness provoked wide-ranging therapeutic investigation.

Sailing in murky waters

IN Jungian thought, individuals can be assisted in the dyad of therapy. However, cultures need the vessels of the state, of public ritual, of art, theatre, poetry and myth to hold and facilitate the process of mediation and integration.

Reflecting on Nazism, Jung’s believed that individuals did not pay enough attention to instinctive feelings of guilt and a sense of wrongness in relation to what was happening in Hitler’s Germany. Consequently, the individuals failure to confront their individual shadow elements facilitated the growth of the collective evil of the nation.

I believe that this is also true of our response to asylum seekers. The image of the man holding the baby aloft and others of people floating in the water, was widely repeated under the banner “Babies Overboard” in the lead-up to the 2001 Federal Election. It was aired on news bulletins at a time we were debating proposals to prohibit asylum-seekers from applying for refugee status in our territorial waters.

Initially media were forbidden access to asylum seekers, so the human face of the story was averted. Like Creon’s edict in Thebes, the decision had left a stench in the air and a roiling sensation in the gut.

Two days into the Election Campaign Immigration Minister Ruddock said “A number of children have been thrown overboard, clearly planned and premeditated.” Prime Minister Howard said “I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia. I really don’t.”

Six months later, a Senate Estimate Enquiry confirmed that no babies were thrown overboard by asylum seekers. Photos of people in the water were taken after an unseaworthy vessel sank at sea. Ruddock was acting on hearsay when he made his assertion and by the next day, Defence Minister Reith knew that no evidence existed for children thrown overboard. Senior personnel in the Prime Minister’s Department were aware that defence officials did not corroborate the claim. They made no effort to ensure that the Prime Minister refuted them.

The Prime Minister asserted throughout that he was unaware that the anecdote was untrue, and never revoked his construction that these mad/bad people threw their babies overboard to intimidate Australians into offering them refuge. Wherein lies the madness? In the Ship at Sea? Or in the Ship of State?

Madness of the right

Creon’s response to Antigone’s cry for compassion was to grab the wheel of the boat and shoot into the mob. Howard’s response to Asylum Seekers intensified in the aftermath of September 11, when the world was transfixed by the image of commercial passenger jets penetrating the skins of the Twin Towers in New York. The USA grabbed military action in Afghanistan to offer a semblance of control to Western Cultures. Australia voted the Howard government back into office on its platform of security and protecting Australia’s national boundaries.

Political pragmatism aside, I think that the revelations of the Senate Committee hearings introduce cruelty to the mixture of anger and guilt – a situation that Jungian analyst Rafael Lopez-Pedraza

calls cultural anxiety. How could anyone maintain such a mistake unless, at one level, they either believed, or wanted to believe, that it was true? Or that it was to their advantage to do so? James Hillman calls this the seduction of the “simple idea”: “Simple ideas feel comfortable: they don’t give trouble...A simple idea of power, any idea that defines it simply, lulls us into quiescent passivity, and so actually saps power”

That most people did not qualify for asylum with changing circumstances in Afghanistan has been treated as self-evident justification for Australia’s cruel treatment of them. A year later many of them have gone home. Did they need to taste the barbed wire here?

The cultural symptoms of remorselessly extreme pragmatic action present what John Weir Perry describes as :”a madness of the right”.

It does sound as if there may be two opposite kinds of madness: a madness of the left, full of terror of the bewildering encounter with spiritual and demonic powers in the psyche: and a madness to the right, hollowed out in bland impoverishment and narrowness in which the conventions and concreteness of the mundane world are taken for self-evident realities”.

Therapeutically, analysts working with people stuck in extreme rationality pay very close attention to the words, seeking to connect some nuance of feeling or affect to the content. If the mind has become rigid, and extreme rationality imposed its stranglehold on the psyche, softening and moistening and loosening the grip to allow eros to trickle through is a carefully slow job.

In the myth, Creon pushed logos beyond the point of reason and Anitgone went to her death for the principal of right relationship. However when logos works hand in hand with eros, good craftwork and careful attention can patch the leaks, trim the vessel, and let her sail again.

*How fares the soul of my country?
The precious vessel that holds us all
Contains our seething mess and soothes it
Allows our Foment and Ferments it
Into rich liquid
That fires the blood
Ignites the mind
And soars the heart with passion*

*The soul of my country is all at sea
Becalmed and hidden in a heavy veil
Of politician’s talk and clouded words
That stifle and becalm her in doldrums
Dulling the mind
Sinking the heart
Pumping the veins with bilgewater
And deadening her clear-toned ring of reason*

*Who serves the soul of my country?
And looks to her welfare in the world
Ensuring due regard for what is demanded
Forfeiting all that is required
To cleanse the blood
Purify the mind
Fumigate the vessel
And bring her back to even keel.*