

"We have come to know the gods as disease... Now we are seeing the repressed gods return as natural disasters on a global scale."

Sabini 'Temple to Gravity', Spring 75

An Elemental

WE SEE IT IN THE NEWS everyday: the elements of nature out of balance. Drought, hurricanes, bushfires and floods, alarming images which illustrate the escalating scientific evidence that human activities are producing climate change.

HOW WE LIVE is disordering our environment, and nature is reflecting back to us our own imbalances. The question we now face is how to take the necessary actions to respond to a situation that is so hard to truly acknowledge and accept. We both want to know and don't want to know, as it becomes apparent how much change is required of us. We are confronted by the knowledge that we need to challenge the vested powers of corporations and governments, as well as confronting a demanding ego in ourselves. We want to cling to present perceived entitlements such as cheap electricity

and unfettered travel. In his book *Heat*, George Monbiot writes that it takes a different kind of consciousness from our contemporary sensibility, if we are to fight for the austerity and greater regulations that are clearly required of us to avoid disaster. One of the great challenges to modern consciousness is to embrace the value of limits.

Jung often lamented the separation of modern consciousness from nature, and the symbolic meanings once found there. *"Thunder is no longer the voice of a god nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man's life..."* Jung, *Collected Works* 18::585

Imbalance

by Sally Gillespie

Yet in facing our current environmental situation, there is a growing response of fear and guilt that resonates with an instinctual feeling that there are indeed spirits in nature who are disturbed and angry. Our hubris is all too apparent, while what to do about it is hotly debated. A regression to pre-industrial ways of behaving and thinking is not possible. Maturity and consciousness are called for, and a rite of passage needed, one that will take us from a juvenile narcissism and grandiosity to a position of responsibility and restraint, as we acknowledge both the natural ecosystems and the human communities upon which we depend.

“The still infantile man of today has had means of destruction put into his hands which require an immeasurably enhanced sense of responsibility, or an

almost pathological anxiety, if the fatally easy abuse of their power is to be avoided.”

(Jung, CW 18:§1367)

The personal and collective initiation process that lies ahead will be gruelling as we face worldwide food shortages, energy restrictions, rising outbreaks of

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disease, species extinctions and other effects of rapidly changing climatic patterns. Many lives are at stake, and while affluence cushions western industrialized nations, we also bear greater responsibility for creating global environmental imbalance. What we see happening ‘over there’ in the desertification of Africa or the air pollution of China, is a consequence

An Elemental Imbalance

of our lifestyles here. How we respond to this knowledge both defines us and determines our future. Consumer choices become more complicated with increased awareness. I watch my own conflicting desires as I learn more about the carbon emissions of my travel, my heating, my groceries. I see myself slowly moving from being environmentally aware as a willed act of sacrifice, to making a necessary and heartfelt choice.

Facing the disorder of the elements of nature requires an internal accounting of my own imbalances. The disasters of fire, air, earth and water in today's world mirror the disorders of these elemental forces within myself and others. The outer reflects the inner, or as Jung suggests more graphically, the demons of nature are playing unconscious havoc in response to our denial of them in outer reality:

"The demonism of nature, which man had apparently triumphed over, he has unwittingly swallowed into himself and so become the devil's marionette."


Jung, CW 18:§1365

The fire spirit kindles passion, warms the heart and lightens the way. But a fire demon who is over-fed and out

of balance with the other elements devours with its burning energy and its increasing demand for more resources. The candle burns at both ends, creating a way of life that pivots on growth and overheated economies, while self and meaning are consumed in the drives of ambition.

Externally the overuse of fire in high energy-consuming lifestyles is creating a hothouse of higher global temperatures, with increasing bushfires and droughts. Internally a conflagration of imperatives fuels activity that creates inner emotional deserts. We need to become conscious of both the fiery gods that power us on in search of greater economic growth and achievement, and the fire muses that inspire us to create sustaining meaning and purpose. Less devotion to competitive Mars, and more attendance to the hearth of Hestia, support the cultivation of a fire that centres earthy life, where stories and visions can be shared to guide a sustainable life on earth.

Air fans fire. Contemporary life is a whirlwind of air spirits with its frenetic digital communications and the exponential growth of airline travel. Along with the warming



temperatures encircling the globe, there is the overheated air of constant chatter swirling around us and within us. Hurricanes act as a vent to release the build up of hot air. They are on the rise in the world, while internally we experience storms of anxiety and restlessness as mental activity becomes overcharged.

Alongside the chatter, the media delivers the confronting ecological truths of our interconnectedness. We are learning that warmer air temperatures affect every aspect of life on earth, from desertification and the spread of diseases to dying ocean reefs and species extinctions. On a collective level we are experiencing what the astronauts first saw when they rocketed into the sky and turned back to view Earth – the beauty, fragility and unity of the planet where we live. Consciously engaging the airy realm can give perspective. We need far-seeing intellect and thought to help us face the times we are in. The challenge is to claim the time and space to think, and to risk seeing the immensity of the picture of our current situation. It can be overwhelming and, as with the astronauts, it can radically re-order our values and ideals. All

of us at this time are confronted with developing a global consciousness and finding a way to individually live within this awareness.

Relationship to earth is pivotal to the way the energies of fire and air play out. Being caught in the airy realms, disconnected from earthy life, whips up a dust storm; becoming embroiled in a firestorm of ambitions burns out the land. The fate of the earth needs to be

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seen, her voice heard. Earth struggles with an avalanche of material desires driven by the demands of the fire and air dragons: exotic holidays, the speediest of technologies, the most powerful of cars. Being ordinary, having humility, learning patience are earthy experiences that are shunned in today's world. The earth gods protest through an avalanche of fatigue and body complaints, and the heavy demons of depression can shut us out of the circus of the world. Neither the Earth nor our being can sustain the onslaught of activities that contemporary life demands in order to be 24/7 productive and performing. Sustainability requires

An Elemental Imbalance

cycles, seasons – inbuilt constraints with their balancing periods of inactivity and non-achievement in order to thrive. Our earthy work is to redeem these restless spirits from their place of banishment and shame.

Rich fertile earth is fed by compost, manure and other rotting detritus. Humus is the root word for humility and humbleness. What makes good soil also nourishes the soul. Reducing ego's demands for more possessions, achievements and experiences, enriches the ground of our being. The earth gods require us to shed old images, structures, beliefs, positions and identities to be more vital. The autumnal season of loss and the winter period of dormancy ensure future crops. Seeking security through constant growth and productivity stimulated by artificial means ensures collapse ahead in humans and ecosystems alike. True earthy security is based on an understanding and acceptance of the necessity for restraints and constraints, for the way we must match needs to resources. Earth knows there are limits and we feel secure when we can acknowledge them and responsibly live within them.

“The facts of nature cannot in the long run be violated. Penetrating and seeping through everything like water, they will undermine any system that fails to account for them, and sooner or later they will bring about its downfall.”

Jung CW 16:§227

We in the developed world are living a lifestyle fuelled by the hubris of Icarus – and our wings are beginning to melt as we approach the heat of the Sun. The flight of Icarus ends in the sea. On planet Earth inundation looms as ice caps thaw, ocean levels rise and storms increase. Our contemporary images of the ocean dramatically alert us to the consequences of our heroic ambitions. In the realms of the unconscious, in our own depths, there is a terror in each of us as we witness the destruction of precious habitat. We feel helpless before the tsunami of catastrophic news: floods, rising sea temperatures, desertification, increasing salinity. Scenes of drought and flood affect us deeply on an instinctual level. Their disturbing images find their way into our dream life, with their many resonances of aridity and thirst, their capacity to drown and overwhelm.

Our waters are deeply stirred by the most potent of emotions. How we

relate to what lies in the unconscious is crucial for us personally and collectively. We can be flooded by denial and turn to all kinds of addictive behaviours, or we can acknowledge our deepest terrors and thirsts, and transform destructive behaviours into life-sustaining ones. The watery realm connects us to the life of the unconscious, the place of dreams, reverie, imagination and contemplation. We can go to the waters for healing and rebirth but to do so requires a surrender of ego.

"The tempo of the development of consciousness through science and technology was too rapid, and left the unconscious, which could no longer keep up with it, far behind, thus forcing it into a defensive position which expresses itself in a universal will to destruction."

Jung, CW 9i:§617

It is very easy to feel swamped by the daily flood of information about climate change and become paralysed in response. Collectively we need to meet at the river and draw on the power of water to feel how small movements change currents. The tidal wave of action and awareness that swept the world in 2007 as individuals flocked to *An Inconvenient Truth*, fed into a

change of government in Australia that has strengthened the Kyoto Treaty. Here in Sydney, as individuals turn off taps, water consumption has been reduced to 1970's levels. We are learning that individual actions, carried out collectively, turn tides.

There are many polarities to hold in facing climate change: individual need and collective good, present desires and future livelihood, personal actions and global outcomes, destructive impulses and creative urges. There is ample opportunity in the current situation to follow Jung's urgings to hold the tension of the opposites in order to widen consciousness, and the possibilities that go with this. To change the world out there we need to change consciousness, to find a sustaining and sustainable way of being. Restoring the natural elemental energies of fire, earth, air and water into consciousness is one way to relate to and reconcile ourselves with the environmental reality of the world.

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