

The Architecture of the Soul:
The Use of Myth and Fairy Tale
in Depth Psychology



The PAJA Papers

The Architecture of the Soul: The Use of Myth and Fairy Tale in Depth Psychology

Stephen Martin



We live in re-mythologizing times. More and more writers and cultural observers are returning our attention to the hidden infrastructure in the way we think, imagine and believe, namely, to fairy tales and myths. Consider the success of Robert Bly's *Iron John*, which is about the "wild man" within all men, that inner masculinity which, long submerged, is the energy that we must use to re-invigorate our sagging national manhood. Whether or not you agree with Bly, mythopoetic consciousness seems to be on the rise. The instigator was none other than Joseph Campbell, one of the great mythophiles in our time, a man singularly able to translate the poetry of myth and fairy tale into the prose of everyday life. His success following his interviews with Bill Moyers on public television gave permission to the rest of us to embrace a mythic way of looking, thinking and feeling. The one who paved the way for Campbell was C.G. Jung.

Early in this century, Jung became consumed with interest in myths and fairy tales as the stories of the psyche. In the fearfully magical world of the insane asylum, he had observed them come to life in his tormented patients. Jung himself lived through mythic times with Freud and others, times during which "giant" passions reigned and "titanic" personalities clashed. Reading his autobiography is like reading a mythic document, precisely because it is not so much a literal history but soul history, that is, a revelation of what moved him from within, and not a compendium of external events. Soul history is a way of experiencing life from the inside out, where we turn our attention to the

formative stories that are our deepest secrets, but secrets we have regrettably overlooked, of which we are unconscious or asleep to, like those fairy tale heroes who are infuriatingly somnolent when they should be wide awake. These secret stories are the hidden foundation of our personalities and only visible when we look deep into the earth of our beings. These stories are the blueprints of our behavior and sense of self; they are the architecture of the soul.

Once upon a time there was a lady with hair so long that it cascaded like a waterfall down her back. Imprisoned in luxury, she was at the mercy of the king of numerals, her father, and his servant, this lady's husband. One day, when she could stand it no longer, she succumbed in a moment of passion to the seductions of a dark spirit from the south. Drunken and ecstatic, she glimpsed a doorway to freedom. But when she returned to herself, the doorway had disappeared, as had the dark spirit. She was inconsolable at her loss and yet it had become clear that the time had come for her to leave this gilded cage and journey forth.

After some time she arrived at an unassuming house amidst common folk. In that house she found a mirror which spoke to her of her dreams. As she gazed into the mirror she understood how unhappy she had been. In her dreams she came face to face with a gypsy whom she recognized as herself. She rescued this gypsy as her dreams taught her the secret art of making herself colorful and beautiful. She cut off her long hair that had constrained her body. In her dreams, she found her dark lover again, this time, as a mechanic gifted at repair and tinkering. And finally, in her dreams, she became Patricia, the noble one, who could juggle rings in the air. When she left this house, she knew that she was no longer a prisoner of the numeral king or his young servant.

As you no doubt have guessed, this is a case history. But how different it is from the case history written in the usual psycholingo: "Self-referred nineteen year old doctoral student in mathematics whose chief complaint is a failing marriage, depressed affect and occasional drinking episodes.

Psychodynamically, there is an over-identification with her father, a professor of mathematics, and possible reiterated attachment to husband, also in the field. Presented appropriately, well-groomed, though dressed in somber colors, thought processes intact. Good candidate for insight oriented psychotherapy.”

How much more compelling a case history is, as James Hillman so often points out, if we can imagine it as a fairy tale or a story rather than as a clinical problem needing a solution. Imagining our client, or ourselves, in this way gives a distinctly different flavor to the therapeutic experience. The fairy tale or mythic description engages, draws us inward and downward in the same way that fiction or theater captures our imagination. Framed in this manner, it is not hard to feel involved with ourselves, to experience our life as adventure, even if it is painful.

This approach is the hallmark of depth psychology in which an active relationship is promoted between our sense of who we are, our identity, and the symbols and imagery that make up our inner world, revealed to us in dreams, fantasies, creative acts, as well as in our symptoms. Depth psychology is a perspective that enables us to see in the dark and discern the rich storehouse of people, places, creatures and conditions that populate our inner landscape. The perspective of depth psychology is a “personifying perspective” in which we encourage our stories to unfold, giving them form through our emotional interest which in turn enables them to instruct us on what is truly important in life.

Depth psychology is also defined by the importance it gives to meaning. Quite simply, meaning is that sense of connectedness to a larger, perhaps timeless, reality that we think of as purpose, direction or destiny. Meaning can also be associated with mystery, excitement, wonder and even fear. Whenever we approach our psyches from the perspective of depth psychology, we are engaged in “meaning” and, in the course of the therapeutic experience, can experience that tangible moment when we know we are on the right track.

I call this the “moment of mythic awareness.” In some cases there is more feeling than substance to it, but in others, the moment emerges from a specific content and galvanizes the client like a jolt of electricity, as if he or she were seeing the world for the very first time. Although this moment may not, in every case, be obviously connected to any specific myth or tale, many such moments represent what I call an “*Aha!*” experience, a sudden and clear-cut recognition that a particular myth or tale is being enacted in life. Finally, it is important to point out that the relationship between meaning and story is reciprocal. When we allow ourselves to imagine our case histories as stories, as dramas, with all the emotional power and urgency of films and literature, we are automatically evoking meaning. One belongs to the other.

But what about myths and fairy tales? In some ways there are distinct differences between them. Myths are like cultural dreams that enshrine portions of history and pertain much more to religious issues such as the beginnings of existence, the forces that govern the cosmos and all manner of trans-human reality. Even though in the great mythologies the gods and goddesses may behave in distinctly human fashion, their divine status separates them from the people of fairy tales. Fairy tale folk are exceptionally human and down to earth. They are the common folk, with common desires and problems, dilemmas and faults. How much more like the dumpling I am, the one who screws things up and has hell to pay from his angry brothers or parents, than am I like noble Zeus, who with thunderbolt in hand rules over the many realms of being. Or am I, I wonder, if only in my fantasies, more like him?

While there is logic to this distinction between myth and fairy tale, I would like to propose that we dispense with it as an either/or formulation. Even though myths have a tendency to be narratively more developed than fairy tales, it is clear to me that they both are essential building blocks of the soul. Perhaps the figure of Hermes might feel more substantial because of the many embellished stories that are

associated with his birth and life than the handless maiden whose story is told in a few pages in an anthology of Grimms' fairy tales. Nevertheless, they are both representative people of our inner world with which we can identify and which convey to us a very special, a very particular sense of meaning. When we are Hermes-like we are communicative and connective, ready to journey forth or cut a deal, friendly and open to what the road has in store for us. But who does not know the feeling of the handless maiden when we feel betrayed by those we loved best, feel sold down the river for a quick fix and have our ability to "handle" life taken from us because of our naive goodness and resistance to fighting back?

Fairy tales and myth are archetypal illustrations of what is essentially human. Archetypes are the templates out of which the psyche fashions the bricks of our souls and the myths and tales are in turn our individual stories which are variations of the same. Inborn, ancient and universal, archetypes are the principles that give psychic life its form and pattern. Myth and fairy tale describe how an archetype behaves, providing our psychic processes a personalized language. As such they are in the same family as dreams, spontaneous fantasy and active imagination. We might say that myth is the archetypal image of the culture, the fairy tale is the archetypal image of the common folk, and the dream is the archetypal image of the individual.

Because myth and fairy tale personify the collective level of archetypal activity, they belong to all of us, no matter whether they come from the Far East or the Wild West. The evocative power of these stories is due to the fact that they resonate with the individualized archetypal world in each of us. These stories make sense because we can see and feel parts of ourselves in them, even if we don't understand why. When we search for our myths, as nowadays we are exhorted to do, and when we become involved with the so-called myths of our families, our personal origins and their stories, we invariably must distill from them their collective structure in order to fully appreciate why our personal myths are

10 / The Architecture of the Soul

important. They are important precisely because our personal myths are individualized renditions or embodiments of these timeless human stories.

When we are able to move beyond our personal story and see ourselves reflected in the larger story, meaning takes a quantum leap forward. Not only do we feel we make sense in our personal history, but suddenly, with this moment of—with a capital M— Mythic awareness, we are really dealing with the eternal in our lives. So, from the standpoint of depth psychology, mythologizing our stories must be accompanied by the recognition of the stories that are mythologizing us. In so doing, we become dramatically and powerfully connected to the world of archetypal forces that has the power to make whole on an existential level by healing the split between ourselves and the depth of our humanity.

At this point, I'd like to tell you another story. Once there was young woman, of Jewish background, but whose family had abandoned the old ways for social rather than spiritual reasons. Her father was a giant in his field, a prominent and successful businessman who had been the primary emotional influence on this woman. She strove to be like him, to please him, to accomplish, so that he would finally love her. Despite her own successes, she grew more despondent and would break down into tears at the most inopportune moments. In addition, she felt completely guilt-ridden, especially when she would have really liked to have some fun instead of working without stop. Naturally, she tried to handle all of this herself, just as her father would have, but the persistence of the symptoms got the better of her and she began therapy. I might add that it was not easy for her, for she was quite ambivalent about asking for help, and, as the work proceeded, grew increasingly uncomfortable about what was emerging regarding her relationship with her father. Needless to say, her loyalty caused strong resistance as she did not like to think ill of her father or to examine the autocratic way he treated his wife, her mother. Nor did she like examining why her relationships with men

never seemed to get anywhere, failing as they did to meet her exacting standards.

She dreamed little at first and was, in fact, quite circumspect about such material, until one day she came in particularly shaken. It turned out that she had had the latest installment of a recurrent dream, one that had plagued her since early childhood. In these dreams, faceless men would pursue her, changing form at will, and often ending up as amorphous figures, like clouds or smoke, as they engulfed her. These dreams were terrifying. On a personal level, these faceless pursuers symbolized an internalized image of her father and his relentless demands on her. Until beginning her therapeutic work, there was really nothing that stood between him and her so that she was completely vulnerable to his real and her internalized, imagined demands. She was running for her life, terrorized by this image. This much was not hard to understand, even though it was difficult to feel. In a sense, we might have said that this was the personal dimension of this myth, but was more intellectually understood than emotionally felt. Although this interpretation made sense, it did not silence the dream.

In the latest variation of the dream that she brought to her analysis, she found herself being chased through a desert by the faceless male until, cornered, she was forced to look him straight in the face and surrender. Instead of destroying her, the figure became plaintive and in the background, as she awoke, heart pounding, terrified, she heard a voice imploring her to "look and see, and worship me."

She had no clear associations to the dream. The only factor she could relate to was the intensity of the feelings evoked, a profound fear mixed with awe and the growing sense that understanding what these dreams were telling her was critical for understanding who she was.

It was at this point that I suggested to her that she leaf through the Old Testament and pay particular attention to the manifestations of Yahweh. What she discovered was a formless, faceless divinity that, at different times, followed, led or appeared to the Israelites either as a cloud or smoke

12 / The Architecture of the Soul

or at times, as a pillar of fire. What struck her about this god were his relentless demands for worship, recognition and "righteous" behavior from his people, which she interpreted as doing what he wanted instead of what, at times, might have been more humane, more loving and more constructive. She was powerfully impressed by what she was feeling, for here in the pages of a book she had never read was an image of what was dogging her. She experienced at this point what I would call that "moment of mythic awareness." Her perspective on her life began to change and to expand. At this point the role of Judaism and the impact it might have had on her became a question in her life. She began to feel that there was more to her difficulty than merely learning to manage an overbearing and demanding father.

The dream continued to raise significant questions over a long period of time. Dreams of this sort, that are strongly mythological, are not dealt with in one or even several sessions but need, like tales and myths, to be told again and again. They become symbolic beacons by which an individual's journey is navigated, and their unfolding may take a long time.

This woman's dream raised many critical questions for her, but the most important emerged from the strange plaintive demand by the disembodied voice to see and worship. Did God need her to be complete? (Here we have one of the great questions that Jung sought to address in *Answer to Job*.) I must point out again that this woman was not familiar with theology or mythology. In fact, she was a physical therapist with no formal religious or spiritual training. Yet through this dream and the work she had done with it, her entire attitude shifted and she adopted a deeper perspective towards her own life. It became a mythological drama. In the course of this shift, her symptoms all but disappeared and she made significant headway in freeing herself from the binding chains of an unconscious relationship to God, or her father.

In the course of time, she learned more and more

about Judaism, including something of its mystical traditions. Another leap forward was achieved when she encountered the story of the Shekinah, the feminine "face" of God. Here again she experienced another "moment of mythical awareness" when she realized that her god had no face, that it had no identity and that only by reuniting with the Shekinah could Yahweh become whole. To her the meaning of this myth for her life was clear: only by meeting her faceless pursuer, the father within her, fully and equally, could she give the god a face and thus heal the split between what was demanded of her and what she wished and saw for herself. In recognizing this she was essentially freeing herself from a profound unconsciousness and taking her rightful place in her own destiny.

One more story. There was once a man who was afflicted with a noticeable but not debilitating physical defect. He lived an angry, solitary life, open to very little and for the most part hell-bent just on surviving. He experienced himself as cursed, shut out from ever knowing anything better or sweeter than his bitter fate. In his cold, hard shell he refused to acknowledge anything good about his world or that there could be any redemption for him. He was made bitter still by the betrayal of those he thought loved him. By the time he came to analysis, he was almost past caring. Why not try this, he thought; after all, nothing else works.

One day he came in with a dream. He had dreamed that he was in a strange place wearing some sort of fur coat, heavy and unwieldy. Yet when he closed his eyes the coat would disappear and only when his eyes were open was the coat present. Over time the coat grew heavier and heavier, weighing him down until he could no longer move. Then suddenly there appeared a woman from his past, someone he had loved from afar. With the greatest ease of movement, she lifted the coat from his shoulders and he felt an overpowering sense of gratitude and freedom.

This person was not given to taking his dreams very seriously but this one stayed with him. He was puzzled by

the coat and still moved and nostalgic about the woman. He had not seen “hide nor hair” of her for years. The dream felt important to him and engaged him. At this point, I introduced an archetypal amplification, that is, the “mythic perspective,” by pointing out that the dream reminded me of that class of fairy tales dealing with “Beauty and the Beast” in which the hero is bewitched, compelled by some evil force to assume the shape of an animal, be it a bear, a lion, or some supernatural being like the winged-god Amor from the tale “Amor and Psyche.” The bewitchment took place during the day; in the night, however, he would be freed. Not until true love triumphs with a kiss from the beloved, or some variation of the same, will he be redeemed.

It was fairly clear that this man was living in the guise of the beast and that the dream was suggesting what had to transpire within him in order for the burden of his outcast status to be lifted. I was not quite expecting the results that occurred. Instead of his usual cynicism, he sat there quietly until, with uncharacteristic tears, he told me that Beauty and the Beast had long been his secret favorite tale and that he wished often to experience what the beast in that tale finally receives. He spoke little during the remainder of the session but it was quite clear that the entire atmosphere around him had changed; his bitterness was giving way and his petty complaints dissolved in the face of more profound feeling.

In the work that followed, he courageously allowed himself to experience more of the sadness beneath his heavy burden of rage and more of his own potential tenderness. When we parted company, he was by no means healed. No real-life beauty had yet redeemed his beast, but active within him was the beginning of that possibility. Behind closed eyes, he could imagine her existence, and could prepare himself by discovering his own inner beauty. The telling of that dream and the subsequent amplification had catalyzed his “moment of mythic awareness” during which a meaningless suffering began to give way, not only to the remarkable recollection of his favorite fairy tale and its synchronistic appropriateness, but to a new, or renewed way of looking at

his life, a mythic attitude towards his existence. He no longer felt completely hopeless; rather, he carried with him a dawning awareness that even his suffering could make sense and have purpose.

The healing nature of such dreams are indeed marvelous. When seen through to their stories, that is, to the myth and tale that form their archetypal core, we become anchored in a more profound reality. Like our beast, we can discover that suffering makes sense. Without this awareness, we are dragged along by our fates and forced to “act out” these stories rather than to be enlightened and redeemed by them. Without this awareness we remain stuck in our fear rather than rejoicing in what part of the human drama we embody and what our symptoms can really tell us. In other words, we remain an ego in search of the missing Self, empty and alone in a de-animated universe.

The object of depth psychology is to restore a sense of life’s drama, to reanimate it by recollecting and reconnecting with the actors and players within us. To strive for this level of psychic experience is, I believe, what Jung meant when he spoke of the process of individuation and of becoming whole. It can only come about when we open ourselves truly to the myriad wonderful stories of the human soul and embrace those who people them with the fullness of heart and freest of minds.
