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In Search of a New Mythology

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Humanity's profound disconnection from nature is played out in its most visible form in the unfolding environmental catastrophe people are facing today. At the root of this alienation from the natural world is a spiritual crisis. The current dominant paradigm of rationalism and scientific inquiry rendered the natural world lifeless and soulless; nature became a commodity, ripe for exploitation. Humanity needs to birth a new, collective mythology that can inspire a sustainable relationship with the natural world. Our very survival might hinge on our ability to create a cohesive narrative that allows for an experience of nature as alive, interconnected, and sacred.

Humanity's alienation from the natural world is a source of growing alarm and anxiety for many today. This profound disconnection from nature is played out in its most visible form in the unfolding ecological catastrophe the Earth is facing. Mass extinction of species, climate change, and rapid loss of fertile land are just a few of the most urgent issues. Trying to solve the problems on the level that they were created through policy changes, legislation, or technological measures has proven to be woefully insufficient, and has, at times, even backfired. A paradigm shift of how we, as humans, view ourselves and the world around us is of utmost urgency to ensure our survival and that of our fellow nonhuman beings. Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung (2002) had warned early on of the consequences of the Western world's one-sided emphasis on rationalism and technology: "Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events" (p. 79).

At the heart of the environmental catastrophe is a spiritual crisis. Western culture fell victim to the fantasy of rationalism, sanitizing the world of the messy unpredictability of emotions and divorcing the spiritual from everyday life. Spirituality in its many forms got relegated to children, the ones living on the fringes of society, and the so-called "primitive" people. The world became brittle and mechanical, and it shrank to what human consciousness was able to perceive through the five senses. When Western scientific thinkers objectified the natural world, we as members of Western society isolated ourselves not just from the outer natural world but also from the nature within ourselves. Modern people are beginning to grasp the disastrous effects of this separation. They are just starting to recognize how profoundly the well-being of the psyche depends upon spirituality, myths, ritual, ceremonies, community, and nature. As French author and political activist Jacques Lusseyran (2006) noted, "Man is nourished by the invisible. Man is nourished by that which is beyond personal. He dies from preferring their opposites" (p. 180).

Humanity needs to birth a new mythology, one that allows for a recognition of nature as the material expression of the same life force pulsating through humans and nonhumans alike. For only if we have an experiential understanding of the world around us as alive, interconnected, and sacred will we be able to engage in a meaningful and sustainable relationship with it. Our future hinges on our ability to reimagine our place in the world.

The development of the scientific paradigm started with Aristotle and culminated in the 16th century with a series of scientific discoveries that resulted in a dramatic shift in consciousness toward a rational, mechanical worldview. Jung described the psychological impact of the Western world's transition from a mythological to a mechanical paradigm, writing, "When moderns fell off the roof of the medieval cathedral, they fell into the abyss of self" (as cited in Hollis, 2000, p. 14). People withdrew their projections from the external world and encountered them within themselves. The gods (and demons) ceased to reside in trees, rivers, and mountains and re-emerged in our psyches as symptoms (Jung, 2002, p. 127). But although Jung bemoaned the effect of the "*de-deification*" of the modern experience of the world, he also viewed it as a necessary part of the process for the development of human consciousness (Segal, 1998, p. 19).

The mechanical worldview allowed for an empirical inquiry into an objectified world, bringing with it the technological advancements of the past centuries. Toward the end of the 20th century, it was scientists themselves who began to stress the detrimental consequences of the scientific myth. Renowned biologist Edward O. Wilson (1984) warned that human activity is bringing about "the greatest impasse to the abundance and diversity of life on Earth" (p. 247), and biologist Paul Ehrlich (1971) estimated that some 10,000 species a year are being extinguished because of humans' relentless pressure on the natural world. Cosmologist Brian Swimme and cultural historian Thomas Berry (1992) pointed toward the interrelatedness of psychic health and the state of the natural world when they wrote: "That these centuries of 'progress' should now be ending in increasing stress for the human is a final evidence that what humans do to the outer world they do to their interior world" (p. 242). But for modern people it is neither possible—nor desirable—to live in the mythical world of our ancestors any more. Their traditional myths can no longer fulfill the functions they used to serve, such as providing meaning for one's existence and explaining natural phenomena. At the same time, humans have a deep need to transcend their individual lives and create meaning beyond their personal realities. Jung (1961/1963) was keenly aware of this longing and its attempt to be fulfilled through myths:

The need for mythic statements is satisfied when we frame a view of the world which adequately explains the meaning of human existence in the cosmos, a view which springs from our psychic wholeness, from the co-operation between the conscious and the unconscious. Meaninglessness

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inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness. Meaning makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything. (p. 340)

The challenge is to hold both the need for individual psychological development as well as the need for a cohesive, collective mythology that embeds people in the natural world and allows for a sustaining relationship with it.

The key to this new myth making lies in a shift away from an emphasis on the individual psyche to an emphasis on the world psyche and from the focus on the relationship between self and ego toward a relationship between the self and all other creation. The psychology of the 20th century was a psychology of the self; the psychology of the 21st century needs to be a relational psychology with the world. Campbell (1988) foreshadowed this movement when he stated in *The Power of Myth* that “the only mythology that is valid today is the mythology of the planet” (p. 28). We need myths that “identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet” (p. 24). A synthesis of science and spirituality is required to create a third way of being that recognizes the natural world as “full of spirit, feeling, intelligence, and relation” (Kidner, 2001, p. 293).

The question arises, What must a new mythology look like to satisfy humans’ need for meaning and purpose as well as to explain the universe in a manner consistent with the current scientific knowledge? One way for people to create meaning is to tell their stories. Expanding on this notion, it is equally important that humanity, as a species, has a cohesive and meaning-making story of where it comes from. Our current scientific story of origin, the big bang theory—as some scientists refer to the beginning of our universe—is a mechanistic one. In their book *The Universe Story* (1992) Swimme and Berry provided an alternative to this narrative: They described the creation of the universe as a deeply relational unfolding of an intelligent, creative design:

The important thing to appreciate is that the story as told here is not the story of a mechanistic, essentially meaningless universe but the story of a universe that has from the beginning had its mysterious self-organizing power that, if experienced in any serious manner, must evoke an even greater sense of awe than that evoked in earlier times at the experience of the dawn breaking over the horizon, the lightning storms crashing over the hills, or the night sounds of the tropical rainforests, for it is out of this story that all of these phenomena have emerged. (p. 238)

Campbell (1970) identified four main functions of traditional myths as (1) metaphysical, (2) cosmological, (3) sociological, and (4) psychological in nature. Viewing the mythologized scientific story of the universe as told by Swimme and Berry (1992) through the lens of these four functions serves as a template for an inquiry into how a new paradigm needs to look to fulfill people’s mythological and existential needs, as well as to foster a sustainable, meaningful relationship with all inhabitants of this world.

As Campbell (2004) saw it, the *metaphysical function of myth* is “to evoke in the individual a sense of grateful, affirmative awe before the monstrous mystery that is existence” (p. 6). Western society’s current scientific story of our existence paints the planet as a mere speck in the outskirts of the universe, tethered by gravity to the sun, with life itself having been born out of a primordial soup ignited by a chance lightning storm. Most people probably have experienced the sheer terror of existential angst when presented with this scenario: the cold vastness of space, the unimaginable length of time

involved, and the seeming randomness of it all. Woodman (1982) described this sense of cosmic dislocation in *Addiction to Perfection*: “In Western society very little is sacred; connections between man and nature, man and God, are broken. We are without archetypal images, without sacred rituals, without a myth to hold our ego-orientation together” (p. 123). Swimme and Berry (1992) reframed humanity’s origin story as the unfolding of a self-organizing universe with a life-giving force at its center—all of the universe’s forms differentiated but connected expressions of the same energy. This view provides humanity again with a much-needed sense of being at home in the universe and of being a part of something larger than oneself.

The *cosmological function of myth*, according to Campbell (2004), is to make sense of the occurrences of the natural world and to imbue them with meaning by connecting them back to the great mystery of life itself (p. 7). Swimme and Berry’s (1992) mythologized story of the universe certainly served this explanatory function. They provided a detailed account of the emergence of our universe, the Earth, and all its creations, while at the same time giving it meaning by suggesting that the whole cosmos vibrates with life and interconnectedness. In serving this function, *The Universe Story* came full circle back to one of humanity’s oldest creeds, animism, a belief that a soul or a spirit existed in every object, even inanimate ones (Hefner & Guimaraes, 2003, par. 1). The reconciliation of these ancient views with the scientific paradigm could create the potential for a much-needed shift in consciousness.

It is a fallacy, however, to believe that only within the scientific, Judeo–Christian belief system did environmental degradation occur. Deforestation and extinction of entire species due to human activity took place for thousands of years within many different mythological belief systems, from ancient China to the Rome of antiquity to the early Americas. Therefore, even if it were possible, simply returning to a more indigenous, animistic belief system would not address the problem. There is always the danger of myopia when looking at something as a linear movement, but it is safe to say that the movement from mythical to scientific thinking has expanded humanity’s horizon in unprecedented ways. The task now is to integrate scientific knowledge into a new, life-sustaining, collective mythology. Campbell (1988) was optimistic when he wrote, “We are at this moment participating in one of the greatest leaps of the human spirit to a knowledge not only of outside nature but also of our own deep inward mystery” (p. xix). He believed that there is a “point of wisdom beyond the conflicts of illusion and truth by which lives can be put together again” (pp. xviii–xix).

The purpose of the *sociological function of mythology*—to explain the rules of society to its members—is to ensure the continued survival of the group (Campbell, 2004, p. 6). Most cultures and societies today attribute value to the world in a very strict hierarchical order: Humans are on top, then come life forms with characteristics most similar to humans, and at the bottom are life forms least similar to people. There is, of course, also a value system within the human race that determines a person’s value based on race, gender, nationality, and age. This type of thinking is reinforced by the Cartesian split of mind from matter, which in its essence is a split between soul and matter. The result is a tendency toward dualistic thinking and a dualistic worldview: subject *or* object, valuable *or* worthless, and soulless *or* ensouled. It is a mindset that brings forth extreme distortions, such as when the life of a human fetus is protected at all costs while entire species are wiped off the face of the Earth due to human activity. Swimme and Berry’s (1992) *The Universe Story* told of a different set of values that sees all expressions and manifestations of the universe as being of equal value. For this to become the dominant origin story would represent a radical shift from our current outlook and would bring along a radical

change in behavior. Jungian analyst Robert Johnson (1983) explained that such a change would also require people to recognize that they have been completely possessed and dominated by a set of beliefs that they, as individuals, never chose (p. 47). Furthermore, he wrote:

At a certain point in the history of a people, a new possibility bursts out of the collective unconscious; it is a new idea, a new belief, a new value, or a new way of looking at the universe. It represents a potential good if it can be integrated into consciousness, but at first it is overwhelming, even destructive. (p. xiii)

Throughout history, the times when one belief system has crumbled without a new system established to replace it have always been tumultuous. Our current moment in time is no different. Hillman (1976) described this stage: “When a person’s or a nation’s belief falls apart there is a general psychic disorder. The ideas that held the complexes no longer function as adequate containers” (p. 132).

Finally, the *fourth function of myth* is psychological. Myth traditionally provided guidance through the developmental stages of the individual “from birth through maturity through senility to death” (Campbell, 2004, p. 10), in accord with the social and cosmological order of the group. Depth psychologists see the psychological function of myth as its ability to reveal the existence of the unconscious and to open one up to it (Segal, 1999, p. 30). Campbell (p. 10) and Jung (Segal, 1999, pp. 67–97) agreed that the psychological function is the most constant and the only valid one of the four functions left today.

The necessity for each of us, as inhabitants of the planet, to find our own individual myths today is reflected in the turmoil and utter lack of cohesion in our current world. The rising popularity of social media, which provides a platform to share our personal mythologies, and which measures their validity in the number of followers or clicks, is an expression of this need. Personal or artistic expressions at times transcend the tumult to become our modern myths, giving us an experience of being part of a group with shared beliefs and values. Events such as a rock concert, a rave, or a demonstration also provide much-needed group experiences where the pressure for individualization is temporarily suspended and replaced by a transcending feeling of oneness with the other. The next morning, though, more often than not each person is on his or her own again, exiled out of the mythical paradise of a unified projection. People are still projecting, but the objects of those projections vary widely, ranging from celebrities to superheroes to charitable causes to religious fundamentalism to the myths of individualism and rationalism. Each age cloaks its myths in the imagery of its time and the language it knows. The current time has a plethora of myths that reflect the fragmentation of our society and our myth of individualism. Today we are each on our own personal hero’s journey.

When society became more literal and material, it not only took spirit and soul out of the natural world, but ultimately out of people themselves. Humans did not find their inner world reflected in the outer world any longer. A mythologized world where life vibrates through everything and where objects have subjectivity would provide reconnection with the outer *and* the inner worlds. But for most people this is not an experienced reality. One way to reconnect with an ensouled natural world on an experiential level is through imagination. Depth psychology’s call to drop down and inward in active imagination needs to be expanded to a call to venture outside of the self in engagement with the external world. The madmen who talk to rocks and trees might have been right all along. Maybe they still have a sense that every object also has a spiritual dimension to it. On a day-to-day level, such a belief system would mean that even an everyday object would be treated

differently because one can imagine entering into relationship with it. The one-way consumer attitude in which objects are used once and discarded would be challenged and softened.

A universe where everything is an expression of an original, self-birthing energy is a polytheistic expression of oneness. In psychological terms, this means that the people of such a universe must hold the tension of opposites of unification and differentiation, forces that simultaneously occur in an ongoing process. At a societal level, the coexistence of unification and differentiation is paralleled by our realization as humans that we are not the supreme culmination of all creation, but just one of many of its expressions. This process is mirrored by the psychic process of the ego recognizing that it is not the only consciousness within the self, but one of many. The ego, as well as humanity, initially resists its dethroning, but ultimately this is where contentment and peace are to be found intrapsychically, interpersonally, and in relation with the Earth.

But even the ones among us who identify with the belief that humans are simply another expression among many other expressions of universe appear to often hold on to the vague and rather naïve thought that if we, as humans, mess up, somebody—God?—will ultimately step in and bail us out. This is probably a remnant of patriarchal, monotheistic belief systems in which power is externally located. For example, Christianity's narrative of an omnipresent savior has most likely become part of Christians' psychic structure; after all, Christians learn to believe that we humans are the crown of creation and the chosen ones. In short, most of us are possessed by a superiority complex. This proposed explanation might account, at least partially, for the complacency of so many people when faced with environmental degradation and disasters.

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CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

One might ask what the 15-billion-year-old story of a self-organizing, evolving universe could possibly bring to a 50-minute therapy session. The question itself implies a specific theory of developmental and individual psychology: People and their symptoms are viewed as the result of what happened to them at birth, as children, or in adolescence. This view does not allow for the recognition that humans are also part of something larger than themselves and that their desires and longings transcend their immediate, personal life. A creation story, such as *The Universe Story*, that emphasizes humans' kinship with stardust and jellyfish, acknowledges this need for meaning and belonging. "Psychology, so dedicated to awakening human consciousness, needs to wake itself up to one of the most ancient human truths: we cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet" (Hillman, 1995, p. xxii). For a practitioner, the call is to widen the focus from the pathology of the individual to also include the pathology of the person's outer world.

Developmental theory is a useful way to understand a person, but it is not the only way. And more importantly, there is a danger of getting caught in an assumption of inevitability that people are inescapably bound to their symptoms. Similarly, contemporary thinkers often look to the past for the causes of society's alienation from nature, "focusing on environmental villains such as Descartes in a way that makes our own, current practices appear to be somehow inevitable" (Kidner, 2001, p. 13). The belief that people are the product of their childhood experiences, their brain chemistry, or their family patterns is not just held by many therapists, but also by clients, who often come in with set ideas of how their childhoods have formed them and how certain life events are the cause for their presenting issues. As much as these observations have validity, they are also, as Hollis (2000) noted, a "flight from the soul and therefore from the transcendent task of creating meaning. . . Such a denial of depth is a failure of nerve in the face of largeness" (p. 16). The human psyche is a myth-making psyche (Jung, 1961/1963). It has a desire to know where it comes from and what its purpose is in life. Looking at a person in only the context of his or her individual life truncates the psyche.

Reframing a presenting symptom from an interpersonal dysfunction to the soul's sane, if at times ill-advised, reaction to a dysfunctional environment is a healing experience for the patient.

Clinical psychologist and ecopsychologist Chellis Glendinning (1995) reframed "our disconnection from the Earth as the 'original trauma,' which laid the groundwork for subsequent traumas such as child abuse or the genocide of indigenous people" (p. 41), and Hollis (2000) argued that "in this existential chasm depth psychology necessarily finds its work, for spiritual dislocation is the chief wound which lies beneath the other wounds we treat with work, drugs, ideologies, or desperate love" (p. 14). Reframing a presenting symptom from an interpersonal dysfunction to the soul's sane, if at times ill-advised, reaction to a dysfunctional en-

vironment is a healing experience for the patient. The language of a person's symptoms can be interpreted in many different ways—neurologically, psychologically, socially, or culturally—but there are also always ecological and spiritual components. Suffering only becomes symptomatic if it feels meaningless. Nearly all suffering is bearable and therefore manageable if it has meaning (Jung, 1961/1963, p. 340).

Looking at a symptom through the lens of a different time or culture, it becomes even more evident how the contemporaneous worldview—the myth people live in—shapes the perception of that symptom. In tribal cultures a disease is not viewed as an intrapsychic issue but foremost as a spiritual issue that needs to be fixed first in the spiritual realm. It is regarded as a disturbance of the social fabric of the community. Consequently, the goal of traditional healing is not to strengthen the client's ego, but to encourage the client to transcend the ego by considering him- or herself as embedded in, and expressive of, the community (Katz & Rolde, 1981). It is important to recognize that all the theories clinicians apply are just that—theories. They are strongly culturally bound concepts and belief systems. Some might serve the clinician or the client better than others, but they do not hold an objective truth. Depth psychology, with its practice of trying to see *through* things to essence levels, provides a helpful counterbalance to the Western mind's need for an objective truth. Depth psychology encourages people to become aware of the myths

they create, while it also provides an understanding and deep appreciation of the importance of a cohesive, relational myth for mental and physical well-being. Jung believed that psychotherapy emerged as a substitute for myth when traditional myths stopped working (Segal, 1999, p. 120). Following this line of thought, the work of a therapist can be viewed as creating enough of a scaffolding around clients to support them until they are able to stand on their own while they are out on their perilous journeys in the deep woods creating their own personal myths; and, maybe, hopefully, humanity will be also able to arrive at a collective, life-sustaining mythology for our species as a whole.

How does one prove the necessity of a paradigm shift? A shift in consciousness takes a leap of faith, and faith is anathema to empirical thinking. New perspectives could be opened by reframing research questions in terms of the paradigm of matter as alive and ensouled, and by extending the considerations of human diversity to incorporate the diversity of the nonhuman world. For only when the intimate interconnectedness between human health and the health of the Earth has become mainstream knowledge can a new “mythology of the planet” take hold (Campbell, 1988, p. 28).

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