The Disturbing Release of Personality

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The Joseph Campbell Foundation (JCF), Opus Archives and Research Center, and Pacifica Graduate Institute outdid themselves with the first Symposium on Myth, held August 31st through September 3, 2012. For the opening plenary address, Dr. David Miller gave a virtuoso performance, a brilliantly conceived challenge for us to see through our own "seeing-through" of myth. The workshops and lectures were stimulating, the people in attendance were warm, interesting and bright, the setting was idyllic, and the food was, quite simply, delicious. From any perspective, it was an unmitigated success.

Aside from Professor Miller's remarks, I was also struck by work that Safron Rossi, executive director of Opus Archives, has undertaken. Dr. Rossi is in the midst of combing through and editing Campbell's lecture notes on the goddess, which will eventually be published in book form through JCF. A passage she quotes as an example of Campbell's thinking on this subject, delivered to the graduating class at Sarah Lawrence in 1972, has captured my imagination by showcasing not only Campbell's creative imagination, but his keen and intuitive grasp of the intersections between, and interpenetration of myth, culture, and individual psychology.

Here is Campbell's observation:

> So I've tried to review here now up to very recently the roles of woman and in this very last moment what I wanted to bring out was the accent on the individual as a peculiar, special person, not simply woman but this woman, but personality. Now in the past, women have been bound simply to biological social tasks. They were pregnant most of the time and when they were giving birth they had to take care of the children. They also had the enormous social tasks of supporting the household and preparing the food and the clothing and every, every, everything. That's no longer what women have to deal with now and they are released to develop individually, personally, as men have been released for very many centuries. And it's that release of the personality that put men in the dominant position, not the muscles or anything of the kind. They were not bound back to the nature roles. And I think now with Nora having closed the door, it's the personality of the woman that is going to find itself and the differentiation and the roles will not simply be the classic roles (Campbell, L445 *Mythic Goddess lecture*, 5/18/72).

"The release of the personality." This is the key phrase, and Campbell was right to emphasize what an important concept it is, for it is nothing less than the birth of a new consciousness. For much of human history the individual personality—be it masculine or feminine—has been integrally bound to a specific piece of land, to a specific people, and has lacked a well-defined self-identity; typically oneself was experienced not as oneself, but as an anonymous part of a larger tribal, collective, or communal group, in which the emphasis was on the larger unit rather than the individual. The individual had value only so far as he or she might contribute to the collective.

> But only toward the close of the Middle Ages did man gradually become aware of his body as a support for his ego. And, having gained this awareness, he is henceforth not [simply] philosopher, or a poet, but a specific individual such as those who gaze at us from a portrait by Jan van Eyck. The conception of man as subject is based on a conception of the world and the environment as an object (Jean Gebser, *The Ever Present Origin,* p. 11)

This growing awareness of interiority and evolving human self-understanding within what we have come to know as Western Culture is equivalent to a release of personality or an expansion of consciousness, and might be described as the "discovery" of perspective, an inner individual phenomenon orienting one to the external world through dimensionality, which brought something very new and different (and, I might add, disturbing) to the table. With perspective, one becomes aware of a new and different dimension to the peculiar quality of being alive - the dimensionality of an individual located in a particular time and place that acts upon, and is acted upon, by the objective world.

Perspective begins to emerge roughly around the 12th century: the riot of detail and depth found in Gothic architecture, along with its flying buttresses, reimagined and redesigned inner sacred spaces, Heloise's courageous insistence on self-determination destabilized the traditional ideas of womanhood; Roger Bacon began investigations into perspective via the study of optics in his *Opus Majus*; and the troubadour's *Saluts d'Amor* focused upon seeing and singing, not just about love

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troubadours' *Salutz d'Amor* focused upon seeing and singing, not just about love generally or abstractly, but about a particular personal, unique, and *individual* love.

All of these new and radically different ways of seeing—and seeing through—the world are in some way indebted to an emerging, perspectival kind of consciousness. Brunelleschi's dome over the Duomo of Florence in the 15th century and Leonardo's polymath genius reflect, perhaps, the high water mark of this new way of experiencing and thinking about human beings during this period. These signal cultural events reflecting the greater interiority and evolving inner life of the individuals—for both men and women—may have been on Campbell's mind when he spoke to what he called the release of personality, and the evolution of a more deeply subjective-objective understanding of the world is in part what David Miller spoke to, a way of seeing that necessitates in turn a sometimes disturbing "seeing-through."

Poets and artists are, in any era, the canaries in the coal mines of culture; they are generally among the first to apprehend the forces shaping and driving the constituent elements of a culture, and in the early 14th century case I am about to describe, the poet Petrarch assumes the role of one such canary (Francesco Petrarca, letter 1, Vol. 4, Le Familiari).

Petrarch recalls that he's wanted to ascend Mt. Ventoux, the highest mountain in Provençe (pictured above), since he was a child, and on this particular day he set out with his brother to do so. It was a difficult climb, and once at the summit he describes himself as being "shaken by the unaccustomed wind and the wide, freely shifting vistas," and describes himself as being "awestruck." He goes on to say, "Suddenly a new thought seized me, transporting me from space into time." His attention at this moment has turned to his inner world, and he begins to indulge a reverie based upon the past, difficult decade of his life.

This encounter with perspective and space, the sudden apprehension of the subject/object split, impels Petrarch to turn inward and meditate on time (past experience) in order to mitigate the disturbing force of his new awareness of the space without - but this inner meditation also proves disturbing because he is unable to find the familiar comfort he usually finds, and he continues to shift the focus of his consciousness between inner and outer realities as a way of searching for equilibrium. (And I might add as an aside that just such a bi-focal shifting of attention is of the utmost importance to the process of psychotherapy, is it not?) Continuing the bi-focal shifting, Petrarch looks out once again and then, still disturbed by the outer, shifts focus back into his inner world, and yet again is disturbed by his encounter with a now destabilized or deconstructed inner self, which as a result of these new experiences, has been made to seem objectively other. "I admit I was overcome…" he says, and "I begged my brother not to disturb me…"

At this point, Petrarch's experience of his own inner world has become just as disturbing as his experience of the outer world when first glimpsed from the summit of Ventoux. The disturbing, vast expanse that opened before his eyes on the summit was the same disturbing vastness that opened up within his own being when he shifted focus to the inner world. One more time, however, Petrarch allows himself to "contemplate the mountain," which I take to mean that he looked deeply and intentionally into the scene in which he found himself; he took in the vistas, the depths, the vastness of sky, and the dizzying heights, and then once again, he turned inward and surrendered to the new realities of his soul. Deep looking is a challenging action to apply and understand and it must have taken a while for him to grasp it, yet it seems that the "seeing-through" of his own experience calms him. At this point he writes, "We fell silent…" and he concluded his letter by writing, "So much perspiration and effort just to bring the body a little closer to heaven; the soul, when approaching God, must be similarly terrified."

So, we begin to see a little of what Professor Miller was speaking about at the Symposium when he challenged those of us in the audience to allow disturbances to enter our lives. When we allow ourselves to be disturbed by looking deeply into the world as well as the self, we feel gobsmacked or wounded (and often are) in some way, but it is the wounding itself that makes us aware of the qualities comprising our unique personalities and the need for their release, because the fullest possible release of one's personality into the world—the birth of a higher order consciousness—provides a palliative to the wound. Remember that Petrarch pleaded with his brother to disturb him no farther, yet he was nonetheless willing to continue to disturb himself by employing an alternating focus on the inner and outer worlds while contemplating the vastness of the space of both. In those moments Petrarch was experiencing the expansion of consciousness; because of the deeply disturbing nature of psychic transformation, such a release isn't likely to be a pleasant experience - which is why, I suspect, Campbell invokes the image of Nora closing the door (from Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House*) in the quote provided above by Dr. Rossi. That closing door occurred as the result of Nora being so wounded that she nearly took her own life; culturally, the sound of that door closing Ibsen's play reverberated around the world, causing tremendous consternation and disturbance.

Gentle experiences don't disturb us, and therefore they don't often move us to reflection or contemplation, either; only the dangerous or the uncanny will reliably do that. The experiences that create the necessary psychic conditions resulting in the expansion of consciousness are usually existentially terrifying; they cause one to become so deeply disturbed, so overwhelmed, that these events and their emotional sequels become the powerful currents in the stream of existential imagination against which we continue to beat until the ends of our lives. The wound is created by the interpenetration of space into soul and soul into space, and the resulting overwhelming awareness of the vastness of each, soul and space. Such a wounding is, I think, a prerequisite for the discovery of the inner world, a discovery which then enables a personality to be released.

Now in the early 21st century, nearly 700 years after Petrarch climbed Mt. Ventoux, many of us perceive we are, once again, standing on the summit of a previously unsurmounted peak; by looking deeply and with intention into the overwhelming complexity of our external as well as our internal condition, by allowing ourselves to be disturbed by what we see around us and disturbed by what we feel within, we may discover that a new kind of consciousness is gradually emerging and becoming clearer as we continually shift our focus, alternately resting on and destabilizing the

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space within as well as the space without. We can't really know what this new consciousness will be as it isn't yet; if we try to describe something that is yet to be with currently valid concepts and attitudes, we risk misunderstanding, or overlooking entirely, the new, emerging thing by applying old and inadequate means of expression.

One may begin to see, and be disturbed by, the difficulty of the task ahead of us. If

so, that is wonderful! Down with *ne pas déranger*! The genius of Joseph Campbell and David Miller is found in the determination to look more and more deeply into ourselves, and into the world as well; to not get distracted by, nor fall in thrall to the irremediable past, nor to some barely coalesced future; it simply reminds us to look deeply into what is around us and at that which is within - in so doing, we stand the best chance of releasing our own personalities, preparing the way for the organic evolution of consciousness to take us to the next unfolding stage of human consciousness.

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