

A Mid-life Perspective: Preface — Part I

“The world hangs on a thin thread; that thread is the psyche of man. How important is it to know something about it?” — Carl Jung.

Jung analogized the difference in time-perception between consciousness and the unconscious through the idea of a million year old man. How would the time-awareness of such a being differ from our more temporal viewpoint? How do we treat him; how does he react to the changes taking place today?

In my last post, I outlined the major themes of my book as stated in the preface. In the next three, I'll offer the full text. These are the “facts of the case” for the million year old man as I understand them:

“The Human Animal

Civilization is a comparatively recent product when weighed against the immense stretch of time required for consciousness to emerge from the depths of instinctual nature. The beast tokens our animal ancestry, and the eons-long climb through the darkness of pre-history yet finds it just below the threshold of culture. As a symbol, it relates not only to our biological heritage through the body and its functions but to our sense of individuality, as it is through our bodies that we first experience ourselves as distinct and separate from others.

As humanity developed, the snake in the Garden evolved into Satan in the Old Testament, and both symbolize the opposition needed to distinguish conscious from unconscious. Each toddler repeats this contrary “no” stage in its development, and that opposition is a vital factor in the growth and consolidation of consciousness. It is a basic conflict between a “god-like” self-awareness set against a split-off instinctual heritage. The horns and tail of the Devil later became a graphic description of the animal urges repressed for their gradual conversion into the more humanizing social instincts embraced by Christian ideals.

As the newer myth took hold, the spiritual aim of building the soul, the personal relation to the Deity, sank beneath the weight of a still-developing and over-compensating collective ego, emphasizing the long, serpentine conflicts required for individual evolution. Psychologically and spiritually, ego-effects are a gauge of self-knowledge. Despite centuries of religious exhortation, they remain in much the same state now as in the past. The writer, Philip Wylie, described this idea as “the

fatuous awe of the ape with the mirror.” The ape points not only to a stunted inner life but to regressive tendencies which both conceal and reveal the psychological dawn of those who would recognize and act upon their own inner opposition.

Nature and the Unconscious

This theme revolves around the image of the earth as a natural symbol of the unconscious. The earth and sun are the sources of all known life, suitable metaphors for the masculine and feminine forces which conceive it. Jung and Neumann have demonstrated that artifacts and symbols dating back to pre-patriarchal cultures intimately associate masculinity with light and consciousness, just as feminine images are associated with unconscious darkness and fertility: the earthly and the feminine, the creative matrix which bears and fosters the child of consciousness. Symbolically, masculinity refers to the heady principles of thought, the organizing of consciousness; the feminine principle dissolves separate tendencies to form emotional and physical relationships – properties of the soul.

The primitive mind long ago conceived the sun as spirit, reflecting processes which urged the coming of light to the dark, unconscious void of human origin. Earth and sun are psychological analogues for “feminine” relatedness – the oneness of the unconscious, the body, and the individual – and the dissecting, masculine character of consciousness. Together, they express the intermingling pairs of opposites and the penetrating form of their relationship. Male and female, spirit and matter, mind and body: all describe the two poles required for conscious orientation.

Primitive sun-worship anticipated a Christian myth “not of this world”. Both signify the urge to distinguish conscious from unconscious, just as it is repeated in the individual. The movement away from nature toward an artificial fantasy-sphere is a projection of over-extension. Jung and Neumann suggested that the natural process of separating the two psychic systems has deepened into such a division today that we can no longer relate to our instinctual foundations – a kind of collective mid-life change in the centering and organizing processes of the psyche. Our intellectual inflation only accentuates our historical opposition to nature and the corresponding functions designed to relate us to earthly reality.

As the momentum of this drive toward conscious identity finds us alienated from ourselves, the unconscious attempts to re-orient us in the current swing by steering us back to itself, to nature and the earth, to our physical/emotional ground. The swing toward natural science describes a symbolic movement. The spiritual unfolding of our natures speaks only indirectly through its own language.

The creative spirit turns destructive when it is restricted to conscious aims and remains unconscious for too long, when a new stage is signaled. Our systematic abuse of the earth reveals an inner conflict: the oscillating poles of spirit and matter seek the undeveloped functions still in the sway of the old stage. The artificial environment we have created in the relatively short swing back to the material world exposes our Christian disdain for nature as a symbol of our animal heritage and a “god-like” ego which cannot accept its origins or its subjection to natural laws. We are literally poisoning ourselves and our children, even as exaggerated fantasies pursue grandiose notions of “conquering” space — still driven by an inflated and unanchored ego which sees itself as “not of this world.”