

publiziert in:

Zeitschrift für Tanztherapie – Körperpsychotherapie und Kreativtherapie
Nr. 6/ 1997. 4. Jahrgang, Claus Richter Verlag

„ ...myth and symbol ...

The realm of the Gods
is a forgotten dimension
of the world we know.“

Joseph Campbell
The Hero with a Thousand Faces

UNFOLDING A PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY - A Study in Authentic Movement

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Active Imagination is a method in Jungian depth psychology in which the client enters into a dialogue with his/her dream figures, either verbally or through a creative medium such as painting or writing.

In Authentic Movement, an expansion of this approach, unconscious contents become actively embodied and visible through movement expression.

This study explores Authentic Movement as a practice which uses Active Imagination through movement to know and understand personal myth. In learning to understand and live our personal myths we have a way of moving toward „ becoming our total selves.“ For, as we come into contact with and learn to accept the many facets of our being, we come closer to fulfilling our often hidden life’s dream. (Mindell 1989, pp. 44 - 45)

**Each life has a story with many possible story lines, wanting, even waiting, to unfold. The basic pattern or structure behind this story is what we will call personal myth. From a psychological perspective, personal myth is born of the same unconscious, innate images and knowledge, experienced by individuals in night time and waking dreams, as revealed through sacred myth of the past. (Campbell 1982, pp. 207 - 239)
Myth, as it appears in religion, legend and fairy tales, has always served to connect the sacred with the mundane, as a way to help us live our lives in the every day. To quote Joseph Campbell, „ It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.“ (Campbell 1973, p. 3)**

The Background - Mover and Witness

Working with small weekly groups of five or six high-functioning women over the past eleven years, I have often felt that I am witness to the mysterious unravellings of many women’s lives. As witness, I experience myself as sister traveller, appreciator and heartfelt companion of the trials ensued. I am awe-struck, joy-struck, dumbfounded. I am empty, looking through the eyes of clear water. I am just „there“ witnessing it all. I am there part of it all. I am there guarding and guiding. I am seeing from my heart, soul, body, mind. It is more than just me. „ We“ are seeing.

Embedded in the „we“ of this supportive collective, the process of one group member, Katrin, will be presented. Katrin is a music therapist, teacher and healing practitioner in her late forties, married and the mother of two teenagers. Likening her symbolic journey through Authentic Movement to the mythic journey of the „hero/heroine, “which is wrought with risks, tests, thresholds, crossings and metamorphosis, Katrin had the courage and the „calling“ to leave „home“ and strike out into unknown territory. (Campbell 1973, pp. 245 - 246)

Following her process over three years, we will see how her myth was revealed through imagery and bodily movement, paying special attention to the role of her hands. As her journey unfolds we will also see how she „learns to allow and accept the early experience of chaos, of irrational forms embodied or imagined, of not knowing.“ (Adler 1985, p. 18)

Beginning the Journey - October 1992

The following presentation is based on my detailed notes taken after each weekly Authentic Movement session, as well as on three follow up talks.

I would like to emphasize that my main focus is on the process of the mover; the mover, who follows and is led by her body impulses, sensations, rhythms and images.

My role as witness consists primarily in my „accompanying presence.“ As witness, I allow myself to be inwardly „touched and moved“ simultaneously by my own world and that of another.

Together, as a group, we formed the „temenos“ or supporting container, in which each woman’s inner life could unfold.

I did not intervene directly during the movement phases. However, in the verbal exchange following the movement, I used interventions such as: picking up on repeated movements, patterns or themes, clarifying questions, amplification (connecting archetypes from myth, fairy tales, art and culture to personal process), or the sharing of my own images surfaced in the role of witness. Such interventions served to stimulate self-reflection and to help the mover connect her inner world with the present and the past.

On November 17 of the first year, Katrin actively imagined herself standing on top of a high sand dune overlooking the ocean. Enjoying the exquisite beauty of this landscape she also described a feeling of deep inner loneliness. She stood tall, spine straight, head tilted to one side with her elbow wrapped around her head, as if trying to support herself with her arm and shoulder. This body position released a memory of her deceased father as someone who had always loved, encouraged and believed in her. Expressing great happiness to have had such a father, she, at the same time, expressed great sadness at having no one in her life now who gives her such support. This coupled experience: the ecstasy of „having an overview“ accompanied by a feeling of „inner loneliness,“ began to reveal Katrin’s poignant search for union.

Repeating many times over the next three years, this theme of „having an overview“ and its co-theme, “the desire for merging,“ became embodied through such images and sensations as the following: looking out over a wide ocean or desert landscape, being a large flying bird looking down at the earth, floating through infinite space, being able to look into the cosmos, a bodily sensation of lightness and effortlessness, a feeling of merging with the universe.

Physically Katrin experienced the clarity of „having an overview“ and the feeling of „being above it all“ mainly through the body parts of her head and eyes. On January 19, of the first year, she expressed sensing her head and upper body, as far as her chest, as her „center“ and „soul.“ Over time it became apparent that she basically identified herself with her mind. As her process evolved body splits between her upper and lower body halves, her left and right sides and a general sense of her body parts being disconnected became visible. The clearest expression of her body/mind split began to take form through her hands. Her hands began to tell a story. I witnessed Katrin’s hands unwinding a personal mythology. I saw them digging back in time, plowing the way for the future, pushing back veils and pulling out shadows in the moment. I saw her hands reaching toward sun spots of pure consciousness, hands searching for connecting threads, hands weaving the personal with the transpersonal.

Confrontations and Tests - Demons and Daimons

When Katrin first joined the Authentic Movement group she was not consciously looking for confrontation. Rather, as she herself described, she was led into it by „curiosity, fascination and interest“ in further exploring her inner world of imagery which she had at that time begun to discover through movement. However, as in all mythic journeys, there is no way to leave the familiar and follow „the call to adventure“ without encountering threatening forces. (Campbell 1973, p. 246)

Joseph Campbell envisions the hero/heroine moving „in a landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials.“ (1973, p. 97) Just how these trials may ensue or in which guise these forces will reveal themselves can never be known in advance. In Katrin's process it was her hands which began to undergo a symbolic metamorphosis, challenging her as both demon and daimon and putting her to the test.

On March 2, of the same year, moving her arms only from elbow to hand, she experienced them as „two comic book characters not related to me and having a life of their own.“

On March 23, placing her right hand to her face, she felt it fill with light. Describing its transformation into another person as „indescribably beautiful and full of love,“ she was overwhelmed with sadness as her hand „moved away on an endless path until it disappeared into the earth.“

On April 27, her hands became archaic animals that led her to their home in the earth where it was dark and peaceful. She said that she could „see“ that there was „nothing“ and realized that they had shown her a place where she could be „at one with herself.“ Yet she felt a great sadness.

These three sessions illustrate three variations on the themes of disconnection, separation, inner knowing and the longing for merging that we could already intimate in the very first session. As Katrin's hands took on the role of transmitters, they continued to extract images from her unconscious and make them known in ever more surprising ways.

The Second Year - Polarity - The Personal and the Collective Unconscious

In the second year Katrin increasingly experienced her hands as having a life of their own. Her left hand was felt to be passive, softer, more introverted and the right, active, aggressive, extroverted. Eventually the right hand began to disclose itself as a life-threatening kind of monster. Performing a beating motion on her liver area in one session, it later took on the form of a terrifying claw. It was this „claw“ which led Katrin into battle with as yet unknown „destructive forces.“

In the first encounters she experienced „the claw“ as totally separate from herself, as something attacking her from the outside, as is evident in the following two sessions :

On January 26, of the second year, she imagined it digging into her head and taking out her brain, after which she experienced her head as a „stupid, empty, white ball.“ While expressing her horror at being left a „mindless thing,“ she was able to connect back to her greatest childhood fear, the fear of becoming insane, of losing her mind, of becoming an „idiot.“

With the appearance of „the idiot“ an important thread in her myth began to unravel. The „idiot,“ the „lunatic,“ connected to lunar moon energy, opposite to the sun energy of her sense of clarity and „overview,“ made itself known.

On December 13, nearly one year later, Katrin began by walking around the room with a tipsy gait. Then, sinking to the floor, she lay very still except for her right arm which seemed detached from the rest of her body. This arm, held far from her torso, began to move in slow motion making a large gesture toward her chest. She later described it as „a huge, grey thing attacking me“ and „wanting to kill me.“ As she experienced it wanting to „tear out my heart,“ she became panicked and broke off the active imagination.

Here the primal affect of fear was so intense that it interrupted her imaginative process. (Chodorow 1991, p. 131) But, while relating her experience, Katrin remained oddly detached, although she had, even if only in a symbolic sense, just escaped death. According to Joan Chodorow: „Such dissociated affect may

represent certain difficulties or even devastating experiences from the pre-verbal, pre-symbolic developmental period of infancy.“ Pre-verbal memories however, are often „ difficult to retrieve ... because there are no words available to organize and describe the event.“ (1991, p. 133)

Katrin was able to express feeling very threatened and that she had the strong sense that „ no rationality can hold back death.“ Yet, she remained unknowing as to why „ it“ wanted her life and was left feeling a great need to protect herself. Now it was clear that „the claw“ wanted her mind and her heart. This was serious and she needed to protect herself, but from whom or from what? We both still had no real understanding as to why this was „ happening“ to her or to the source of the aggression. In the next months she was put through many tests as the meaning behind the images began to break through into consciousness.

The following week, on December 20, as she stood gripping the ballet bar at the far end of the room, she suddenly knew the origin of „ the claw.“ Very painful memories of her now deceased mother came clearly into her awareness. Able to contain and follow her emotions, Katrin began crying, then walking toward her favorite white wall, she pushed and leaned on it, ending the session by walking upright through the room. As she shared her experience, she described feeling like a little girl in need of comforting and of having had a sense of knowing and trusting that she could be held by the wall.

In this session her body movement, emotional reaction and personal memory joined in disclosing the threatening nature of her hand in the person of her mother. She recalled her mother as being a „ big-hearted and generous woman who also had a witch side.“ As a child she had often experienced her mother as rejecting, unpredictable, torturing and threatening to annihilate her. As Katrin’s myth continued to unfold, the archetype of the negative mother, as she appears in many fairy tales, came into view. Rooted in the cultural unconscious and connecting her with the roots of her German heritage, the Brother Grimm’s folk tale of „ Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,“ came into mind.

In this fairy tale the negative mother appears as a jealous step-mother who orders Snow White’s death by demanding that a hunter cut out her heart. At first we see how the innocent and trusting Snow White manages to follow her self -protective instinct for survival, saving herself by pleading with the hunter to let her go off and live in the woods never to return. In this manner she saves her life but is abandoned to the wild woods. There she finds the dwarfs as helpers who provide her with a safe place to be. However, still put to the test, she is confronted by the forces of „evil“ (deception) three more times as the step-mother appears in various disguises. The final deception - the poison apple - does end in Snow White’s death. But we see how she is restored to life as the coffin bearers accidentally trip and the poison apple core is spit up -and through the loving care of the dwarfs and the prince. (Grimm 1982, pp. 8 - 24)

Considering Katrin’s encounter with the various shape changes of her own hands as a similar confrontation and testing, we will see how new experiences eventually de-power such demonic forces of deception as she moves through the third year. By continuing to embody the spontaneous constellations of her images she learns how to hold the „ poison“ inside and integrate it, thus making space for the redeeming creative qualities inherent in the archetypes of the dwarfs and the prince.

The Third Year - Meeting the Great Mother

On January 13, of the third year, Katrin lay on the floor stroking herself with her hands. This time she related experiencing them as „ very different, yet belonging together“ and connected to her body as a whole. Still sensing her right hand as „ strong and out in the world,“ she was relieved to enjoy its protective function. Here I think of the fierce but motherly and nurturing side of female animals who are equally able to gently stroke or to show their claws in protecting their offspring from harm.

In the next session, on January 13, Katrin began by walking stiffly through the room. After some time her arms began to slash out and her feet began a slow stamping movement. Then, as she stood motionless, her facial expression changed . Katrin appeared to become very sad. In the verbal sharing following, she described embodying the image of „ a big, empty-headed, dumb monster“ who was looking out over a beautiful middle European landscape but unable to appreciate it. Becoming very angry, she found herself embodying the new image of a spider. This spider was furious and felt a strong need to demolish the entire

landscape. As Katrin talked about it afterward, she could not understand why she had become so enraged, whereas she had no difficulty in connecting her sadness with her deep longing to be part of that landscape. In this active imagination Katrin's personal rage and the vengeful side of the archetype of the Great Mother began to interweave in the spider image.

Joan Chodorow talks about this image coming up in „ issues related to the Great Mother, also known as Spider Woman, Spinning Woman, Maya, the weaver of illusions, and many other names.“ Chodorow goes on to say that recognition of „ the cold-blooded, predator aspect of the Great Mother is necessary to any deep psychological development. To recognize it in Her is also to recognize that unwanted, rejected aspect of our own nature.“ (Chodorow 1991, p. 128)

Here we see how Katrin was as yet unable to experience her rage as part of herself, unable to own it. On the other hand, her sadness, evoked by being cut off from the object of her longing, was very familiar and closer to her conscious identity of herself. Sylvia Brinton Perera, in her study of the scapegoated individual, describes how difficult it is to look into the face of our own shadow energies and recognize them as „ reflections of the dark side of existence.“ Yet, she states : „ They can be claimed consciously as affirmations of wholeness and of the Self's capacity to bring forth in each of us our own monstrous individuality.“ This can, in turn, free „ the individual to a new birth.“ If however, an individual identifies with the role of the scapegoat and assumes personal responsibility for the rejected shadow sides of others, this usually results in self-rejection and the tendency to cover up deep feelings of shame and guilt. Perera envisions us „ coming into ourselves as we wrestle with the dark energies surging through us and through others, as we learn to stand consciously against the mere acting out of the powers in which we, each of us, partake.“ (Perera 1986, p. 105)

Moving Towards Integration

On February 21, Katrin's hands, again disguised as aggressors, challenged her with a new test. Placed on either side of her neck they performed a symbolic enactment of choking her. Then, suddenly, they spread out on both sides of her body as she lay on her back outstretched on the floor. She remained in this position for a long time.

In our verbal exchange Katrin described how she overcame this latest attack with the help of her mind. Instead of sensing her head as separate from the rest of her body, she „ used it“ to see through the trickery. Once she realized „ It is only my fear and they won't really choke me,“ her hands lost their destructive power. She experienced a „ deep sense of oneness,“ and the realization that „ without my head my body is not filled with energy.“ Now beginning to see through the disguises and deceptions of „ the evil step-mother“ - she moved toward integration.

On May 16, of the third year, her right hand, forming itself into a claw moved toward her left hand. Instead of the left hand becoming powerless, the right hand became less aggressive, folding up smaller to fit into the left one, which embraced it. This enactment was accompanied by a first positive memory of being stroked as a child by her mother and the first contact to her own aggressive impulses. In this session, for the first time, Katrin experienced „ the claw“ as a destructive force within herself. During this phase in her process, as she began to own both the nurturing and destructive sides of her mother and herself, a new sense of physical and emotional connectedness developed. Images of wholeness began to emerge (especially the embodied image of a stable tree trunk), as well as, a new body feeling of being centered in her pelvis.

Finding the Key

In the last session, July of the third year, Katrin found the key to understanding her personal myth.

She stood with her hand on her heart making heavy sighing sounds, then sobbing softly. When she returned to the group she was visibly very shaken, very sad and yet, very lucid. She recounted feeling intense pain in her heart area as she envisioned herself standing at the railing of an old wooden ship, all alone in a grey, desolate landscape - a kind of valley or sea of tears. At that moment on the railing, the image of „ the idiot-monster,“ still in the shadows, broke into consciousness along with her great fear of becoming insane. She had an immediate insight as to what it means to „ go crazy.“ She described it as "being on the edge.“ „ And when you can no longer bear the pain, you leave, you capsule yourself away.“ In German the word for crazy is „ verrückt ,“ which as a verb means „ ver-rücken „, or to move over, to disarrange. Katrin understood in an instant that becoming insane means to move over into another reality, to create a different reality in order to survive.

Contacting the meaning behind „ the idiot“ freed her to share her life-long feeling of always having „ to carry an endless core of inner suffering that I must endure.“ This sense of potential disarrangement permeated her being and lived parallel to her otherwise „ friendly and optimistic sense of herself.“ Now she felt relieved to get closer to the origin of her pain, as well as to truly appreciate the treasures which had kept her from going over the edge. Understanding the source of her sadness and repressed anger to be rooted in the negative relationship with her mother, she also understood how she had managed to survive - by creating the other reality of her life-enhancing music and through the loving support of her father. She further expressed experiencing her suffering in its transpersonal dimension as a „ deep longing to merge with the source of all cosmic energy.“ She described the intense frustration she felt at „ not being able to enter into this state of union, or eternity, but of only catching glimpses.“ Establishing contact to this wounded place in herself also brought up the questions of : „ Why must I go through all this ? Why me?“ The answer that echoed back to her was an inner knowing: „ because it is so in life.“

Returning with the Boon

According to Joseph Campbell the real significance of the hero's journey is his return to the community with the boon, „ ...which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world,...“ (Campbell 1973, p. 36) In finding „ the key“ Katrin gained „ intimate knowledge of shadow and suffering“ and began to understand „ the ground of reality behind the opposites,“ suggesting a new „spiritual awareness of the tree of life and death.“ (Perera 1986, p. 109) Through the Authentic Movement process she was able to link up her inner world with a conscious perspective which led to an increasing sense of wholeness. S.B.Perea concludes that : „ Only when one's experiences can be seen as meaningfully related to an image of the transpersonal, can the scapegoat-identified individual find the self-acceptance necessary for life. (1986, pp. 109 - 110)

Katrin, the heroine of this myth, continues to take her precious gifts of music and healing, the transformative power of her suffering and the still-evolving reward of self-understanding out into the everyday, sharing with others. At the end of the three years, she expressed that she did not consider her process as being over, rather that her newly gained insights continued to help her weave the many-faceted threads of her life's myth.

Weaving it all Together - Concluding Thoughts

In following Katrin's process in Authentic Movement as a heroine's journey, we have witnessed the unfolding of her personal myth with its roots in the collective and its link to the transpersonal. We have seen how „ the myth- making or story- telling capacity of the psyche“ served as „ a powerful organizing and healing factor.“ (Whitmont & Perera 1989, p. 80)

Watching as she actively embodied her imagery, we saw her meeting with life-threatening forces that must be encountered, endured and overcome in order for psychic growth to occur. We have accompanied her as she moved from a bodily felt sense of disconnection or symbolic dismemberment, toward a feeling of connectedness and wholeness. We have seen her contend with destructive energies, first experienced as only coming from the outside, then recognized within herself, and lastly as a universal condition of life's polarities. Finally, we were witness to her confrontation with suffering and death, as well as her search for oneness and merging, both common to the myths, legends and religions of many cultures.

In viewing the basic underlying structure of Katrin's myth as her longing for union, it can be understood as everyone's longing for the taste of the nurturing mother we once actually experienced, or as the wish for that mother whose flavor we were never fully able to savour. We can only begin with our human condition. Yet, Katrin's yearning to merge with her real biological mother led to an encounter with the Great Mother in her life-giving and life-destroying aspects. Katrin's search then became a spiritual seeking, just as each of us seeks in our own way to become part of that which is greater than ourself and to join in the bliss and peace of that union. Katrin's sadness, her feeling of „ wanting to get closer but always remaining just outside looking in, unable to enter paradise,“ - is that not our wish and our sadness, too? Are we not suffering collectively, waiting outside together, wanting to get in but not knowing how ?

It seems that if we keep searching, our search always takes us through our greatest fears. But, if we do not give up, if we keep on going and succeed in passing through the door to our own images, then our personal story begins to unfold and we find out that it is more than just our story. Once we begin unravelling the threads of our personal myth we connect to collective and universal myth, as well. We search, each in our own way, seeking fulfillment, seeking at-oneness with ourselves, with the collective and with the universal.

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