

Dancing with the Gods

Paul Rebillot and Melissa Kay

In the last book ¹⁾ he wrote before his death, Gregory Bateson tells the story of a man who asked his computer, "Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?" The machine did its work, analyzing, Bateson says, "its own computational habits," and then printed neatly the following answer: THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY.

Defining "story" as "a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call *relevance*," Bateson concludes:

If the world be connected, if I am at all fundamentally right in what I am saying, then *thinking in terms of stories* must be shared by all mind or

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minds, whether ours or those of redwood forests and sea anemones . . . The evolutionary process through millions of generations whereby the sea anemone, like you and like me, came to be—that process, too, must be of the stuff of stories.'

It seems to me that here the insights of the science of evolution and of depth psychology come together in a way that is of critical importance for any future therapeutic process. Those stories, which are the stuff of mental process as Bateson describes it, are the same, I believe, as the archetypes described by Carl Jung. Together these stories or archetypes are what Jung called "the collective unconscious," that is, the inherited species-memory of our whole evolutionary process, the process of natural selection by which our species has survived.

The new thrust of my own work has to do with discovering the archetypes within the body itself. The human collective unconscious is, I am convinced, in the human body, in the genetic structure, in the movement potential, in the blood, in the nervous system, in the structures and processes of the human brain.

The therapeutic import of this is that the archetypes have the power to order the life process of individuals in accordance with the natural selections made by the species. And if this species-memory is in the body, then that means that the potential of the body to realize the archetypes is available to every individual.

Mythological and ritual structures are conscious manifestations of the archetypes of the species-memory. We have only, in some sense, to "break the code" in order to release the energy of these stories in our lives. I believe this code-breaking capacity is within the movement potential of our bodies.

Let me retrace my steps now to the experience out of which these awarenesses emerged.

Recently, talking to a group of friends, I said, "I was in ancient Greece last year." We all laughed at the idea. But as I thought about it, I realized that's really where I was last year. I was in ancient Greece. I spent very little time in modern Greece while I was there. I walked among the ruins. I reached my hand into the water at the beach at Delos and picked out a shard of pottery and felt with my fingers the fingerprints of the potter who had made that piece of pottery five hundred years before Christ. I really was in ancient Greece last year.

I stood on the highest peak on the Isle of Delos, the very peak on which Zeus stood while Leto crouched in a cave below to give birth to Apollo—to give birth to *reason!* What an event! It is said that the whole island burst into a bloom of golden flowers at the birth of Apollo.

As I was coming down from that mountain peak, I cut my foot and hurt my knee, and I could not help but wonder, as I walked down that long, long stairway in the hot sun of Delos, "Why am I doing this?"

Why do I trip myself as I walk down this Sacred Way?" And I began to meditate on the concept of God, and how it evolved, and what it is in the human race.

What are the gods? What was happening in Greece that this myth of the birth of Apollo should have emerged and dramatized itself on this island? What was happening to the human race in the figure of Greek civilization and its evolution, its process of surviving as a species?

What seems to have been evolving here was the transformation of western culture from matriarchy into patriarchy, a shift to a new ordering principle that would affect our inner psychic life as much as our outer political life. I take it that that was evolutionarily sound at the time in terms of species survival and development. What happened here was a natural process of selection, and the myths record that process. I began to wonder again, "What are the gods?"

I could see the smoothness of the stones and I imagined the many feet that had walked here before me. The stones by now are worn to a treacherous angle by the weight of the centuries. I thought of the people of ancient Greece making this pilgrimage, going to sit in the temple of Aphrodite, and then in the temple of Zeus, then going on to the temples of Apollo and Athena. And I realized that as they went from place to place, from temple to temple, they were learning how to differentiate their faculties. Their reasoning powers were differentiated by going and meditating on the God Apollo; their orgiastic powers, by meditating on and becoming one with the God Dionysus. The gods, I realized, are potentials, human potentials projected outwards.

At first the gods appeared in the images of cosmological events like the creation of the universe. These were the power gods, the thunder and lightning gods, and may record the memory of the astounding transformation of non-life into life. Then they take on animal forms, serpents and bulls, lambs and griffins. In Egyptian mythology, they are transforming from animal into human form, and so the gods appear with human bodies and animal heads, signifying the evolution of animal potentials into human form. In many ways, the evolution of our gods has mirrored the evolution of the species and of the individual human fetus within the womb.

In ancient Greece, the principal gods become particularly human in form, and they experience all the problems and issues of human life. But they experience these problems and issues at an infinite level. These gods are the potentials for experience that echo through the whole of the human species. And so they are immortal. In Greece, they are also multiple; they are distinct.

In Hebrew mythology, the concept of Jehovah or Yahweh brings these images of potential, of power and authority, of love and creativity, into one image. The potential is still projected out ward, but it has coalesced into the image of one God.

And then, out of Yahweh, comes Christ, the one God embodied in human form, God become body. What that indicates is that our task is no longer to separate and project the various aspects of our being as we did in going from the temple of Athena to the temple of Hecate to the temple of Hera. Rather our task is to enter into our own being, our

own bodies. Our Sacred Way leads now into the temple of human experience.

My hurt leg recalled to me the image of Vulcan or Haephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods, who didn't need to go out and prove his godhood but simply stayed at home and plied his craft. And I thought, I, too, no longer need to go out searching for Zeus and Apollo. Rather, my need now is to plunge into the experience of the temple within, of God embodied, of Christ, or Buddha, or Body.

Sitting in the temple of Apollo, I imagined the way it must have been with the floor of shining marble reflecting the rays of the sun in orderly horizontal shapes broken by the vertical lines of columns, twos and twos and twos, all balanced and symmetrical. And there standing in the corner perhaps, or standing facing the sunlight, was the image of a perfectly proportioned body, a beautiful being completely harmonious with himself and with nature, playing on his harp. Beneath this image were, perhaps, musicians also playing harps, which, in very beautiful and orderly ways, organized the sound and sense and feeling of this place. Perhaps there were also dancers, priests and priestesses, moving two by two. Everything was reasonable, everything was orderly.

I, as a worshipper, come and sit in this temple and experience an environment of order. What I am doing essentially is projecting outward into this environment my own sense of order. I'm experiencing it and appreciating it; I'm worshipping it, calling it by the name Apollo.

A temple is a mirror on which we project some aspect of our nature, an aspect that we call immortal because it is a potential that has evolved in the species and belongs to the species, so that all human beings now have the potential for that experience which the Greeks called Apollo.

The potential, the god, is immortal, but I am mortal. I am a human being; I experience mortality around me; I experience death. How do I experience the voice of reason when I am confronted with the death of a loved one, for example? How do the immortals interact with mortal beings, persons like you and me going through life stress situations? This interaction is, I believe, what Greek drama is all about. In the theater the ancient Greeks had the opportunity to see the relationships between the immortals—the potentials of human experience—and mortals—the Limits of individuality. The ordering power of the archetypes—the ancestral memory of the species—was experienced by the people watching the play.

In those days the connection with the leading actor and the sense of empathetic contact with the drama was much more powerful than it is in present-day theaters. There was no square of light separating the audience from the actors; the identification was much more complete. Seated, for example, in the amphitheater at Delphi you could see the actor on stage surrounded by the people, and beyond them, the vista of the earth and the heavens. The enactment of the drama was a focusing, a learning, a catharsis, an experience of mortal and immortal in living relationship with nature and the cosmos.

And so the process moved from the temple, from contemplation of the projected archetype, to the theater, frequently located near the temple, where the archetype was experienced in dynamic relationship with someone like yourself. The final phase was the initiation rite itself in which the god was ingested, the projected archetype reowned by the psyche. Through participation in the ritual, the initiate experienced psychic reconnection with the archetypal structure and with the ordering power of that structure. That is the healing power of ritual.

I returned from Greece with renewed conviction that creating rituals and working with mythological images is an essential part of the healing process. A ritual is an attempt to embody an archetypal structure in the here and now, to bring that energy form into relationship with personal biography. To bring ourselves into contact with these mythological structures in a vital, energetic way is, I believe, to release the greatest potential of the body and of the psyche.

I have seen people in my workshops dancing out what we call "demons" experiencing energies they had never thought possible. Their bodies expand to the extent that the dancers allow their point of view of who they are to break down and surrender to the release of energy encompassed by the concept of demon.

Similarly, in certain shamanistic rituals, the person to be healed, or initiated, must take on the soul of various animals. He has to become the animal to the extent that he actually goes out and kills as that animal kills and eats as that animal eats. In this way he allows the potential in his body for that kind of animal experience to be realized. When he returns to the human fold, or to himself, after the trance, he has within his body the entire potential of that particular animal deity.

When I say ritual I do not mean ceremony. I do not mean habitual forms or empty gestures that are carried out like abstractions, empty movements of hands and arms and shoulders. For example, people have experimented with dropping a grain every so often into a pigeon cage. The grain, striking the pigeon from above, would startle it and cause it to jump. After a while, similar to the Pavlov dogs, the pigeon began doing this little dance of jumping around whenever it was hungry, expecting that if it jumped around like that the grain would start to fall. That to me is an empty ceremony, and that is not what I mean by ritual.

Ritual, to me, is tuning into the deepest levels that we can of human experience. *Here* touches the cosmos; now launches eternity. Movement and posture are essential aspects of ritual. Many meditative practices are based on the awareness that bodily posture releases the feeling or attitude expressed by the posture. In a genuine ritual we find our way back to the ordering power of the archetypes, experiencing them by incorporating them in our bodies in such a way as to bring a full realization of them in the here and now, in direct and immediate relationship to our own lives. The archetypes, become *relevant*. By making that contact

in our bodies, we release into our lives the healing power of the order that is found in the mythological structures.

In 1980 I began offering professional training groups based on my experience with *The Hero's Journey*, a ritual structure I have worked with for several years. In the training groups participants explore a myth of their choosing, whatever story feels most descriptive of their own lives. What we are seeking in these groups is the deepest possible meshing of personal biography and mythological structure. We are, in other words, creating healing rituals.

A man may, for example, feel drawn to the myth of Icarus, who is a type of the *puer aeternus*. He will explore what it feels like to reach out his arms, imagining that he has wings and is flying. He will discover that his lungs fill with air and he feels a kind of upsurge. His head reaches up, his eyes look upward. That is the movement of the *puer aeternus*—always looking upward to the higher and higher plane. But as he approaches the sun, the goal of his striving, the wax is burned from his wings and he falls down to earth. The *puer aeternus* is continually reaching upward for the star, which is never attained. Holding his breath like that, he can't let the full potential of his body be realized. He is always holding his chest up, always looking up. And if he can't breathe out, he can't plunge down into his own outbreath. Something has to happen to bring him down so that he can let some of that air out. The *puer aeternus* is always coming down to the ground in some shattering, hurtful way. The body has to hurt itself before he can plunge down into the outbreath.

Clearly what such a man needs to learn is how to release his breath and relax his body, particularly his upper body, so that his energy can drop down to earth and flow into his lower body, his belly and pelvis, legs and feet.

All this is explored in ritual movement so that the story is learned not simply by the mind but by the body itself. The body learns how to hold itself differently, how to breathe in a new and deeper way. The body takes on a new attitude.

A woman who has experienced considerable depression and frustration in love relationships chose, in one of my groups, to explore the myth of Eros and Psyche. In the story, Psyche is so beautiful that she has become the rival of Aphrodite. Aphrodite, the goddess of love and mother of Eros, has become her bitter enemy. Psyche's long search for Eros, her divine husband, is, archetypally, the image of the quest of the human soul for reunion with its own divinity, that is, the awakening of its fullest potential. Aphrodite, the divine embodiment of natural, instinctual love, is outraged at Psyche's audacity. She puts her in the hands of her servants, Trouble and Sorrow, and assigns her four seemingly impossible tasks. At the outset of each of these tasks, Psyche, the human soul, wants to commit suicide.

A woman driven by this archetypal energy tends to hold her energy in her head, away from her body. Frequently her body is lifted out of

her pelvis and her shoulders are raised, suggesting her upward striving but perhaps also compensating for the depression that continually drags her down. In exploring the myth, however, the woman in my group discovered that Psyche's desire to commit suicide—her depression—is actually her desire to surrender to her own deepest nature, to the wisdom of her body. This surrender is often a death experience for the ego. Again and again a person must learn, when she goes through an ordeal, to surrender to her instincts and trust that she will know what to do, that the way will be made clear to her. As she begins to realize this, she develops a deep trust in her own process. By exploring the postures of all the characters in the myth—Eros, Aphrodite and Persephone, the ants and the reeds, the rams and the eagle—this woman, who had experienced herself only as the yearning Psyche, began to awaken to the full range of her being's potentialities—her divinity.

Dramatizing the initial encounter between Psyche and Aphrodite, she broke through to the awareness that Aphrodite was not her tormentor but her teacher. From that awareness she entered into a new relationship with her feminine nature, with the goddess, with Nature itself. Shortly after the workshop she dreamed she was giving birth to a daughter. In the story the daughter of Psyche and Eros is named Pleasure.

I have found that by playing out a mythological structure, a person can often integrate an energy that may be missing from his biographical material. For instance, a young man having difficulty expressing his will chose to explore the myth of Ganymede and Zeus. In dramatizing the archetype of Zeus driving Hebe from Olympus, he found, after much cajolery, that he finally had to pick her up and throw her out of the room. Acting firmly and decisively was something he had never been able to do. By playing out the archetype and connecting it with his own personal biographical image, he was able to heal a certain aspect of his ability to deal with interaction.

The practical uses of the creation of rituals for psychotherapeutic purposes should become increasingly apparent. We have already seen, in working with Gestalt process, the effectiveness of dramatizing the projected other—whether mother, father, lover, top dog or underdog, or whatever. By playing out those roles and interacting with them we are able to experience in our being the Power of the monster we think is so terrible, or of the lover we think is so beautiful. By reowning those projected aspects of myself, I experience an increased potential in my daily living. I fill in the holes in my personality, as Fritz Perls put it, by reclaiming the energies I have projected outward and called somebody else.

Similarly, if the cosmic or archetypal energies remain projected outward, if the heroes and the gods remain projected outward, we are continually at their mercy. Rather than living the archetype, rather than allowing the archetype to order our lives and our psyches, the archetype lives us. We are its victim. But by becoming aware of and

integrating the archetype into our being, into our body, by embodying the archetype, we can begin to learn how to move into it and how to move out of it. If, for example, I recognize that my participation in the Icarus archetype means that I'm always holding my breath when I'm reaching upward toward some unfathomable goal, I can also learn to come down and breathe out and let myself sink back down to earth without having to crash all the time because my wings melt from the heat of the sun. By planting the pattern of the archetype, of the myth, in the body through the use of ritual movement, a person can begin to get a sense of how these elemental forms of archetypal energies organize themselves within his own being, within her own body.

A wonderful way to study a mythological structure is to find some of the paintings or sculptures of the gods and Goddesses and simply take on those body postures. Begin from a simple relaxed posture, which call the "zero place," and move slowly into the posture of the god or goddess you are exploring. Experience what happens with breath, with pelvis and shoulders, with your point of view—the way your eyes look at the world—when you take on the posture of Zeus or of Poseidon pointing out to the sea, or of the statue of Liberty holding the torch above her head, or of Apollo leaning on a surface and strumming his harp, or of Aphrodite preparing herself in front of her mirror. What happens to your breath? What happens to the Feeling in your body when those structures and forms are explored?

This is what I mean by creating a sense of the temple, for the body is now the temple and the mirror of the archetypes. We need no longer go to a structure out there. The body itself is the temple. By taking on the various postures, we take on physically an imitation of the projected archetype within our own bodies. We say, "Superman is my hero"; we take on the posture of Superman, and we are in the temple of Superman, experiencing how the body is ordered around that image, reaching up and flying through the air. Or we may wish to explore the form of Golem, slurping along on the ground, smelling of the swamp and slavering at the mouth. We experience that potential; we meditate by taking on the posture.

In my work I have developed a ritual form called "The Fool's Dance," based on the ancient Chinese art of t'ai chi. When working with the mythological structure of the hero's journey, for example, participants find postures expressive of their hero, demon, spirit guide, reward, and so forth. By creating a meditative dance, moving slowly from one posture into the other, they discover the energetic relationships among these various forms; they create, in their bodies and in their psyches, a pattern of relationship and resolution. Perhaps most important, they discover how to move their center through all of the postures, experiencing each, identifying with none. This is the role of the Fool in the Tarot deck, hence the name of this dance.

Children know all about this. Playing Mr. Spock or Superman, or any of the recent translations of the archetypes, they are using their bodies to explore those energies, discovering how their bodies work when they

play heroic people or angry people, or whatever. They are learning the lessons of the archetypal structures that exist in the physical body; they are, in effect, rehearsing how to be full, adult human beings. First they discover the energy patterns of the organism, and then, how those patterns individuate in their own biographical structure.

It is absolutely essential that this connection between the archetypal form and the here and now of the personal biography be made, otherwise the person will be dwelling at the level of the archetypes and separating himself from his life. To remain in such a state of separation is a form of madness. The ordering power of the archetype cannot take place unless it is brought into direct and immediate contact with the here and now concrete reality.

We discover this connection by moving from temple meditation on the archetype into theater. Perhaps one of the gods or goddesses captures your imagination. Let's say, the goddess Persephone. You put on some music and dance the dance of Persephone, surrendering to the experience of that power and that form. As that energy moves through your body, you are dancing with the gods.

As the dance or movement incorporates more and more, it may move into sound and word. As it moves into words, the archetypal drama takes on immediate and direct application to the here and now structure of your life. You might dramatize a dance, or a conversation, between Persephone and Hades or Demeter, experiencing the two or three forms of your body communicating and contacting each other. Now you are moving out of the temple and into the theater. How does this interaction relate to your interaction with your lover, with your parents, friends, or the people at work? By playing out the drama and seeing what the interaction of these parts is in the mythological structure, you begin to discover how that relates to the same drama you are playing in your biographical material.

When you dramatize the relationship of the archetypes to each other, and then make the application to the here and now structure of your life, the myth reaches down and works its magical power on the real life

situation. Put another, simpler way, the body, by exploring the archetypal forms, experiences increased potential. Someone who has always played the victim of the gods, for example, can experience the other side of that power by playing the gods of whom he is the victim. When people say to me, "I'm afraid," I tell them, "Just realize that however much you make yourself afraid, that's how much power there is on the other side of that dichotomy. When you become the one that is making you afraid, you will realize how much power you have. The amount of fear you have is the power you're not owning."

By dramatizing that power, the body has a chance to experience the increased capacity, and the psyche has a chance to adjust to it.

Frequently in my workshops, as part of the initiation—the process of reowning the projected power—an ordeal discovers itself, some act

which calls for the person to have a direct experience of that archetypal energy.

Working out the ordeals calls for the person to see what experience in the here and now would be the equivalent of owning the archetypal energy in the mythological structure. Ganymede pouring the wine of the gods translates into Stanford going from person to person expressing exactly what he feels and being as truthful as he knows how to be in a human interaction. What more perfect communication, what more perfect way of sharing the elixir of the gods than by pouring out his humanity toward people! Persephone's abduction to the Underworld manifests as Ruth caught in a game whose rules she does not know, and discovering, in that situation, how to create the rules of her own game. Benj, exploring the power of don Juan, transforms hostile, negative, judgmental energy into graceful dance movement. In the ordeal the person confronts the archetypal energy on the level of present experience, which brings the ordering power of the archetype into the here and now structure of personal biography. I call that initiation—that is, the direct experience of the archetypal form in the here and now.

An empty ceremony is the pigeon dancing under the falling grain; a true, full ritual has a direct and immediate application and relevance to our lives. This application is part of the process of owning and experiencing the archetypes; it is also part of the process of disidentifying from the archetypes. Disidentification is not avoidance; rather it is the attainment of a personal, conscious relationship to the archetypal energy. I can be a *puer aeternus*, but I am not a *puer aeternus*. I can be Apollo, and I am not Apollo. I can be a hero and I can be a demon, and I am neither a hero nor a demon. I can be Paul Rebillot, and I am not Paul Rebillot. I am that simple "zero place," a presence and a potential. I am nothing. Learning to dance into and out of the zero place enables the initiate, if you will, to find a place where she is identified neither with her personality nor with any of the archetypes. She awakens to her own inner essence, which moves through all the forms but is none of them.

Pure identification with the archetype can be psychosis. Disidentification from the archetype can be sanity.

With the process of disidentification, I become aware of the form that my body goes into and the thoughts and feelings I have and the way I behave with other people when I am in this particular energetic form. I become able to recognize the pattern of the demon, for example, when I'm about to approach someone I've not met. My shoulders raise, my breath shortens, I begin to doubt and question myself. I now have a connection between this archetypal form in my body and this real life situation. However, I know I can also be a hero. If I take on the body posture of the hero and look at this situation from that perspective, I might find a whole new resolution. With this awareness, I can take steps to manifest this difference in my life.

One of the most important elements of any ritual is grounding it in the return to the home ground situation. If my ordeal has been to confront people with my honesty and be as real as I can, when I go home I might decide that I'm going to confront my wife and tell her exactly what's going on with me and ask her to open herself to me in the same way. Or maybe that's too big. Maybe I'll just take her in my arms for a little longer than I ordinarily do, to make more physical contact. Or maybe I'll start greeting the Boss at work by just touching him on the shoulder a little bit, to be able to bring more physical contact into my real world, if the capacity for physical contact is what I found in my archetypal reality.

By finding some way of focusing the magic, or the healing, of the archetypal form and manifesting that in a simple, concrete way in the home situation, the healing power of the archetype is carried into the life situation. The drama becomes relevant.

And this precisely, I believe, is our present task—to make the gods relevant, to realize the archetypal forms in the structures of our lives. We are no longer initiated by priests and priestesses in sacred temples. Rather, we are initiated by the events of our lives. We have only to recognize the pattern. Life is the high priestess of initiation, and the world is her temple.

The myths are not finished, nor will they be as long as human life continues. Many of the ancient myths end in unworldly places. Ganymede becomes a constellation in the heavens. Psyche is taken up to Mt. Olympus and there gives birth to Joy. Parsifal takes the Grail off to a private hermitage. Our task is to live these stories forward into relevance for our own age and culture.

Clearly we are witnessing the end of the patriarchal age which has dominated western culture since the advent of Greek civilization. The reawakening of the feminine principle which we are experiencing does not mean, however, that we are returning to a matriarchal culture. That would be a movement backward. I believe, rather, that we are moving forward into a new age, the age of the child, the age of the androgyne.

We look out now upon a world divided between two giant powers each possessing the most potent force that humankind has had to deal with since the Promethean discovery of fire. I refer, of course, to nuclear energy. Russia and the United States stand now like two adolescents—two adolescent males—in a contest of power.

The survival of our species depends upon the transformation of this mythological structure, upon the awakening of another voice, another force.

We have known matriarchy, the dominance of the deep, instinctual energy of the feminine principle. We have known patriarchy, the dominance of the solar masculine principle of rational consciousness. We have, as a species, discovered the values and the limitations of each.

In the age of the child, responsibility lies neither with the Great Mother nor with the Great Father, but with the one begotten of them

both, the full, androgynous human being. In every previous age in history, when individuals have ventured beyond the mainstream of humanity²⁾, they have always placed their trust in God. Climbing Mt. Everest, exploring unknown regions of the Earth, people have trusted in a god-force out there, whether masculine or feminine. But when, in 1968, humankind first ventured out in the Chariot of Apollo to touch his sister, Diana, the moon, the adventurer pressed a button and said from the far side of the moon, not "I believe in God, in God I trust," but "I believe in man." That is a powerful new step—for humanity to begin to integrate itself as god, to acknowledge its own divinity.

The androgynous child looks upon the world as an undivided whole, and knows it as his own home, as her own responsibility. We cannot wait, in the posture of this child, for Father or Mother—for authorities in any form—to speak or to act when our home is threatened. There is no one out there to blame or hold responsible for our personal or our political lives. We must speak and act ourselves, express our relationship to all that is happening. We feel both the exhilaration and the loneliness of this posture, this coming of age of the human race. We live in a world of our own making.

What kind of a world will we make?

1) Gregory Bateson (1979), *Mind and nature. A necessary unity*, New York: E.P.Dutton, p.13 cont.