

Ritual Process and Ceremonial Design – What did I learn?

This experiential class required you to enter into it through “deep ecumenism, an open and inquiring mind, along with a willingness to explore new forms of expression” (syllabus). I came to the class with a particular interest in the imagination. As an artist my mind is happy playing in the creative right side, running around looking at things from different view points, believing the unbelievable. An epistemology of the imagination was developed by exploring the ontological implications of having a conversation with the “Sacred Other”. A phenomenology of this was discussed through the nature of “Imaginal Realities” and “Ritual Process”.

The class was commenced by reading the West African and Native American texts of Malidoma Somé and Black Elk, and then moved onto a Western approach to ritual more rooted in the imagination. In the early texts we encountered naïve realism where the spirits were real. In the later texts, especially the Smith reading, we moved from an objective land of “spirits” experienced in shamanism to the subjective land of “image” experienced in psychology. This was an exciting educational moment for me, as I know the power of both image and spirit. Even though I was slightly irritated that so many “academics” outside of Theology don’t appear to be brave enough to say, “I believe in the existence of spirits”, by talking about power of spirit as a subjective image they are still able to leave the possibility of the existence of spirit open. To be able to talk about subjective image in objective language yields many possibilities and gives a new kind of freedom. Convincing people of the power of image could in a round about way, convince them of the power of spirit. Jung so cleverly opened the imagination by showing the power of the mind, then so often stretched it with words from the mentors of his own mind, pushing those boundaries a little further and planting seeds of possibility. A Psychological theory based on image restores the sacred to the west based on experience of the “sacred other” that does not need a theological construct to hold it up.

The study of Imaginal Realities showed us the fundamental principle of mind is image and gives rise to thought. Hillman’s “therapy of ideas” is a “therapy of human images” (Randy). His theory that psychology “starts neither in the physiology of the brain, the structure of language, the organization of society, nor the analysis of behavior, but in the process of imagination” opens up a new world view. If we are our imaginations and images interact with bodily tissue, then our

imaginations have power to influence our physical being and also limit and condition what we can become (Randy). Plotkin noted the currency of the imagination is symbol. As an artist, symbol and image are my preferred language. I have also learnt to trust my intuition, feeling there is some kind of internal/external guide out there. Jung believes instincts, which psychologists have worked hard to control and have been shown to be controlled by the use of symbol in ape studies, lay at the bottom of the mind in the unconscious. He also noted that at the bottom of the unconscious is the world. This holds with my own thought that instinct (from below) and intuition/psychic guide (from above) are not far apart, both require you to let go of your ego and turn off cognitive processes to fully access. My instinct to put previous studies of Art and Psychology together with the Imagination here at Antioch, along with an external guiding voice, now feels more profound. If I adopt "Imagination (poetics)" as a third mode of knowing it can help me understand and link my other two "Intellect (science and reason)" and "Belief (religion)", creating a stable concept founded on a unifying trinity.

In our Western inanimate world an image/object appears to gain power when it gains substance, taking on symbolic, even spiritual meaning. This can happen through emotional experience, which may include among others; a personal story, a feeling experienced, or even the synchronistic time or location an image appears. Though as an artist I would disagree with some that image without substance is mere fantasy, a personal experience with an image helps ensure integration and effect upon the psyche. Ritual gives us the opportunity to "power up" these images, change our realities, our stories and our world image. A self-generated psychotherapy, creating possibility and removing limitations, allowing the soul educate the soul.

In Depth Psychology the archetypal pattern of ritual is not culturally appropriating and takes us from profane space (ego world) to sacred space (curtain between worlds) through three stages; Separation (severance), Initiation and Return (incorporation). It is an experiential map that intensifies imagery through stimulation of the senses and has the potential to temporarily override our ego's that often hold onto destructive patterns of behavior. A Shaman uses ritual to open the windows of the body, then restores health and balance by looking into the soul and directing spirits in or out of it. The psychologist seeks to restore health by re-incorporating "swollen complexes" into our psyche that have split off from our ego. By looking at both

theories through the window of the imagination, they both become equally believable. By directing the spirit/image, either externally or internally, you may change the person.

Plotkin believes “imagination is the primary window to the soul” and our most valuable power on the journey to reach it. When we discover our instinctive soul destiny we craft all our worlds together, aligning our inner teacher with the nature outside of us, linking the Middle world (ego growth) to the Upperworld (spirit realization) and Underworld (soul embodiment). Jung sees the soul not only inside us but all around us in nature, an “anima mundi – soul of the world”. Shape-Shifters believe that the body is a physical expression of the soul, reality is just a state of mind and the soul can shift the body into any shape it wants – Wow!

One image that came through loud and clear during the class was that of an “Axis mundi”. It gives an un-limiting structural dimension to the world, a vertical connection to that we can not see, an axis to all worlds. Depth psychology gives us an inner axis mundi in the archetypal “Self”; Shamanism places it outside of us. Since we discovered the world is round, by looking to the horizon we only end up in the same place we started, the potential for wholeness is there, but an unlimited potential is not. Is it any coincidence that the word “ego” spews with roundness! It brings up in my mind a Rene Magritte image of a man looking into a mirror to see the back of his own head. With out going up and down we are stuck in Plotkins middle world of ego growth. The introduction of an axis mundi image to the world incorporates imagination, gifting us with a graceful spiral of limitless potential and the possibility of different realities.

Plotkin gave us 3 realms of development and 3 worlds. There are 3 stages to ritual and 3 ways to tell if something with numinous quality is sacred; *Mysterium, Tremendum* and *fascinans*. Now I have 3 ways of knowing and had already worked out there are three truths, what you think, what you say/hear and what you feel. I gain a deeper connection and understanding of myself and my world by asking how “I feel” about something, similar to Plotkin requiring us to go down into the soul for the real answers. Many post Jungian scholars are creating new techniques based around “feeling tones” that privilege the heart as an organ of perception (Randy). Looking from my heart through a window of the imagination gives a richness and depth to life that holds “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*” (Smith, 39) along with an unlimited potential for human kind.