

Salome and the Storytelling Mind

I stretched my back and yawned, then glanced warily at the clock. It was late on a Friday evening, and I had just finished reading Hillman's seminal paper "The Fiction of Case History." His reimagining of psychotherapy and its practice as closer to literature than science was like opening up to one of Stan Grof's holotropic breathing experiences. What if therapy were more fiction than fact, more story than theory? What if the purpose of therapy was to be told into story and given a plot to live by? Not sure where to begin, I looked down and saw my dog Riley sleeping contentedly on the floor beside me. The thought of a short siesta before tackling such a paradigm-shifting idea felt just right....

The fire licked the sides of the crater, sometimes leaping almost to the rim. I flinched with its rise and hit my head on the stone wall behind me. My eyes began to acclimate to the surroundings, and I realized I was sitting on the edge of an abyss that seemed to reach to Hades. The bench was narrow and carved into a sheer cliff wall. I felt a soft touch on my arm and turned to find Salome sitting beside me. Her constant companion, the black snake, was at our feet. I had just met her a week or two before in a dream, though as she told me then, she had been trying to gain my attention for many years, dressed in different personified disguises. She seemed to know right away what brought me again so quickly to her. "I am pleased that poetry has finally found you," she said quietly. "I know you have many questions."

I sat for a moment with my eyes shut, trying to calm the rush of thoughts, but before I could ask for logical explanations, Salome spoke, saying, "Let's proceed through *memoria*. Remember, my sisters and I have always been the hidden muses throughout history for all who have asked these questions. You have read many of them and have always been drawn to their way of thinking. Plato and Blake, Rilke and Jung, Neruda, Hillman, Mindell, Lockhart, and Watkins—they have all been mentors to you. It has just been hard for you to listen." Salome touched my arm and asked me to shut my eyes. Suddenly memories of my patient's dreams and stories came rushing back.

“Can you see her sitting there?” Salome asked.

“I can,” I said in surprise. It was Julia sitting across from me in a session from so many years ago. I began to tell Salome what a lovely young woman Julia was, tragically caught in the midst of recurrent psychotic episodes. She had been quite drawn to the spiritual side of existence, so much so that she had shunned relationships with men. She told me that day that she might be pregnant and smiled saying she had decided that if she was pregnant, she would keep the child and become a mother. I remember the next moment vividly. A blue jay hit the window. Over and over again, it pecked and banged. Julia’s face blanched. I asked her what she knew of blue jays. She said they steal the eggs from nests and eat them. She then revealed that at the moment the blue jay had come, she had a thought that she was a disgusting sinner for considering having a baby.

As the reverie ended I heard Salome ask, “Was this experience science?”

“No, it doesn’t qualify as science.”

“But was it useful,” Salome responded quickly. “My criterion is not verifiable science in

this sense, but we must ask: Is the story or experience heuristic? Does it lead to a deeper understanding and a different way of holding her psychotic experiences?”

I could begin to see the consequences of this shift in therapy. The truth could never be proved in the same way as biology or geology, but instead was based on how the story carried the person into life. That story created an opening in Julia’s therapy to come back again to what we now called “Blue Jay Man,” the one who would take away her baby and the wishes for her own existence. We spent time characterizing him as if he were an antagonist in a novel, defining him with face, name, thoughts, voice, and a belief system. He took on life, yet she was now no longer identified with him. These moves allowed us to look for him and identify the when, how, and why of his coming and going. She began to find a thread of meaning in her constant suffering.

Salome smiled at my thoughts. She reached over and touched my arm again, saying, “Let’s go further.”

Another memory came flooding back. He sat with his back pushed rigidly against my couch, seemingly afraid of losing contact. “It’s

Robert,” I told Salome, “a man with a very difficult childhood history.” My memory continued as I asked Robert about his sitting posture, and he told me of the fear that he had a hole in his back and unless it was covered, his spirit would fly out. He told me of this feeling, which had begun in childhood, and the way he had always slept carefully on his back with the covers pulled tight to his neck. He also told of how difficult it had been to tell me because the last therapist to whom he divulged this history said he most likely had a multiple personality disorder. That therapist also implied it was obvious what the hole in his back referred to.

After assuring him that there were better ways of storying these fears than his previous therapy had presented, I asked him to try something completely different. What if he incubated a dream in the old Asclepian tradition? “I’ll never forget the dream he brought in,” I excitedly told Salome. *“He was in an airplane with three other men who were all him. The plane was flying over the Alps. There were jagged mountain cliffs below. Suddenly the plane turned and headed straight toward the mountains as if to crash. But then just as suddenly, it was approaching for a landing, except now it was heading into a hole or cave in the side of the mountain. The mountain was on its side and looked just like a spinal column. Once inside he and the other three Roberts got out and stood facing the four directions, with him to the north. There in front of him was his beating heart, and he knew now he was inside his own body. Just to the right of the heart was a little five-year-old boy wrapped in a gold liquid gel, alive but as if in suspended animation. Robert heard frightening noises to his right. There was a long tunnel leading into the blackness, and it was from here the noises were coming. He knew that he would have to go down this tunnel before the little boy could be freed.”* “Can you now see the difference between story and fact?” Salome asked. “This is crucial. What you have been practicing for years with clients has not been science, it has been fiction. The mind *stories*. It is set up that way, as I helped Jonathan Gottschall to realize in his book *The Storytelling Animal*. Look at what happened when you were open to a different way of seeing and fictioning: open to not reducing his symptom

to only the story of trauma and to not giving him the plot of pathology and multiple personality. Instead, by creating the opportunity for his imagination to have its own voice, you enabled a different story to come through. Remember what one of your favorite mentors has said: ‘It is not a matter of indifference whether one calls something a “mania” or a “god.” To serve a mania is detestable and undignified, but to serve a god is full of meaning and promise’” (Jung, 1967, p. 38).

Salome and I sat quietly on the bench for quite some time after the memories subsided. I had a sense of appreciation for all she had shown me. She smiled silently and gave me a good- bye look before touching my arm one last time.

I awoke on the floor next to Riley. I looked at the clock. Only a few minutes had passed. I touched a warm spot on my left arm and remembered Salome and the *memoria*. I had been dreaming. Or had I?