

# Perpetual Adolescence

Jungian Analyses of American Media, Literature, and Pop Culture



Edited by Sally Porterfield, Keith Polette, & Tita French Baumlín

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EDITED BY

Sally Porterfield

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Tita French Baumlin

**SUNY**  
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# Introduction to the Puer/Puella Archetype

**GEORGE H. JENSEN**

The psychological context of dream contents consists in the web of associations in which the dream is naturally embedded. . . . [C]areful analysis will never rely too much on technical rules; the danger of deception and suggestion is too great. In the analysis of isolated dreams above all, this kind of knowing in advance and making assumptions on the grounds of practical expectation or general probability is positively wrong. It should therefore be an absolute rule to assume that every dream, and every part of a dream, is unknown at the outset, and to attempt an interpretation only after carefully taking up the context.

—C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*

The fantasy we call “current events,” that which is taking place outside in the historical field, is a reflection of an eternal mythological experience. . . . Nothing can be revealed by a newspaper, by the world’s *chronique scandaleuse*, unless the essence is grasped from within through an archetypal pattern. The archetype provides the basis for uniting those incommensurables, fact and meaning.

—James Hillman, “An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present”

All schools of criticism—at least, those with some staying power—ebb and wane. They begin with a brilliant and original thinker who breaks through habitual, routine interpretations to offer an entirely new way to view texts. A first generation of followers emulates the great thinker, and the new method becomes a school. As the school grows, methods become rules, interpretations sound like recitations, and insight reduces to mimicry. The school loses its luster until a fresh thinker—or a generation of them—stretches the theory, alters the methods, and surprises us once again. Jung understood this, and he often warned his readers against mapping his thought process into a series of steps. Interpretation should never be based on “technical rules.” Every text has its context—its “web of associations,” a remarkably postmodern phrase—and context is always a shifting ground.

If interpretation evolves from context, as Jung certainly believed, then all context is important, including popular culture. We bring our complete selves to the texts we write, and, whether we realize it or not, we draw from our complete selves as we interpret texts. As context shifts, so too should interpretations. This belief in the totality of self, culture, and text drew Jung to look for psychological insights in both high and low art, history and politics, myth and fads. Even the most highly developed individuals, he believed, could not entirely rise above the mass-mindedness of their times.<sup>1</sup> Thus, analyzing popular culture, looking for a collective trauma that might soon erupt into political upheaval, is potentially even more important than finding some truth about the psyche in Greek tragedy.

Jung, for example, wrote an extended essay on UFOs. Even during his lifetime, many who did not bother to read more than the title of Jung's work assumed that he was a "saucer-believer." He was not. As in all things, Jung was a skeptic in the best sense of the term. Without adequate evidence, he doubted. When confronted with radical ideas, he kept an open mind. Jung was not a believer in little green men, but he was interested in the "tendency all over the world to believe in saucers and to want them to be real" (CW 10: 309). He argued that the tendency to believe in UFOs was related to a remnant trauma from World War II and the "increasing uncertainty" of the early cold war, "the strain of Russian policies and their still unpredictable consequences" (CW 10: 319, 324). Such events "arouse expectations of a redeeming supernatural event" (CW 10: 328), leaving individuals vulnerable to mass-mindedness, charismatic leaders, and totalitarianism. Jung wrote about UFOs "to sound a note of warning" (CW 10: 311). He believed that it was "difficult to form a correct estimate of the significance of contemporary events," yet analyzing contemporary expressions of archetypes could lend some distance and objectivity. In a similar vein, the essays in this volume examine contemporary expressions of the puer archetype—the eternal youth—to understand our own times.

### **The Collective Unconscious and Archetypes**

Jung is often discussed and rarely read. Even when read, he is typically encountered piecemeal. Many know enough about concepts such as the collective unconscious and archetypes only to dismiss them. However, if understood within the context of Jung's theory of self, the notion of a collective unconscious is not so difficult to accept.

It is interesting that even those who accept a rather mechanistic version of the unconscious often question the idea of a *collective* unconscious. To understand why so many find the collective unconscious and archetypes problematic, we should begin with what they *believe* Jung wrote. The common

(mis)understanding of Jung's theory is that archetypes are universal images that are passed on genetically and stored in an area of the brain called the collective unconscious. A host of questions arise at this point that, even in the asking, indicate the categories of archetype and collective unconscious have already been reified: Can any image be universal? Can images be passed on genetically? Is there an area of the brain that could serve as the collective unconscious? Another reaction to this (mis)understanding of Jung's theory is to dismiss it without any thought at all, a gut response that this theory conflicts with fundamental—perhaps even unspoken—beliefs: *Animal behavior is ruled by instincts and drives, but humans learn and change. Animals do not really feel. Animals do not solve problems. Humans are the products of language, history, culture.*

Of course, we could avoid such problems by bracketing the collective unconscious. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye chooses to “not speak” of the collective unconscious as the source of archetypes. Instead, he emphasizes the literary tradition: “Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels” (97).<sup>2</sup> For him, an archetype is a “recurring image” or a “social fact” that “helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (99).<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Hillman, who founded the school of archetypal psychology with the publication of *Re-Visioning Psychology* in 1975, brackets the collective unconscious by emphasizing the subject. For Hillman, an archetype—a term that he prefers to avoid—is not so much an archetype either because it emerges from the collective unconscious or because it is a “social fact” in the literary tradition; rather, Hillman argues that we experience the “archetypal”—his preferred term—because we view it archetypally (“Inquiry into Image”). Jung might say that Frye's approach is extraverted, and Hillman's is introverted. He might add that they both fail to explain the power of archetypes, which comes from a momentary unity of outer and inner, material reality and perception, culture and body, history and experience. As Erich Neumann says, archetypes are powerful because they represent a “unitary reality.” The material world, culture, being, meaning all become “transparent” (174–75).

But perhaps we need not dance around the collective unconscious. What Jung actually wrote is not so problematic. He wrote that archetypes are ideas *in potential* that are fully realized only once they have emerged and taken on the content of a particular culture and historical epoch.<sup>4</sup> The influence of culture on archetypes, Jung says, is so great that the spirit archetype as it manifests itself in France cannot be substituted for the same archetype as it manifests itself in India. We cannot adopt the archetypes of another culture in the same way that we put on a new suit of clothes: “If we now try to cover our nakedness with the gorgeous trappings of the East, . . . we would be playing our own history false” (CW 9.1: 14). Archetypes develop historically and they can be interpreted only historically:

The forms we use for assigning meaning are historical categories that reach back into the mists of time—a fact we do not take sufficiently into account. Interpretations make use of certain linguistic matrices that are themselves derived from primordial images. From whatever side we approach this question, everywhere we find ourselves confronted with the history of language, with images and motifs that lead straight back to the primitive wonder-world. (CW 9.1: 32–33)

Contrary to essentialist views of his theory, Jung argues that our knowledge of archetypes is anything but pure. Archetypes, which Jung says evolve over time, are constantly being transformed and reinterpreted by the individual's consciousness, and they are inseparable from language, history, and culture.

Rather than conceive of archetypes as fixed for millennia, we might consider that history is to archetypes as jazz is to melody. We might think that we know the melody to “Stormy Weather” or some other standard, until a remarkable jazz artist transforms it. Indeed, one might even argue that what jazz has taught us is that we can never know the melody; we can, however, be surprised. We can be repeatedly and endlessly surprised to find what we knew assume a new form.

Certainly, female archetypes are most in need of exploration. Jung himself encouraged Toni Wolff, Marie-Louise von Franz, and his wife in this task. More recently, in her study of mythic patterns in novels authored by women, Pratt writes of the female imagination—which is “not escapist but strategic”—as it rediscovers a means of transformation that patriarchy pushes into the unconscious:

[F]or three centuries women novelists have been gathering around campfires where they have warned us with tales of patriarchal horror and encouraged us with stories of heroes undertaking quests that we may emulate. They have given us maps of the patriarchal battlefield and of the landscape of our ruined culture, and they have resurrected for our use codes and symbols of our potential power. . . . They have dug the goddess out of the ruins and cleansed the debris from her face, casting aside the gynophobic masks that have obscured her beauty, her power, and her benefice. (375)

Pratt and other scholars rightly demonstrate that archetypes are primordial and ever new (see also Elias-Button). Artists, often in consort with scholars, rework archetypes of a previous age and discover archetypes that can emerge only in a new age (Neumann 90).

Unlike most theories of symbols or signs, however, Jung explains why archetypes carry such enduring power: although they are a part of a cultural

tradition, they are more than mere cultural creations. When archetypes function as cultural signs, they are meaningful because they connect with the archetype (as part of our heritage) that remains within (CW 12: 11). This statement will not surprise those who have read Jung's essays—read “essays” in the sense of *tries* or *attempts* here—to explain archetypes, but I would like to suggest that everything we need to know about archetypes and the collective unconscious is in a simple poetic phrase, a style rare in Jung's works: “Hunger makes food into gods” (8: 155). Let us unpack this metaphor and see where it leads. For *hunger*, we could substitute the body in the broadest possible sense, not as reduced to biology or genetics.<sup>5</sup> For *food*, we can substitute the body's relation to its context. Any human who is denied food will experience hunger, which is an emotion, what Jung calls a “feeling-toned” instinct. But would it be accurate to say that we inherit hunger or that emotions are genetic? Not entirely. These emerge as the body *lives* in its material context.<sup>6</sup> However, once we do experience something like hunger, we make *food* into *gods* or archetypes, a transaction that occurs within a historical and cultural context. As we follow this explanation of the development of an archetype, we can see how it can be both universal (emerging from hunger, the body) and variable (contingent on the material, historical, and cultural context).<sup>7</sup> And, equally important, we can understand why archetypes are so powerful. They do not simply come to us as socially constructed symbols from outside; they also connect with some emotionally charged aspect of our body. Indeed, when we experience the archetypal, there is no inner and outer or split between mind and history (Samuels, *Plural Psyche* 27). As Neumann writes, we experience “a unitary image” of the “unitary world” (173). Jungian criticism that ignores history is not very Jungian (for an example of the blending of archetypes and history, see Emma Jung and von Franz's *The Grail Legend*).

Jung's theory of archetypes, I have been arguing, needs to be viewed more fluidly, and Jung's emphasis on history, language, and culture needs to be acknowledged. We also need to recognize that Jung developed a model of the psyche that was dynamic and holistic, perhaps an unacknowledged debt to Hegel (see Kelly's *Individualism* and Jensen's *Identities*). Jung wanted to embrace positions that, in current academic debates, are often considered irreconcilable: cognition and social construction, structure and history, mind and body, stability and fragmentation, idealism and materialism, form and culture.

### **Puer, Senex, and Mother**

In the *Apocryphon of John*, one of the so-called Gnostic texts found near Nag Hammadi in 1945, John flees the harassment of Pharisees by turning “away from the temple to a desert place.” It is there that Jesus appears before him:

Straightway, while I was contemplating these things, behold, the heavens opened and the whole creation which is below heaven shone, and the world was shaken. I was afraid and behold I saw in the light a youth who stood by me. While I looked at him he became like an old man. And he changed his likeness again becoming like a servant. There was not a plurality before me, but there was a likeness with multiple forms in the light and the likeness appeared through each other, and the likeness had three forms.

He said to me, "John, John, why do you doubt, or why are you afraid? You are not unfamiliar with this image, are you?—that is, do not be timid!—I am the one who is with you always. I am the Father, I am the Mother, I am the Son. I am the undefiled and incorruptible one. Now I have come to teach you what is and what was and what will come to pass, that you may know the things which are not revealed, and those which are revealed, and to teach you concerning the unwavering race of the perfect Man.

As Jesus speaks to John of the "perfect Man," he assumes the form of the Father (the Senex, or wise old man), the Mother, and the Son (puer, or youth).

Had Jung lived long enough to read this passage when it was eventually published, I think he would have liked it, for Jung believed that archetypes formed constellations of three. Recognizing the constellation can mean the difference between being unconsciously under the power of an archetype and becoming more conscious of the reasons we are being drawn into the same pattern repeatedly, even when we are harmed in the process. When we move to an awareness of the constellation, we are more likely to move through the process of individuation (Jung's term for personal development, which includes exploring the potential of the individual and one's connection to others) and gain some separation from a potentially dangerous pattern. It is all a matter of perspective. As Hillman writes, "In analytical practice, we have learned that an archetypal understanding of events can cure the compulsive fascination with one's case history. *The facts do no change, but their order is given another dimension through another myth.* They are experienced differently; they gain another meaning because they are told through another tale" ("An Aspect" 34).

Hillman goes so far as to claim the polarities of puer and senex "provide the psychological foundation of the problem of history" (35). Or, to paraphrase, to say that history repeats itself is to say that history is an expression of human nature. I would add that the polarity is foundational to personal development. In the simplest terms, puer is potential and senex is experience, or the wisdom that should come with experience. In terms of personal development, the key is to gain wisdom without losing potential. At a broader societal level, puer is the element of chance and the embrace of change; senex is the accumulated wisdom of a culture as embodied in its institutions and laws. In *The Birth of*



*Tragedy*, Nietzsche described these forces as Apollonian and Dionysian. As with all things Jungian, we are better to avoid becoming “one-sided” and seek a unity of opposites.

The essays in this volume explore the presence of the *puer aeternus* in popular culture. The archetype could be describes as eternal youth, which makes it sound rather pleasant, the fountain of youth that so much advertising sells us along with a multitude of products. Yet *puer aeternus* embodies, according to Marie-Louise von Franz, “all those characteristics that are normal in a youth of seventeen or eighteen continued into later life” (7). She continues:

The one thing dreaded throughout by such a type of man is to be bound to anything whatever. There is a terrific fear of being pinned down, of entering space and time completely, and of being the singular human being that one is. There is always the fear of being caught in a situation from which it may be impossible to slip out again. Every just-so situation is hell. At the same time, there is a highly symbolic fascination for dangerous sports—particularly flying and mountaineering—so as to get as high as possible, the symbolism being to get away from reality, from earth, from ordinary life. If this type of complex is very pronounced, many such men die young in airplane crashes and mountaineering accidents. (8)

Thus, this archetype, when split from its constellation, deals more with arrested development than eternal youth. We are drawn to the puer. As Terry Eagleton points out, “Most of us would prefer a spree with Dionysus to a seminar with Apollo” (2). Yet, for all the appeal of the puer, do we want to rely on reckless teenagers to solve the significant problems facing us?

I wanted to begin with a discussion of the puer archetype within a constellation—a whole—to raise the following question: Why is the *puer aeternus* stalled in adolescence? Marie-Louise von Franz, in her classic study of the *puer aeternus* as manifested in *The Little Prince*, argues that the male is a homosexual who is fixated on the mother. We are all probably ready to move past this explanation, so I want to encourage readers to view the splitting of *puer aeternus* from a constellation with the senex and the mother-wife as traumatic, a reality borne of violence. As Greg Morgenson wrote, “Whenever a sacral form splits—be it a theological dogma, a scientific theory, a politic of experience, or a social role—it splits like an atom. The imagination explodes. Possibilities inflate the ego, and the puer flies” (55).

Jung believes that we experience individual trauma *as well as* trauma at social and cultural levels. He wrote extensively about the trauma of childhood *as well as* the trauma of Nazism, Stalinism, world war, and atomic bombs. He realized that even those outside of Germany were affected by Nazism, those outside

of Russian were affected by Stalinism, those outside of Europe or Asia were affected by World War II, and those outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were affected by the bomb.

Because we live in a media-saturated culture, we are even more vulnerable to societal and cultural trauma than were Jung and his peers. Reading a book about the Holocaust is not the same as watching it on television. With the speed and presence of current mass media, we experience *pantraumatic* events even more intensely. The entire world watched the World Trade towers collapse, and we watched it over and over, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for months. How has mass media brought trauma from the other side of the world to our living room? How has mass media made us more vulnerable to trauma? How has mass media altered our memory, making it more difficult to heal? The examples of *puer aeternus* discussed in this volume explore these questions and offer insights into how we need to adapt to recent technological changes. By understanding current manifestations of the puer, we can learn more about the trauma that affects us all and how we might heal. We need to be more aware that archetypes had a role in terrorists flying airplanes into the World Trade towers and that archetypes had a role in the wars that followed.

## Conclusion

At a small, four-screen cinema, which usually screens documentaries and artsy independent films, I recently watched *An Inconvenient Truth*, the documentary about Al Gore's campaign to convince the world that global warming is a real danger. I was impressed by Gore's ethos, the range and depth of his scientific data, and the effectiveness of his visual rhetoric. As I watched, I asked myself, "How could anyone ignore Gore's message?" About two weeks later, I walked into *Unidentified*, playing at the same cinema. I had not read reviews of this film, and I knew only that it had something to do with UFOs. I expected an artsy independent film, maybe something like Spielberg's *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* on a small scale, but *Unidentified* was anything but artsy. The film was grainy, the dialogue was stilted, and the acting was stiff. I probably should have walked out and asked for a refund, but I was curious. I wanted to know why the theater was full of people intently watching a horrible movie about two reporters as they investigated UFO incidents. Early on, one of the characters talked about going to church, and another scene ended with a perplexingly long close-up of the Bible on a bookshelf. Then, about an hour into the film, I learned UFOs, which appear from behind dark clouds, are actually demons that control our thoughts. As I watched *Unidentified*, I asked myself, "How could people believe such rubbish?"

How could people ignore the scientific evidence in *An Inconvenient Truth*? How could people believe that UFOs are demons that control our thoughts and tempt us to sin? The answer to both questions, Jung would say, is the same. Despite millennia of cultural evolution, we are still creatures with instincts. For better or worse, we still lead lives that are, to a large extent, irrational and unconscious. To improve our understanding of such irrational and unconscious forces, the essays in this volume analyze expressions of a single archetype—the puer.

The early articles in this volume examine the puer archetype from the perspective of psychotherapy or mental health. Anodea Judith's "Culture on the Couch" argues that the planet is facing enormous problems, such as global warming, that will require a mature response, yet Western Civilization has thus far reacted as if stagnated in adolescence. She asks, "What if Western Civilization were a client that came in for analysis?" Her answer is a fascinating case study of W.C., the culture seeking therapy. Susan Rowland's "Puer and Hellmouth" examines the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as an example of popular culture with a "positive ensouled mission": to heal the split between the senex and the puer. Rinda West ("Puer in Nature") analyzes two polarities of the puer as responses to the natural world: the slacker, whose utilitarian approach to nature expresses itself in cynicism and gratuitous violence (examined here in John Gardner's novel *Grendel*); and the purist, expressed in isolation from human culture in the name of protecting nature (analyzed here in Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man*). Dustin Eaton's "Grounding Icarus" discusses the urge to suicide in brilliant artists; he focuses on the life and death of Kurt Cobain, lead singer and songwriter for the rock band Nirvana.

The volume next moves into an analysis of developmental issues related to the puer archetype. John A. Gosling's "Protracted Adolescence" argues that the American collective psyche is developmentally retarded, characterized by a "fear of Other." Luke Hockley's "Shaken, Not Stirred" analyzes Agent 007 as our contemporary culture's Peter Pan and ties this image to British culture's "shadow of Empire and World War II consciousness." Darrell Dobson's "A Crown Must Be Earned Every Day" is a self-analysis of the role of aesthetic experience in the formation of personal identity. Keith Polette's "Senex and Puer in the Classroom" claims that the American educational system, despite its claims to encourage maturation, prevents students from becoming adults.

Finally, the volume addresses the puer archetype as it impacts broader cultural issues. Sally Porterfield's "The Puer as American Hero" discusses our fascination with "celebrity" as a media substitute for authentic heroism. Susan Schwartz's "Little Lost Girl" looks to Sylvia Plath's life as an example of the puella woman who wants "to excel and to be loved but not to be known intimately." Marita

Delaney's "Provincials in Time" examines midlife passage among puer-possessed Americans. Chaz Gormley's "The Marriage of the *Puer Aeternus* and Trickster Archetypes" investigates early trauma as the prime indicator of the creation of the puer personality. Craig Chalquist's "Insanity by the Numbers, Knowings from the Ground" ties our culture's obsession with quantitative research to a childish insistence on factism, which is ultimately a denial of our humanity.

The essays in this volume acknowledge that we are inspired by archetypes to make heroic sacrifices *and* that we are also driven by archetypes toward mass-mindedness. It is as important, Jung would say, for us to be critical of all of the forces that shape our lives, whether these forces be science or myth. It is equally important for us to understand the trauma that affects our times.

## Notes

1. Certainly, the central example of "mass-mindedness" during Jung's lifetime was Nazi Germany. From the early 1930s to the beginning of World War II, Jung was involved with German psychoanalysis. This connection as well as some of Jung's comments about national character brought charges of anti-Semitism that have never been entirely resolved. In *Jung: A Biography*, Deirdre Bair devoted her longest chapter to this issue, drawing heavily upon material in the Jung archives (431–63). While it certainly could be argued that Jung made questionable decisions that drew him into the Nazi propaganda machine, Bair's thorough analysis makes it difficult to view Jung as a Nazi sympathizer or an anti-Semite. As Bair points out, Jung felt that he was maintaining contact with the German psychoanalytic community to work on behalf of Jewish colleagues. For example, in the years leading to World War II, Jung sponsored the immigration of a number of Jewish psychoanalysts to Switzerland, agreeing to support them if they were unable to support themselves. In citing this example, however, I do not want to close debate on this period of Jung's life. As Bair points out, we will know more as restricted archives, including the Freud archives, are opened to scholars.
2. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye wanted to create a systematic, even scientific, approach to criticism (7–8). He also opposed the Romantic notion of originality: "Originality returns to the origins of literature, as radicalism returns to its roots" (97–98). Jung's explanation of the collective unconscious struck him, no doubt, as too mysterious and too Romantic to be scientific.
3. Much of the appeal of Frye's work should be viewed within the context of the 1950s. Whereas New Critics tended to stay within the borders of single works, Frye's work was intertextual. He drew the idea of archetypes from Jung to catalog literature, that is, to articulate a grammar of literary themes in a way that was not so scientific (though he, at times, claims that criticism is a science) or reductive. Frye was not a psychologist. He did not tie archetypes to the mind of the writer or reader. Similar to New Critics, formalists, and structuralists, Frye's approach to literature traverses a terrain that might include literary characters but is rather devoid of human beings.
4. Joseph Campbell has presented the most articulate defense of a traditional reading of Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and archetypes in "The Imprints of Experience," a chapter in *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of Gods* (50–131).

5. By using the term *body* rather than *brain*, *mind*, or *biology*, I hope to convey the sense of the collective aspects of humanity that account for the unity or permanence of our experience. I mean the body as Kenneth Burke uses the term in *Permanence and Change*, a book written when Burke was reading Jung. Burke writes: "Insofar as the individual mind is a group product, we may look for the same patterns of relationship between the one and the many in any historical period. And however much we may question the terminology in which these patterns were expressed, the fact that man's neurological structure has remained pretty much of a constant through all the shifts of his environment would justify us in looking for permanencies beneath the differences, as the individual seeks by thought and act to confirm his solidarity with his group" (159). Burke argues that it is the body that accounts for permanence and culture that brings about change.
6. While Jung did not believe that the mind is a *tabula rasa* at birth, he does not subscribe to the notion that we can ever speak of anything such as genetically driven behavior. In *Psychological Types*, Jung stresses repeatedly that modes of thought or patterns of behavior emerge historically. The Romantic movement, for example, developed a new world perspective and its own approach to understanding identity. Even though the Romantic movement is long past, some individuals, given their psychological type, might be still be prone to adopt Romantic views, but he hardly espouses anything close to a deterministic or purely genetic model.
7. One of the problems with a more traditional approach to archetypes is Jung's separation of "form" and "content." If we recognize that what Jung calls the "form" of an archetype might as easily be labeled as "emotions" or "affect," then the "form" and "content" of archetypes do not seem so separate. A complex of emotions comes together with a social scene, what Jung on a few occasions referred to as archetypal constellations, and distinctions between the "inner" and "outer" dissolve. The world, as Neumann describes it, becomes "transparent" (175).

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# Culture on the Couch

## *Western Civilization's Journey from Crisis to Maturity*

**ANODEA JUDITH**

The only myth that is going to be worth talking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not this city, not these people, but the planet and everybody on it. . . . And what it will have to deal with will be exactly what all myths have dealt with—the maturation of the individual, from dependency through adulthood, through maturity, and then to the exit; and then how to relate this society to the world of nature and the cosmos. . . . And until that gets going, you don't have anything.

—Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

Sooner or later, we all have to grow up. We've heard this a thousand times, as if it were a fact as certain as death and taxes. Continue to put one foot in front of the other and you will eventually get there, wherever "there" might happen to be. Ideas of what constitutes maturity vary widely, but most people assume that it will just happen by itself, like ripening fruit, with time as the only necessity.

If only it were that easy! Would that we could endlessly play in the sun for our ripening, hanging passively on the vine, waiting for the day when we finally let go and return to the earth. Would that we could play innocently in the Garden of Eden, with benevolent parents to protect and guide us, as we imagine it might have been in times of old. Or would that we didn't have to grow up at all and could live in the endless pursuit of our pleasures, following our whim from moment to moment, without limitation or responsibility. These are longings of a former time.

The world of our ancestors was indeed simpler. People grew up, but, with fewer choices, their paths held more certainty. Follow your duty, do as you're told, and everything will work out. There were challenges, of course, but the external world was expected to continue, just as it always had. Mother Earth would provide for our needs, and the Father would set the rules. Growing up meant that we surrendered gracefully to authority and became obedient members of society. Conformity became more important than doing the

grueling work of finding our true Self. “Maturity” in these times, at least for most people, lacked authenticity and meaning.

Today we face a far different reality, and facing this reality squarely may indeed be the first of our many tasks of maturation. The parental free ride that has given us the abundance of resources that we have enjoyed since our earliest infancy is, alas, coming to an end. We who are alive today are saddled with a responsibility far greater than any our ancestors have faced: the task of saving four billion years of evolution from the possibility of extinction—no less than the task of caring for an entire planet.

Most people know the litany: global warming that could cause worldwide famine and displace hundreds of millions from their homes; war and terrorism that escalate with ever more dangerous weapons in the hands of power-driven leaders; disappearing oil reserves that threaten economic collapse; rampant consumption that exhausts resources; environmental decline polluting our air, water, and land; and politics expected to govern an exponentially growing population with unsustainable energy. A grim situation indeed.

We also know that these dire circumstances reveal a deeper crisis of morals, meaning, and maturity. Depression and chronic illness are epidemic. The World Health Organization states that 450 million people worldwide suffer from mental health problems, with 120 million complaining of chronic depression (*Signposts*), while 10 percent of children have psychological symptoms severe enough to cause impairment (*Agenda for Children’s Mental Health*, qtd. in Goode). Economic values serve self-interest above the public good, with the dollar being the deciding factor in newscasts and voter pamphlets. Meanwhile, our public media distract us with sensationalist broadcasting of “Reality TV” shows that have nothing to do with reality—certainly not the reality that is crying for our attention.

The reality we must now face is that the father figures that we worship, empower, and pretend to elect all too often turn out to be government officials embroiled in scandals, priests who molest innocent children, gurus who exploit their followers, or swindlers out to make a buck. With the plunge in George W. Bush’s approval ratings, the father figure’s dangerous shortcomings are revealed to all who care to look, stripping the role of its numinosity and power. This psychological patricide brings about a slaughter of his outmoded beliefs and values, requiring the child to find its own values and wisdom.

The roads that have led us to this point, laid down with the best of intentions, are now leading us astray. With the mother long gone, and the father falling from grace, we have no choice but to give up our passive powerlessness and step into our true authority. As individuals, we are being asked to stand up, speak out, and co-create a reality that has never before existed. We are, as Jean Houston has said, “people of the parentheses” (1), living in a time between eras,



where we are no longer innocent children who take what they need without worrying about where it comes from, yet still not adults with the requisite knowledge and maturity to run an entire planet effectively.

Saving four billion years of evolution from the possibility of extinction is not a task for children. This is a task for a species on the verge of godlike powers of both creation and destruction, equally capable of either. For either the problems that we face in our world today will bring us to our cultural maturity, or else they will end the experiment here. Today's problems are the evolutionary drivers—the contractions of the birth process—that will spawn an awakening so massive that history has no precedent. For the planet itself is our teacher and initiator, taking us through a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, and from an organizing principle based on the *love of power* to one based on the *power of love*. This rite will challenge every facet of life, both individually and collectively, asking each of us to undergo the task of self-reflection, individuation, and the spiritual growth necessary for maturity.

### **Cultural Adolescence**

One need only turn on the televised news to see adolescent behavior raging through all ages, races, creeds, and genders. Creative but disrespectful, powerful but reckless, narcissistically obsessed with our looks, insisting on immediate gratification of our whims, and bursting with libido, we are sorely lacking in social and environmental conscience. Like teenagers thoughtlessly cleaning out the refrigerator while entertaining their friends, human populations are insatiably consuming the once-vast cupboards of oceans and forests in the attempt to satisfy gargantuan appetites. And why not? Hasn't Mother Nature always kept the cupboards well stocked in the past, free to her children, just for the asking?

As adolescent children face the abrupt halt of their biological growth, they must take their prodigious life force and learn to grow in a new dimension. At best, this dimension is spiritual, growing toward deeper understanding of themselves and their world. But if this passage is blocked or distorted, adolescents act out recklessly, often harming themselves and others. Without understanding the longer view of life, they can destroy essentials before they learn their true value. In the case of adolescent suicide, this essential destruction can even be their own life.

To become adults, adolescents who have previously been nurtured, cared for, and educated by elders must learn to provide for themselves and others, in turn. They must learn about the meaning of life, the structure and order of the world, and their purpose within it. Yet they are also compelled—by the unique life force within them—to question and change that structure as they grow