

## The Magic of Mythical Thinking

There is a certain hope we carry for books like this one, that purport to open some road to self knowledge; to unveil some of the mysteries that animate our personalities and drive moods and behavior that – let’s just face it – arrive sometimes like strangers at our own front door. That hope is self acceptance. Peace. The integration of our conscious and unconscious personalities into a unified whole. Or at least into someone less at war with themselves. That has certainly been my hope for this book. It is not an accident of career that led me to these stories and myths. Because what I have learned, and what the founders of modern psychology recognized more than a century ago, is that these myths and dreams and archetypes are the *only* language our unconscious has to express itself. It is a very different language from the one we use, day to day. But the path to integration means learning both. Or at least not brushing aside the messages from our unconscious, in hopes that it will go away. It will not go away. Any more than the base of an iceberg can detach itself and leave the top floating on its own.

In his *Symbols of Transformation*,<sup>1</sup> Carl Jung identified

two types of thinking that correspond to these two languages. The first is “directed thinking,” which is the thinking of our conscious, rational mind. The other he calls “non-directed” or associative thinking. These are the free roaming associations that occur whenever we are dreaming or day dreaming or just letting our minds drift from thought to thought. According to Jung, directed-thought came about later in human evolution, and it requires concentration and effort. Non-directed thinking takes no effort. It’s our default mode. And it’s been around a lot longer. This early mind gave rise to myths and fanciful explanations for whatever we didn’t understand about our world. And you can still see this thinking at work in children at play, when they spontaneously invent fanciful explanations for why their doll or their toys behave in a certain way. Any explanation can become part of the mythology that governs this imaginary world. And so it was during the early ages of man. How did one explain the movement of the sun across the sky? A god driving a chariot of fire seemed as likely an explanation as any. And so we have Phoebus appear in the ancient world, born out of associative thinking and canonized in the religion of that time.

Now is Phoebus the charioteer a good explanation for the sun? Well, from today’s scientific point of view, you would say no. It’s ridiculous. But why is it any more ridiculous than supposing God might resemble Michelangelo’s bearded old man in the clouds? Or a man at all? Aren’t both these images the product of mythological thinking? The kind that captures our *feelings* of reverence for something we cannot explain? We can discredit these

images, we can say God is not an old man and the sun is not a charioteer. But should that discredit our feelings of reverence as well? Personally, I don't think it must. I think there is room for reverence alongside our new very literal thinking. In fact, I think both ways of thinking are essential if we are to live life in a way that integrates both conscious and unconscious sides of ourselves.

### DON QUIXOTE

There is perhaps no hero more emblematic of the schism between our literal and mythological minds than Don Quixote. Published by Miguel de Cervantes in 1605, the novel tells the story of a nobleman in Spain, Alonso Quijana, a man so besotted by the great romances of knights and ladies during the middle ages, that he determines to enter this world himself, even though it no longer exists. Taking upon himself the invented title of *Don Quixote*, a knight errant in search of honor and gallantry, he assembles around himself a madman's imitation of the myth. An illusion given life by the pure force of his imagination. For armor, he assembles the rusted junk of his great grandfather; for his helmet, a little tin headpiece and some pasteboard. In place of a knightly steed, he rides forth on an old nag, accompanied by a local peasant, *Sancho Panza*, whom he has cajoled into playing the role of squire with promises of his own island, once they are both made rich by their adventures. Since the codes of chivalry require that he fight on behalf of some lady love, he pledges himself to the beautiful *Dulcinea de Tobosco*, an idealized version of a local peasant girl who doesn't even

know he exists.

No sooner do Don Quixote and Sancho Panza set forth on their adventures than we see his mythical imagination bend reality to fit his expectations. The local swineherd's horn becomes for him, the trumpets announcing his arrival at a palace. The town prostitutes becomes beautiful ladies of the court he is visiting. And most famously, an array of windmills is transformed in his mind into a legion of giants, with whom he does battle. It does not matter that Sancho is there at every stage to point out the reality within his delusions. It does not matter that the windmill itself lifts Quixote and his horse from a full gallop and hurls them mercilessly to the stones. Don Quixote remains steadfast in his fantasy. It was a sorcerer, he explains, who turned the giants into windmills at the last moment, "to deprive me of the glory of defeating them."

What are we to make of such a peculiar hero? A man so completely committed to his delusion that he cannot be battered out of it, no matter the consequence? If he were simply a crazy old man, as Cervantes claims, it's doubtful that every great author for the past four hundred years would credit Don Quixote as an unequalled masterpiece of literature. So what gives? Apart from the pure charm of the writing, what makes Don Quixote so indelible in our pantheon of heroes?

For myself it is because Quixote operates on the exact battlefield between mythological and practical thinking that we just discussed. It is not an accident that Cervantes pairs him with an earthy, literal minded peasant who is completely incapable of seeing Quixote's world in all its mythic splendor. Sancho Panza personifies the lens we

use to see the world in all its practical, logical drabness. Our everyday lens. And yet Quixote himself represents something far more precious to us. The capacity to bring our imagined worlds to life, despite all doubters and nay-sayers and evidence to the contrary. In the adventures of Don Quixote, we have both the mythic and prosaic views of the world operating side by side – *and both are true!* The mechanical truth of the windmills does nothing to discredit the mythic achievement of battling those giants. Anymore than realizing that Michelangelo's bearded old man is probably not God should discredit our belief that there must be one. Am I advocating delusion? No. I am advocating integration, of both sides of our mind. The mythic and the practical. Our conscious with our unconscious.

We could not survive in a world that is 100% practical, ruled only by science and pure empirical data. We would dry up. Where would progress come from? Even the smallest innovation requires our capacity to imagine what does not already exist. And the wellspring of all that imagination? All creativity? All our capacity to think beyond what has already been thought? You guessed it – it is your unconscious mind, in all its spontaneous forms. You could not stop it if you tried.

Learning to live in a way that your conscious, practical work-a-day thinking need not obliterate this wellspring from your unconscious self – this is the first step towards integration and self acceptance. Over time, Don Quixote has become something of a patron saint of far fetched dreams. To call something 'Quixotic' is, for most people,

to call it ridiculous. Unachievable. Even delusional. This is unfortunate. And might I humbly suggest that we modify this attitude? To give at least some importance to those impractical impulses that arise within us. We need not understand them completely to grant them validity. They are arising in a different language from the one we so readily speak and share with others. But doesn't that mean we should make *more* effort to understand their meaning, not less? You would not ignore a preverbal child who was trying to express herself. How much more short sighted is it to ignore this deeper half of your own self? The part, by the way, that we have traditionally understood, speaks for God.

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