

# Stuck in the Middle

by Pete Williams

*Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. To live  
In the time between the Gods which have fled, and the Gods which are not yet. —  
Matthew Arnold*

**O**K, those of you who have been reading the Jung Society Newsletters for a while might recognize this quote. I used it a few years ago as an opener to the article, “A Dangerous New Myth: The Return of the Titans.” As an opening quote, it seemed to work pretty well at that time, so I thought I’d try it again. Back then, I wrote about the danger of a new and destructive myth threatening to invade our individual and collective psychic life—the return of a “Titanic Consciousness.” Psychologically, a return to the Titanic attitude “heralds the victory of the literal over the imaginal, the rational over the aesthetic, arrogance over eros, fundamentalism over tolerance, isolation over relatedness, pessimism over hopefulness, projection over responsibility, demonization over understanding, and technology over psychology.”

I wrote that in 2005. Then, I was optimistic that the Titanic tide could be turned. 2008 brought a promise for “hope,” “change,” a new attitude of cooperation, tolerance and compromise. But, sadly, it seems that things have gotten worse. We seem to be caught in a collective regression. The dangerous new myth that heralds the return of the Titans seems to have deepened its hold. My question now is, why? Why is that so? Why do we seem to find ourselves so paralyzed by negativism, demonization and shadow projection? Why are we so *stuck*?

Well, if I’m going to ask “Why?,” I guess I’d better have some answers, or at least some ideas.

In his book, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (2006), Richard Tarnas describes what he calls “the two great myths” which have governed and defined the evolution of human consciousness. He refers to them as, “enduring archetypal structures of meaning that have so profoundly informed the collective psyche that they constitute the very means through which we construe something as fact. They invisibly constellate our vision. *They permeate our ways of knowing and acting.*” (Italics added)

The first of these two is the story of humankind’s campaign of “emancipation and empowerment:” emancipation from the terror and anxiety of the mysterious and the unknown; and, individual and collective empowerment through dominion over nature.

*Human history and the evolution of human consciousness can be seen as an epic narrative of human progress, a long heroic journey from a primitive world of dark ignorance, suffering, and limitation to a brighter modern world of ever-increasing knowledge, freedom and well-being. . . The direction of human history is seen as onward and upward. Humankind is typically personified as “man” and imaged, at least implicitly, as a masculine hero, rising above the constraints of nature, exploring the cosmos, mastering his environment: Restless, bold and brilliantly innovative.*

*As with all powerful myths, we have been largely unconscious of this historical paradigm’s hold on our collective imagination. We have been, and largely remain, unconsciously identified with this progressive understanding of the human project, and particularly of the modern Western project.*

**T**arnas calls this, “The Myth of Progress”—the relentless pursuit of freedom from the vagaries of the non-human, natural world.

The second great historical vision Tarnas introduces can perhaps best be understood as the inevitable concomitant and unavoidable collateral consequence of the first myth. He calls this story, “The Myth of the Fall.”

*In this understanding, human history and the evolution of human consciousness*

are seen as a predominately problematic, even tragic narrative of humanity's gradual but radical fall and separation from an original state of oneness with nature and an encompassing spiritual dimension of being. In its primordial condition, humankind had possessed an instinctive knowledge of the profound sacred unity and inter-connectedness of the world, but under the influence of the Western mind, the course of history brought about a deep schism between humankind and nature, and a desecralization of the world.

*In this perspective, both humanity and nature are seen as having suffered grievously under a long exploitative, dualistic vision of the world. Revealed is the progressive impoverishment of human life and the human spirit, and a fragmentation of original unities.*

In naming these two historical paradigms, Tarnas uses the language of opposites—"Progress," and "the Fall." The first can be seen as a teleological imperative—the ambitious pursuit of autonomy; the second, the inevitable consequence—the tragic fall from wholeness and unity. And yet Tarnas further acknowledges that in order to fully grasp the profound psychological impact of these myths now at work as present-day dynamics, they must be understood as one, unified story. Together "they form a metanarrative in which they are precisely intertwined to form a complex, integrated whole. These two historical dramas constitute each other. Not only are they simultaneously true, they are embedded in each other's truth."

I believe that when viewed as one story, a unified "meta-myth" as Tarnas suggests, we have a map with which to pinpoint just where we currently stand along the evolutionary trajectory of human consciousness and, more importantly, how we got here and perhaps why we seem to be so stuck. For the past 2,500 years, since the gods and goddesses fell from the heavens, we've been on a journey that has required a decidedly masculine-heroic attitude, one that is linear, discriminating and differentiating. The Western collective has devoted itself to a project entailing the de-construction of the mysteries of the natural world which has required the elevation of logos and spirit, and a commensurate depreciation of eros and soul, thus creating within the psyche a deep and irreconcilable split that has now become our Cartesian legacy. We have been living a myth of the *de-mystification of the human experience*. Now, as Jung so often stated, we are in desperate need of a new myth, and I believe that perhaps what is needed is a myth that will foster and nurture the re-birth of mystery—the *re-mystification of the human experience*.

If we now put on our Jungian hats and consider this discussion in the context of the Ego-Self relationship, we might imagine that the myths that Tarnas describes represent the ego's experience of the journey toward the development of human consciousness. Humankind's solar ascent to autonomy has required not only the subjugation of nature but the relativization of the unconscious, the fountainhead of all that is mysterious and unknown—the mystical dimension of the human experience. The

embrace of a paradigm of *re-mystification* would then require an unwinding of this ego-centric construct in which consciousness is privileged and the unconscious is relegated to the realm of collective shadow.

Considered through a Jungian lens of course, much of this is nothing new. We've known for a long time that we're in trouble psychologically, spiritually and culturally (politically). Jung understands our problem to be rooted in our radically diminished capacity to think, see and reflect on the symbolic nature of the human experience. He describes our urgent dilemma as the loss of the "symbolic life." He declares that, "Man is in need of a symbolic life—badly in need." I believe that the path to the rediscovery of the mystery can perhaps only be found through re-learning to embrace the world and our experience of it with a symbolic attitude.

*Through scientific understanding, our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him. Thunder is no longer the voice of a god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man's life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain still harbors a great demon. Neither do things speak to him, like stones, springs, plants and animals. He no longer has a bush-soul identifying him with a wild animal. His immediate communication with nature is gone forever, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious. (Jung, CW 18, para. 585)*

For Jung, living the symbolic life means living with an openness to an experience of the unknown. It requires maintaining a conscious awareness of a *reality* that is hidden, non-rational and represents a world that is "more than meets the eye," or is logical and "makes sense"—the *mundus imaginalis*. It means allowing ourselves to recognize and appreciate the discreet numinousities that are so ever-present in our everyday lives. It challenges us to develop a tolerance for ambiguity. It is an attitude which seeks to render ever-more transparent the otherwise opaque veil that stands between the rationalism and empiricism of the ego, and the mysteries and ambiguity of the unconscious.

During his lifetime, and particularly during the first half of his career, Jung was very concerned about the attempts that were made to portray him as nothing more than a "mystic." He feared his contributions to the understanding of the human psyche would be undermined and dismissed if the label of mystic were to earn credence. The reality, of course, is that Jung was a disciplined man of science, a psychiatrist who used his scientific skills and his vast literary and historical knowledge to observe and then map the workings of the psyche. In fact, he thought of himself as a "natural scientist."

To dismiss Jung then as a mystic in the sense that his detractors intended is obviously absurd. But, I believe that if we consider that the concept of the mystic and the mystical comes from the Latin word, *mysticus*, meaning "full of mystery," then we might conclude that in fact much of his life and his body of work is rooted in a profoundly mystical attitude. He was devoted to the *re-discovery* and the *re-covery* of the essential myster-

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ies in which the human psyche was embedded for the vast majority of human history. In alchemy, he saw a system of images and symbols that have evolved for the purpose of achieving the goal of infusing spirit into matter. He understood the vital importance of re-connecting with the archaic and primitive ground of the psyche, the “bush-soul.” He recognized the soul-killing consequences of splitting archetype and instinct—the splitting of mind and body, spirit and soul. And of the very core of his psychology, the reality of the unconscious, he said, “The concept of the unconscious posits nothing, it designates only my unknowing. The unconscious is a piece of Nature our mind cannot comprehend.”

So, perhaps the gods that have fled are those that drove humankind’s solar ascent to autonomy, knowledge and emancipation from ignorance and the terrifying vagaries of the unknown. And perhaps those which have not yet arrived are those that operate in the service of recovering our “bush-soul”—that primitive consciousness that Jung says we lost so long ago. Could it then be that what we now await is the return of a mystical attitude, the re-birth of a mystical consciousness to inform and mediate the post-modern human experience. In her book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (2001), author Dorothee Soelle describes for us what such a mystical attitude and consciousness might look like. She says that, “Some of the essential features (of the mystical attitude) are a feeling of being one with all that lives, an immersion or diving into a hitherto unknown whole, a cessation of the ego’s dominion and a simultaneous discovery of the real self, amazement, and an intense sense of joy.”

I want to end by telling of the experience which originally inspired my interest in this question of the mystical attitude. In the fall of 2009, I was in Oregon during the short window of the salmon spawning season. While walking along the banks of the Columbia River, we came to a narrow, very fast-running stream teeming with hundreds of salmon struggling to make their way back up the stream to their birthplace to spawn. They had to fight mightily to overcome the fast currents that seemed determined to frustrate their cause and send them back into the river. Many had already died, but others kept coming, swimming over their fallen brethren. It was like overlooking an ongoing, raging battlefield. Those who made it to the quiet headwaters would fulfill their procreative destiny and then themselves quickly die. All the adults would perish, I was told, and their decomposing bodies would provide the nutrients necessary to sustain the early growth of the next generation.

As I stood watching this drama unfold, I was struck by the profound connection between this natural, instinctual pattern, and the archetypal story of death and rebirth. Here, playing out in nature, was an image of the central principal of the Christian myth—birth, life and the meaning of sacrifice and death. I have since come to appreciate that this was for me a *mystical* experience. The worlds of religion and nature collapsed into one. It was an experience of spirit in nature, and nature in spirit—archetype and instinct not split, but as one whole. And, for me, the salmon as a symbol of death and resurrection was suddenly much more potent and resonant than the figure of the crucified Christ had ever been.

## there

by Brooke Van Natta

you left your nightstick at home  
and it was your only protection  
against the darkness.  
now you are vulnerable  
just as I am.  
you no longer belong  
to the consciousness afforded only  
to one stowing a weapon.  
the invisible armor created  
by knowing that safety lives  
at the end of a barrel,  
and in this dangerous world  
one can never be too careful.  
yet you never see your role  
in the creation of that danger  
because paranoia can spread  
like flames upon the sun-dried grasses.  
you see your position  
in eternal victimhood  
but the real story lies elsewhere:  
what you have arisen from  
and to where you shall return.  
there is no need to start quoting  
some hearsay document  
in the uncouth defense of nonsense.  
who is the object of your persuasion?  
I am assured that the tear drenched widow  
is not convinced  
yet even she may join the game  
of mortality combat,  
forgetting to ask about causes  
and without considering third variables.  
because, really,  
this is not some kind of scientific quest.  
it is life.  
the very container  
of blind faith  
and unexamined convictions.  
fuck it.  
let’s just go get drunk.  
except don’t take the alleyway;  
it is dangerous there  
in the dark.

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