Foreigners– Friend or Foe– Agents of Change

by Jutta von Buchholtz

Recently I attended one of many Jungian gatherings. About thirty chairs were arranged somewhat like a circle and after the usual shuffling and shifting, everyone settled in and on a chair. The group quieted. I scanned the assembly and noticed one empty chair. As I focused on that opening in the circular arrangement of chairs and people, I felt the urge to round out the circle, make it perfect, fill in the gap, remove the chair or plug the hole. Simultaneously I experienced this hole as a hospitable opening, welcoming anyone who might have been running late or who wanted to join the group extemporaneously. On the one hand I felt really "comfy" within the group and wanted it "closed" unchanging, finished, orderly; on the other hand I was glad there was this irregularity, this invitingly empty chair that could accommodate anyone who might still want to join the group—as I might have wanted to if I had been on the outside. Both reactions are typical, genuine human responses to opening ourselves and/or our established group to the other, to something or someone new, i.e. the strange foreigner or the unknown element.

My Jewish friend Hanna told me of an old custom in her religious tradition. "The Elijah ritual is at the Passover Seder. There is a cup of wine on the table for Elijah. (This welcoming cup is left on the table for the entire meal, just in case Elijah shows up.) There is a place near the end of the Seder, after the meal has been eaten, when someone opens the door to see if Elijah might still be coming this year—and closes it again after a little while, after it has been established that he has not come." In this setting the cup of wine is analogous, symbolic of a welcome mat for Elijah, foreigner and as such understood as emissary from God.

The thirteenth century Persian mystic Rumi expresses this same attitude of receptivity, an inner-psychic welcome to whomever or whatever might knock on the door to one's soul:

This being human is a guesthouse
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat every guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, there is the story of "Philemon and Baucis." The supreme god Zeus and his son Hermes, disguised as disgusting, homeless beggars from foreign parts, came knocking at doors to test the villagers' adherence to the divine laws of hospitality. Every door in the village was slammed into their faces. Almost at the end of their patience, they came to the edge of the town and to a narrow hut where they were welcomed by an old couple, Philemon and his wife Baucis, who treated them as honorable guests. The hosts were rewarded for their hospitality to the gods/beggars: their one wish was granted, that they could die together, not one mourning the death of the other.

The ritual around Elijah's arrival, Rumi's poem "Guesthouse" and the story of "Philemon and Baucis," are examples from three cultures, emphasizing the age-old culturally correct treatment of foreigners—in the inner as well as the outer way.

Foreigners are peregrinating outsiders. Either as waves of migrants, lone travelers, or inner psychically, as creative thoughts, an insight, novel experiences, they suddenly appear at the boundaries of the settled "in-group." The three examples above demonstrate ancient, divine laws of hospitality that prescribe how we are to treat foreigners.

Last week I took some clothes that needed repair to a gifted seamstress, the very best in my town. She had come to the USA from Russia over twenty years ago and still speaks English haltingly, although she has attended English classes at a local community center for years. We were talking about our languages—both of us foreigners speaking English, a tongue not our own. We recalled how it is when we return to visit our countries of origin and how wonderful it feels to hear everyone speak our mother tongue. Tears welled up in our eyes—a foreigner will always be a foreigner, far away from and longing for home, be it the concrete one that was left behind, or one, less concrete, that whispers about the soul's homecoming in a deeper, more symbolic way. Thus foreigners are also often deeply familiar with the melancholy of homesickness.

That being said I wondered about the connection between foreigners and boundaries, walls. Why, for example, did the Chinese build their Great Wall? As one of humanity's earliest constructions it is also a symbol that demonstrates exclusion and inclusion. We can understand a wall as an image for any boundary between "Us" and "Them," the "In-Group" and those "Outsiders." Psychologically speaking, walls are symbols, concrete expressions that demonstrate how we defend our habitual thought patterns from potential new ways of understanding something, from an increase in consciousness. In classical Greek civilization, for example, anyone who was not Greek was inferior and labeled "barbarian."

Hadrian's Wall was another impressive defensive structure, intended to secure the Roman Empire's border from invasion by life- and culture- threatening barbarian hordes from the North, while at the same time protecting the insiders, the Roman legions, keeping them out of harm's way.

Medieval fortresses, surrounded by thick walls and protective

Jutta von Buchholtz will be our October speaker. Please see her bio on page 3.

moats, were defensive structures to safeguard the innermost part of the fortress, be it a well, a chapel, or the living quarters of the inhabitants from marauding enemies.

To this day we resort to the rather primitive structural defense of walls. Usually, we still think: the bigger the better, the safer. The Berlin Wall was intended to prevent East Germans from fleeing the oppressive Soviet regime and migrating to democratic West Germany. Nor could West Germans readily move to the eastern part of their homeland, which few of them wished. For decades after WWII my country was split in two, each side considering the other alien and a potential danger to its own existence. What image was thus forced on our collective consciousness? Korea is similarly split. Hungarians are busily erecting a wall crowned with barbed wire to keep refugees who flee Syria and Afghanistan, from entering.

In the USA we continue the centuries old practice of walling out foreigners. The wall separating Mexico and thus South and Central America from the United States is intended to deter those immigrants from entering this nation of immigrants.

Floods of foreigners, emigrating refugees from parts of Africa torn by war and famine, flee across the Mediterranean, often under deadly circumstances, to arrive as illegal foreigners in Greece, Italy and Spain, seeking refuge. Many lose their lives during the crossings, made extremely dangerous by exploitative, criminal entrepreneurs. Countries are turning away foreigners seeking refuge because their refugee camps are dangerously overcrowded and the conditions are inhumane, but also because the arriving foreigners arouse hostility because they are thought to pose a variety of threats.

Protective walls are boundaries that serve to keep insiders safely within and outsiders outside. This arrangement is intended to stabilize the status quo, and thus limiting change—for better or for worse.

Boundaries are necessary: they define and characterize that which is inside and that which is on the outside. Can you imagine a country, a home, without walls, fences and boundaries? In my profession as analyst—as such I am also an edge person—we occasionally have clients who have issues with their personal boundaries. They are referred to as "borderline" clients in the DSM. Their boundaries are too permeable which can cause a great deal of suffering both for the client as well as those near her/him. Their boundaries and thus their very person, are not well enough defined.

On the other hand, it seems to me that defensive wall builders—whether these walls are concrete structures made of real stone and metal, or psychological defense mechanisms such as denial, projection etc. —are understanding the foreign element solely as a threat to the establishment and its rules and values. Psychologically speaking, defense systems are intended to protect the ego, the established ruler of human consciousness, from the dread of the potentially dangerous unknown. This mindset is closed to the possibility that the shock of the new could possibly be enrichment, a gift.

The understanding that a foreigner—or worse, a group of them—is a potential danger to the settled set has archaic, archetypal roots. Under primitive conditions, as during the early Greek times when agriculture was new, a foreigner was excluded from the protection of the laws and customs enjoyed by members of the tribe. The Latin word *hostis* is the same etymological root for such words as hospitality and hostility, indicating the innermost bi-valent attitude to foreigners, strangers. Yet, there might be times when it would be advantageous to enter into friendly relations with foreigners, such as with merchants for trade or travelers bringing important news from the outside. These relations were under the auspice of Zeus *xenios*, the protector of suppliants and foreigners. He was the *pater familias* and would uphold unwritten laws and customs. But exceptions were made, and foreigners who were invited to participate in a meal, had special protection. The daily meal was sacred among many peoples. "The meal unites with sacred bonds all who partake of it." (Nilsson, p. 73.) Once they had shared in a meal, understood to be a sacred ritual—as is the case for the Eucharist in Christian tradition—in most cases, foreigners, strangers, travelers were accepted to the in-group. This ancient law was recently horribly violated in Charleston, when a stranger entered a church, shared in the sacred ritual of prayer, then pulled out a gun to murder nine of his friendly hosts.

Tacit: you never know with the "Other," the "Foreigner," the "Alien," the "Outsider." One had better be wary and careful—if not hostile. Fairy tales, literature, myths, and legends abound with stories of foreigners entering the plot in many guises and disguises—some are helpful, some evil but inevitably these meetings lead to change, possibly even transformation. Oedipus, for example, entered Thebes as foreigner and delivered it from the curse of the Sphinx. And yet, the plague that later seized the city could only be conquered by the removal of that same once liberating foreigner. In Sophocles' sequel, *Oedipus on Kolonos*, at the end of his life's journey, the gods elevate Oedipus, the foreigner, whom they had horribly punished, as exemplary for the tragedy of being human.

Sabina Spielrein, one of the early analysts, explored the necessity of destruction as the cause of coming into being. Foreigners are potential agents of dreaded destruction—but they can as well carry the seed of growth.

In my therapist's office is a quote from Jesus:

> *"If you bring forth what is within, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you don't bring forth will destroy you."*

And to paraphrase C.G. Jung on the topic of foreigners in the psyche, if we refuse to make something conscious, we encounter it outside as fate.

Foreigners are agents of change and fate—are part of life.

For further reading on the topic:

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*
Martin Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion*
Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*
Lapham's Quarterly, Volume VIII, Number 1, Winter 2015. "Foreigners"