

COMMENT

Fundamentalism's fearfulness

by
James Hollis

The American novelist Nelson Algren, author of *The Man With the Golden Arm*, and quondam lover of Simone de Beauvoir, once articulated three rules of civilized existence. They were, to wit: (1) never eat at a place called "Ma's," (2) never play poker with a guy named "Doc," and (3) never go to bed with someone who has more problems than you. Perhaps a similar bottom-line piece of advice is: never underestimate the power of fear.

We live in one of those historic interludes when the old myth no longer serves and the new myth has not yet arrived, though its lineaments are already emerging in the Orphic testimonies of artists and prophets, and the dream you dream tonight. Since humankind ill tolerates a vacuum, or an ambiguity, we find this moment filled with rancorous rhetoric and moralistic urgency. Since those who are most frightened are most urgent, most likely to seek support from their own kind, they have an inordinate influence on the political rhetoric, which has increasingly turned exclusionary, violent, and divisive.

As finite creatures, we cannot appropriate or begin to understand the mystery we call God. As we know, Jung asked the most important question of our time, namely, "Where did the gods go when they left Mt. Olympus?" (*CW 13, para. 34*). His answer is that they left the verbal husks they once inhabited (*Zeus*,

Aphrodite, *Artemis* and the like) and entered the solar plexus. As deep psychic energies, they still move us as surely as they once radiantly stood atop that luminous mount.

A god is the incarnated image of the mysterious energy which animates the cosmos. When that energy enters an image, it grows numinous and attracts the corresponding depth dimension within us—like drawn to like. When that energy leaves the image, a god dies, a civilization withers, a love pales, an old ego complex is outgrown. What is divine is the energy, not the husk, which it once inhabited. To reify, to worship the image is to adore the husk when the mystery is departed. Our elders had a name for this; it was *idolatry*. Idolatry is the greatest of sins, as the prophets reminded us, for it seeks to fix, to hold, to circumscribe what is godly. Such is impiety for it seeks to limit the Divine.

Any kind of fundamentalism, be it religious, political, Jungian, is blasphemous, for it serves the most rudimentary of ego needs, namely security, at the price of respect for the mystery. To cling to our images serves as an understandable palliative to our anxiety in the face of change and ambiguity, but such an ego fixation is contrary to a faithful affirmation of the freedom of the mystery to pursue its own incarnational ends. In short, the anxiety of ambiguity seeks to limit

the autonomy of mystery by fixing an image; the fixation of image is literalism; literalism is idolatry. The truly religious apprehension of life, and the depth psychology perspective, oblige all of us to suffer the anxiety of ambiguity, ride the current of soul as it permutes, and await incarnation in a new venue. What else is faith, then, but respectful iconoclasm, and the strength to wait upon the mystery?

Any police officer, or therapist, will quickly attest that no one is more dangerous than the frightened person. Since our age is betwixt and between connecting mythic images, many are very deeply troubled, and unable or unwilling to do their inner work with the Shadow. Surely it does none of us any good to acquiesce in the fearfulness of those who fractionate our society, assault gays, denigrate women, polarize and persecute. All of us need to stand up to bigotry, to projection, to the vast abyss of unconsciousness, even as we recall that the most difficult of all tasks is for frightened people to face what most frightens them. Concurrent with standing up against such fearful forces, we are obliged to attend to our own fearfulness, our own fundamentalism of word, and habit, and ideology.

The antidote to the deterioration into faithless fundamentalism is the radical trust that there is a transcendent order which will be found, paradoxically, within. The willingness to live such a risk, with such psychic danger, opens us to the enigma described by Friedrich Hölderlin in his 1803 "Hymn to Patmos," that that which so terrifies is also most dear, and most near: "God is near but difficult to grasp; / however, where danger is greatest, the godly draws nearest." **1996**

JAMES HOLLIS, Ph.D., is a Jungian analyst and Education Director of the C. G. Jung Institute of Philadelphia as well as author of several books.

