

Chapter 9

A Great Grief

Man feels isolated in the cosmos because he is no longer involved in nature.¹

What is needed now . . . is to find a way to restore a sense of the sacred to science and to the world – to embody mind and to “enmind” matter. Getting there will involve a radical approach to studying consciousness, where the researcher (scientist or philosopher) may be profoundly changed in the process of exploring his or her own consciousness.²

In his passionate essay, “Healing the Split,” written shortly before his death in 1961, Jung puts most of his reliance on dreams for the “recovery” of humanity’s previous connection with “natural symbols” (as opposed to cultural symbols) that have been repressed into the deepest layers of the psyche. He does not distinguish between “natural *symbols*” and nature as a living, breathing organism. With regard to the western ego’s reconnection with lost symbolic contents from “nature,” he goes on to say that, “It is the single individual who will undergo it and carry it through.”^{3,4}

On the one hand, this is obviously true since we all have our individual psyches and egos. On the other hand, it is increasingly evident that as an *evolutionary* phenomenon, the reconnection of the western psyche with its roots in nature – not just as “natural *symbol*” – is also a collective phenomenon taking place both externally as well as internally within the single individual.⁵ It would appear that Jung did not foresee what I am proposing is happening at this very moment: That the *collective unconscious* itself would be working to bring about a “healing of the split,” and that such a reconnection would not depend solely on the personal work of each individual to reintegrate repressed unconscious contents.⁶ For Jung the individual psyche is the “patient.” I am proposing that along with the individual psyche as patient, the western ego itself is the designated patient that is presently involved in a healing process. The healing agent, as I discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, is the evolutionary process as reframed through the lens of complexity theory in a reciprocal coevolutionary relationship with the western psyche.

In a letter dated February 9, 1960, to A. D. Cornell of Cambridge University, Jung writes, “As far as we can see, the collective unconscious is identical with nature to the extent that nature herself, including matter, is unknown to us . . . the collective unconscious is simply nature.”⁷ There is much about this statement that seems right to me. But there is much about it that does not, and that is even more unsettling.

Arguably, the concept of the “collective unconscious” is perhaps Jung’s most brilliant contribution to the field of psychology. Certainly it is on the order of the discovery of the personal unconscious by Freud. At the same time it does not suffice in addressing this evolutionary dynamic that is unfolding in our midst. Indeed, in many ways it detracts from it. The major problem is that the concept of the “collective unconscious” is just that – a concept. As a cogni-centric⁸ concept, it is a by-product of that *logos*-based rational ego that I have identified as *the* problem that today most threatens the survival of our species. For all of Jung’s effort and intention,⁹ at this point in our psychic evolution the notion that the collective unconscious is synonymous with nature is a detraction. It pulls us back into that post-Genesis ego and a cogni-centric view of nature. In this view we *perceive* nature from the outside as a thing – inanimate, objectified, dynamic, soulless. We have enormous difficulty *experiencing* nature as living, and the very source of our being, the *prima materia*, the primordial ooze out of which we emerged, including our soul(s).

I cannot define nature. It seems to me that every attempt to do so – to circumscribe nature by rational limits and definition – runs counter to the very essence of nature. I could say that nature is beauty, ugliness, mystery, laws, chaos, gentle, violent, monstrous, knowable, unknowable, . . . and go on at some length giving two-dimensional words to what we experience as nature.

In *Man and his Symbols*, Jung wrote:

Man feels isolated in the cosmos because he is no longer involved in nature. Natural phenomena have lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man . . . No voices now speak to man from stones, plants and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature is gone, and with it the profound emotional energy this symbolic connection supplied.¹⁰

It is important to note that in the above quote regarding “man’s” costly loss of his connection with nature, Jung writes from his perch as a Euro-centric, cogni-centric scientist, albeit one whose eyes were dramatically opened in his travels through New Mexico, Washington, DC, Africa, and India 40 years previously. His use of the universal “man” as if it referred to all (western) humanity belies the cultural prejudices of his day. It also fails to openly recognize that there is still a *direct* source for that (re)connection

in those very cultures that he visited – though diminished by their having been assaulted by western civilization – that can enlighten, even heal western civilization itself.

For those of us not born into tribal cultures, it is true that we are “stuck” with our cogni-centric center. But we can strive to *know* our dilemma and behave in a manner that contains it, rather than in a manner that identifies with it. Here again I will call on my experience with Borderland patients to illustrate this drive to know, to understand the meaning of this dilemma.

During one analytic session, one man in his 30s talked about his struggles to pull his outer life together – where to live, what kind of work/career he should be pursuing, etc. He stopped talking mid-sentence, and there was a long silence. Then he said:

I carry a Great Grief. I feel it deep inside (points to his heart). It’s never not there. I feel its presence. It is never far from me. In Montana I felt connected. (He had just returned from a trip there.) Here I’m disconnected – in my car, living on top of the land. I’m part of the land; that’s my home. But I’m a product of my culture and therefore cut off from my home. I felt expanded there; I feel contracted here. When I was at the gathering in Montana (a wilderness experience) I was part of a community. When I was there a voice kept saying, “Teaching kids about nature may be one of the most important things you do.”

This particular young man – I shall call him Allan – was familiar with the concept of the collective unconscious. But I knew that in the moment when he named and revealed a deeply intimate part of himself – his Great Grief – for me to mention the “collective unconscious,” or any other rational construct as a definer or container for what he was sharing in that moment would be to profane the moment and leave him feeling profoundly unseen and unheard. I had no impulse to do so, having been taught by Hannah that many experiences of nature can be related to only on their own experiential terms.

And even here I need to be careful. It is tempting to use phrases like “feeling” versus “thinking,” *logos* versus sensation, to use metaphor – “It’s as if . . .” These would be better than the heavy “collective unconscious,” but still inadequate, a profanation to the individual – and to nature herself.

The challenge is to not interpret at all – certainly not in the moment – to hold an experience that can feel *between language*, that can leave one with the tension of holding one’s intellectual and rational breath for far longer than any of us can imagine doing. To not seek the comfort of rational understanding, but to come to some kind of knowing through a holding and a wonderment.

Interestingly, not many weeks after Allan revealed his Great Grief, his long-standing “stuckness” regarding his need to negotiate more functionally the mundane world loosened, and he found it possible to focus on claiming the greater fullness of his life. It was as if he had to have a place to put his

secret, his Great Grief. Not to get rid of it, but to lay it in a safe place after having it consciously witnessed in order to move forward. Allan began to explore career options and to consider earning money, which he had always disdained as being *the* source of the world's troubles. He became committed to a relationship, and even considered the previously unspeakable subjects of marriage and family, commitments he had never perceived as possible before. But in his sessions, he would periodically remind me that his Great Grief was "in there," and truth be told, some part of him felt that it's too late: "We blew it, and we humans probably won't survive." For Allan, the word "probably" was new. Ironically, it became part of his personal statement after our focusing on the concept of Borderland phenomena and the idea that the mourning he felt was not of him, but *by him*, in response to a "Great Grief" that he felt in and for nature and the human dilemma.

The word "probably" resulted also from our discussion of my notion of a new evolutionary phenomenon that was reconnecting the western ego with nature. "Probably," which for Allan was a euphemism for "hope," entered in because now he could separate his despair about where we have come as the human race and our (self-)destructive inclinations. He could conceive a new departure point, the Borderland, which points to a new evolutionary unfolding and possibility. It was freeing him to recognize that he was grieving *something out there*, and that the source of his grief was not "just" his depressive nature. (Although he experienced painful events in his life that were depressing, I don't think he has a depressive "nature.")

This same "Great Grief" is manifest in a dream reported by a man in his 60s:

I was in south Florida, near Miami. The area was quite developed – "modernized." Lots of people, hotels, high-rise apartment buildings, long walkways near the ocean. I was there on business. I was near the hotel I was staying in. As I walked along the winding concrete walkway near the beach, it was as if the walkway divided the "civilized" part of the world from the "nature" part of the world, although there was only a narrow, serpentine path separating the two. There was a thin stand of "jungle" on one side, and concrete and development on the other. The "civilized" part seemed to go on for miles and miles. I noticed that on the "nature" side of the path, there were some kids playing. I saw a large frog sitting on the ground quite still – presumably in a hyper-vigilant defensive mode. Nearby was a snake, coiled, also quite still, in a similar defensive stance. Between the two was a little girl with a stick, trying to shove the snake towards the frog and vice versa. She was obviously looking for some "action," trying to get the snake to attack the frog. She hadn't noticed that the snake was much too small to eat the frog, or do much else with it. I don't think the snake was poisonous. The girl didn't get it and kept trying to bring about an attack. It seemed to me that the frog and the snake were more afraid of her than anything else. Neither moved. It seemed a pitiful sight.

I did get to my hotel room. I don't know what my work was there. But I found the place depressing. It seemed to me a microcosm of where the world is today – sad and depressed and split in the midst of its new millennium and prosperity. Here was nature, tired, oppressed, with even its instinct depressed. And here was a young girl, cut off herself from her own instinct, her own connection with nature, with life, witlessly trying to prod instinct into these near lifeless-seeming, very sad forms.

The dreamer commented that this was one of his saddest and most profound dreams, unlike any he had ever dreamt. There was something about it that was even more compelling than the more dramatic nightmares and monster dreams that he had experienced over the years. The most prevalent feelings associated with this dream were depression and despair. If this is the state of our world, what does all the rest of it mean – all that technology and “progress”? The dream lingered with him for weeks, even months, and seemed to haunt his very breath. The world is dying, he felt, and our souls with it. And the world is too busy to even note it. How can we let this happen? This feeling left the dreamer in a state of grief and mourning. He said it left him with the refrain of a Tom Waits song going through his head for days.¹¹ The title of the song is “The Earth Died Screaming”.

One of the more disturbing images for him in the dream was that of the little girl. She was about 8 years old. Where was her mother, he wondered. Why was she out there by herself on the Borderland between the industrialized world and what was left of nature? Were her parents not aware that she was depressed, that the little bit of instinct or earthly connection left in her was seeking in her own feeble, naive way to spark life into dying nature? Why was she left alone with this dilemma? Didn't they know that her soul was depressed?

Neither did the dreamer miss the message about himself. For he knew that his dream represented his own psychic landscape, that the little girl represented his own depressed soul, and that his critical judgments of her parents were judgments that were also aimed at him. What was *he* going to do about it?

Perhaps most important to him was that he was not able to repress it and make himself feel better by watching his net worth grow on his computer screen. This dream impacted his life, and he began to process how he might make some difference, what of value he might do in this drama unfolding in our midst. One thing he did immediately was to take seriously the subject of the earth's dying. When colleagues and acquaintances gave the usual verbal nod to the daily blurb in the newspaper about global warming or other forms of ecological deterioration, he would insist on discussing the implications. He was not satisfied with perfunctory exchanges on the subject.

Mostly, however, he wondered about the spiritual implications of the earth dying. Where was God? Did God not care?

During the course of reading Susan Griffin's book, *What Her Body*

Thought: A Journey into the Shadows, I was startled to come across a dream she reports while she was in Germany, one which mirrors both the symbolic content and the import of the dream reported above. She introduces her dream as follows:

While I was still in Germany, just after my collapse [from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome – CFIDS], the newspapers were preoccupied with a mysterious illness that was killing seals in the North Sea. Their bodies, lifeless or nearly dead, were washing up by the hundreds on the beaches of northern Europe. The papers suggested that something was injuring the immune systems of these animals. One photograph run on the front page of a German newspaper showed a pile of dead seals, just at the end of the sea, rising higher than six feet.

The dream:

I dreamed I was on a beach. In their swimsuits, wearing sunglasses and cotton hats, children beside them digging sand with small shovels, several bathers lay on blankets, taking in the sun. They acted as if they were completely unaware of the dead animals all around them. In my dream, I was the only witness. Standing in front of the stacked-up bodies of seals, I began to plead with [the people]. *Don't you know*, I called out to them, *unless you do something now, what is happening to these seals will happen to you too.*¹²

When dreams of a number of dreamers, like the two preceding ones, have such strikingly similar symbolic images and themes, it suggests that there is a message from the collective unconscious, in addition to the one from the individual personal unconscious. It is as if the collective unconscious were speaking to western culture through the medium of these two dreamers with the message that civilization's impact on nature is degrading the natural world in which we live and that degradation threatens our own survival as a culture, if not as a species.¹³

Another man, Rich, in his late 30s was engaged in a scientific project. He spontaneously offered the following concerns in a session:

The earth is sterilized by our expansion. Where will you find a wolf that is actually dangerous? Or an elk that is alive not merely because of a game preserve? There is no wilderness to die in. Once when I was hiking, a shy bighorn sheep came right up to me and wanted me to feed it some sun screen I was putting on. It makes me feel conflicted. There's no "outside" any more.

I'm afraid of the wilderness – it's dangerous. But that's what's wonderful about it. I don't know what I'm talking about, but it sits in me like a rock sometimes. The good thing about science and technology is

making way for people. But we've won over nature, you know. It's fear more than sadness. Fear about it: I'm afraid that everything – the people and places I love – will be crushed. For every effort you undertake to save them – people and places – it's part of what destroys them. The plans one makes are corrupt. Your soul is weeping. I feel petrified with pain and fear about it, and I don't have a clue as to what could be done about it. I felt that for a long time. I feared it would turn into cancer or some other autoimmune disorder. It's like a big black hole (he points to his chest). The nature and instinct that's destroyed . . . I feel conflicted when I'm designing things, rational structures in my job. There are people – activists – running around throwing their mourning in my face. They're too busy to have a center, too busy trying to change/fix it, instead of living a process, digesting what is happening. You can't mourn enough. You somehow have to digest it, absorb it, you can't just burn it up right away.¹⁴

At this point in the session I asked him “What value does your mourning have?” He answered, “My mourning is my own problem.” To which I responded, “It matters. It matters because your mourning appreciates them – the people and places you love, the wolf, the elk, the choking earth – and thanks them for their being. It matters.” So much of human despair derives from the sense that what one feels most deeply does not matter.

Rich's concern for the animals and his despair of the choking-off of instinct reminded me of a session with Hannah late in our work. (At this point Hannah would ask for a session as she felt a need.) She complained that she had lost her footing and was experiencing some depression and friction with her husband. She blamed him for her malaise, while knowing that he was not a major contributor to her current upset. She presented a dream in which a dark male figure was pursuing her and threatening her. She was frightened and felt cornered in the dream. She had no idea what this male figure represented in her psyche. At my suggestion that she do an active imagination with the dream character, the dialogue revealed that he felt isolated and in despair. His despair was paramount. When asked about the nature of his despair, he said that he was despondent about the state of the world, the destruction of the earth, the dying of the species. He could not bear it.

I recalled a session earlier in our work. At that time Hannah said that “Nothing can make-up for this world that has been lost. Nothing. Nothing. It's all gone.” I felt that the voice that spoke those words within her unconscious a year or two previously were his, those of the current dream figure. In that earlier session I said, “But there are animals and trees here now. Will you abandon them?” She replied, “I am angry that everything is not destroyed so there will be nothing new born to suffer.” I suggested to her that because the despairing male figure in her dream was left alone with his despair about the plight of nature and the human dilemma, he had no alternative but to attack her to get her attention. Ironically, this dynamic in her

dream was, to a significant degree, the result of her healing, both in her inner life and outer life (she had begun to refer to herself as “happy”) over the past couple of years. “He” felt left behind. And he had begun to pull her back into that old despair as a way of getting her attention.

Hannah and I (and in the back of my mind, “he”) spent the rest of that session talking about what was shifting toward the positive, toward the preservation of nature, and particularly about the shift taking place in human consciousness. It was my thought that her despairing inner masculine figure did not know that hope was possible, that a shift in consciousness was occurring that was more focused on preservation of life than on its destruction. We talked specifics: The move toward socially responsible investing and effective corporate governance in the financial and corporate worlds; a heightening consciousness in politics regarding preservation of the ecology.

She reported a few weeks later that her depression had lifted – within a day of the session – and that she had stopped attacking her husband and was able to resume her work. It seemed that she (“he”) had connected with the spirit of hope inherent in the life instinct. She did not ask for another session.

I could go on with more examples – there are many. However, the point is that although for all these individuals their despair does connect with and partially derive from personal emotional and psychological antecedents, their “Great Grief” derives from their connection to nature herself – not as neurosis, but as *objective, nonpersonal, nonrational phenomena occurring in the natural universe*. These are individuals, as I described in Chapter 2, who have one or both feet in the Borderland. Their psyches are connected to and respond to nature as living essence – not in an *as if* context of symbolic meaning only, but as ongoing feeling *connection*.

Our culture has become so dissociated, that in its one-sidedness and its own dissociation neurosis it communicates profound distress coupled with dire warnings about the future of our ecology and our way of life, indeed our very survival. And yet it condemns those who take these warnings to heart and are emotionally distressed by them. It is acceptable to address these warnings rationally as *thoughts* and *ideas*, to engage in the pros and cons of given political positions and possible actions. But those who take them to heart – and to soul – are often seen as extremist, one sided, and neurotic. To point out the contradictions emerging from within the scientific and political spheres is to point out that the emperor has no clothes.

Unfortunately, this prejudice and cultural dissociation often is reflected in a one-sidedness of psychotherapy in all its forms when it pathologizes behaviors and emotions that do not fit its preexisting definitions and categories of rationality and normative behavior. This prejudice within psychology is so prevalent and unrelenting that it is a major contributor to the suffering and pain of many patients seen in hospitals and private consulting rooms.

I have come to the conclusion over the past 15 years that the collective

unconscious has tapped certain individuals within the culture to be carriers of personal and collective mourning for the profound assault and wounds to nature wrought, predominantly, by western civilization and the modern technological society. Globalization has only accentuated the speed and intensity of this process. I am seeing more and more individuals like Allan, Hannah, and Rich who are gripped by a mourning that is both personal and outside themselves. On the collective level, they are not unlike the “professional” mourners described by Nikos Kazantzakis in *Zorba the Greek*, whose job it is to mourn loudly for those who had just died and to wail at their funerals. These professional mourners chose their work and were paid money for their services. The Allans, Hannahs and Riches – and there are many of them in our culture – were chosen unasked. Often they pay dearly in emotional terms for their sensitivity as Borderland personalities. My clinical work with each of them as individuals consisted in learning to sort out my own cogni-centric and cultural prejudices from what appeared to be their legitimate experience, and assisting them in learning to discriminate their experience of the sacred from what they perceived as pathological.¹⁵

As the following chapters will reveal, some of the individuals who might be seen as Borderland personalities are quite worldly and secure in the outer world. Some, contrariwise, might be seen as “old souls,” with a sensitivity that makes it painful for them to have too much commerce with the mundane world. Their connection to nature and Borderland reality leaves them with both a shyness and sensitivity to living in an industrial world. I remember one individual for whom living in an apartment with a refrigerator became oppressive because the sound of the refrigerator when it came on and shut off was like fingernails on a blackboard to him. Although this is an extreme example, there are many versions of what feels like oppression by a world caught in technological madness. The following poem, in my view, reflects the sensitivity of these gentle souls:

There Are Men Too Gentle to Live Among Wolves

There are men too gentle to live among wolves
 Who prey upon them with IBM eyes
 And sell their hearts and guts for martinis at noon.
 There are men too gentle for a savage world
 Who dream instead of snow and children and Halloween
 And wonder if the leaves will change their color soon.
 There are men too gentle to live among wolves
 Who anoint them for burial with greedy claws
 And murder them for a merchant's profit and gain.
 There are men too gentle for a corporate world
 Who dream instead of candied apples and ferris wheels
 And pause to hear the distant whistle of a train.

There are men too gentle to live among wolves
Who devour them with eager appetite and search
For other men to prey upon and suck their childhood dry.
There are men too gentle for an accountant's world
Who dream instead of Easter eggs and fragrant grass
And search for beauty in the mystery of the sky.
There are men too gentle to live among wolves
Who toss them like a lost and wounded dove.
Such gentle men are lonely in a merchant's world,
Unless they have a gentle one to love.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Carl G. Jung and after his death M.-L. von Franz, 1964: 95.
- 2 Quincey, 2002: 11.
- 3 Although Jung is speaking implicitly of the western ego when he uses the term "ego," he never explicitly states so.
- 4 Jung, 1961: 261.
- 5 Jungian analyst, Marie-Louise von Franz, seemed to be reaching for a related notion in her discussion of "reciprocal individuation." In Edinger, 1999: 24–25.
- 6 My contention that Jung did not foresee this psychodynamic role of the collective unconscious was reinforced in a personal conversation in 1989 with Jung's son, Franz Jung.
- 7 Jung, 1960: 540.
- 8 A term coined by the modern authority on shamanism, Michael Harner.
- 9 That is, between 1911 when he wrote his essay, "Two Kinds of Thinking," and 1961 when he died. The overspecialization of the western ego became dramatically identifiable around the time of Jung's death and has increased exponentially in its threat to species survival since then.
- 10 Jung, 1964: 95.
- 11 "The Earth Died Screaming" by Tom Waits.
- 12 Griffin, 1999: 97.
- 13 The personal content of these dreams are manifest as reported above. In the case of the man in his 60s, I am familiar with the personal import of his dream since we have a relationship. I have had no contact with Susan Griffin, and her dream as reported stands for both the personal message about her life and health and the broader more collective message that it reflects. It is clear from her book that she took the import of her dream on both the personal and collective levels.
- 14 This echoes Jung's assertion that, "It is the single individual who will undergo a reconnection with the lost symbolic contents of nature and carry it through."
- 15 A brief glance back to the 16th-century Inquisition of the Catholic Church and the lives of Galileo Galilei and Nicolas Copernicus displays the profound confusion of western civilization regarding what was perceived as pathological and what was perceived as sacred. That confusion has evolved as western civilization has evolved. Although today we are more sophisticated, and the "punishments" less severe than in the 16th century, this confusion remains with us still.
- 16 Kavanaugh, 1991.