

## Hermes and the Experience of Depth Psychotherapy

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For many, Jung is a psychologist of the magnificent, whose rich ideas and stunning erudition are what often first attract enthusiastic interest. He himself is a larger than life; indeed a mythic character and we expect the same of his psychology. Therefore Jung and Jungian have traditionally meant colossal depth, numinous experience and ineffable meaning. But, what of the ordinary, the small and the subtle? What place does the everyday work of transformation have in this big-bang model of classic Jungian theory? How do we as Jungians understand our work in the context of those poor souls among us who do feel that most of their experience does not merit the designation *individuation*, *archetypal* or *transcendental*? How was I to work with people whose inner lives were not characterized by mesmerizing alchemical sequences or knock your socks off archetypal dreams. The discomfort generated by these questions, in my life and in my clinical work, account for the origin of what is to follow and outline the dethronement of the heroic perspective in the practice of Jungian therapy in favor of a more hermetic one which values, indeed exults, in the small, the accidental and the commonplace.

Looking back at these origins, I now recognize the presence of Hermes in my decision-making process. By giving up a particular hierarchy of values and allowing myself to feel the frustration and uncertainty of how to work in a meaningful way with the small stuff in my clients' lives, I was forsaking the known for the unknown and Apollo for Hermes. As patron of our psychological wandering, Hermes would

have us pay the closest attention to whatever the psyche presents, no matter how trivial or how elusive. For Hermes leads us down unexpected roads, cajoling and charming us in the half-light, rescuing us from preconceptions and the persona haughtiness that comes from wanting to have just the right kind of inner life. What my clients desperately needed was the help of Hermes so that they could feel the quiet thrill of being led by their so-called ordinary material somewhere magical and unforeseen.

With these thoughts in mind, let me backtrack for a moment to comment upon the relationship between the gods and the psyche, the very basis of Jung's symbolic method. Whether speaking of Hermes, Apollo or any other mythological figure, we are referring to psychological realities that are larger than the individual. They and their activities personify the various facets of the universal human condition as envisioned by a given culture. Although our culture does not appear to have as direct and conscious a relationship to as specific a pantheon as the ancient Greeks, one need only look just below the surface of modern life to discern the presence of these larger than life realities. The *perfect woman* or the *ideal man*, the *savvy kid* or the *creative genius* are all examples of present day tutelary deities. Therapeutic work aims at differentiating these mythic characters and determining how they influence our inner and outer lives. Suffice it to say that while our world may have shrunk in terms of imaginal sophistication, it has become no less mythological.

Jung understood all of this very well, how these mythic characters are the symbolic representations of patterns alive within our psyche. These "archetypal images" are the core elements around which our unique life evolves and make themselves

known in various ways. They orchestrate the images in our dreams and are hidden in our symptoms. Their influence can also be detected in the way we think or in our likes and dislikes. In short, these archetypal images are the filters through which we experience existence. While at certain moments we may be more influenced by one archetypal configuration or another, one thing is certain: no matter what we are dealing with or doing, the archetypal image is at work organizing and conditioning our experiences.

Ignoring the influence of these transpersonal patterns endangers our well being. Instead of seeing the symptom, dream, or fantasy as meaningful and revealing, they become inert psychological debris to be processed and filed or mastered and forgotten. Their timeless wisdom goes unseen but not for long because, as the fairy tales teach us, neglected divinities return thirsting for vengeance. Instead of serving as guides for our consciousness during the process of individuation, our afflictions worsen, our symptoms intensify and we remain split within ourselves. To honor these figures, and the totality of our selves, we must pursue their unconscious core of meaning. By urging them to speak we can unveil what is required to achieve psychic balance. By amplifying the image with myth or tale, rationally or irrationally, we can connect the inner world to the outer world. In so doing, the neglected may voice its wisdom and we can be healed.

From this perspective, Hermes the god is just such an archetypal reality whose influence on our life can be better understood by learning more about his mythic manifestations. Such influences can affect us profoundly in our personal lives and out there in the collective world. Thus Jung could speak of Wotan's influence on the

Third Reich or can the contemporary cultural historian call our attention to the amoral masculine hero myth that fuels the Western way of life, for better or worse. We must come to know them and their patterns if we are to live consciously.

In this way, our personal renditions of these timeless patterns come to light as our personal myths. Thus we restore the importance of the imagination that is educated out of us early on. The child-like wonder and delight in life can live again in us when we take inner happenings seriously and spend time with them. Our inner images are important, no matter how small or ordinary and by caring about them we care about our deeper selves. Without this attitude, we become boring and predictable, and sick.

Now to Hermes and the experience of psychotherapy. Many who are forced to enter psychotherapy and to make changes in their life do so only grudgingly. Usually, they enter the therapeutic relationship in a state of painful ambivalence, hurting yet resistant to relief. It is not unusual to find someone strangely protective of his or her symptoms or defensive about their failure to cope or thrive. An admission of such psychological pain breeds embarrassment and is a serious blow to the rigid neurotic ego and to that over-ardently held belief in the connection between competence and control and value as a person. No wonder one holds onto one's pain so strongly. Symptoms become inflated in value, blocking any deeper relationship between the ego and the other parts of the self. This is what Jung meant when he said that neurosis is "a painful disunion with oneself." Or, in vernacular wisdom, "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't!"

Naturally then, the very first task of the therapist is to establish a rapport with the client. This might be accomplished by providing an environment where the suffering person will be accepted as they are, complete with their beloved symptom. The therapist will listen to their complaints and not judge or criticize. Concern for their distress and the recognition of their struggle is offered with no strings attached. The invocation of this rapport, or alliance as it is so often called, during the early stages of therapy, can also be imaged as the extension of the hand of friendship to the client by the therapist. This act of friendliness, so often healing even after one meeting, is above all else hermetic because, to the Greeks who knew him, Hermes was the friendliest of gods to men. He was the helpful youth who aided grieving Priam retrieve Hector's body, his dead son, from the enraged Achilles. It was also Hermes who, as the guide of departed souls to the underworld, earned the title *akaketa*, the painless one, because he brought no more suffering to the unfortunate. To gently usher your bereft, friendless client into the healing relationship is to befriend him and guide lest he stumble when they have lost their way.

On a deeper level, disunion occurs when there is an absence of inner friendliness or tolerance for various unacceptable parts of the personality. Symptoms, as expressions of the neglected and rejected within us, appear when the ego becomes too sure of itself, too identified with the fantasy of heroic control. When this occurs, the psyche as a whole rebels, tripping up the conscious mind with depressive feelings and deenergized bodies, physical illness or strife-filled thoughts. Consciousness becomes the enemy of the unconscious and we are left to rant and

rave about cruel fate or loathsome inner weakness. The hermetic message of friendship therefore is not only interpersonal but also intrapersonal. In my therapeutic work I spend a great deal of time helping people to befriend their conflicts and to learn to listen, in a magnanimous and open-minded way (this is also a part of Hermes as the bestower of boons), to the message concealed in their distress. To be hermetic about this process is to view such obstacles along life's pathway like to proverbial "herm", that small stone pillar placed at the junction of intersecting roads where food and drink were left for wayfarers. It is in contemplation of our symptoms that we may sit for a while and reorient ourselves. Telling the painful tale, or receiving feedback from the therapist is nourishing the whole person. In reaching out in a companionable and amicable manner to our distress, it is no longer denied and reconciliation with what we fear and despise can occur. This sort of reconciliation is the cornerstone of relationship to oneself. Here again Hermes is hard at work, this time as courier who brings to our awareness the message in our madness, just as he kept the gods and goddesses from each others throats by passing information from one to the other. Hermes was nothing less than an expression of the relatedness of the parts. Thus, wholeness requires the gentle art of psychological friendliness.

To promote just the right atmosphere for this delicate work, the therapist must be at home with embarrassment. We must be unabashed by all those secret skeletons which plague our clients' lives. Nor must we be too proud to admit that we too have smelled the stink of psychic wounds. This fate we all have in common. Acceptance of these indignities betokens yet again the presence of Hermes. Unlike his lofty brother, Apollo, or regal sister, Athena, Hermes was a common fellow, devoid of haughty dignity or pride and not afraid to rub shoulder with the psychological lower

classes, be they thieves, servants, wanderers or lost souls. Hermes loves and protects them all. It is he who compassionately unravels the best-laid defense that makes us too proud to accept responsibility for our dilemmas and allow us to blame others for our troubles. Stuck in self-righteous identification with our conflicts, as if no one else has ever suffered so much or in such a fashion, we can become petty despots scrambling to protect our little bit of turf. Only Hermes and his friendly love for foible, foolishness and frailty can get these curmudgeons to open their souls. No amount of sustained confrontation will do it, although it helps to crack the shell. No, only our own empathy with and acceptance of indignity will ultimately do the trick.

Where direct confrontation might belong to Ares or mighty Zeus, Hermes would take a different route to storm these defenses. It is he who inspires the therapist with cunning and stealth in order to, at just the right moment, step through the keyhole of the locked in relationship between symptom and consciousness (Hermes becomes a mist and reenters his birth cave after filching Apollo's cattle). This timely moment might occur with a slip of the tongue or with the deft usage of a chance experience or particular dream image. By whatever the means, the crafty, hermetic therapist must be ever ready to steal into the client's closed psychic system in order to reveal the symptom's meaning. Just as Hermes defused Apollo's anger at the theft of his cattle by giving him the tortoise shell lyre, so will the hermetic therapist give voice to the ordinary. That is, just as Hermes has the wisdom to see the lyre's music hidden in the tortoise shell, so too must the therapist never disregard what seems insignificant on the surface. We must be continually inventive if we are to avoid a destructive power play with the ego's defensiveness. Like the Hermes-blessed Odysseus who outsmarted Polyphemous the Cyclops, or who duped the gullible Trojans, defensive resistance must be bypassed by resourceful guile, not so much to

win a savage victory but to end the siege and begin the long journey home. For like the poor Greeks and Trojans, too long has the client fought against or been besieged by the neurosis and for too long has he ceased to grow. Although the hermetic method rejects the hallowed linear fantasy of Jungian psychological development that follows a particular course (persona etc.) what it sacrifices in abstract coherence and adherence to the ruling dogma, it gains in spontaneity and life.

This hermetic attitude pivots or hinges upon (Hermes was called *stropheus* or the socket) the opportunistic use of windfall, synchronicity and the obvious. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the small, day-to-day stuff is what provides us with the greatest leverage for change. Nothing should be taken for granted. Each small part, each tortoise, provides potential insight and the therapist must be ready to wrestle with its nuances like the athlete, who in ancient times, prayed to Hermes *agonios* as the patron of the contest. Psychologically limber and trim, the therapist must be ready to spar with the material again and again. This is the circular movement of hermetic practice.

Seeing therapeutic interventions in this way, as being the timely and crafty utilization of the client's life no matter how objectively unspectacular it may seem, is an act of sacrifice on the part of the therapist. What is sacrificed are the therapist's expectations and longing for the perfect interpretation that will clinch the cure, or for the revelation of that elusive memory which is the psychic missing link. Sacrifice in this sense means giving up identification with the heroic theoretical systems, be they Great Mother fantasies of development or Great Father edicts decreeing the acceptable intrapsychic dynamics. We have a picture of this kind of sacrifice in

Hermes when, instead of selfishly eating all 50 of Apollo's stolen cattle, he sacrificed two to all the Olympians and returned the other 48. By dedicating his larcenous booty to his divine peers, and to himself, Hermes cemented his connection to them and to their community. Through this act of sacrifice, he sidestepped the pitfalls of pride and possessiveness. For the therapists the message is clear: the meaningful intervention that steals past the client's fear of change and possessiveness of the neurotic attitude, and interprets his life in such a way as to enhance the relationship with his neglected inner parts is true hermetic larceny. Just as Hermes was willing to sacrifice, so too does the therapist when clever interpretations are not held on to as signs of his originality or specialness. Though we may facilitate healing, we are not healing in and of ourselves. We are merely conduits for the natural urge towards wholeness inherent in the client. By sacrificing the meat of greedy ego needs, the therapist becomes dedicated to meaning intrapsychic relationship in whatever creative form it emerges in the client. This is Hermes as the archetypal interpreter, the one who does not make up the messages but who conveys and translates them for humankind and the immortals. This is the work of the therapist who does not give the client the symbols for life, but helps to translate the meaning of what is inherently there and the natural direction of psychological life.

I would like to now turn our attention from the specific influence of Hermes in the experience of psychotherapy to a consideration of his role in the depth psychological experience as a whole. It goes without saying that Hermes is not the only archetypal pattern informing this process. At certain moments the therapist may incarnate the warming balm of Demeter, who as mother provides love and support for the client's first steps towards health. At other times, stern, limit-setting Saturnine fathering might be needed to contain confusion. Concrete problems

solving might require the ardor and efficiency of the hero to cut through all the garbage. Or Apollo's influence might be felt in our prophetic prognoses of a given condition or when we need clear light to shine through murky complexities. Just as likely will Dionysian juiciness loosen the constricted ruminations of an obsessive or a depressive or will *Athenic* armored wisdom and prudent intelligence quell the spoilt child within us. Regardless of the particular pattern active at a given moment, depth psychological exploration necessitates that the therapist have access to and familiarity with this variety of style. Not to have this would hamper the range of the client's journey. The truly mercurial therapist therefore, by virtue of his or her own psychological flexibility and self-awareness, will be capable of and comfortable with shape-shifting as the case demands. Thus though not visible on center stage when the other deities or archetypal patterns work through the therapist's personality and skills; Hermes is nevertheless central to the process. For, he is the unseen connector and mediator who brings into and maintains the relationship of the different parts and enables them to contribute their essence to the therapist-client connection. In a sense, by orchestrating this entire drama, Hermes was rightly referred to by Jung as the principle of individuation.

In the broadest sense, depth exploration deals with the unknown in the personality, with the so-called darkness of the unconscious. Our task as therapists is to accompany our clients into these areas of their inner worlds in order to bring meaning and insight out of it. As practitioners, we are forced to admit so frequently that this work can be maddeningly ambiguous and subjective, unable to withstand the rational light of day. Indeed, the underside of hermetic dexterity is the groping in the dark that occurs when we interact with feelings and moods, anxieties and fantasies. Every therapist and client is familiar with the feeling that despite the

best-made theoretical maps, the unconscious may remain as inscrutable as the night. I for one must admit to a feeling of comfort with this inscrutability because it conveys the eternal flux of becoming that is the real essence of individuation. Although we search always for certainty and self-definition and for true identity, such desires are merely way stations along the road and not the final goal. Instead, to see into and appreciate the depth with all its endless potential is to recognize that this work is night work and that the night belongs to Hermes. As lord of the night, it is he who guides our efforts as we make our way along darkened paths and who, as god of windfall, rewards our honest efforts with the illumination of insight or a vision of a deeper mystery.

The deeper mystery is that Hermes is also the spirit of transition and liminality, as Murray Stein has so wonderfully explained in his work entitled *Midlife*. As god of boundaries and thresholds Hermes is the inner experience of the interface between consciousness and the unconscious when our lives are interrupted by meaningful synchronicities, sudden compelling thoughts or feelings and vivid images or feelings as if a radiant twilight had unexpectedly enveloped us. This is the liminal Hermes at work suspending us between one familiar ego place and another. In the depth process this feeling is often noted as a sense of strangeness or subtle depersonalization that heralds a new leg of the journey. Who among us has not at some time experienced this unreality when what so easy once, in fact second nature, now seems utterly foreign (e.g. mid-life, important emotional events). It as if we have become strangers to ourselves. The effect of this depersonalization is uncanny and not a little bit frightening because liminality means coming unstuck from outmoded ways of being and behaving. If one can grow comfortable with this sense of the provisional, the as if, and can float like Hermes, bending to the inner

currents, then the fear dissipates and the thrill of discovery is engendered. This is the hallmark of psychological transition.

Therapy that evokes Hermes and liminality does not only affirm where and who one is, though that might be necessary initially, but promotes the transition from the constricted to the unlimited. Here the client enters the world of possibility where any piece of inner data is given voice and where logical problems solving judgment gives way to the autonomous wisdom of the image with all its psychological urgency. This is what the therapist means by saying that in here, in this hour, you may say or feel, do or imagine whatever you wish, or what the client realizes when, leaving the office, muses that no one would ever believe that such things existed inside of them. In this "as if" world evoked by the liminal, borderland experience, the client becomes more and more like the disembodied soul, sloughing off the weight of care-worn, depleted attitudes so that others might be born out of the twilight. It is a dying in order to be reborn so that depth work is death work and Hermes, guide of souls, the psychopomp, knows the way. Trusting Hermes means giving up logical certainty in favor of a belief in the process and a belief in the deeper self.

When in this liminal state, catching the elusive dream or fantasy and reading it for meaning is essential if one is to become a reconstituted ego once again. These symbolic messages are the psyche's way of nourishing our selves and bringing us back to earth. Seeing past fixed forms into the meaning of things, be they dreams or moods, images or symptoms, animates the secret wisdom in us. After all, isn't it Hermes who, as Mercurius, the spirit of alchemy, reveals the workings of the human

soul in the play of seemingly inert metals? Through his shimmering filter, night vision replaces day vision as the way of seeing symbolic images supplant concepts as a way of knowing and as food for the evolving psyche. And so it should be because concepts are too abstract, too dry to be food for the hungry soul. In that provisional state, the client's soul needs a much more hydrated source of nourishment in order to restore the psychic flow. In simpler words, depth work needs the juicy imagery of Hermes-Mercurius, with all its color and animation, if deeper awareness is to grow and bloom.

When we enter the hermetic space we allow the purposefulness of the psyche to make itself known. We listen instead of hear, watch instead of look. Our consciousness shifts from one that needs to know to one that is open to wonder and possibility. Thus it is Hermes who whispers that magical *aha* in our ears when it all makes sense, when he has gotten the message past our instinctive defensiveness. Without this appreciation of the liminal, of the as if, of the provisional we can never hope to experience that misty, transcendent backdrop to human existence.

This leads me to the final aspect of Hermes that I will mention this evening, his relationship to the underworld. Although Hermes symbolic vision may take us upward beyond ourselves and connects us with the transcendent archetypal Olympians so to speak, he may also take us downward. Through him we cross over the threshold of Hades and come to know our inner heaviness and depressions. No matter how close we or our clients come to knowing the gods and goddesses, the eternal verities within ourselves which make us feel larger than life, our mortality is never very far away. No therapeutic relationship or transference is forever and

though these archetypal forces work through us and enrich our lives, we are chronically, inevitably human. Nothing is eternal for us as individuals except the imperative of the journey. Eventually, when we part company with each other or with ourselves through aging and death and experience this underworld feeling of loss and emptiness, Hermes materializes at our side yet again. This time he comes as the impartial servant of the deep, Hermes *chthonios*. It is this Hermes who does not play favorites but who spreads life and death equally. Two-faced Hermes *chthonios* deals with essences. In his first manifestation he is god of the underground who gives substantiality and groundedness to our journeys through strong feelings of adventure and loss, hope and fear. In his second manifestation, he is a ruler of the underworld giving us a living awareness of death and ending, thus making our conscious lives richer and more exquisite. But whichever face he may turn towards us, one thing is certain: although the quest may abound with indescribable dangers, it is through the two-faced Hermes that it becomes an exercise in perpetual revelation. Living on the hermetic threshold is living at the cutting edge of the great opposites of life and death, consciousness and the unconscious. By not succumbing to identification with either extreme, but by seeking the balance of the two, we take up the hermetic task more effectively. How better therefore to accomplish this than by emulating the hermetic caduceus with its entwined serpents overcoming their opposition in an embrace? And what better attitude could we affect than that of Hermes *charidotēs*, companion to the three graces, who lends charm and delight to the work of our lives.

