

Re-Inventing the Human

By Tayria Ward PhD

*Lecture given at the Foundation for Mythological Studies
Nature and Human Nature Conference
March 17, 2007*

It has become apparent in recent decades that the human has become like a destructive virus on our planet, destroying at a dazzlingly rapid rate what it took the Earth billions of years to carefully develop. Now the conditions for our survival as a species are threatened, and it is our moment to decide either to continue with the inertia of ways of life and thinking that have led us into this pathologically self-destructive behavior or to enter determinedly, with commitment, into rehab as a species and demand from ourselves that we recover. As Richard Buckminster Fuller wrote in 1981, "Humanity is in 'final exam' as to whether or not it qualifies for continuance in Universe." (1981, p.xxxvi)

Since the inertia of destruction is hard to interrupt at the level of politics, corporations, educational establishments, religious and philosophical institutions which vehemently perpetuate it, I am heartened by what Laurens Van der Post states of his belief in the power of the individual to effect change. He wrote:

It is, for me, no idle coincidence that the most significant discovery in the physical world of this age has been the fact that the greatest and most unimaginable power resides in the smallest possible organization of matter. The force which threatens to blow the world asunder resides not in the clouds or mountains but in the invisible heart of the atom. The inner force, too, which, like the power of the atom, can either remake or shatter civilization resides in the smallest unit of society, the individual. The individual is the secret advance base from which this power sets out to invade committee rooms, mothers meetings, county councils, parliaments, continents and nations. (1955, pp. 79-80)

I have long been intrigued by Carl Jung's response when someone asked him if he believed we would survive as a species. He replied: "If enough people do their inner work." Obviously we cannot wait for nations and governments to find the source and solution to our collective situation. We, as individuals, one by one, are called upon do the work. We *must* do the work.

What is the work? Since becoming gripped by concern over our predicament more than two decades ago, my personal journey has led me into a deep encounter with what I came to realize is an indigenous person yet alive and aware inside of me. If we look back into human history to a time before the destruction began in an attempt to discover where the human experiment arrived at faulty conclusions, took some wrong turns, where we "got on the wrong bus" as Nobel Peace Prize winner of last year, Wangari Maathai, words it, we find indigenous peoples lived in harmony within the delicate balance of earth's

systems. Prior to enculturation practices that have been developed over the last centuries, with their attending rigid structures of thought and overvaluing of the human among earth's inhabitants, the idea of a reverently respectful relationship with nature – rather than domination or conquest of her – was a ruling principle in these people's psyche and way of life.

I did not have a clue how the last centuries evolution of thought, since agriculture, industrialization and modernization were set into motion, was wired into me even at the level of my genes and cellular structure. We emerge from the womb into the world this thought has set up, and are shaped at every level by its results, even, increasingly, at the level of our biology. Apparently because I sincerely wished for it, but without even mildly comprehending the consequences of what I wished for, the universe set up for me, by some invisible set of powers and intelligences, a meticulously designed rite of passage to awaken the previously dormant indigenous person yet living within my organic and psychological being. The result of the awakening was an explosive unraveling of the interior and exterior structures of my existence. To call it a breakdown is to trivialize the impact – every single cell in my body was in pain as the transformation began. It was, and is, more comprehensive than anything I could ever have dreamed of happening to me; the revival of this indigenous being created a devastating war with the structures of mind, situations and personality that had previously defined my existence. More than a decade later, I have only glimmers of the meaning and purpose of what continues to unfold; but, thankfully, I continue to trust it as necessary and ultimately the path toward healing that is essential.

Eco-theologian Thomas Berry states that our species has become autistic – as humans we are only talking amongst ourselves, we have “broken the great conversation” as he puts it. We are no longer listening to the river, wind, raven, stars, rock, trees – all of whom continue in consistent conversation with each other. We have forgotten that we have the capability and the responsibility to participate in that dialogue curiously, intelligently and humbly. “Something sinister happened to the human group,” says Brian Swimme. (1995, taped lecture)

Primal peoples who are involved in the great conversation would no more pour poison into a river than they would inject arsenic into their own veins or those of their children. Understanding that the earth, and we in it, is all one body, they would see no difference. To poison the river is to poison our own bodies, destroy our own life and health. The notion that we are separate, the split that has been imagined, is a diabolical error.

I will tell the story of a remarkable address that I experienced some years ago in nature, as I feel the story itself communicates better than anything my mind can devise to explain myself further. Shortly after my life as I knew it had crumbled, desperately grieving and groping for perspective, I decided to shave my head and to go into the woods to stay there for 10 days alone, without human contact. It was a completely instinctual move. About the third day in this solitary place, having made my home under a beautiful oak tree, a voice spoke to me that was exactly like what it is to hear words in a dream – the physical ears are not what pick up the sound, but rather the apparatus within that hears words in

dreams. The voice said, "Can you get this off? It is irritating me." I gazed about the area with wonder. My eyes were drawn to a branch that had fallen from the top of the tree, now draped awkwardly around a lower branch. I understood immediately that the words had come out of the tree, and that it was asking me to remove the dead limb. It took enormous effort to pull it off, but when I did I distinctly heard the tree speak again, with something like a powerful sigh saying, "Thank you!" My imagination could never conceive of such a story. A tree had broken through my autism and communicated with me.

Some months later I visited this spot again, and remembering our conversation I asked the tree, "What can I do for you?" My eyes were again drawn to something and I took care of it with love. Later that night I was sleeping outdoors about a mile from the tree when a fog rolled in thicker than pea soup. I couldn't even see the hands at the end of my arms. I awakened and felt pulled, as if I were on the other end of a taut rubber band. I could not get my boots on fast enough before I began walking, in black darkness and thick fog, over wild, bushy and uneven terrain; it felt like a dream, but I was completely awake in every sense. I heard wild animals hiss as I passed them, irritated by my brazen movement through their territory, yet not even a shiver of fear went through me. I could have, should have, tripped on rocks, run into trees or bushes, or fallen off of ridges, but I walked safely on as entirely "other" senses were in charge of my journey. Suddenly I arrived at the base of my tree, miraculously in the darkness knowing exactly where I was. The tree then spoke to me saying, firmly and sweetly, "What can *I* do for *you*?" There was an urgent prayer weighing on my heart so I blurted it out to the tree as I wept, feeling more touched and truly seen than maybe I ever had felt in my entire life.

I remember hearing Brian Swimme in a taped lecture marvel that jellyfish migrate thousands of miles, without eyes and without a brain, arriving precisely at their destination. My experience in the middle of that night, being pulled toward my tree, causes me to believe that humans have similar senses to those of the jellyfish. I arrived precisely at my destination without eyes, and apparently without the use of my brain. Something operating at a cellular level seemed to be in charge, and somehow I trusted it implicitly.

As humans, I believe that our next evolutionary challenge will be to revive such innate sensibilities and follow their powerful lead. Our "brains" have led us into such destructive havoc. A Nigerian shaman that I worked with for a long period told me that all indigenous people know that the thinking apparatus is in the heart; it is not in the head. Western peoples have marginalized, even infantilized the thought of the heart, believing the thinking of the head to be superior, allowing it to dominate. The heart has become like our Africa – that large continent of our origin whose inhabitants we have enslaved and colonized and have attempted to convert to the thinking and values of the Western mind.

A piece of land that is allocated for domestication loses its original identity as drastic measures are taken to cultivate it – trees and boulders are removed, the growth of other plants is inhibited, insects and animals are sent into exile, birds are discouraged from

visiting. If we accept that mind is a part of the fabric of everything that is, then we might see that to the extent that our the earth's land has been cultivated and domesticated, so also is our mind no longer the natural, native mind we were born with as a species. It has been radically altered. However the thinking of the heart by nature is not so capable of domestication, it resists cultivation, it remains wild and fierce and utterly diverse. The rules and rationales of the heart are of a different realm, and will not easily submit to those of the head. Fearing this darkly uncontrollable region, humans have thus split themselves from this motherland; and the split is evident in every faction of our consensual reality.

The only war that is worth fighting now is the one to reconcile the thought of the heart with the thinking of the head; every other war is merely a distraction. An inner Lincoln, or Gandhi, or King must be called forth – a visionary, wise, uncompromising negotiator to mediate the conflict. It is a dangerous proposition; indeed each of these persons was assassinated. Paradoxically, even though I have felt death as a very real threat of negotiating this interior war, I know that life itself depends upon the willingness to engage it. As evolution has demonstrated, species become shaped by the environment they chose to live in, especially the *thinking* in that environment, and the anatomy adapts at the level of the genes and the cellular structure. The longer we as humans ignore the terrain of the heart, the more our capability of communicating with it may become extinct, eradicated beyond revival – at which point I believe we will have negated the possibility of our continuance on earth. Nature is proving to me that this has not happened yet, but the potential is real.

Nearly three years ago, the migratory impulse in me like that of the jellyfish moved me out of my long home in Los Angeles deep into the mountains of North Carolina. There I reside in wilderness, working toward my own recovery, and conducting regular retreats committed to the work of reviving the indigenous mind in myself and others. Jung himself wrote:

It is impossible to go directly on from our cultural state of today if we do not receive increments of strength from our primitive roots. These latter... we receive only if ... we go back behind our present stage of culture to give the suppressed primitive in us an opportunity to develop itself. How that is to happen is a question in itself...

-Carl Jung (1975, p.81)

That is the question I am living. There is much to share, but most of it is best communicated through long listening to mountain and stars, wind and snow, cool rushing streams and flocks of birds. I find this listening to be one of the highest forms of activity – similar to the hummingbird that hovers, its wings silent and invisible, to stay there requires a heightened state of effort and attention. This is the work. Each of us has to find our individual way to do it, and then do whatever it takes.

Though I have emphasized the difficulty of the journey, as I feel at this point that it is naïve to imagine the effort otherwise, the primary needs of the heart are connection, love

and touch, ritual, celebration and play, beauty, poetry and music – rather than the needs for mastery, conquest, acquisition, fear, domination and competition that reign in the world we have created. I feel, I know, I believe that we as humans have the power to re-invent ourselves and our world, to recreate the human as a viable presence on this planet, if we will come out of denial and take up the challenge with courage, integrity, humility, honesty and beauty. This conference and all that is spoken here is a strong step in that direction, and I am thrilled and proud to be part of and witness to it.

Bibliography:

Berry, T., & Clarke, T. (1991). *Befriending the earth*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.

Fuller, R. B. (1981). *Critical path*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Jung, C. G. (1975). Letters to Oskar Schmitz. *Psychological Perspectives*, 6(1), 79-95.

Swimme, B. (Speaker). (1995). *Canticle to the cosmos*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Van der Post, L. (1955). *The dark eye in Africa*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc.