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Chasing Metaphors

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Chasing Metaphors
by
Mark P. Widrlechner
"From what source, in the last analysis, do we derive meaning? The forms we use for assigning meaning are historical categories that reach back into the mists of time – a fact that we do not take sufficiently into account. ...From whatever side we approach this question, everywhere we find ourselves confronted with the history of language, with images and motifs that lead straight back to the primitive wonder-world." C.G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," (1934, rev. 1954), as translated by R.F. C. Hull.

These verses are dedicated to the exploration of meanings deeper than words --- MPW, Ames, Iowa, September 2013

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The Dancing Goats

These are the days of hot milkweeds, flaming orange and red.
You know it was stinkin’ hot.
Main Street was almost deserted when I pulled up to the store at 3.
I walked up the steps, red rod in hand, looking for a new mop head.
The young man there, with a strong desire to serve
    but no authority, tried his best but was no help.
Venturing back out into the heat,
    I went down to The Dancing Goat.
The cool air there refreshed, as did their refreshments.
Sipping my drink, I heard her ask the customer:

“Do you want whipped cream on that Mountain Goat?”

With a chuckle, I picked up a beautiful book from the table and learned why the goats were dancing.

Old Billy found the bright red berries far away and jumped for joy.

The rest is history.

A laugh and a legend's lesson,

I guess the trip was worth it after all...
Still Running

He took a chance
    uncalculated
And let the metaphor run
    where it would
And chased it
    till it wore him out
And chased it some more
    with little rest
Never knowing
    where he might end up
A Prescription

Delve into Nature's magic.
Seek the soma if you can.
What other potions can ease your pain?
If they include a counterirritant, so much the better,
But don't get carried away.

Some will say you're wasting your time,
And they may be right.
But don't take their word for it.
Delve into Nature's magic.

Such delving will never leave you with empty hands,
Even if there is no formula to be found
And no potion to be concocted.
After Nine

ice cream vendor gone
relentless cicadas hum
bright moon surveys all
do we have to come in now?
the moon is singing

for my little love

gifts fell from the sky
dark ground strewn with basswood blooms
in the shady grove
All but Fantasy (for Becky)

South of the buck with a downturned tine,
I caught two innocent does
On my way back to the colored clay.
Painting may be all but fantasy,
But you captured the sky so well.

Small Changes

Once you accept Wolf as your teacher,
The air will smell different each day;
Some door will close and you'll swear you've heard an elk;
And you will never look at counting sheep the same way again.
Five Slices of Summer

Let’s start with the black-bottom pie in the little diner ’cross from the Travelodge. Was it worth the mad dash through traffic to grab a slice to go that warm night? At that age, yes. Now I’m not so sure...

Back then Ma Hale would serve up her steaming platters (down along the lazy river). But you had to save some room as hard as that might be. A piece of her apricot, luscious with a scoop of vanilla more than compensated for gettin’ lost along the way.

She had competition, no doubt. The chefs in the grand colonial dining hall
And up on the sands, not too far from the beach,
in a rainy summer, the blackcaps would swell
like nobody’s business.
A few days of July sun,
and it was high time for picking,
high time for Aunt J’s pie.

Of course, I can’t stop without noting
the juneberries kept safe behind her nets out back.
The pies she’d bake from those purple jewels
were like no other.

We can always try re-creating.
That’s what recipes are for.
But the bakers’ hands cannot be remade
nor can past summers.
Mixed Messages III

Swanky amenities
Now at 117 Welch Ave
Live theatre, always in 3D
It’s a chick magnet
Free off-street parking

Personal Nomenclature

Whatever the rules of naming say,
Some align with the paternal,
Others with their mother’s side.
Some can navigate through both streams with ease,
While the rest strike out on their own, carving new canals.
Why do we set our rules of naming so?
When do we discover our true alignments?
And how many are thus renamed?
The Bumblebee’s Flight

After the wedding was all said and done,
All the bridesmaids stood tall in the line, receiving,
Arrayed in a grayed shade of pink,
With beige heels and dark green trim.
In the heat of the late afternoon sun,
Their perfume was intoxicating.
Knowingly, the matchmaker came down the line
Compelled to give each one a little kiss
And tarry a bit in conversation,
Taking them in, one by one.

The Waiting

Once storm clouds gather
Will real rains pour down
Only after downdrafts fly past?
Unspoken Troubles (for Sydney)

On this fresh June morning
When all would seem right in this world,
I meet your honest eyes
And gentle smile,
Knowing now that all is not right in this world.
But a line has formed,
A hungry line that keeps our meeting brief.
So I take your unspoken troubles along
In this small white bag
And walk down past the horses
To the cornfield
And take them out
And spread them between the new seedlings
Where the sun will dry them out
And a warm, gentle breeze will blow them all away.
Vienna 1901

The young lady stopped at the edge of the park
to listen to the Gypsy band,
Her light silk shawl, gold and green, swaying in the breeze.
Herr Klimt was making his way to the café
When the shawl caught his eye from across the boulevard.
He lost his steps and stumbled
Into Herr Maestro Mahler, who could not resist a lively tune.
(I wonder if this was their first meeting.)
The Gypsy band played on into the evening;
The young lady transformed into a linden tree in full bloom.
Lesley

she messaged at four
running on coyote time
i was still asleep

Before Breakfast

The windows are open.
After I greet the newborn day
And check the quality of the rested sky,
1 step back, flip on a too-bright bank of lights,
Look up to see what the night has done,
Then, look down to open the drawer,
And take out your small, silver scissors,
The ones that stand between me and Brezhnev.
The Shells

the young seeker hiked to his friend
carrying a basket of mussel shells
seeking the stories
seeking the magic
he didn't have the initiation fee
but held hope and gifts
and a collection of secrets
only revealed upon death
mundane on their face
well camouflaged
yet precious within
such collections when freely given
silently qualified him

could he know?
Salutations

Before class today, I slipped round back
    and walked up the woodchip path,
past elm and ash and hollow hickory, out to the little meadow,
where among the purple coneflowers,
I called out to my medicine and greeted the bracing air
    that flew from where the medicine lives.

The goldfinch did the same.
A chickadee said hello.
And catbird and wren chattered, almost annoyed.
(Perhaps I was disturbing their morning ritual.)

Turning back, looking east downslope, a few wild sunflowers
showed translucent fire, basking in the warming glow.

As class began, I found a warm, bright spot
    and unrolled my mat,
not yet knowing that today we would be saluting the rising sun
    and sharing its great energy.
A Brief Criticism of Jung

He found that part of the mind that consorts with our instincts,
in our waking and our sleep,
and tried to give it a name, though it uses no names
and is uneasy with names.
It was convenient for him to think this neural nexus all the same,
a foundation for our kind, immutable.

But the forces of change have snuck past our defenses ~
No perfection in transcription;
No keeping out the selective gods that reward and punish
based on our codons, our instincts, the time and place.
Questions to Ponder before the Ceremony

What might you attach to yourself to ensure transference?
Animal? Vegetable? Mineral?
What is best for the occasion?
Is it even needed?
Or is clear intention all that is required?
Is the signal distraction?
Or reinforcement?
You decide.
Careful Steps

I went to see my lady
I brought along three fine wasps
The sky that day was cloudless
So I took the tricky path
I had to jump the water
But the wasps did not get wet

It must be near her birthday
Starry campions were blooming
And once I left her wasps there
Young hummingbird came to call
He Needed a Drink

The winter of 2010-11 was cold and very snowy. As it began, the local flock of crows spent time almost every day visiting our feeders and the water bowl (as long as it wasn’t frozen or buried in the snow). But one of those crows got hurt, most likely hit by a neighborhood car. His wing was probably broken, and he could barely fly. He spent more and more time in our yard, near the feeders, that water bowl and the protection of trees and hedges. So we left extra corn and bread out for him and made sure that the water was thawed. Just like his mates, he always wanted to dunk his food.

At some point near year’s end, we didn’t see him anymore nor any sign of his passing. In the meantime, as the winter got snowier, my wife Sherry developed pneumonia after surgery for cancer and was admitted to the oncology floor at the city hospital, a stay that would only end when she moved on to the hospice. In the spring, when we gathered at Sherry’s memorial celebration, the hall was decorated by a rainbow of irises and masses of shared prairie grasses, stalks, and seed heads from the previous fall. In one of those dried arrangements, a friend shared a unique galled stalk of cup plant, shaped like a scepter.
Other than photographs, a guest book, and bittersweet memories, that cup plant stalk was one the few things I brought home from the memorial. While doing yard work a few weeks later, I found the crow’s skull under the spruce tree. Right after that, I had to leave for an important reconnaissance trip, to seek out seeds on ash trees in New York and Pennsylvania. In the quiet spells during that trip, I was reading “Animal Speak” by Ted Andrews. It’s a fascinating book that looks at many aspects of how totemic spirits can manifest in our lives and how we can attune ourselves to them.

After one very long, hot day, my partner and I pulled into Kane, Pennsylvania. There were only a couple places to stay, the Kane Motel and the Wolves’ Den next door. We had reservations at the Kane Motel, though I must admit the Wolves’ Den sure looked nicer (at least from the outside). Our guest rooms and the exterior were a time warp from a 1950s motor hotel, down to the phones that only connect to the front desk and the quarter-fed massage units by the beds. But the lobby was really different, not at all typical. It was filled with Native American artifacts and works of art, including a striking staff topped by deer antlers set on the wall behind the counter. When I checked in, the décor caught my eye instantly. I asked the elderly lady at the front desk about it. She told me that I should chat with her co-owner husband, who had some Indian blood. It was mostly his doing.
The next morning, when we were getting ready to check out, her husband was working the desk. We struck up a conversation. Near the end, I asked him about that staff. He said it was a special prayer staff. I told him how much I admired it. Then he mentioned that Ted Andrews had made it for him, the same man who wrote the book I was reading in my room the night before. Evidently, Ted used to live just down the road a few miles from Kane.

When I got back home, I knew that I should take the cup plant stalk and that dear crow’s skull and fashion a prayer staff, and so I did. About that time, I bought a new house with an extra room in the basement and decided to create a special, sacred space there to meditate and commune with my totems. On the north wall, I could picture two focal points – one, a painting that I hoped to commission of elk, wolves, and buntings in the Sheyenne River valley of North Dakota from pre-settlement days; the other, a station (some might even call it an altar) that had, at its center, the crow prayer staff.

When I moved in, the extra room seemed perfectly dry, except for some water damage to the ceiling from a bathroom leak and to the above-grade windows, perhaps from condensation. All the walls and carpeting appeared to be bone dry. I was pleasantly surprised and got the ceiling and windows replaced.
During the fall, I was fortunate to find a painter in New Mexico willing to take on my commission, which began a wonderful collaboration that produced both the painting, “Our Totems Won’t Lead Us Astray,” that now graces the north wall, and a great friendship.

“Our Totems” shows a prairie stream running out from the wall, with some elk on one side and two wolves and a pair of buntings on the other. A few feet over to its left sits the prayer staff at its station, the crow spirit being represented by a bird that, in his last days, remained near the water we put out, as he found it harder and harder to move. About a year after I put everything in place in that room, sometime in winter or early spring, the base of the north wall just behind the prayer staff began to seep. I just noticed it the other day, when the carpet suddenly discolored. The other spirits in that room must have been quite mobile and had no trouble finding water. But the crow needed the water to come to him and the Earth obliged.
"How the harmonizing of conscious and unconscious data is to be undertaken cannot be indicated in the form of a recipe. It is an irrational life-process which expresses itself in definite symbols. ...knowledge of the symbols in indispensable, for it is in them that the union of conscious and unconscious contents is consummated. ...I have therefore called the union of opposites the "transcendent function."