

Memorial Tribute to James Hillman

James Hillman brought the very word “soul” back to psychology, he brought psychology out of the consulting room into the world, and he brought astonishing inventiveness, style, and learning to every sentence he wrote and spoke.

I want to recall here just one particular moment where James said something that perfectly captures his spirit. Here was the set-up: It was the turn of the millennium, and James gave two major lectures in Santa Barbara in successive years, one in 1999 and the other in 2000. So he had something to say on each side of Y2K.

In the 1999 lecture, at Pacifica, he spoke about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and he pointed out that "our calendar has built into it the apocalyptic fantasy," with its thousand-year sequence just then about to reach its threshold. You'll all recall of course that at the end of that year as the century and millennium went through its shift, after all the efforts by computer specialists and planners to avoid the global infrastructure crash, midnight December 31 turned smoothly into 12:01 AM on January 1, 2000, and happy celebrations and fireworks took place around the world, with no collapse of civilization. So in September of 2000, when James began his keynote address at the big Psychology at the Threshold conference, he reflected on this fact – and then said:

"Can we not snatch some defeat from this victory?"

How supremely James, that remark: The marvelous trickster wit, the casual subversiveness, the counter-intuitive reversal of the expected truism. In those two little sentences straddling Y2K he managed to hit about a half dozen of his favorite targets simultaneously: The inflated heroic ego, modernity, literalist-apocalyptic Christianity, American naive can-do optimism, the techno-scientific-managerial mindset. All this with his trademark view from below, his eye for shadow, the gift of the loss, the down side, the depression, the failure, the errancy – above all, his love of turning upside down the common wisdom, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory on behalf of soul, of life.

One reason James compelled and delighted so many was that he kept outcontextualizing the dominant world views of both science and religion, and he did this by virtue of his sheer erudition, psychological complexity, and spirited irony. He laughed at the dominant bullies.

The list of dangerous, two-horned topics to which he turned his extraordinary vision is nearly endless: ecology, aging, war, destiny, *puer* and *senex*, the city and urban design, architecture, economics, the men's movement, racism, pornography, language, philosophy, cosmology, astrology, phenomenology, public education, art, animals, emotion, Shakespeare, the Renaissance, Romanticism, Neoplatonism.

He contained so many paradoxes: He was wonderfully European, cultured, multilingual, in touch with the primary sources of the grand tradition. But he did what he did as a born American, a jazzy irreverent rebel, always improvising, overthrowing the dogma of the old monarchy, vigorously asserting

the common life of soul – the ambiguous many over the literal one.

James was both postmodern and ancient. He saw *through*, endlessly, like a deconstructionist, and yet he *saw*, vividly, the gods, the spirits, the depths, like an ancient poet.

He recognized essences without ever succumbing to essentialism.

He had an allegiance to the fallen world, yet he risked a large vision.

He was a poet of psyche and a psychologist of the polis.

Above all, James championed the imagination in its high rightful place at the center of human reality, with perhaps greater force and eloquence than anyone since William Blake. And he saw the anima mundi, the soul of the world, in ways no one had seen before, inspiring not just psychologists but scholars across the disciplines, artists, poets, activists on every front.

But he didn't like system. "You cannot diagram a single thing I've written," he said. "Give me the pearls but not the string – it's a noose."

And he did not suffer fools, as they say. Even when he was young, in university at Dublin, one of his professors noted his restless lack of interest. After weeks of class, the professor finally looked over at him and said drily, "Take the odd note, Hillman."

Yet what subtlety and alert engagement with the present!

In a way, James worked alone within his own inner crucible. And yet he was always profoundly part of a large community of friends and colleagues around the world whom he helped in countless ways and was in turn stimulated by.

How deeply James enriched us with his unending flow of insights, placing so many things in new light – and in shadow. His depth of soul and breadth of knowledge, his sparkling language, his heretic originality, his sharp-edged individuality. He will be deeply missed, but he left us with so much that we will be integrating for a long, long time to come.

Richard Tarnas
May 4, 2013
New York City