

When anomalies call

June 6, 2017

As good coaches and therapists we are trained to listen on many levels to our clients and the stories that they bring. We are not so surprised when clients present with issues for which we have had an insider's seat or a particular training. But we may need to look more attentively to identify themes which arrive unannounced and to which we may not feel so consciously attuned. Sometimes it's not about what is emergent in the other but about what we are being asked to pay attention to for our own learning. And when synchronicities appear, silently disturbing the fabric of socially constructed reality, we can choose whether to embrace them as bearers of emergent meaning or dismiss them as anomalies. The choice we make, and the place within ourselves from which we make it, can open up or close down our own worldview and that of the client.

A few months ago I noticed something odd happening in my practice. Of the clients I have had thus far 60% identify as female and 40% as male. Yet here I was seeing 9 female clients in a row – statistically rather improbable, I thought. A couple of days later this had risen to 13. Where had all the men gone? Was I driving them away? But, as I reflected, it became apparent that this wasn't about the men at all. Obviously it was about the women! And what were these women bringing? So I looked back over recent transcripts in search of common themes. One thing and one thing only stood out - a whole range of health issues connected to the sacral area, such as uterine cancer, hereditary ovarian cancer, miscarriages, fibroids, polyps, irregular periods and sacro-iliac joint hypermobility.

Now I am not a medic so this very concentrated band of symptoms seemed unusual to be landing at the door of a male coach. As I opened up to colleagues about this it gradually dawned on me that the collective experiences of the feminine perhaps needed to be brought to the attention of a masculine collective. How else to explain the curious way this had come to my own attention? So while the symptomology was about the feminine the message seemed to be for the masculine. If true could this be something the masculine is not looking at but is also implicated in?

To pause for a moment, what we have so far is an anomaly, but an anomaly which is coming with a pattern of symptoms, focused on the uterus, experienced by one gender. Then there is curiosity (the author's) and an openness to explore with colleagues. But exploration classically requires a method, a lens and a context. The context so far seems to be simply the search for meaning – a very open enquiry indeed. The method is perhaps simply paying attention and staying curious. One lens that has suggested itself is synchronicity – in part because of its relationship (in the author's eyes) with the conjunction of anomaly and meaning. A second is gender.

So could my colleagues in my Men's Circle, through our shared context of working with the masculine, help the meaning emerge? This small group was set up with a specific mission to work with the Sacred Masculine. If it surprises you that there is such a thing as a Sacred Masculine

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archetype then you are not alone. The consensus among us in this group is that the shadow of two millennia of patriarchy has obscured the archetype of the Sacred Masculine such that many men do not (consciously or unconsciously) see this dimension being modelled in any meaningful way by men who currently occupy positions of authority. In psychological terms our need as men to idealise other men is not being met; as a result many millions of men are struggling to access and internalise this core element of themselves. This potentially translates at an existential level into spiritual crisis, reflecting a loss of meaning or faith in the masculine; at a practical level this plays out through men being uncertain of their role in life, being unsure how to be in right relationship particularly with their female partners, thereby often acting out through immaturity, irresponsibility or disrespectful behaviour. As our group reflected on the history of men and particularly the centuries of white, colonial patriarchy there was a bold suggestion that we invite in the Sacred Feminine to our Circle. Perhaps without the Feminine Principle our efforts in the group were going to be too slow and laboured, such is the density of the shadow material that we are looking to illuminate, acknowledge, accept, own and integrate. But beyond that is the deep appreciation that the Feminine and the Masculine principles are fundamentally linked and stand in right relation with one another. It was shortly after this decision to invite in the Sacred Feminine that my 13 female clients appeared.

So far so helpful. But to reflect on all this from another angle, I decided to peer through the lens of trans-generational trauma, a recent, paradigm-busting field of psychotherapeutic interest. This is trauma that is passed down the ancestral line unconsciously. In other words it can be a state of feeling or unfeeling, loss or grief that has its roots in trauma but which then becomes normalised as part of life among subsequent generations without its connection to trauma being explicitly identified; alternatively it can be trauma that is physically and/or psychologically experienced by children or grandchildren alive today, seemingly on behalf of ancestors who lived through the trauma but who apparently did not or could not somatise it[1]; or trauma's impact on the present can be inferred from certain destructive behaviours[2] which get acted out unconsciously among those with ancestral exposure to trauma. Inter-generational trauma, by contrast, is something that has been spoken about in the family; as a result younger family members know to some extent what they are dealing with and are thus better able to manage its legacy. But because the negative dimensions of patriarchy have become so widespread over the past 2000 years they have arguably become normalised, despite the best efforts of feminism and human rights movements (and now our own small Men's Circle) to call them out. I would argue therefore that some of the experience of traumatising and being traumatised by the masculine are being passed down the line trans-generationally.

Putting these seemingly disparate fragments together, I felt I was being invited to view the uterus as the epicentre of a specific kind of trans-generational trauma, namely that resulting at close quarters from the unacknowledged impacts of patriarchy. While neither patriarchy nor matriarchy

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is inherently good or bad there is more than enough evidence around us in 2017 to suggest that contemporary patriarchy has got well and truly split off from any semblance of its sacred nature. In practical terms, once a system of power becomes divorced from its inner awareness or external checks and balances then the system does not feed back properly. With no accountability there will be little cause for reflection among men of power on the negative impact of unrestrained male power. And in the absence of reflectiveness consciousness will stagnate. In its place the shadow takes over and runs amok, but this is covered up through the (sometimes unconscious) processes of projection^[3] and projective identification^[4], whereby the contents of the shadow are exported onto those deemed inferior beings, typically POC and women. But that is not all. The shadow has to be owned and if men are not going to own their own stuff then who do you think ends up somatising it?

The hypothesis then is that - whether out of love, through coercion or a misplaced sense of duty - the feminine has been absorbing for a couple of millennia or longer much of this toxicity. And the one organ in the body which is a prime candidate for holding these unprocessed energies is the uterus. This is the vessel for life which comes with a powerful and vital monthly cleansing capability, linked to the lunar cycle and of course to the Mother Goddess, whose presence has been eclipsed in this age of male monotheism and rampant patriarchy. Men have no such vessel, nor do they ever have the experience of holding in their bodies the life of another, masculine or feminine. So perhaps it is all too easy for the masculine to 'project' externally and for the feminine to 'contain' internally. What then if the uterus becomes the clearing-house for anything and everything which is somatised in the feminine which originates from being in relationship with the masculine shadow - all the subjugation and whorification of the feminine, split off emotional incontinence, the disowned shame and sexual predatoriness? (I could go on but this is a short blog...) In the face of such a psychophysical onslaught the uterus shedding its lining once a month does not seem to be an adequate response.

Maybe I am running too far ahead with this. Perhaps it is enough for now to reflect upon and intuit what the principles of the Sacred Masculine may actually be. In one of our Men's Circle sessions this principle appeared, in part, as an organising one which, through its very presence and solidity, enables joy and playfulness to unfold. And there is wisdom there too, centred not in the head (the exalted centre for western men over recent centuries) but in the heart. And in the space that the Sacred Masculine protects and contains there is a witnessing without judgment of what is being experienced. This archetypal depiction may seem unrecognisable to us men today. Where is the warrior, the action man, amongst all this reflectiveness? Well, the Warrior has his place and his own archetype. But for the Sacred Masculine it seems that the development of self-awareness, wisdom and the ability to hold a space lovingly and protectively precede and, dare I say it, 'trump' all other attributes.

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Pulling all this together, I would say the purpose of this blog was not necessarily to enquire deeply into the Sacred Masculine or Feminine (of which more another time) nor into trans-generational trauma per se nor even into the reality of psychophysical trauma on the uterus but to simply observe an anomaly and then describe the development of an open enquiry around it. Or perhaps it was all of these! In retrospect this is a good example of a trans-disciplinary approach where one starts out with no preconceived context or framework and then allows oneself to be guided by intuition, by what emerges and by whatever is available. By paying attention to an anomaly the possibility of a deeper meaning began to emerge. Then with apparent synchronicity comes a sign that one is on the right track even if one doesn't know where the track is heading! This then builds trust, emboldens one to pay further attention and examine the terrain through different lenses. The lenses I have used are simply those within my area of experience, interest and values. But there could be many more. So the 'conclusion' I reached is simply where I have arrived at with the current enquiry and is not in any way a definitive end point. Other contexts may yet present themselves with their power to shift perspectives on any part of this enquiry. So here finally is my parting comment: holding the trans-disciplinary context always allows for more and not less to be seen and included – and this is surely in service to our clients and ourselves.

[1] Somatising is taking something, which could be a feeling or an idea, into the body. When an unfamiliar idea 'sinks in' you are arguably somatising it. If you are looking for a dramatic account of such phenomena may I direct you to Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger's extraordinary *The Ancestor Syndrome*. (2009 Routledge.)

[2] And for a contemporary account of this latter form of trans-generational trauma then I urge you to read psychotherapist Barbara Fletchman Smith's harrowing observations of present-day impacts on British people of Caribbean heritage arising from hundreds of years of slavery. (*Transcending the Legacy of Slavery. A Psychoanalytic View*. 2001. Karnac.)

[3] Projection is the process whereby the parts of me that I cannot accept are attributed to The Other, who is then condemned (by me) for having them.

[4] Projective Identification is a method of introjecting onto another person certain aspects of identity. In class systems it is common for those at the higher end to do this to those at the lower end. The psychological rationale is 'your inferiority is required for me to experience my superiority.' Inferiority/superiority then become internalised as part of the 'social contract'.