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New Mythos Grant

The Mythos of Change: Mythical Journeying from the Inside Out

Preliminary Research Report

Stillness and Waiting: Lessons From the Wilderness

...the things in the land fit together perfectly, even though they are always changing. I wish the order of my life to be arranged in the same way I find the light, the slight movement of the wind, the voice of a bird, the heading of a seed pod I see before me. This impeccable and indisputable integrity I want in myself.

--- Barry Holstun Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*. pg. 362

My proposed project, as described in the New Mythos grant proposal, is to study what may be called a “mythos of change” as a relevant paradigm in the contemporary context. Specifically, I am interested in that aspect of change that manifests as a catalytic tension of opposites in an individual when faced with a transformative life-experience. Such a tension comes from the recognition that a new way of thinking about a life-situation is necessary as opposed to becoming swayed by powerful and equally compelling resistances that make such insights challenging. What qualities form the mythos or narrative of this tension? What qualities promote their reconciliation into integrity?

Insight comes from a collision of inner psychological states with an outer experiential reality. Of the many experiences that represent a tension of opposites, the choice of an urban lifestyle versus a life in closer harmony with the rhythms of nature is one that has always fascinated me. What narrative holds these life-choices in

juxtaposition and how can an individual merge the essence of these experiences to live a more peaceful, integrated and abundant life, wherever they chose to live? How can one bring the wilderness into our homes and hearts?

In my time at the Opus Archives Research Center, I found the work of Jane Hollister Wheelwright particularly gripping. In my reading of Wheelwright's work, two lessons, of several, emerge from her experiences in the wilderness that may be brought directly into our homes. So, in beginning this conversation about what constitutes a mythos of change, this paper explores these two qualities brought forth by Wheelwright. These are - *stillness* and *waiting*.

In Wheelwright's *The Long Shore: A Psychological Experience of Wilderness*, her inner world of spirit collides with the outer world of experience. Through a large collection of writing including the *Ranch Papers*, with revisions, deletions, additions, and many modifications over the years, Wheelwright weaves her inner psychological life in words, with the natural environment of a ranch that she has come to love, but is required to sell. In the many versions of her work, what is included in the final version of published volume is just as captivating as what is not. Nevertheless, the opportunity to look at the many drafts of these works gave me an experience of the very qualities Wheelwright writes about. In order to go through the many pages of writing, the reader must, quite simply, become still, focus on her words, and wait. After page and page of waiting in the writing, there it is! All of a sudden. Little flashes of brilliance, insight, revelations and reflections leap out of the darkness of the ink in which they have been written in the early hours of dawn.

One may wonder, what is special about the way Wheelwright presents the qualities of stillness and waiting. My response to this comes in the form of one of Wheelwright's own quotes.

She writes:

I had to ask myself again why the oaks fascinate me even to my own embarrassment. What is it in them that always gets to me. No one limb looks like any other; their twistings, turnings reflect the elements and mark their life stories, determining their ages. They always seem to be gathered together in pleasing wholes and their green in the fall is almost black against the straw colored hills. [*The Ranch Papers, Ranch XLIII*, Sept 14, 1964, pg. 2]

Wheelwright's writing also presents details in "pleasing wholes." And in the details the reader is encouraged to slow down and notice. In doing this, there is a growing appreciation of all that could very easily have been missed had it not been for her gentle nudge encouraging the reader to catch the beauty that lies abundantly around us.

Wheelwright's seeming obsession with the ranch reflects a deep love for the land of her ancestral heritage. While she had grown on the ranch, unlike her father, she had not worked on the land itself in quite the same way. However, when the ranch was up for sale, Wheelwright's world slowed down to meticulous details. Her writing demonstrates this slow, steady and still voice aiming precisely to find the center of the experience she finds herself in.

Determined to etch every leaf, tree and blade of grass into her being, Wheelwright began spending more and more time in the wilderness and in those moments she waited. In the wild, the strong connection of external surroundings with her dynamic inner world gave her inspiration, insights and pages and pages of writing. Wheelwright discovered a terrain of wilderness within herself that also represented her exterior world and each

morning as she filled the pages of her legal pad, she connected once more with that stillness and waiting that she found each time she rode her horse into the wild.

What particular types of insight result when a great catalyst enters into life at precisely the right moment? In the case of Jane Wheelwright, it was the draining loss of the ranch that allowed her to gain a tremendous energy to rediscover the land that she had grown up on. The close and carefully detailed analysis of what she saw in the wilderness and the minute details of her external environment allowed her to connect psychologically to the wilderness within herself. She was able to contemplate the idea of what the world would be like without wild, untamed spaces where nature exploded into bloom. Without these spaces, would it be possible to let the imprisoned splendor within herself, those wild, untamed spaces within her own nature, explode outwards?

Wheelwright's response to these questions comes in the following form:

If you are overtaken by the elements you cannot escape. Caught by the storm, you have to sit it out and be drenched just like every other living thing- and worse, because clothes, unlike feathers and fur, are not totally up to the elements. There is no point in looking ahead. You develop the habit of not being too sure about anything. You find yourself saying "Perhaps" and "Possibly," or, like the old timers, you say nothing at all because, like them, you have learned to wait and see. [*The Ranch Papers, Ranch A1*, pg. 110]

Images of the wild have an archetypal space in our psyches. Like our dreams, they are places that hold our darkest fears, deepest insecurities and if we are lucky, a compass. We must grab this compass and find our way by traversing the unknown and we must do this alone. Conquering the terrain, the weather, the unnamed threats to our survival and the potential of all those moments when right and wrong blur into thin threads of possibility, in the wild we must get very still. In dreams, the wilderness might represent

the possibility of waking up to our depths to find ourselves. In the wild, it is the possibility of losing oneself and never finding what is lost.

Wheelwright argues that the existence of such spaces is critical to societal mental health. A world that does not have any images of wilderness is a world that has lost itself and is veering towards mental illness. Furthermore, she writes that the experience of "merging" might not be realized in life were it not for the qualities that the wilderness offers to us. In *The Long Shore*, Wheelwright's daughter Lynda Wheelwright Schmidt, also a Jungian analyst concludes the following:

This experience, which I call "merging," is the heart of my relationship with the wilderness. I find that I have to feel alone to merge, so that I can make an intimate connection with the wilderness, with myself as a creature of nature, with the sense of awe that is the hallmark of the Other, the reality that is greater than oneself. I can feel alone in this way when others are around, but only if there is no talking. When I go out entirely alone, however, I am always anxious, too. But this is anxiety caused by awe of the enormity of the wilderness bringing home to me my vulnerability, my frailty, not the anxiety of loss. [*The Long Shore, Typescripts*, pg. 5]

Wheelwright indicates here that there is a quality found in the wild that is unmatched by any counterpart found in urban spaces. This intimate connection with the Wild is a connection with the Other, which makes the journey outward, also a journey inward. And this inward journey is of paramount importance. It is this journey that brings us one step closer to our authentic Self. In the quiet of the deep wilderness, there is an open invitation to be still. In this stillness, the answers to our own vocation, inner purpose, and life-path bubble up in the heat of the passion that creates all of life itself. Here, the wild exterior provides a perfect mirror for a wild interior where the caged animals are set free and not

feared but revered for the wisdom they unquestionably bring along with them. But one must be still and wait.

Even the slightest restless rustle that makes a presence known is all it takes for wild creatures to withdraw. The creatures of the wild only reveal their splendor when it is safe and trust can be felt like electricity in the air. When the trust is broken, the animal destroys what lies ahead or retreats. Similarly, the wilderness of the psyche requires a safety and trust to reveal what it guards within. Cultivating depth and sacredness in life requires moving beyond the superficial layers and digging deep into the darkness. And here one must be still and wait with perfect trust in the creative force that will no doubt pull us towards the light of becoming.

Perhaps this is why it is so much easier in today's society to get lost in the distractions of our modern times. It is easier to move from one task to another, never finishing any one fully and never letting any action enter within the psyche fully. It is easier not to care enough about any one thing long enough to become invested; to become disconnected from the actions that make up the majority of our day. An addiction that is given full legitimacy in our culture, it is easy to never fully attend to any one thing. It is easy because it does not involve being still and waiting.

Stillness and waiting are not for the weak of heart. It takes tremendous courage to sit still and wait for what might emerge out of the rough terrain of the wilderness within. Sometimes what reveals itself is dark, blurred by the shadows of our insecurities and hidden behind our delusions and judgments. On rare occasions, what we see is far more shocking than what we feared we would and much more humbling in ways we could not imagine. But most every time, what we find takes our breath away with its precision, the

speed with which it grabs us, and the seering sting of the first bite it takes out of our vulnerability. On this, Schmidt, again in conversation with her mother, writes:

That's it: You have to let the wild reveal itself on its own say-so. The wild animal will deign to show itself when it is ready, when it has weighed the situation, this way and that way and its way. Like the dream messages or the wind or whatever belongs to the wild, the animal comes in its own time and place. Not yours. You never have the control. The animal's choice controls you. If you do not respect the wild, you will see nothing. Even sometimes when you do, the denizen still is not ready to show itself. That is the experience I know best: days and days and days, nothing appears. Then, without reason or rationale or one's deserts, or God knows why, the coyote, the fox, the puma, the bobcat, will glide by for a matter of seconds, within your sight. The fatalistic, timeless, spaceless happening comes when it will: not because of you. And that is what makes it so treasured. [*The Long Shore, Typscripts, pg. 6, Chapter 20*]

Wheelwright's records and conversations with her daughter demonstrate her detailed commitment to exploring how individuals might relate to their environments. Her work reinforces that the wilderness is our most treasured possession if only we were still and waited to let it speak to us in ways we might understand. It connects the inner world of spirit with the outer world of action. And it is only by merging the two that we can hope to ultimately find our deeper selves both within ourselves and in the environments we inhabit. This is one powerful narrative of change, a mythos of personal transformation, forged by a single courageous step into the wilderness, within and so without, pointing the way home.

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