

Addiction, Shamanism and the Day I Didn't Die

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My wife, Deena Metzger, opens up her essay, *Illness Heals the World*:
“Illness is a story. It calls us to healing beyond our physical selves: a strange contradiction. Suffering from an affliction invites us to step into a realm of healing that can benefit ourselves, our communities and the world. Illness is, therefore, at the very core of healing. Not a contradiction but the strange dance of creation.”

What is the greater story of the illness of addiction? What is the story that cuts deep into the world of Spirit? What is the authentic and ensouled truth of the story we are in? What is the path of healing? And what gift to the world do we bring through our healing?

In the mid-nineties I was initiated as a shaman into the tribal medicine of the Shona and Ndebele people of central Africa. The understanding is that the ancestors call forth ones gifts with sacred illness. When I arrived in Zimbabwe it was quickly evident that I had many of the symptoms of water spirit disease – a vivid dream life, waking visions, mood swings, stomach problems, an excruciating and incapacitating empathy, a life rich in tragedy. From the point of view of Bantu medicine many addicts bear the dual diagnosis of water spirit disease.

The water spirits are spirits of peacemaking and healing. The only cure for water spirit disease is to surrender to initiation as a healer that is allied with the water spirits. As a veteran of the twelve steps this ‘surrender that was the heart and soul of initiation was very familiar.

“Take my will and my life,” we intone.

As a professional nurse I found this profound and refreshing: one makes peace with the spirit that afflicts and is empowered by it in the healing of others.

I've been graced by apprenticeship with three sacred illnesses in this life: water spirit disease, multiple sclerosis and drug addiction.

In *The Way of Sacred Illness* I wrote of being initiated by the spirit of MS:

“Multiple sclerosis has drawn me as a healer into a circle of healers, some that I have named, others that I'm beginning to know. Healing and initiation is the medicine of community, the weave of many hands. MS itself is the subtlest and most deft of healers, a true and vivid spirit ally, the one who knows the intimate cellular truth, undisguised, undeniable and utterly transparent. Among the living and the spirits this Guest turns a face that is not without beauty. Who am I to argue that fate delivered me here by accident, has called me towards the dance with this one so real in its intelligence, so relentless in its wisdom?”

I've published quite a lot about MS and water spirit disease but here I want to speak with gratitude and respect to the disease of drugs -- passed on through the ancestral line for at least 150 years.

(In Zimbabwe, an essential aspect of initiation is the healing of the ancestors. Being clean and sober is a gesture towards those ones that inspire this body.)

The extraordinary exchange between Bill Wilson and C.G.Jung underscores that addiction was understood as sacred illness from the very beginning of what became a worldwide network of anonymous fellowship. Writing in 1961 Bill W. tells Jung about how a patient of Jung's (a certain Roland H.) in the early 1930's was seminal to the founding of AA.

"First of all, you frankly told him of his hopelessness, so far as any further medical or psychiatric treatment might be concerned... This candid and humble statement of yours was beyond doubt the first foundation stone upon which our Society has since been built. When he asked you if there was any other hope, you told him there might be, provided he could become the subject of a spiritual or religious experience ..."

In his response Jung wrote of Roland H:

"His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God. How could one formulate such an insight in a language that is not misunderstood in our days? You see, 'alcohol' in Latin is 'spiritus' and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum."

Every addict and every moth knows that the flame is more compelling than mere survival. Every addict knows the truth of W.H. Auden's words "we are lived by forces we scarcely understand." My translation is "we are lived by stories we scarcely understand." The sacred nature of the story of addiction begins when drugs or liquor brings you to your knees.

"I was so high but then I crashed."

Again as in initiation into tribal medicine, one learns the blessed alchemy that transforms humiliation into humility.

On December 28, 2008 I did not die, There are so many ways to die – the possibilities are without number – but I didn't..

On that day I was 18,904 days old.

I've anticipated December 28 for over 30 years now.

You see my father died when he was 18,904 days old. A few months after my mother separated from him and took my 11 year old self and my three brothers to New Mexico he had his first heart attack and then submitted to the yogic discipline of slow-motion suicide. Alcohol and cigarettes. Bloated with congestive heart failure he drew his last breath nine years later in a hospital in Hollywood.

In his forties his body sheltered the disease that took him to his grave. In my forties I cultivated hospitality for the “incurable” Guest, multiple sclerosis.

Listening, listening to its incessant wisdom

And addiction?

In the mountains north of my grandfather’s ranch the *penitentes* used to flagellate themselves and crucify a member every Easter. That old time religion was good enough for me but I merely flagellated my nervous system with psychedelics for a few years until it bled its ecstasy into the earth.

I tried hard to be an alcoholic but ultimately didn’t have the will. Made a few gallons of sake’ those months I was a hermit after nursing school and meditate all day and drink into the night. Communing with my dad’s spirit.

Why would a self-respecting hippie choose to be addicted to a drug that would numb his soul ?

Psychedelics were my game and with them I courted madness and vision.

I remember well when I ate LSD with my dad a year before he died. Looking in my eyes, I into his, beneath the gaze of the icon of Kwan Yin he won in a poker game in Korea during the war, he said, “We are the same person aren’t we ?” I responded “Yes,” as it was the mutual evidence of our senses.

“Not one, not two” says Suzuki Roshi.

Sunyata.

Allan Watts says of his experiences with psychedelics, “when you get the message hang up the phone,” I was most stubborn or most dense. I insisted as only an addict could that psychedelics were necessary – *necessary* – to mediate my spiritual and intimate life. Eventually I conceded to the message that the gods had offered with such generosity.

The truth is I would have been most disappointed if I didn’t acquire some kind of addiction. Although I first imagined that my addiction was altogether superior to another’s, the company of fellow addicts showed me the utter banality of it. The same tawdry distortions of building a life around using, the same driven willingness to make loved ones suffer for your appetites.

My great good fortune is that I bottomed out as a homeless teenage druggie and then began the “slow cook” that has been my life.

A week before the day that I chose life I wrote a prose poem to my father to burn in an offering up of those 18,904 days. I’d been meditating on the story of the master craftsman Daedalus and his son Icarus imprisoned in the labyrinth with the Minotaur. The figure of the Minotaur haunts me: a son of Poseidon in his bull form by the mortal queen Pasiphae I can see only the godbeast of addiction persisting generation after generation. Daedalus crafting wings with feathers and wax to soar beyond imprisonment, tells his son not to fly too high or the wings will melt.

But now, dad, in retrospect, can I sing the birds eye view?

You father Daedalus and I your son Icarus – after tasting 100 micrograms of LSD you tell me I’m not to get too close to the sun? Know you nothing of aspiration? When the wax wings melt you speak of the tragedy of a young man’s longing. But don’t you know the aspiration and the fall to earth are the story we’re in.?

(This I write, inveterate smartass, three decades after your death, and you remind me you were doing a spiritual exercise taking all the love of the universe into your heart when you had your first coronary. I see Icarus fell through your death into my body, reconfigured through my addiction to fall finally to earth.)

And in the full ideogram of fate the fall to earth is equally blessed though many don’t live to enjoy the blessings.

Such is the sweet and desperate intimacy played across generations and every one of these 18,904 days.

The old man in the boy always knew this: the rise, the fall and the healing of the full cycle is the fistful of flowers I offer you on the day that I will not die.

The boys choice of addiction that vanquishes the fiction of choice I offer you on the day that I will not die.

The tears. saliva. blood and breath of all the drunken ancestors forever grieving that we lost the confederacy I offer to fire the day that I will not die.

And that other disease, multiple sclerosis, the years of piss and shit, going blind and then not, losing my legs and regaining them, losing my mind and recovering a portion of it, wondering if it was mine to be paralyzed – the gamut of this brief spasm in a still brief life -- I offer over this day that I will not die.

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I have a lovely wooden coffin, once a container for ARMIDA POIZIN: THE WINE TO DIE FOR. RIP in which I will leave this poem and all I cannot name that is to be burned on the day I will not die.

And after that?

After 18,904 days?

Well – one day at a time from then on.

May we all rest in peace, dad ---

Michael