

Holding Two Truths: Navigating Ambiguity

Decades ago I worked as a Planned Parenthood volunteer. I escorted women from their car to the clinic, with screaming protesters surrounding the building. I took a deep breath, put my bullet proof vest on, and linked arms with the women I led. I prayed constantly for love to surround all involved. One particular sunny day, it was crowded on the sidewalk surrounding the clinic as both a Catholic church, and Operation Rescue had shown up for the protest. There were billboards filled with gruesome pictures, women holding imitation aborted fetuses, and people constantly shouting at the women entering the clinic. "Hey lady, don't kill your baby today!"

"Hey lady, you don't have to do this. Come talk to us!" I breathed in love with every step I took. A Catholic priest led others in a circle as he prayed the rosary, and at one point he turned toward us raising his hand in blessing and said, "I pray for all of you involved in this tragedy." A fellow volunteer reactively grumbled to me, "I don't need his prayers." I responded, "I need all the prayers I can get." We were divided. We sat on different sides of two extreme polarities, but somewhere deep inside of me, I sensed a middle ground. Several weeks after this experience at Planned Parenthood I went to a protest at the federal prison where a prisoner was to be executed after almost a decade-long hiatus of executions in Colorado. As we pulled up to the prison, we encountered a prison guard who asked us, "Are you for or against?" As I looked to the right to see a more celebratory group I confusedly responded, "Against," and turned left into a parking lot of people holding candles. We began to walk through the crowd, singing and praying, and I would look into the eyes of those I passed and silently nod; grateful that I did not stand outside of that prison alone. As I quietly walked along, I raised my gaze to meet the eyes of who I thought was a stranger. I met the eyes of the priest I had seen weeks before; except this time he was on my side.

Extremes exist and many of us live out of them. [Carl Jung](#) speaks of the "third thing which unites opposites" where wisdom rises when two truths are held simultaneously. As the person in the story stood next to the priest who prayed for her a few weeks before, sides became more of an illusion than a reality. Lines never stay static. They change depending on the context. We could be on the opposite side of a person one day, and in an instant the line shifts, and we are united.

Out there beyond right-doing and wrongdoing there is a field,

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,

the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, languages, even the phrase "each other"

doesn't make any sense. ~ Rumi

When lines blur we can wonder where we stand and why. Because of this encounter with the priest, the person in the story found herself in a place of ambiguity, she was unsure as to how to navigate. Many of those around her held on tightly to their sides, but to the person in the story that did not seem to be the road that held the most potential.

From epistemologist [Dr. Manulani Meyers](#):

We have a high intolerance for ambiguity and that's what indigeneity has to offer the planet. Because of nature and the needed swing toward a scientific, predictable, and empirical world that produced such science that the Western world needed, to stop the horror that was happening. That is a positive, that the West swung into a one-truth epistemology. Now you've really got to figure out what a one-truth epistemology means. It's an Aristotelian idea that you can't hold two opposite truths to be, two at the same time. And that, we disagree with. We can hold opposites, my truth could be your truth, and both truths are called relative truths. So when you go into the mystic traditions you just have to find more rigorous ways to discuss what the world is needing to birth and that's why a lot of this scholarship will be found in women's writing... We are about wholeness and we are looking for synonyms to wholeness. You can just be saying whole, whole, whole, holistic. You've got to find synonyms to discuss what the perceived polemics of today are. And that is two truths. We can hold opposites to be true at the same time simultaneously.

There is power in allowing for ambiguity. However small in number, there are those who have studied that power (Beauvoir; 1948; Boss, 2013; Busch, 2010; Empson, 1966; Hodgson, 2001; Wilkinson, 2006). And there are many ways to tell the story of what happens when opposites are held together rather than chosen.

Telling the Story of Ambiguity through Jungian Archetypes

When you approach a temple in East Asia, you will most likely see a fu dog outside of it. In Western European churches, you might see gargoyles lined up on a cathedral ledge. In Ireland, you would see the sheela na gig situated over an archway of a stone structure. These figures represent the archetype of the masculine; a quality of energy that is action-oriented, protective, and in service to the feminine. The job of the masculine is to protect the sacred feminine; a quality of energy that is subtle, unseen, and in service to life. At the temple, the fu dog guards the door to the inner sanctuary. When we take good care of ourselves through good boundaries and healthy choices, the masculine within is protecting the heart of who we are. The archetypes, as Jung defined them, cannot be pointed to directly in our linear language. We experience the archetypes of the masculine and the feminine through dreams, imagination, and creative expression. They are helpful tools in getting to know the whole of who we are. The archetypal masculine and the feminine have little to do with societal gender roles

but live within every being where “the feminine is deeply embedded in all of us...and we must all discover the feminine within if we are to discern the patterns and energies of the psyche that empower transformation” (Garrison, 2000, p. 288). The feminine represents the soul, the breath, the emotional, and invisible aspect of the human experience. The masculine represents the body, the focused, visible, action-oriented part of ourselves. According to Jung, wholeness happens at the point where the two merge; in the “clash and reconciliation” (Garrison, p. 291) of these polarities. For example, those of us who show up easily in the world and manifest our dreams and live less in the interior life, embody the masculine more readily. And those who vision and daydream, deeply knowing their internal selves but have difficulty bringing their desires to life, embody the feminine with greater ease. Wholeness comes from getting reacquainted with the qualities within that are unfamiliar. This is [shadow work](#); to recover what is not readily seen in the light of one’s consciousness.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture and have for centuries that values the masculine far more than its counterpart. “After several thousand years, during which Western culture developed in increasingly masculine and patriarchal ways, separating the opposites from each other and subordinating the feminine under the masculine, a great reversal is taking place” (Garrison, 2000, p. 291). The feminine has been wounded and this is most readily seen in the lack of care shown for our bodies, and the Earth.

In my house lives the most beautiful wild animal.

But she is sad.

She has lost her forest.

She has lost her tribe.

*Her very language is almost gone, dissolved
in sorrow and disuse.*

What can you do to comfort such a creature?

She stares out of the window and longs to go somewhere -- but where?

The nothingness of the days exhausts her.

Have you ever seen an animal weep?

*When I touch her she looks at me with that
lost world in her eyes --*

hopeful, but trembling.

~ Mary Oliver

The whole of who we are is where the two archetypes meet. When one is privileged over the other, just like the light and the dark (another way of naming these qualities), the imbalance can be damaging. John O’Donohue (1999) writes, “There is something deeply sacred about every presence. When we become blind to this, we violate Nature and turn our beautiful world into a wasteland...We lament today the absence of God

and the demise of the sacred. Yet it is we ourselves who have killed God. The world is just as full of sacred presence as it was centuries ago. With the hardening of our minds we are no longer able to feel and sense the ever-present sacred the way our ancestors did. (p. 76) Because “the entire course of Western civilization is seen as vitiated by patriarchy, the aggressive, plundering, male domination of our society” (Berry, p. 141) there is a temptation to abandon the masculine all together. Privileging the feminine over the masculine leads to a lack of structure and boundaries that are necessary for growth. Privileging the masculine over the feminine leads to control and domination; an overuse of boundaries. The magic happens in the integration of the two.

Resources

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