



© Pita Davis

Coyote and other Archetypal Tales:

Synchronicity, Surprise and the Unexpected Moment

(Excerpt from an edited conversation of Angeles Arrien with Alan Briskin)

“Magic happens when there is a movement in the group from opposition to paradox.”

Angeles Arrien (Angie): I think we’ve been trying to define transpersonal for years (all of us who are deeply interested). It’s the spiritual or the mysterious or that which is greater than any part. Use the word “magic.” What creates magic in us? And it’s a mystery. But I think there are choice points along the way. I think that the transpersonal is a unifying force.... Wherever there’s magic there’s delight and love. Humor. The human spirit is being moved. Moved and uplifted. I think the transpersonal is very mysterious wherever there’s breakdown. I guess it’s a call to creativity. All conflict is a call to creativity and problem solving. I also see the transpersonal as something that wants to move something forward....

I could have success by cultural standards or by family standards, yet I may still experience a divine haunting.... I think another word that people will use is “meaning.” “I’ve lost meaning”.... The human spirit always wants to make a contribution and perhaps there are not enough invitations to do so.

I think the meta conversation in every group is about inclusion and exclusion, it’s archetypal. And it’s interesting to watch the drive for inclusion and the fear of exclusion, and what that sets up as a matrix for competition or comparison, rather than cooperation and collaboration.

I keep wondering, if we could be as creative positively as we are in the shadow side. There’s a lot of human creativity going into the shadow side, and I’m struck by the possibility: if we could just put that much attention and effort, collectively, on the positive side, we could create together something empowering with such inspiration and excitement that could change the world.

Jung says that when the poles of good and evil, or the shadow and the light are very far apart, then there’s a necessity for an intermediary bridge. And [he spoke of] two symbols. One would be Pegasus, the winged horse, which was a symbol of the positive instinctual nature that knows how to move opposition into paradox. The winged horse, whose wings are the mystery—the transpersonal—and the horse, which is of the ground—the practical and knowable worlds.

Then he said also [a second symbol is] the feminine—found in every man and woman—a place where you can create a field of allurements. To magnetize, so that people will open and deepen their experience. And we can’t open and deepen our experience until we feel safe. And he says we’re never safe in polarity, but we can create safety in paradox....

Perhaps paradox is the element of surprise that always comes up in the collective. I love tracking the unexpected in a collective, because I feel that that’s the place where spirit announces itself. Because it’s beyond people’s agendas. Coyote. Trickster....

Alan Briskin: Is there something that may be particularly left out of the group that would sort of call in the trickster?

Angie: I think the trickster opens a way to transforming opposition into paradox. I think what is left out is the unifying principle... where there’s been maximum conflict in a collective, the trickster shows up.

Principle

Element of the Experience

Surprise, Mystery and Alchemy

People describe the element of surprise in their experiences—the unexpected, the unpredictable, the mysterious, the magical. They speak of this element seeming to appear out of nowhere, completely unplanned, in its own time and rhythm, and on its own terms.

Sometimes a person appears uninvited, sometimes an object is produced, or a familiar object takes on new significance; a sudden conflict erupts, or a surprising connection is made between two people that could be named “coincidence.” All of these are instinctively known by the group to have significance far beyond coincidence. Whatever form it takes, this is the appearance of the wildcard, the “joker”—also referred to as the “trickster” or “coyote”—and despite the guise of its appearance, this is the messenger of insight.



“When you’re really looking for that moment of illumination—and, of course, you can’t look for illumination, that’s the paradox! You can’t seek it out directly—that’s where magic does happen in groups.”

—Lauren Artress

“When I am present in a group, I will listen and watch for whatever seems to be around the edges of a group—places where a thought or an emotion or an insight will be touched on and then not deepened. Or where there is this kind of (*sings a note in the air*), but then there’s either a reflective move away from it—from fear or from unfamiliarity, or from a lack of recognition. That moment—if we could hang in that moment for a moment—would open something up for us that is ready to be born.”

—Rachel Bagby

Once I was in a group that had much conflict. Specifically, there was a hold-out, someone who wanted to have her way, period. And so an older gentleman said, “You know, I’m really curious about why you need to have your way.” And she said, “Because I want to be queen.”

In this group was also a princess, a true princess from Arabia, who went over to her and gave her her crown. That acknowledgment brought the whole collective down, put them in a place of delight...[the situation] polarized. It was the group, and her. Which is a coyote action...the true princess. Why would she be there? It’s just a mystery. The forces bringing these two women together to shift an opposition to a paradox. It’s always interesting when there’s a severe polarity...any investment in looking good, doing it right, having it together...a trickster is ready to catalyze people out of fear or out of pride, which are the two large impediments in group work. [Trickster] is the awakener.... “Wake up, now! You’re falling asleep.”

Commentary on Coyote and other Archetypal Tales:

Who or what is the trickster? Trickster tales, particularly Native American stories of coyote and raven, embody awakening, “reflection coming into being,” in the words of the mythologist Lewis Hyde. In Angie’s story of a group polarized, opposition between one member of the group and the rest leaves everyone stuck, a common phenomenon in groups. Sometimes the opposition is between two individuals, sometimes between sub-groups, other times polarized around issues that the group cannot solve in a satisfactory way. Something is left out, “the unifying principle” in Angie’s language. In opposition, the group is polarized between light and shadow, good and bad, right and wrong. In other words, a duality not bridged.

Magic happens when there is a movement in the group from opposition to paradox. In Angie’s story of the woman who wishes to be a princess and the princess who is, paradox is achieved metaphorically. A person says she is stuck because she wants to be treated as a princess and a real princess is present. The real princess pulls out from the folds of her dress a crown, and presents it to her. Now there are two princesses. Paradox has the quality of presenting two truths, each with its own tiara.

The shock of seeing two truths bridges opposition because it awakens us, makes us reflect, makes us wonder, “How can this be so?” In one traditional trickster tale, raven dives into the water believing plums reflected in the water will feed his belly. Instead, he raps his head on the rocks just below the water’s surface. How can this be so, thinks raven, that the appearance of plums are not the same as plums? The pain of contact with the rocks awakens raven and helps him to eventually fool other animals, using what he learned from his experience with the plums. There is delight, but only after raven takes a good knock on the head.

In our conversations with people about collective intelligence and spiritual wisdom there is often mention of the unplanned moment, the surprise, the unexpected. What makes them trickster moments is the quality of their effect on the group. A mark of trickster’s cunning is his ability to seize or block opportunity. So too in the group, where trickster dynamics can as often feel like a rap on the head as much as a slap of enlightenment. Collective intelligence is furthered when enough preparation has occurred in the group for trickster’s antics to become delight rather than frustration. In Angie’s story, something is already moving in the group, otherwise the older gentleman could not ask such a direct question, and the woman, who is so polarized from the others, could not answer in such a creative way.

Angie points to two qualities that prepare the way for movement into paradox. The first is safety, “we can’t open and deepen our experience until we feel safe.” The feminine aspect is crucial to safety in group life in the specific way it “magnetizes” and creates a field of allurements. This chemistry or quality of attraction can be between individuals or found in common interests, but however it emerges, its function is to open the inner eye so that individuals can open to and deepen their experience. Possibly it begins with a question, “Why is this so?” or “How can this be?” or simply “Tell me more.” The question magnetizes the various elements, attracting new understanding.

This kind of inquiry goes hand in hand with the flight of Pegasus. The chasm between polarities is bridged by the positive instinctual forces for compassion, empathy, knowing of a unity despite the appearance of opposites. The older gentleman asks why, the woman answers with an image of royalty and a real princess shares her crown. Only then does a group really begin to “take off,” metaphorically rising up, nestled in the wings of a mythological beast. ■

“This chemistry or quality of attraction can be between individuals or found in common interests, but however it emerges, its function is to open the inner eye so that individuals can open to and deepen their experiences.”

Principle

Significance of Gathering

Connectedness

People most often find great comfort and inspiration in group gatherings. There is a very real need for safe places where people feel welcomed; where they can come together to share feelings and experiences at a deep personal level. Places where they come to feel fully seen and heard and validated. Places where they are able to take the time to really listen to each other, to reflect together, to make sense of their experiences, and so to reach deeper levels of understanding in their own lives and for the community represented. In the group, people experience the power of being seen, being heard and understood at a very deep level; a sense of coming home, of belonging.



“People are sick of being intimidated and run by fear or pride or politics. They’re hungry—hungry for anything that’s meaningful, or a quality connection, or to create something together that everybody could get satisfaction from.”

—Angeles Arrien

“One is to be part of calling the world to cease to be fragmented and to become whole; to carry a consciousness of relationship and connection that lives the life that serves life.”

—Anne Doshier