

Madman or Mystic? Re-imagining Relationship to the Sacred

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Review of: Diego Pignatelli Spinazzola,
*Primordial Psyche: A Reliving of the Soul of
Ancestors, A Jungian and Transpersonal View*,
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In *Primordial Psyche: A Reliving of the Soul of Ancestors*, Diego Pignatelli molds fundamental esoteric ideas from Eastern mysticism, Christian theology, creation myths, Jungian theory, and transpersonal thought into one comprehensive question that is both critical and infinite: What is the relationship between the archetypal hero, the mystic, the prophet,

and the madman? Although Pignatelli is not the first to pose this question, his process of inquiry is unique in the way he weaves his array of perspectives into a fabric that begins to reveal a pattern in which we can locate a felt sense of understanding, a resonance that speaks to those of us who have located ourselves within a myth, traced the path of a wounding through Jungian therapy, followed the thread of understanding using dreamwork, ritual, or other depth psychological methods, or experienced the numinous on some unalterable level that changed us forever.

It is easy to locate the scholarly influences of C. G. Jung's masterful *Aion* on Pignatelli, especially in the understanding that the story of the collective is the story of the individual and vice versa. *Aion*; the work of Jungian scholar Erich Neumann, who conceives the archetype of the hero in terms of creative imagination; and the ideas of archetypal psychologist James Hillman concerning the *anima mundi*, all offer both content and conflict for the mystic or madman in question. Pignatelli maintains, like Jung before him, that the powerful and undeniable western cultural influences of materialism, mechanization, and reductionistic rationalism effectively short-circuit our connection with the primeval unconscious resulting in an intolerable rift. This division in modern men and women separates us from the sacred, limiting our capacity to navigate divine corridors of the numinous, relegating us to living lives of estrangement, isolation, and alienation. In this age of transition, humankind has "expelled the god within" writes Pignatelli, leaving the majority of individuals to a sort of profane ignorance, unwittingly burying any symbolic or revelatory meaning that would otherwise push its way through from the unconscious. Organized religion, rather than aiding the process of spirituality, serves to extinguish it, repressing and compressing the godlike parts inside us.

Pignatelli's work has also clearly been influenced by Italian psychiatrist Silvano Arieti.

Arieti's innovative research on schizophrenia, paleological thinking, and creativity has theorized that when neurotic defenses collapse, humans regress into primordial thinking as the next level of defense. "A schizophrenic perceives life interwoven with divine symbols, but he sees fragments since he cannot manage to see the whole thing" (2011, 58), Pignatelli asserts. "Perhaps the only remains of the archaic psyche which primordial humanity has left in modern day mind is psychosis" (2011, 68). When a person encounters existential anxiety too great to bear, he or she abandons rational thought and flees instead to the instinctive *participation mystique* omnipresent in prehistoric cultures in which there was neither a separation between subject and object nor a distinction between the self and the environment—a mode of being that characterizes the borderline psychotic or schizophrenic. This amounts to a rampant "return of the repressed," as the unconscious rises up in a new form of madness.

The traits that contemporary psychology deems psychotic, however, can be identified in mystics over eons. In inquiring into the nature of the numinous and its relation to the madman, Pignatelli observes that the term *schizophrenia* means "split or separate"—and that, although a psychotic can only glimpse an underlying wholeness, instead primarily dissociating and perceiving separation and fragmentation, the perspective of a mystic leans toward unity. Psychotics and schizophrenics likely live lives "closer to the primitive perception of ancient peoples" and, therefore, "closer to a reintegrated, individuated journey towards the totality of the apparent psyche" (Pignatelli 2011, 68).

This fragmentation, however, often produces anguish and distress for those who experience it. Pignatelli integrates theories of John Weir Perry (1976), who describes how stress can trigger highly activated archetypal images that erupt from the psyche in tumultuous visionary episodes. Although potentially an opportunity for the psyche to restore balance and

promote healing, if the visionary experiences are not validated, they may result in disorder or psychosis. If the turmoil is received with compassion, however, and allowed to run its course and evolve into a self-organizing process, the outcome may be a creative experience. Contemporary culture, regrettably, scarcely provides a container for such a process, and frequently individuals who don't receive such support are labeled psychotic and end up suffering a great deal.

The power of both madman and mystic emerges in the presence of the creative individual who can revolutionize the old paradigms, the prophet who looks to the future with new eyes. The fragmented, psychotic personality of our day and age can only be embraced via a heroic return, as Neumann maintained (1954), embodied with creative imagination that allows him or her to elicit the precarious balance between potential overwhelm by the repressed unconscious or definitive destruction of the self-same forces via heroic, egoic, destructive will. In fact, the creative imagination, or connection with soul at its deepest levels, not only allows for a healthy balance but also creates a fertile process for expansion of the self.

Pignatelli sheds light on the collective layer of the psyche that houses both gods and pathologies. A borderline psychotic inhabits this liminal space, accompanied by elements that serve as pathways between worlds that lead to transformation. Among others, the mandala, the four directions, and the hologram all serve to orient an initiate who is inundated by the unconscious because each contains information about the greater whole. Pignatelli neatly overlays transpersonal and Jungian theory, rightly claiming that transpersonal views feature an ontological experience of what Jung alluded to as archetypal forces. In this, the transpersonal framework allows for a variety of healing modalities that consider alternatives to psychosis, treating symptoms such as visitations, initiation rites, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, and other "mystical

crises" as authentic encounters that assault the psyche in a very real way. I am reminded that even Jung, in undergoing what might be called a "shamanic illness" during the years he recorded his experience in what is now *The Red Book* (2009), found himself immersed in powerful revolutionary forces that defy explanation by mainstream science and carry well beyond symbolic archetypal manifestations. Although Jung was gravely concerned he might be going mad, he managed to escape over-identification with the archetypes by allowing his "inner healer" to emerge.

Regarding the negative aspects of primordial mind, Pignatelli cites Stanislav's Grof's theory of *spiritual emergency* (Grof and Grof (1989), a personal crisis initiated by the reawakening of kundalini, and offers up the notion that a psychotic is only a passive spectator in active events. He stops short, however, of addressing in depth the wide range of difficult circumstances that can be brought on by experiences of primordial psyche, choosing to focus instead on the potentially positive aspects of the phenomena. In reading *Primordial Psyche*, it would behoove us to keep in mind that those who don't receive appropriate diagnosis or support—for kundalini experiences or other forms of psychic eruption—can easily fall into crisis, psychosis, or schizophrenia and experience distintegration, stuckness, loss of creativity, or other incapacitating conditions, fostering tremendous pain and despair.

While *Primordial Psyche* appears deceptively short and could technically be read in one sitting, in fact, the way the material is structured provides the capacity to drop deeply into it at varying levels. It is a book that strives mightily to articulate topics that are difficult to describe, yet which somehow manage to elucidate glimpses regularly into the Great Mystery that surrounds ideas of primordial mind, ancestral and shamanic wisdom, visionary transpersonal experiences, and other numinosum. With each rereading, the vertical plummet into the depths becomes easier as the

drop becomes more familiar and the unknown less fearsome and more accessible. In fact, I truly appreciated how the book communicates powerful content in short segments—fragments even—mimicking the very elemental paradigm it strives to describe. Indeed, this is the type of digest that elicits far greater understanding through spacious contemplation of every short section—each a stand-alone work in and of itself as well as a steppingstone to an aggregate within a greater whole. Though at times the writing struggles with a language gap between Pignatelli's native Italian and the English translation, he succeeds in communicating various mythical images that result in an "innate mythologem," which serves to reveal a "potentiality of meaning" where any language would fail due to the supraordinary nature of the topic.

Throughout the book, we glimpse various manifestations of the primordial mind and the loss of the sacred that has resulted in dire circumstances for contemporary culture—as well as for the individuals who end up suffering in the context of mental illness, but Pignatelli does a commendable job of holding out hope by maintaining the vision that we can somehow transcend the madness if we can reimagine psychosis as creativity and give life to heroic leanings that will lead us back to the sacred. Indeed, though the writing is complex and sometimes lacking extensive introduction or context in what are rather esoteric topics—making me wish I were more versed in Hindu myth, for example—the occasional sentence fragment waxes more poetic in part because of its very lack of completeness, echoing the dialectic between the madman and the mystic who each wear fragmentation like a robe, gathering it in preparation for the next call to action. In fact, in the sense of mourning that accompanies Pignatelli's description of the sacred and its utter loss, we begin to understand that he has experienced his own bright glimpse of the numinous and what lies behind the boundaries of the rational mind. "Life keeps going like a piece

of thread interwoven with archetypes which are hidden . . . and then uncover themselves in the meshes of an eternal present."

Even as this short but thought-provoking text ends, the question that remains for me is whether it is yet another aspect of madness to think we can, as Pignatelli suggests, achieve a creative balance between the primordial psyche that enveloped our ancestors and the heroic rationale that threatens to destroy us all, thus mending the fragmented and increasingly ruptured psyche. In the end, I believe *Primordial Psyche* gives each of us permission to access our brokenness, wherever it resides, to acknowledge and embrace our own fragmented pieces of self and sanity, to encourage the heroic aspect of ourselves creatively and soulfully to emerge amid the madness while we tirelessly gaze at the terrifying face of the primordial powers our ancestors were never forced to discern. If only we can caress it instead of caving in, we might just fall madly in love with all of it, all over again.

NOTE

References to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are cited in the text as CW, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).

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ABSTRACT

Modern men and women have experienced a seemingly unsolvable rift with the sacred, foregoing ancient ways of knowing for rational thought. The collective unconscious, once the domain of our ancestors, has reemerged in a radical return of the repressed, manifesting in disturbing pathologies. But the same traits that make for madness also show up in mystics, and those prophets and heroes who employ creative imagination to re-invoke relationship with the unconscious can avoid being inundated by the influx of unknown primordial forces. As the engaging essays in Diego Pignatelli's, *Primordial Psyche: A Reliving of the Soul of Ancestors, A Jungian and Transpersonal View* provide insights into theology, mythology, mysticism, shamanism, and Jungian and transpersonal theory, we are invited to engage with the sacred again.

KEY WORDS

archetypal hero, creativity, madness, mystic, primordial, psychosis, schizophrenia