

Why I Climbed Over the Whitehouse Fence: The Activation of the Central Archetype

by Michael A. Thalbourne

I believe that psychosis is an anomaly. It is a mystery that we do not fully understand. I would like to share with you an instance of psychosis that I myself experienced. Some who know about this incident have warned me not to share such intimate personal details. But, for the sake of psychological science and psychiatry, I am taking the risk and I am sharing those details. I think that more such sharing should be done. However, I should point out that the events in question happened to me nearly 13 years ago, and though they continue to bear fruit as it were, they bear little resemblance to my psychosis-free life as it is now. So, my account begins as follows.

On the morning of Saturday, November 11th, 1989, in a psychotic state, I climbed over the side fence of the White House in Washington D.C. I was arrested, interviewed, and escorted by police to St. Elizabeth's hospital, one of the largest mental health facilities in the country. "Why on Earth did you climb over the fence?", you ask. It's the purpose of this seminar to offer one answer.

Psychosis, which is distinguished by hallucinations and/or delusions that put the person out of touch with consensual reality, is frequently regarded as disordered, chaotic, and meaningless. Modern psychiatrists rarely ask their patients about the content of their delusions, seeking foremost to quash them, principally with anti-psychotic medication. But there's a different view, derived from Jung and his followers.

Though I don't regard myself as a traditional Jungian, various Jungian concepts prove helpful in my explication. The first is that of the archetype. An archetype is a prompt for thought, feeling and behavior that is supposedly inherited in the collective unconscious of the human species. The particular archetype that I want to concentrate on today is known as the Central Archetype, and I want to talk in detail about its activation into consciousness. I can't emphasize enough that I was completely unaware of this concept and its features prior to climbing over the fence, so it was not a self-fulfilling prophecy. I quote the details from the transpersonal psychologists Stanislav and Christina Grof (1985).

"This type of transpersonal crisis has been explored and described by the Californian psychiatrist and



*"O! how I dreamt of things impossible,"
William Blake (1757-1827)*

Jungian analyst John Weir Perry. In his clinical work with young psychotic patients, twelve of whom he saw in systematic intensive psychotherapy over long periods of time, he recognized to his surprise that the psychotic process was far from being an absurd and erratic product of pathological processes in the brain."

"If sensitive support was provided, the nature of the psychopathological development was drastically transformed and what resulted was emotional healing, psychological renewal and deep transformation of the patients' personalities. Moreover,

John Perry discovered in this work that the majority of his patients manifested certain standard experiential patterns and characteristic stages if their process was not suppressed by routine psychopharmaceutic treatment."

"The individuals in this type of crisis experience themselves as being in the middle of the world process, as being the center of all things, which Perry attributes to the activation of what he calls the central archetype. They are preoccupied with death and the themes of ritual killing, martyrdom, crucifixion, and afterlife. Another important theme is return to the beginnings of the world to creation, the original paradisiacal state, or the first ancestor."

"The experiences typically focus on some cataclysmic clash of opposite forces on a global, or even cosmic level that has the quality of a sacred combat. The more mundane form of these experiences stage as protagonists, capitalists and communists, Americans and Russians, the white and yellow race, secret

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societies against the rest of the world, and the like. The archetypal form of this conflict involves the forces of light and darkness, Christ and Antichrist or the Devil, Armageddon, and the Apocalypse.”

“A characteristic element of this process is preoccupation with the reversal of opposites – cultural, ethical, political or religious beliefs, values, and attitudes. This is expressed particularly strongly in the sexual area. It involves intense misgiving in regard to the opposite sex, homosexual wishes or panic, and fear of the other sex or gender reversal. These problems find their resolution typically in the theme of the union of opposites, particularly the Sacred Marriage (hieros gamos). It is a union of a mythological nature, an archetypal fusion of the feminine and masculine aspects of one’s personality. Here belongs the belief of being selected as spouse for a god or goddess, becoming a bride to Christ, being visited by the Holy Spirit as the Virgin Mary, identification with Adam and Eve, marriage of the Sun and the Moon, King and Queen, or Prince and Princess.”

“This process culminates in an apotheosis, an experience of being raised to a highly exalted status, either above all humans, or above the human condition altogether – becoming a world savior or messiah, a king, a president, emperor of the world or even lord of the universe. This is often associated with a sense of new birth or rebirth, the other side of the all-important theme of death. Women more frequently experience giving birth to some extraordinary child-savior, redeemer, or messiah, while men more commonly experience being born themselves. The birth of the divine child is often seen as the product of the sacred marriage.”

“During the time of final integration, individuals tend to draw diagrams representing the quadrated world, in which the number four plays an important role – four cardinal points, four quadrants, four rivers, or a quadrated circle. They can also create a drama, in which four kings, four countries, or four political parties play a crucial role.”

These features seem pretty specific, but I’m going to argue that, without realizing it, almost all of them applied to *me* at some stage at or around the White House incident.

In November 1989 I was a first-year tutor in the psychology department at Adelaide University. I was battling stress, overwork, the impending end of my contract, and my failure to complete a large research project. An earthquake had recently occurred in San Francisco, threatening friends. I had something like 90 essays to mark, and the unpleasantness and slowness of the task combined to engender in me a deep depression

for which I was taking medication, to no avail. To cut a long story short, I decided to go off my lithium, preferring anything that mania could bring to my depression. I was indeed better for awhile, but then behaviors distressing to other people began to set in, such as inappropriate social interactions which were brought to my attention by several members of department, but again, to no avail. I had undergone at this time a profound mystical experience, and was not to be deprived of its fruits – the most valuable thing in my life. I avoided my psychiatrist, who had threatened to send me to a psychiatric institution.

What thoughts then moved me to do it, I don’t know, but moved I was to play my tape-recording of the soundtrack (dialogue highlights) of Franco Zeffirelli’s masterful production of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The opening lines brought me staggering to the floor in tears of great sorrow:

*Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parent’s strife.*

“Why the tears?”, you ask. Because, as I heard the words, I didn’t hear them as *traditionally* interpreted, that is, as referring to the Veronese houses of Montague and Capulet (and their children Romeo and Juliet) but as descriptive of the *present* time and political situation. Shakespeare had been a Nostradamus, and the words of his play described *our* world, or at least its unhappy future if things were left to carry on as they were going.

The “two households, both alike in dignity” immediately impressed me as being the United States and the Soviet Union – Perry’s warring opposites.

“From ancient grudge break to new mutiny” seemed to refer, if not to the most recent situation in late 1989, at least to the Cold War and the continued existence of weapons aimed at the other country. It was becoming clear to me that the story was also an allegory warning about the possible destruction of the world in nuclear holocaust should disarmament not take place on the part of the United States and the Soviet Union (as it then still was).

“Star-crossed lovers” may refer to unfavorable astrological configurations, but to a modern ear the phrase may also suggest “star-wars”.

“Take their own life” may suggest mutual destruction in war. This thought is continued in “Whose misadventured

piteous overthrows = launching of missiles?) doth with their death bury their parents' strife", which could also ominously imply a *permanent* end to the warring nations.

Thus did I conclude that the world was in grave danger of a third World War, and I the messenger to put an end to that danger, by travelling to the US and contacting through a parapsychological colleague the United Nations and the President. I was, as Perry says, the center of all things. I was afraid of being killed in the process, and at first I thought it would be by crucifixion, but then I imagined myself smothered in cigarette smoke. Then I would be a martyr, if necessary.

I packed a light load of books and my passport, and took only the clothes that I was wearing. I took a taxi to the airport, from which I rang my mother, hailing her as the Mother of God: I recited, "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now..." and I couldn't remember the rest, so my mother said "now, and at the hour of our death, Amen". Hour of my death? I was mortally afraid. I asked my mother what did King Herod do to the innocents, and she filled me in that he massacred all first born sons. I am a first-born son. My fear increased, and I hid in the handicapped person's toilet until my plane was due.

I took a plane to Melbourne, and negotiated a round-the-world ticket with Qantas, at the cost of over \$5,000. That was the day the Berlin Wall came down, and I took that as an omen of peace breaking out.

On the plane to Los Angeles I met various people, one of them Richard Hodge, Director of the National Heart Foundation of Australia, who "coincidentally" knew Ted Nettelbeck, as he was into jazz. One of the two movies that were screened was *Ghostbusters II*, in which a baby is snatched by evil forces and rescued by the parapsychologists. I told Richard Hodge that I was that baby.

I also met a Phillipino couple who knew Cory Aquino. Suddenly it was if I was spiritistically taken over by the personality of her assassinated husband, Benigno, and I exclaimed in terror that "my wife" was in mortal danger. As it happened, two weeks later there was an attempted coup in which Cory nearly lost her life.

But mainly I sat in my seat alone, thinking, thinking, thinking, the thoughts coming thick and fast. It was "revealed" to me that I was the new world avatar, or incarnation of the deity, from the Sanskrit *ava*, meaning "down" plus *tri*, "to cross", though I for my part protested that I wasn't worthy of such an honor. It was also revealed that after bringing World Peace I would

live in place of the Pope in the Vatican, married to a handsome partner who would be my reward, as if World Peace were not reward enough.



I was Romeo, and not a person but the world was my Juliet – "a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear, Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!" I was the metamorphic rock – changed, pressed between the igneous and the sedimentary. I was the Star Child, as depicted in Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: *A space odyssey*. The year 2000 had a numinous quality to it, and was depicted as the culmination of the efforts at political unity. No more would the Irishmen quarrel, no more would Israeli and Palestinian be at loggerheads, no longer would the US and the USSR threaten the planet with nuclear annihilation. Thus was I to experience an apotheosis, just as Perry said. I even thought that I was really the product of a Virgin Birth, and in a postcard to my parents renamed my father "Joseph", thinking that by an artful trick of genetics I just happened to bear a strong resemblance to my earthly father!

I arrived sleep-deprived in Los Angeles, and, bleary-eyed, immediately boarded a flight for Washington DC, reinterpreting Romeo and Juliet as I went in accordance with its supposedly hidden meanings.

I arrived in DC early Saturday morning. I imagined that a huge crowd had gathered outside the airport to greet the new Messiah. As I passed along the traveller, I imagined, too, that through the enormous glass windows, Christians saw me as Christ, Muslims, as Mohammed, Buddhists as the Buddha, and other devotees as their chosen Lord. But there was no one to meet me. I tried to contact my colleague, Professor Ian Stevenson, who is an expert on evidence for reincarnation and (I thought) incarnation, but his University of Virginia office was closed owing to the weekend, and he was not in the phone book. Events thus took a momentous turn, inasmuch as I now aimed to contact the President, George Bush, directly. I took a taxi to a spot near the White House, walked there, and was told by the sentry on the White House post that I couldn't see the President without an appointment. I was terrified that nuclear war would break out if I didn't warn the authorities in time. I thus moved somewhat along by the fence, and recalled the lines from Shakespeare where Juliet asks of Romeo:

Juliet: *How camest thou thither, tell me, and wherefore?
The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
And the place death, considering who thou art,
If any of my kinsmen find thee here.*

Romeo: *With love's light wings did I o'erperch these
walls; For stony limits cannot hold love out,
And what love can do, that dares love attempt.
Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.*

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I therefore moved so that I was out of sight behind a pillar, hung my backpack over the railings and placed my briefcase *between* the railings, and hoisted myself aloft to the top of the fence, and then jumped down onto the well-manicured lawn. Immediately the Secret Service caught me and took me to the guardhouse. I explained that there was going to be a nuclear war and the President needed to be informed about it. I was very persistent, until at length the chief officer said, perhaps in exasperation, "Michael! We know!" They had known all along! My journey to the White House had been a test. I had passed.

As I alluded to at the beginning, I was handcuffed and taken by two policemen to St. Elizabeth's hospital. There was much waiting around there. I was placed in a dark, dank room, and screamed in pain as I believed I was twice raped by the Devil. But there were also more pleasant visions. In an important one, I as avatar descended some steps from on high, and was married, first to a friend named Andrea, and then to one of my students, Andrew, believing that the Greek derivation of their names meant "mankind". Thus was I symbolically married to all of humanity, and through me, God was married to humanity.

I was eventually admitted to the hospital late that night, still fearful of nuclear war, but given pills and injections to eliminate these "delusions". At length I was put to bed, but before I fell asleep, exhausted, there was a white flash through my eyelids, as the first bombs were detonated, so I believed.

Over the next few days I gradually came down to earth, even writing a poem called "Satyaswarupagita", or "Song of the incarnation of truth", but missing out on the psychological renewal process that Perry sees as the culmination of the psychotic process. It took me a couple of weeks to come up with Perry's symbol of the quadrated world. In Adelaide I'd written a long poem called "Song of a cyclothymic", which was divided into the four seasons, linearly from spring to winter. Now my integration was to place the seasons on a revolving wheel, where, yes, there was winter – my depression – but it was always followed by spring. In this way did the number four play a cardinal role in my renewal.

I was pronounced well again when I gave up the delusion that there was to be a nuclear war. But where does such ideation come from? As Christina and Stanislav Grof say in their 1990 book *The Stormy Search for the Self*:

"One of the most encompassing encounters with death is the experience of the destruction of the world or the universe. The confrontation with the fact of one's own mortality and the ego death take place within individual, personal realms. However, sometimes that same sense

of imminent annihilation extends to a transpersonal level; one can live through vivid sequences of the destruction of all life on earth or of the planet itself. He or she may confuse this inner event with the outer reality and come to fear that the world's existence is being threatened. . ."



"In recent times, we live with the reality that our entire planet is threatened by nuclear destruction, and a great deal of fearfulness about the situation is appropriate. However, some in a spiritual emergency may encounter a very vivid internal experience of nuclear catastrophe, and the fear that arises at this stage can seem beyond personal anxiety."

In conclusion, I don't for a moment deny the efficacy of psychopharmaceutical methods in dealing with psychosis. However, I believe that psychiatry should pay a lot more attention to the content of the psychosis, in the thought that it may indicate an understandable sequence or process, rather than being dismissed simply as thought disorder. Several times I was convinced that I was Jesus Christ, though not once did a psychiatrist pay attention to that thought and try to trace its lineage. Psychological colleagues dismissed the ideation as a "Messiah complex", but, as we've seen, the complex is complex but understandable, at least in some cases. I am thus engaged in writing a paper on the Jesus delusion, and I think I have made good progress in understanding the antecedents of this fixed belief. John Weir Perry was the epitome of a therapist who listened to his patients. We would do well to emulate him.

With time and drugs, my own manic-depressive condition has stabilized and my stress-management skills are much improved; ironically, I'm now much less likely to experience psychosis. The work of psychosis in my life has been done.

Notes on Author:

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