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Barbara Platek

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# The Old Woman and the Birds: Toward a Grounded Feminine

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*Barbara Platek*

Encounters with two distinctive birds and the dream of an old woman form the basis for this author’s musings upon the feminine, nature, and the old ways of healing.

What if there was an older way, a way that had been left for dead, a feminine way with dreams and magic that was a greater authority than the one I’d been following?

—Toko-pa Turner (2017, p. 44)

I am fully committed to the idea that human existence should be rooted in the earth.

—C. G. Jung (1977, p. 204)

The heron is in the creek again as I pass by on my walk. I have seen it there on a daily basis for most of the week. Each encounter occurs as a blessing—a quick intake of breath and a sense of visitation. The heron’s beauty stops me in my tracks. I pause on the bridge above, mesmerized by its presence. The heron stands in the gently flowing water, occasionally swiveling its sleek neck. In these moments, I feel rooted. I am at home on the earth. The heron is my guide, beckoning me into a more natural relationship with body and land.

Recently, I saw a post from a woman who had spotted a heron in another creek downtown. Could it have been the same bird? I do not know anything about their daily routines, so perhaps it was. Her post was full of reverence for what she called “heron medicine.” She shared a video of the bird meandering through the creek bed, its signature liting gait an invitation to move slowly and carefully through the streams and eddies of life.

I am reminded of the tapestry that hangs outside the door to my therapy space. Hand painted by a local artist who trained in the traditional method of scroll making, it depicts two blue herons side by side. My colleague and dear friend hung it on the wall space between our two doors. I cannot remember whether the two of us ever said the words out loud, but the feeling was clear. We are connected by and to the herons. She is an archetypal astrologer, and I am a Jungian therapist. Somehow, the two birds evoke our totems. They exhibit an essence of calm perception which, in my better days, I hope I also share.



Mask, Tlingit, Alaska, ca. 1825. Wood, paint, 8.5 × 6.5 × 6 in. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon Gift, 1966. Accession Number: 1978.412.148.

Hérons are water birds. Analyst Neil Russack (2002) reflected that “the waterbird flies free across the waters, away from the known to the world beyond” (p. 9). In my work with dreams and the unconscious, I also attempt to traverse known and unknown realms. Catching a glimpse of the psyche stirring in its depth—through a dream image, for example—can feel as magical as catching sight of the waterbird in the stream. Both inner and outer occurrences convey something of the wisdom and timing of nature itself. These experiences let us know that we exist within soul, not the other way around.

My repeated sighting of the heron feels significant. Much like a recurring dream, it serves as an evocation, a kind of energetic pull toward greater meaning and depth. Russack (2002) commented that the “waterbird is a weaver, moving between the elements of water, air, and land, stitching together the different worlds” (p. 9). Encountering the waterbird causes me to feel alive, to sense the shimmer of the landscape as it casts its enchanted spell.

Occasionally, a blue heron has alighted on the pond in my backyard. This, too, feels like a blessing. I am always moved when it arrives on my land. Living in an ecosystem that supports this species fills me with hope and delight. At this time of ecological and planetary crisis, sighting the heron feels all the more meaningful—a remedy, perhaps, for the condition Jung (1964) described that sadly affects us all:

Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature, and has lost his emotional “unconscious identity” with natural phenomena. They have slowly lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices speak to man from stones, plants and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. (p. 95)

I have always loved this quote—not so much for the portrayal of loss as for the poetic description of the potential for a life ensouled—but I feel the need to pause here and acknowledge that these heron musings were written during the lush beauty of summer in the Northeast. As I read them now, I am keenly aware that the seasons have shifted. Now that it is winter, the cold has found its way to the land, and there are no heron sightings to be had. All is in deep hibernation. The snow and darkness bring a blanket of stillness, and the energy moves inward, down into the depths.

My heron colleague and dear friend is at Sloan Kettering Memorial Cancer Center in New York to explore and treat likely cancerous tumors on her lung and brain. My heart is heavy and sad, yet I also have faith that she is in good hands. This morning, I walk along the path, thinking of her and the journey that lies ahead. I feel drawn toward the stream and its ice-filled waters. I am reminded of the flow of seasons and the timing of nature—and the many ways in which life can interrupt our plans and desires. Certainly that is the case with unexpected illness.

Even as we pass the solstice and receive the blessing of the darkest time of year, I receive messages about MRIs and PET scans as well as of love and support for the woman whose work intersects my own and whose appreciation of the symbolic and the sacred mirrors mine. Our community is stunned and saddened. I check my phone too many times for updates and news.

In the midst of all this uncertainty, another bird comes to call. This time it is no heron with its liting beauty and ethereal grace. No, something much more grounded arrives. Only minutes after a call with my friend, I come downstairs to find that a wild turkey has arrived at my home. Sometimes referred to as an “earth eagle” by native people, the massive bird has wandered up my walkway and is staring intently through the glass front door.

Turkeys are linked to the Earth Mother in legend and tradition, and many times I have seen groupings of the wild birds amble through my forested backyard. I am certain that I have never encountered a singular bird, let alone one that is so determined to make itself known. As another friend commented, “This was not subtle.” The creature stands for awhile, gazing at me, until finally it wanders away—only to reappear on the back deck. In a repeat performance, it once again stands silently gazing through the glass.

I feel immediately that the turkey’s visit is linked to my conversation with my friend. Turkeys are believed to represent abundance. They convey a sense of all the resources the earth has to offer. The turkey’s arrival holds a message for both of us, letting us know of abundant resources available to support her process, both within and without. And indeed, she could not be in a better place—Sloan Kettering—to receive the help she needs. Nor could she be in a more grateful, guided, and supported place with her own psyche. An entire community is holding her with love and light, and her own link to the deep heart of healing and life is strong.

I also feel the turkey’s arrival as a call resonant with my own process. I am very much aware of my need to remain grounded in the instinctual realm. I have a tendency to live in my head. My daily walks along a path through the woods and alongside a nearby stream are part of my impulse toward embodiment. The same is true for my home, nestled in a pine forest overlooking a pond. My house is constructed of wood and glass and allows me to feel surrounded by natural life—what Jung called “the nourishing soil of the soul” (Jung, 1934, as cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 1).

Several years ago, while contemplating whether to continue analytic training (which I ultimately did not do), I did an active imagination in which I went to consult Jung on the matter. I found him in his study, seated at his desk in front of the three stained glass windows that framed the room. Rather than conferring with me in that space, he led me outdoors to the water’s edge and used a stick to show me the streams running through the earth toward the lake. We stood together, quietly contemplating the water’s pathways. I took from that experience the need to leave the study, a place of head learning and conceptualization, to immerse myself in the natural world and make a living relationship with the waters of the unconscious and the earth.

I resonate with Meredith Sabini’s description of her journey toward a more balanced relationship with natural life:

I too have found my way down through the floors of our “species’ house” to that primordial cave at the bottom. This journey has taken place with the help of hints Jung left behind, the guidance of my own dreams, and the experience of living on that wilderness land where I could expose myself to the elements, to wild animals, and to the spirits inhabiting it. A mysterious “pull of gravity” seemed to take my individuation process in that downward direction. (Sabini, 2006, p. 141)

What Sabini calls a “mysterious pull of gravity” has led me to live on the same piece of land for nearly 25 years. While this might not seem a long time to some, in my case, having moved from place to place as a child, it has served as an opportunity to put down roots. That my home is in a forest also allows for a connection to place and to the rhythms and seasons of nature. An entire living habitat unfolds around me. From my windows, I can see squirrels and deer moving through the backyard, as well as an occasional fox or heron. The pines and pond frame my view, which shifts according to the light and weather.

The turkey’s visitation feels like a message from the soul of the place in which I live. Its arrival at such a specific time conveys a need for trust—not only in the abundance of the earth but also in my ability to be guided by the unconscious. It seems to be inviting me to make a relationship with the signs and symbols of my own life, to be in touch with nature in the deepest sense. Jung said:

Whenever we touch nature we get clean. ... Walking in the woods, lying on the grass, taking a bath in the sea, are from the outside; entering the unconscious, entering yourself through dreams, is touching nature from the inside and this is the same thing, things are put right again. All these things have been used in initiations in past ages. They are all in the old mysteries, the loneliness of nature, the contemplation of the stars, the incubation sleep in the temple. (Jung, 1984, as cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 207–208)

Not long ago, I had a dream that hinted at something of the “old mysteries” and nature-based healing which had a deep impact on me. Here is the dream:

In the woods behind my house, I encounter a few people walking towards me. They are going to get tobacco from the old woman who lives in a small cottage. She is a *curandera*, a female healer.

I awoke from the dream feeling support for my own journey toward a more embodied relationship with the instincts and the earth. The old woman feels like a harbinger of the old ways. She is the wise woman, the healing crone, the keeper of the ancient wisdom. As Clarissa Estes (1992) said, “The symbol of the old woman is one of the most widespread archetypal personifications in the world. ... The old one, The One Who Knows, is within us. She thrives in the deepest soul-psyche of women” (pp. 28–29).

That this old woman lives on the land behind my house is especially moving to me. I have spent many years in recovery from an overly masculine, intellect-based approach to life. Through dreams and life experience, I have been called to make a relationship with the deeper feminine—with body, soul, and earth. The image of the old *curandera* in her forest home seems a perfect medicine, as well as an affirmation for the path I have been traveling. “The One Who Knows” carries the secrets of the great feminine mysteries in her blood and bones. Birth, illness, death, creation, and dissolution are all part of the great round in which she exists.

The old woman is an aspect of the Great Goddess as well as the feminine Self. She embodies an ancient knowledge of the fierce, chthonic powers of Life. Neglected and all but forgotten in my own psyche, as well as that of the collective, her perspective offers a corrective balance to our lopsided reliance on linear rationality, allowing space

for intuition, body, and emotions, reminding us of the interconnectedness of all living things.

In this case, the old woman is imaged in her healing capacity; she is a *curandera*. *Curanderismo* is a natural, earth-based system of healing that seeks to keep all aspects of the body and soul in harmony. It is native to the Americas, the land upon which many of us live. *Curanderismo* traditionally employs natural remedies—herbs, stones, feathers, eggs—to restore vitality and balance to an individual suffering from illnesses both physical and psychic. Estes (1999) commented that in *curanderismo*, “the mother tongue is poetics. The healer is an artist. The invisible worlds are palpably felt and acknowledged directly along with the consensual reality” (p. 2). The *curandera* aspect of the old woman amplifies her relationship with nature and its healing resources.

The old woman’s link to the earth is further underscored by the resonance of the dream’s imagery with the land upon which I live. Long before people like me occupied this area, the Cayuga or *Haudenosaunee* lived here. The image of an elder living in the forest—a *curandera*, shaman, or healer—resonates with their tradition. In my dream, tobacco is featured as an important symbolic aspect of the visit with the old woman. The Cayuga people used tobacco in ritual or ceremony. According to Kurt Jordan, associate professor of Anthropology and American Indian and Indigenous Studies at Cornell, “Tobacco was considered sacred [by the Cayuga and many other native people] and was used as a mechanism to connect people on earth with celestial beings in the Sky World” (personal communication, 2019). Jordan, who was kind enough to answer my many questions, explained, “There is archeological evidence for the use of tobacco in the Northeast going back to about 300 B.C., and it may have been in use even before that.”

That my dream incorporates something of the actual history of the place in which I live brings an added layer of significance. I greatly appreciate the feeling of having the land itself speak through a dream. I am reminded of Jung’s statement on “the old idea that every country or people has its own angel, just as the earth has a soul” (Jung, 1958, as cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 1). The link between my act of seeking tobacco from the old woman in the dream and the ancient practices amongst the people who once resided here deepens my connection to my piece of earth. As Glen A. Mazis (2006) put it, “To return to the psyche in its depth as found in the depths of the world ... requires a return to the body self, the sense of embodiment which is interwoven with the landscape” (p. 7).

What does it mean to enter into the dream of the land and allow its imagery and energy to flow through our lives? It seems to me that here is a remedy for loss of contact with the instincts, a remedy for the overly one-sided development in which most of us participate. Certainly for me, imagining the old *curandera* evokes a feeling of healing. I sense that she offers a continuation of my own search for a more grounded, less head-based approach to healing and to life.

In this regard, I feel called to make a pilgrimage to the old woman’s house, much like the people I saw in the dream, and reengage with her through active imagination. And so I prepare to journey to her small cottage in the forest behind my home. I seek to respectfully ask for her help and healing and to receive the sacred offering of tobacco with which I can learn to perform my own acts of ritual to bring me into greater alignment with spirit and earth. I feel that she will understand the meaning and importance of my encounter with both heron and turkey, and encourage me to regard such signs and symbols as woven into the fabric of the psyche itself. Indeed, I can feel her nodding

her head as if to say, “Yes, these things happen, and we need to pay attention when they occur. Life flows within and without us. Receive these gifts with an open heart, and allow them to strengthen your connection to the source of all things.”

I am welcomed into her cottage and made to feel at ease, as if it were the most natural thing that I would seek her out. Her words convey a deep sense of mystery and depth. Somehow I sense that we are also holding the mystery of life and earth that now surrounds my friend undergoing cancer treatment. “We do not know the ways of Nature,” she tells me. “The Birth/Life/Death cycle is mother to us all.” She pauses at this point to offer tea and nourishment. “Healing happens on many levels,” she continues, “not just the physical.”

I already know in my heart that my time with my friend may be cut short. I know this in the same way that I know the ice will melt in the stream, the shoots will emerge from under the melting snow, and the sap will rise again. The great round of nature will continue in spite of our wishes and our best efforts to assert our ego consciousness against it.

The old woman lets me know that this awareness informs the healing process. Only from the deepest reverence for the mysteries of life and the psyche can I access my ability to heal myself and others. I recognize the truth of what she says. I also understand that, as I approach sixty, it is time for me to claim my own wisdom and my lineage on an archetypal level in the feminine healing tradition.

“Now is the time,” she tells me. Our lives have moved out of balance. We no longer live in right relation with the earth and with our inner wisdom. I sense that she is encouraging me to trust my instincts and intuition and to bring forth my own sense of the sacred. In a world where the voice of the deep mysteries is too often unheard, heron and turkey can still guide our way.

It occurs to me that this link to the deep dreaming landscape is one that I share with my friend. She, too, is guided by nature and by the ebbs and currents of symbolic life. Shortly after writing these reflections, I come across the words of author Sharon Blackie:

The Old Woman, you see, is always with us. The Old Woman *is* the land; she’s always there to be found. You just have to open yourself to the imaginal world—to the Otherworld, in my native mythology—which overlaps and enfolds itself around this one. To pierce the veil, and see beyond the tree to the archetypal form which is intrinsically entwined with it. That’s how we fall into the land’s dreaming: it’s a process of learning to see. ... This is how we cultivate our relationship with this beautiful, animate Earth. (Blackie, 2020, para. 15)

I cannot pretend to understand the mystery that heron, turkey, or the old woman convey. I am enormously grateful to live someplace where I can touch the spirit of the land to enter its dreaming. I think about the gift of tobacco, the sacred substance that links the worlds. To receive tobacco from the old woman is to receive the gift of deep connection to the earth and to its soul. It is an offering from the *curandera* to me, to be brought into my life and sprinkled on the ground—blessing the earth, its wisdom and guidance.

Spending time in the *curandera’s* cottage is a move away from an overly dry patriarchal consciousness to embodied feminine life. It is a fundamental change of direction, one that has been in process for some time. To find the old woman as teacher,



rather than the old man, is a shift of enormous proportion in my psyche, as well as one sorely needed in our collective. The conversation with the old woman is an ongoing process. The dream has allowed me to recognize that I have access to her. She lives in my backyard—in the depths of my psyche.

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*Barbara Platek, MA, LMHC, is a Jungian psychotherapist and author who lives and dreams on her piece of land in Ithaca, New York. A graduate of Pacifica Graduate Institute, she has completed four years of analytic training with the Ontario Association of Jungian Analysts (OAJA). Her writing on dreams and dreaming can be found in a number of publications.*

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