

THE POETICS OF DESTRUCTION

Presented by **George McGrath Callan** on July 23, 2004 for *Psyche and the Spirit of the Times: A series of Community Conversations on the Current State of the American Psyche*

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Abstract:

Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he entralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night.

C.G. Jung

In the life of an individual, the work of soul making is often revealed in the presence of crisis. Latent symptoms, once carefully hidden in the structure of the ego arise from this solitary and particular suffering to become the source material from which an alchemical transformation is forged. Deconstruction, dissociation, and annihilation take place in this crucible of individuation. The old vessel gives way, and familiar notions of identity, relationship, security and containment must be abandoned. Empowered by the imagination, reveries of grief and loss, hope and desire emerge from the shards of the old life. And so it is in the soul work of nations.

On a bright September morning in the year 2001, the United States of America experienced a soul event that would herald the beginning of a fierce and necessary alchemical process. As the ash of destruction fell on the land, our tribal and instinctual knowing drew us together in a million gestures of compassion, solidarity, and grief. In the days, weeks, and months to follow, people everywhere picked up their pens, their cameras, and their musical instruments, and began to give expression to this pathos, shaping living reveries from the tangled steel of the American psyche. Ordinary spaces became receptacles for handmade shrines and memorials. A conversation was taking place between the sensate surface of events and the archetypal reality—between the phenomenal and the numinal. Communities and nations around the world responded to our loss like family members and good neighbors, gathering to pray and sing and cry for us, lighting candles and sending messages of compassion and concern. A window was opening—a golden possibility that we might tap into a global heartbeat, grounded not in the marketplace or on the battleground, but in the precinct of *eros*.

These potent seedlings of *communitas* were forced underground by our cultural symptoms of retribution, nationalism, racism, isolationism, greed, and “bullyism.” In the systemic extortion of our communal memory, orchestrated by our government and powered by mainstream media, “America’s” interrupted images and reveries have slipped into the underworld. Crouching there, they await a time when our sincere encounters with darkness, fear, anger, shame, and death coax them back into consciousness. If transformation takes place in the passageway between the reveries of the past and their retrieval in the present, then the work before us is to reanimate our collective memory and uncover what lies hidden beneath the devastation and cruelty of war and oppression. We gather in conversation in the presence of the possibility that we might regain our sense of *communitas* and reclaim our soulful reveries, in the context of a world straining toward consciousness.

THE POETICS OF DESTRUCTION

I begin with an invocation to honor the very particular place in the “American” * landscape upon which we stand. We turn to the spirit of the Northwest to ask a blessing upon our gathering here tonight. We honor the costal Salish people, the People of the Sacred Water: the Snohomish, the Snoqualamie, the Tulalip, the Puyallap, Nooksack, Lummi, Swinomish, Suquamish, Duwamish, Chinook, Chehalis, Quinalt, Cowichan, Makah, Muchleshoot, Skallam, Snuneymuxw, Stenaus, Notchanlet, Nahtchanlet. We bow to the many rivers named after these tribes—and to the waterways of the salmon: Sockeye, Humpy, Chinook. We revere the Orca who makes her passage through Puget Sound. We smile at this land that bears the grandfather trees: Douglas Fir, Red and Yellow Cedar, Port Orford, Hemlock, and Alder. Oh, you are the land that has claimed us. You are the land that displays the fierceness and elegance of creation. You are the land that knows the tragedy of what we have already lost, and the magnitude of what we stand yet to lose. Stay with us as we gather all the imagination, creativity, skill and ingenuity of our human condition into the basket of life our grandchildren will carry into the future.

I imagine that you have found your way to this gathering because you are searching for alternative ways to think and speak about what most troubles your hearts in a troublesome world. I encourage you to listen into the language of our conversations tonight with a mythic, rather than a literal, consciousness. Let us throw ourselves upon the practice of hearing one another with a mind tuned to the poetics of expression. Let us set aside—just for a while—the strategic, evaluative mind, focused on agreement and disagreement, right and wrong. We do this, not because we do not honor these most valued aspects of mind, but because our thinking and our conversations in the context of the polarizing atmosphere of the times, seem to be over weighted in this direction. In unburdening ourselves in this way we might find more room for a poetic encounter with the world in all its pathos. I offer this suggestion *not* as a solution, *not* as a way out of our nightmare, *not* as a sentimental or transcendent spin on matters of grave concern, but as a way to enter more deeply, for the sake of soul, into the foreboding and the grief we share as members of a species that seems to have its sails trimmed toward destruction. In defiance of that woeful trajectory we have come to hang out here in the forgotten corners of the “American” psyche. T. S. Eliot offers assistance in holding this quality of presence when he writes in the Four Quartets:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.
(pp. 126-127)

Depth psychology among many other possible disciplinary avenues, allows us a container for the cultivation of imagination—for isn't the horrific situation we find ourselves in largely attributable to a massive failure of the imagination? In opening our conversation tonight, I choose depth psychology as my lens because it offers three particular attributes that contribute to the efficacy of this endeavor. First, depth psychology is interested in excavating the psychic terrain for the source of things. Secondly, it is intent upon evoking the shadow material and forgotten reveries of the psyche. And thirdly, depth psychology is not particularly attached to the perceived division between the individual and the world psyche. Here I rely on the words of the 16th Century alchemist and friend of the soul, Paracelsus:

For the sun and the moon and all planets, as well as all the stars and the whole chaos, are in man. . . . For what is outside is also inside; and what is not outside man is not inside. The outer and the inner are one thing, one constellation, one influence, one concordance, one duration . . . one fruit. (Jacobi, p. 21)

It is my fantasy that in our sincere gatherings we might find a way to quiet our polarizing, political, literal discourse for the possibility that in the presence of stillness, some new poetic might rise in our midst. At the same time it is helpful to remember that polarization is not an aberration, but an essential part of a larger process. In alchemy it is the operation of *separatio*. Like the mythic separation of earth and sky, which provided a space for the growth and development of sentient beings, the alchemical *separatio* heralds a psychological severing, offering space for the germination of consciousness. Edward Edinger echoes Jung when he says “one becomes conscious as one is able to contain and endure the opposites...” (p.187)

With full knowledge that the war in Iraq began long before September 11th 2001, I return to September 11th as *one* of the catalysts of our current national and global tragedy. I return to the memory of September 11th because it invokes our capacity as humans to allow the sacred to emerge out of the ashes of our darkest moments, and because in its presence we found a textured expression of our inconsolable grief. I return to September 11th as a window in time when the veil between the personal and the global psyche was lifted and the soul of the world became available in the context of our own brokenness.

I find it necessary and useful to observe and experience the parallel psychic processes of the individual psyche and the national and global psyche...to research, if you will, the concerns of the world in the archives of my own soul and to allow the myths and images of the collective unconscious to brew in that container. It is in the rumblings of my own complexes, in the shadow material of my own psychological life, that I can begin to hear the crooning of the world. The word *croon* is derived from Middle Dutch *kronen*, to groan or lament. What this work asks of me is that I live in such a way as to hear the world crooning, beneath the din of my own personal lamentation. In the period following September 11th, like many of you, I had a cluster of experiences where my personal psyche entered the territory of the global dream. I share with you a short excerpt of the reverie that arose from that dreaming consciousness after my post 9/11 visit to New York:

October 15, 2001

Arm in arm, compelled and in dread, we walk silently down the street in the direction of Ground Zero. We pass a fire station tempeled with flowers and flags, messages and prayers. The air suddenly becomes thick and acrid. Instinctively I reach for the scarf folded neatly in my handbag. As I place it over my mouth and nose, images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki come crashing through my brain. The smell triggers a memory beyond my personal history, beyond my sensual memory. This retort of the brain is at once a collective file cabinet. Hundreds of files are stuffed in, labeled Auschwitz, Bougenwald, Bosnia, Kandahar, Gaza, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Somalia, Rwanda, Wounded Knee, Selma, Watts, and on and on. The city is gray.

We walk from intersection to intersection. Each crossroad reveals a new angle of ruins and bombed-out structures. Dresden. A massive building is still screaming, its tube-like projectiles hang with despair from the side of its black and broken shell. A hungry crane, like some insatiable demon, lifts a skein of mangled steel in its maw. There are no tears here. Steely shock is passing into grim resignation. People walk in slow motion, their timeless faces gray and strained. The spaces between us narrow as our bodies recall some instinctual human inclination. (Callan, pp.101-103)

For a short time we were shocked out of our urban trance into ancient and cultural reverie. We gathered spontaneously with strangers and made altars, shrines, drawings, poems, music, and ritual. As the ash of destruction fell on the land, our tribal and instinctual knowing drew us together in a million gestures of compassion, solidarity, and grief. It was a moment in time when even our journalists spoke in the language of *poesis*. In the aura of September 11th, they frequently referenced ancient rituals and mythologies, and relied on Shakespeare and the poets to reflect on the impulse to bring form to our encounter with destruction and grief. Communities and nations around the world responded to our loss like family members and good neighbors, gathering to pray and sing and cry for us, lighting candles and sending messages of compassion and concern. A window was opening—a golden possibility that we might tap into a global heartbeat, grounded not in the marketplace or on the battleground, but in the precinct of

eros. In the days, weeks, and months to follow, people everywhere picked up their pens and brushes, their cameras, and their musical instruments and began to give expression to this pathos, shaping living reveries from the tangled steel of the “American” psyche. Ordinary spaces became memorial sites. A conversation was taking place between our mortal reality and the sacred.

When we had barely begun this ancient task of mourning, our grieving garments were torn off and replaced with the steely armor of war. Two paths had crossed: One born of grief—of community and creativity, the other born of fear—of separation, violence and retribution. Our administration and the governing bodies of this country made up of both parties, chose the latter path for us. Stunned by the avalanche of events, we turned our anxious attention to war, some of us in protest, some in agreement. With the aid of mainstream media, the template of polarization was set in place. The potent seedlings of *communitas* were forced underground by our cultural symptoms of nationalism, racism, isolationism, and “bullyism.” We have been disoriented, baffled, walking in circles. “America’s” interrupted reveries slipped into the underworld where they gestate and await retrieval. Crouching there, they anticipate a time when our sincere encounters with darkness, fear, anger, shame, and death coax them back up into consciousness. We know that anything short of redemption will fail to host the grandchildren.

If transformation takes place in the passageway between the reveries of the past and their retrieval in the present, then the work before us is to reanimate our collective memories of the noble proclivities of the “American” spirit. In this intentional anamnesis, or recollection, we might then uncover what lies hidden beneath our darkest instincts that find their cruel expression in the symptoms of war and oppression. A symptom, after all, is a forgetting of something that is essential to remember. We call on the goddess Memory, (Mnemnosyne), mother of the muses, to pluck us from the waters of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. While there are a multitude of places, past and present, to find our noble inclinations, it is the particular American story we reference as 9/11 that calls on our attention this evening.

“9/11” has been coined a word and has come to represent “terrorist attack on America.” September 11th was a day in the year 2001, in the infant era of a new millennium. It was a day in a harvest month—September, that transitional month between the blaze of Summer and the cooling of Fall when the leaves begin to turn, the daylight diminishes, and in our country the children return to school, while thousands of children elsewhere, go to work for corporate America in sweatshops and factories and fields. For them

September 11th was most likely a day like any other day. The number 11 is an ancient numeric symbol of balance, revelation, unity. It corresponds to Justice in the Tarot deck. In the I Ching, The Book of Changes, it is *T'ai* represented by three yin lines above three yang below—Earth over Heaven, revealing the universal principles of Peace and Harmony. These things I mention not to be remembered as facts, or matters of import, but to stir up the fantasies and dreams hidden in the memory of this day—a day now buried in literal facts, investigations, conclusions, proclamations, threats and nefarious actions.

We have heard innumerable reasons why the attack happened, and why it shouldn't have, and whose to blame. We have seen the revelation of reams of newly unclassified materials, and are curious about the secrets hiding in classified files. We have seen the detailed blueprints of the World Trade towers and registered the numbers and names of the dead. I often wonder if the day had something in mind for itself, and what Destiny had to say about it.

It behooves us to examine the ways in which we unconsciously collude in keeping poetic consciousness sequestered in the underworld. Of the many ways we may find ourselves to be complicit in this endeavor I suggest two possibilities for your consideration tonight. First, we have been flooded with information, investigations, hearings, data from fact gathering committees, essays, articles, and books on political analysis. Stories devised to attribute blame or to promote political candidacy on one side or another may be necessary, but they are not vital enough to revive the spirit of a people drowning in information, rhetoric and propaganda. Some of us have suffered from an addiction to information. This is a kind of materialistic objectification of facts that feeds our anxiety and keep us in a constant state of psychic ORANGE ALERT. With the rapid movement of world events and the constant uncovering of investigative material, we cannot collect data fast enough. As we bring our attention to the ways in which we become imprisoned by information as fact, we are simultaneously called to become a more intelligent and well-informed citizenry. How we read the world matters. If we read for so-called factual information alone, there will be little or no dialogue. Yet if we read the world phenomenologically, that is, through intimate experience, we invite a profound conversation in which we are in turn, phenomenologically read by the world. Periods of destruction, loss, and death can be extraordinary times for deep exploration into matters of soul. Consider, for example, the dark era that spawned the Renaissance. Information imbued with soul provides gnosis, and brings breath and imagination to the body of our knowledge.

Secondly, it seems to me that we collude in the suppression of *poesis* by employing what I call the “yammering factor.” The democrats are yammering, The Republicans are yammering. The media is yammering. Michael Moore is yammering, Rummy and Wolfie are yammering. Friends—people of like heart and mind—gather for a social event and before we know it we are bludgeoning each other with our yammering. Yet we are yammering about matters of enormous concern—torture and death in the killing fields, the distortions of the conglomerate media, corporate greed, the desecration and desacrilization of justice and civil liberty and so many other essential issues. What is this yammering anyway and what might we replace it with? I think this compulsive yammering is a kind of spinning we do when we feel helpless and anxious. World events can shift in a day or an hour, and we have no idea what ground we’ll be standing on when we wake up in the morning. Yammering serves a purpose in the same way that a symptom does. We might begin to hear our yammering as the voice of a messenger, rather than a permanent visitor. It is a blatant invitation to remember what has been forgotten. For hidden beneath the cover of our anxiety is a deep, bottomless well of grief. We have already lost so much, some of which we will never retrieve again. We cannot bring the dead back to life, we cannot restore lost species, we cannot begin to atone for our sins against the children who have died of starvation by our sanctions, or become orphaned or maimed by our violent activities in the world. I am certain that we, in our humanness, will always yammer when things get unbearable. Yet we find ourselves scanning the psychic terrain beneath the glut of information and the buzz of yammering in search of a still place where we can hear the world crooning. And T. S. Eliot speaks once again from the sanctuary of his Four Quartets:

In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
 You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.
(p. 127)

Reverie is a vehicle that serves to transport us to this quiet place where we might tend our grief. On the path of personal individuation reverie is a creation in progress, a possibility of divine generativity,

sometimes interrupted in childhood and stored in the underworld of the psyche for future rebirth. We can imagine reverie as the world dreaming us. This dreaming happens when we sustain an intimacy with the world. We remember being taken to this place of reverie as children, listening from a branch in a tree, lying in the grass watching clouds form familiar images, participating in the magic of a family festivity, or grieving the loss of a grandparent or a beloved pet. As adults we find that transformation often takes place in the passageway between this state of reverie of the past and its retrieval in the present. We are taken to this middling place and invited to reveal to ourselves what has been concealed in the interest of preserving the ego. In the spirit of reverie, I invite you to come with me across time and space to visit the wall of the missing, the living memorial wall which was made up of Manhattan's "missing" posters.

October 17, 2001

And so it is . . . with homage that I approach The Wall of the Missing, on this cold October morning in New York. It is a visitation unlike any other I have made in the history of my devotional life. The wall stretches out hundreds of feet in front of the 69th regiment armory, an old mansard brick palace with barrel-shaped walls, that once ushered Cubist paintings into "America" in the spectacular Armory Show of 1913. In the aftermath of the disaster it became The Family Assistance Center. The irony of that particular transformation of space reverberates in the double meaning of the word "arms." A building designed for the storage of lethal arms had once touched upon a vital artistic nerve, and was now teeming with nuns and priests, ministers, psychologists, counselors, massage therapists, social workers, Red Cross volunteers, all available to hold the suffering in the arms of compassion. This is, indeed, a building that embodies the archetype of the Shapeshifter. And like the façade of some ancient cathedral, this great wall of grief stood before it.

Unlike other collective memorials, this cenotaph draws the stranger into a personal and intimate grief by the particularity of the images, and the minute and familiar details that describe an individual who has been seen and known personally and privately: articles of clothing worn that day, rings and bracelets, scars and tattoos, piercings, moles, birthmarks, and other precious distinctions and imperfections. A distinguished businessman looks out directly and professionally from the page. One of the descriptives mentioned on his poster is "inverted bellybutton." I smile tenderly, wondering how he would have felt to have that detail disseminated throughout New York City. I gaze into every countenance, and read every description and message. Most of these pictures were taken in celebrational times, at birthdays and weddings, in tuxedos and ball gowns, in the midst of a dance step, or with babe in arms, in moments of laughter, playfulness, surprise. Each shot captures a distinguished or zany pose, a classic moment, a tender glance, a mischievous glint.

I gaze into every countenance, and see the Beloved everywhere, in the faces leaping out from the page, in the hand written message of the one who had posted it, and in the abiding presence of eros and thanatos. They are all of us. Each of us. Every person. There are no strangers here.

For many of us, there was one particular image that clutched at our consciousness and lingered in the heart. Each time you approached another collage, that image would fly out to meet you. What was this "invisible" temenos that held us in this more-than-personal embrace?

Out of the sea of posters, I cannot wrench my eyes from this one. He, an African man with black eyes and a stylish goatee, his lips softly closed. She, a full-bodied Latin woman, her perfectly painted lips framing a vibrant smile. Her shiny black hair is pulled back tightly on top of her head and sculpted in the shape of a tiara. He wears a black shirt, slightly opened at the throat, revealing a hint of a beaded necklace beneath. A silver bracelet encircles his right wrist and his hand rests on her ample hip, the black of the skin setting off a bold contrast against her creamy

floral dress. On her right upper arm is a tattoo of her name, Miosotys, scripted in purple and underlined with a red scroll embellishment. Her hands are not visible in the picture; but following them off the page, I know they rest on his thigh. While their dark eyes look forcefully into the camera, their bodies betray an erotic devotion to one another, an undeniable and electric communication the camera, like my own eyes, would not dare deny. The top of the poster is printed in black felt pen. The message proceeds down the left side of the Photo:

ANdREW BaiLEY
93rd FL
MARsH McleaaN.

Beneath it, in blue ballpoint, in her own cursive script:

Missing
9/11/01
Andrew,
Babe I Love
You, you are
Truly the best
Man that ever
Stepped Into My
Life. We Miss
You so much
Please come Home.
If Any Info Call Mio his fiancée at (718) . . . Thank you.
(Callan, pp. 107-112)

The wall of the missing extends now far beyond our borders. The American psyche has so much to contain. I turn in my mind's eye to the wall of the missing.

I dip my pen in the crucible of blood, and write in every empty space, in Arabic script the names of Afghani villagers, desert wanderers and cave dwellers, farmers and soldiers and weavers, Iraqi women and men, girls and boys, toddlers and elders, merchants and mothers, the hungry, the orphaned, the homeless, the dismembered, the imprisoned. I write the names of "American" and allied soldiers, contractors and mercenaries, and their families. I imagine that there is a place on that wall for all those whose lives have been terminated in a moment of terror – and all those who love them. (Callan, p. 142)

It appears as though the spirit of our times is inviting us into a radical change of consciousness.

Those of us who have been called to psychology know how to sit reverently and tenderly with a patient or friend. We know how to hold the shadow, to witness the confessional material, the ravages and ruptures inherent in the human story. Might we, then, find it in our hearts to sit in stillness with the soul of our shattered and beloved country? Might we witness her brutality and kindness, her grief and her joy, her greed and her generosity, her neglect and her care, her inertia and her ingenuity, her sheer stupidity and her utter brilliance, her corruption and her integrity? Might we, by way of our collective memory help her embody that original dream to accomplish something great on this land?

As we move to open the conversation, I leave you with a few visual reveries and the words of

Christopher Fry from *A Sleep of Prisoners*:

The human soul can go to the lengths of God.
Dark and cold we may be, but this
Is no winter now. The frozen misery
Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul man (and woman) ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.
Where are you making for? It takes
So many thousand years to wake,
But will you wake for pity's sake!
-Christopher Fry

Biography:

George McGrath Callan is an educator, mentor, writer, and archetypal psychologist. She received her doctorate in depth psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. George works in the landscape of the imagination where the individual psyche and the communal psyche meet, and in the development of meaningful rites of passage for our time. She is interested in approaching the global *zeitgeist* with a poetic consciousness. Her writing and her artwork arise from meditations on the *Alchemical Vessel and the Soul of the World*. George teaches and practices in the tradition of Depth Psychology in Seattle, Washington.

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