
Lessons of Jung's Encounter with Native Americans

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Timothy Thomason explores how Jung's encounters with Native Americans in the Taos pueblo in 1925 deepened his belief that humans need a sense of their individual and cultural significance to be psychologically healthy.

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Abstract

This article describes C. G. Jung's meeting with Mountain Lake, a Hopi elder, and other Native Americans during his visit to Taos, New Mexico in 1925. Jung's thoughts about the significance of what he learned from the Indians are discussed and analyzed, with a view toward describing how they contributed to the development of Jung's thought. While Jung made some over-generalizations from his brief meetings with a few Pueblo Indians, the main lesson of his encounter in Taos is still valid, which is that humans need a sense of their individual and cultural significance to be psychologically healthy.

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In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1973) Jung described his encounter with Native Americans he met in New Mexico in 1925. This event, though brief, had a profound effect on Jung, and he referred to it many times in his writings. He commented that his experience in New Mexico made him aware of his imprisonment "in the cultural consciousness of the white man" (Jung, 1973, p. 247).

At the Taos pueblo, Jung spoke for the first time with a non-white, a Hopi elder named Antonio Mirabal (also known as Ochwiay Biano and Mountain Lake), who said that whites were always uneasy and restless: "We do not understand them. We think that they are mad" (Jung, 1973, p. 248). Jung asked him why he thought the whites were mad, and the reply was " 'They say that they think with their heads . . . We think here,' he said, indicating his heart" (p. 248). Impressed, Jung said he realized that Mountain Lake had unveiled a significant truth about whites.

To Jung the Indians he met appeared to be tranquil and dignified, which Jung attributed to their belief that (as Mountain Lake explained) through their religious practice, they helped the sun cross the sky every day. Jung believed this belief and practice served the function of making the Indians' lives cosmologically meaningful. Whites, on the other hand, use reason to formulate the meaning of life: "Knowledge does not enrich us; it removes us more and more from the mythic world in which we were once at home by right of birth" (Jung, 1973, p. 252). Jung said that it would be necessary to put away all European rationalism and knowledge of the world to begin to understand the Pueblo Indian's point of view.

Jung pointed out that "The idea, absurd to us, that a ritual act can magically affect the sun is, upon closer examination, no less irrational" than the Christian religion which, like every religion, is "permeated by the idea that special acts or a special kind of action can influence god - for example, through certain rites or prayers" (Jung, 1973, p. 253). Jung said that while the cosmological beliefs of the pueblo dwellers would be seen as superstitious by Europeans, to the Native Americans European beliefs about science would be seen as superstitious and illogical (Jung, 1964). To Mountain Lake, it was obvious that the sun provides all light and all life and is therefore the great father or God. Jung, on the other

hand, argued that God is the one who created the sun. Jung realized that from a modern perspective, Mountain Lake's animism and Christianity are equally superstitious.

Jung attributed the dignity and serenity of the Pueblo Indians to their relationship to the deity, and their belief that their rituals were essential to keep the universe functioning (Berger & Segaller, 2000). Jung interpreted Mountain Lake's reference to the restlessness of whites as describing their "insatiable lust to lord it in every land," and their megalomania "which leads us to suppose that Christianity is the only truth" (Jung, 1933, p. 213). In Jung's view, the religious and cosmological beliefs of all cultures are useful to help people make their existence seem meaningful.

The main lesson Jung learned from his encounter with Mountain Lake was the importance of forging meaning through a coherent system of beliefs and practice. The content of the belief system is secondary; since philosophical and religious beliefs are based on faith and cannot be empirically validated, in a sense one system is as good as another. Each culture or subculture has their own system of beliefs and practices that provide a sense of meaning. Such belief systems need not be religious; even an agnostic or atheist worldview provides the individual with a view of existence that makes sense to that individual.

Jung was interested in developing a theory of how Pueblo psychology might complement his theory of personality types (Bair, 2003). Jung's visit with Mountain Lake (who he called his "Red Indian friend" (Jung, 1933, p. 213)) prompted him to think about how different cultures value thinking and feeling differently, just as individuals within a culture do. Based on Mountain Lake's comment that Indians think with their hearts rather than their heads, Jung speculated that there is a great divide between whites and Indians, and he seemed to admire the Indian psychology.

Jung's theory of psychological types has been compared to the circular sand paintings of the Navajo, which symbolize the mythical history of the gods, the ancestors and mankind (Sandner, 1991). Duran (1995) graphically represented the four Jungian personality types on two axes (north/thinking; east/sensation; south/feeling; and west/intuition). Others have placed the types in different positions on a circle (north/sensation; east/thinking; south/intuition; and west/feeling (Moodley & West, 2005). Which type goes with which compass point is, apparently, not important, as long as thinking is opposite feeling and sensation is opposite intuition. Two additional psychological functions of introversion and extraversion could be visualized as being above and below the center of the circle. For an individual, the goal is to walk in balance at the center of the sphere (Duran, 2006).

Duran (1984) criticized Jung for his overly idealized view of Native Americans, specifically Jung's (1964) comment that the Indians were so at ease that they were unaware that they were living in America (under the domination of the whites). Jung did not see that many Indian people felt so oppressed that they were drinking themselves to death, according to Duran (1984).

Jung saw the lives of the Indians he met as simple and serene, even though their serenity was based on what Jung considered an animistic mythological system. Jung's view of the Indians as serene and tranquil may be considered as stereotyping to some degree. Many Europeans and European-Americans have seen the aboriginal Indian people as "noble savages," as if their lack of advanced technology somehow made them inherently noble. A more reasoned view would be that Indian people are people like any others, and have both positive and negative aspects. The apparent simplicity and tranquility of the Pueblo dwellers impressed Jung, but in his brief one-day visit he apparently was not made aware of the many social problems that were, and still are, common in many Indian communities. A longer visit may have revealed some distress beneath the tranquility. In addition, if, as Jung concluded, all religious and mythological systems are equally irrational, then why idealize one over another? But Jung's encounter with Mountain Lake did illustrate to Jung how different cultures are similar in their need to make sense of the universe, even if their explanations differ.

Jung may also have over-generalized about the Indians when he tried to compare their thinking style to that of whites. Jung believed that being fully conscious requires intensive thinking, and is exhausting. Primitive people (as he called them) do not think; if they think at all, it is in the belly or in the heart; they are conscious only of emotional thoughts (Jung, 1968). Referring to the Pueblo dwellers, Mountain Lake said they think with their hearts, not their heads. Jung said "the Pueblo Indians derive consciousness from the intensity of feeling. Abstract thought does not exist for them. . . . They cannot go beyond the perceptions of their senses and their feelings" (Jung, 1968, p. 9).

Jung's interest in Indian psychology is admirable, although today it is apparent that his generalizations about Indian psychology were simplistic and based on very little information. His only Indian informant on psychology was Mountain Lake, who only talked with Jung for part of one day and told Jung generalities already known to the general public (Bair, 2003). Jung's limited understanding of Indian psychology led him to idealize it. Given Jung's interest in world mythologies and his belief that all such systems are human creations, one might expect him to simply describe the Pueblo dweller's beliefs as one more belief system, rather than idealize it.

Jung was, of course, correct that the Pueblo belief system was sophisticated enough to serve as a meaning-making system for the Indian people who believed in it. He said "Primitive psychology is by no means primitive" (Jung, 1968, p. 9). Jung actually found his own ideas more in tune with the Pueblo Indians than with the culture of early twentieth-century Europe. "He saw that it was quite wrong to believe that the white man had all the truths" (Berger & Segaller, 2000, p. 152). Jung wrote "it is not only primitive man whose psychology is archaic. It is the psychology also of modern civilized man . . . every civilized human being, however high his conscious development, is still an archaic man at the deeper levels of his psyche" (Jung, 1964, p. 50-51). This thought reinforces the idea that while modern whites might think they know it all, most of them still operate psychologically at a primitive level. For example, many Americans participate fully in their highly technological society while at the same time holding religious beliefs that date back thousands of years.

Jung never forgot his encounter with the Indians in New Mexico. In a letter to Mountain Lake several years after his visit, Jung said "I am busy exploring the truth in which Indians believe. It always impressed me as a great truth" (quoted in Berger & Segaller, 2000, p. 137). One lesson of Jung's encounter with Mountain Lake is that all humans need a belief system to make sense of the universe, even if every culture has a different belief system, and there is no way to know which (if any) belief system is correct. Jung seemed to feel that it really does not matter which system is believed, since the effect (a sense of meaning) in each case is the same.

Just a year before he died, Jung said that Mountain Lake correctly assumed that the consciousness and meaning of his people "will die when destroyed by the narrow-mindedness of American rationalism" (quoted in Berger & Segaller, 2000, p. 153). From this comment it appears that Jung felt that American society as a whole emphasized the thinking function to the exclusion of the feeling function. In Jungian analysis, an individual who was unbalanced in this way would be encouraged to experiment with getting more in touch with his or her feeling side (Duran, 2006).

There are interesting similarities between Jung's theories and Native American healing. Sandner (1991) suggested that the traditional symbolic healing rituals of the Navajo operate on the same principles as modern psychotherapy, which is also a symbolic form of healing. While almost all forms of psychotherapy operate on a symbolic level, Jung's analytical psychology is perhaps the approach that most explicitly recognizes the symbolic and mythological dimensions of the human personality. Like the ritual healing ceremonies of Native Americans, psychotherapy is a socially sanctioned ritual that involves its own belief system. While modern psychotherapies like to claim their practices are empirically supported, often the reference to science is just a pro forma part of the ritual. In modern healing practices, science tends to have more credibility to patients than ancient ceremonies, but scientific practices are not necessarily more effective for healing psychological distress.

It has been noted that Jung's view of the goal of psychotherapy as achieving balance and integration of the parts of the self is similar to the goal of traditional Native American healing rituals. After studying the ceremonies of the Navajo for many years, Donald Sandner noted that "If you wanted a place to look for corroboration of a lot of Jung's views . . . you could do no better than to look into the Navajo symbol system - it's all there. It's all put together from the collective unconscious" (quoted in Berger & Segaller, 2000, p. 141). Joseph Henderson said "The Indian's ceremonies come from the rightful use of archetypes in the unconscious" (quoted in Berger & Segaller, 2000, p. 144). It may be that the widespread belief that humans have disparate aspects that must be integrated into a whole to be healthy provides support for Jung's concept of the collective unconscious.

C. G. Jung's encounter with Mountain Lake in New Mexico was a provocative meeting that Jung always remembered with fondness. He felt that he learned important lessons about how Indian people think, and about the relativism and utility of belief systems. Mountain Lake's perspective on the meaning of existence made clear to Jung that all humans would benefit by having a clear (but humble) sense of their own significance in the order of things.

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