

# Cockroaches and Creator Gods: An Archetypal Dream Exploration

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Clinical psychologist Tiffany Baugher reflects on the ways the numinous power of divine creativity can lurk in the rejected, the strange, and the awe-ful in this essay.

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Tiffany R. Baugher, Ph.D. In the summer of 1994 I was privileged to sit with Sir Laurens van der Post for seven nights of incredible story telling. Spellbound, I listened to the living myths he had culled from living with the Kalahari Bushmen for much of his long existence. One myth in particular struck me, and that was of the creator god, Mantis. The story of Mantis was different from other creation myths that I was familiar with at the time in that he was within creation as he created, rather than standing outside the wheel of life. Mantis felt passion, hunger, love and vindictiveness, and I was struck with the capacity of the Kalahari to hold animal, human, natural and instinctual in the realm of the sacred. This was a culture that was defined by an interlacing of the human and the natural worlds. How different, I thought, from western culture which is imbued with the consuming desire to transcend the limitations of flesh and nature, a culture whose myths are so often no-myths that seek to prettify, fix and escape from life's realities. The night Laurens van der Post spoke of the Mantis I had a dream: I am in a little cottage, sweeping the floor. All of a sudden, I realize that in the corner there is a huge, hideous roach. I am repulsed. I pick up my broom and begin to hit it in an attempt to destroy it. As I beat it, the roach transforms into a grubby-faced child dressed in a coat of roach skins. I don't recognize the change and I continue to attempt to destroy it. Then, in one fluid movement, a beautiful young native man emerges from the roach and steps forward. I know that he is the son of a king. He wears a long robe, and beneath the robe I glimpse spring green legs and wings—this is really the Mantis! I am horrified that I have committed sacrilege by trying to destroy him. How will I ever be able to right this wrong? Then the Mantis-man transforms once again into a strong, young native girl. She takes my hand and leads me out onto the lawn where she calls down the "Spirit of Life." The wind whips wildly and I become aware that a presence of colossal proportions is fast approaching. How will I ever be able to make amends for the tremendous wrong I have done this spirit and his messengers? (Author's dream, July 1994) Sir Laurens' earthy yet cosmic yarns inspired in my psyche a deep and painful look at how I had been remiss in my relationship to the "Spirit of Life." The dream was a gift that blossomed out of the shared myth of a culture that was half a world away. The story had, in effect, healed. However, equally as powerful as the myth I witnessed and the dream it engendered was a desire to host this experience in a particularly active way. Hillman states that, "Dreams, visions, and feelings—so entirely inner and mine—have nothing to do with the soul unless they be recollected, recorded, entered into history. Inner images and feelings (so-called soul-stuff) are free for grabs, nightly at the onerific fair, simply giveaways from the tunnel of love and the chamber of horrors unless they be put through the qualifying intelligence, the history-making of the psyche, sifted and weighed in the disciplined reflection of loving, of ritual, of dialectics, of an art—or of a psychological analysis with its therapeutic plot. . . You see that here I am speaking of history as an equivalent for soul-making, as a digestive operation. (p. 27) The process, then, of digesting this experience, this strange multiform inhabitant of psyche, would include recollection, reflection and art (poetry), though an art (I would like to stress) not in service of the ear, but in the service of the image. Hillman (1979) goes on to say that "We work on the dream, not to unravel it as Freud said, to undo the dream-work's undoing, but to respond to its work with the likeness of our work, all the while aiming to speak like the dream, imaging like the dream." (p. 130) I have been phobic of tree roaches, or palmetto bugs, since early adolescence, a decided disadvantage while being raised in a semi-tropical city filled with bayous and huge "water oaks"—the perfect nesting ground for these creatures. I was a child who would place spiders and crickets gently outside so that they wouldn't be stepped on or eaten by a playful sheepdog. However, I had absolutely no mercy for the cockroach. Father and brothers were enlisted to murder the unfortunate bug that strayed indoors. I would have long conversations with my mother, who held degrees in biology, about the possibility of a limited-spectrum pesticide that would eradicate the roach but not harm anything else. A series of nightmares from late childhood on had featured these awful insects, dreams where I had not even the courage to attack the offending creature, but instead only sought wildly to escape. It was therefore both fascinating and disturbing to me to have an experience of such powerful numinosity literally grow out of (what was for me) the most wretched and rejected living thing on the face of the earth. In working this image, I realized that I had sought to be separate from life in one of its most ancient and primal forms—the cockroach. I had failed to see the "Microcosm before the Macrocosm" (Hillman, 1983b). And in denying the totality of the natural world, I denied my own totality. Hillman states that the "animals out there are our human organs; our organs are interiorized animal species" (p. 312). The play of me-in-you and you-in-me between the human and the natural allows reflection, and discovery of formerly unclaimed aspects of the self. Laurens van der Post says we need animals because "animals are reflections of ourselves. We can't know ourselves unless we see ourselves reflected." (Lecture, July 1994) And what happens when we "throw off from our Adamic natures" (Hillman, 1983b, p. 311) these animal parts? Quite literally, they are demonized: The Cockroach

Midnight wings clacking  
insidiously you shuffle  
in the dark corners  
of my life  
igniting my revulsion

at your lowliness

I find frightening

your insatiable will to survive. . .

I will send you into oblivion! Like so many, I didn't think twice about my decision to destroy this inconvenient creature, and I certainly didn't stop to think how he and I might be interrelated or connected. It would have never occurred to me to think that this vilified insect could hold the sacred and the creative soul of the Mantis. This dream inspired me to look deeply at how I applied hierarchies to different forms of existence and different psychic images. Unlike the Bushmen, I had not bravely held this rich and multi-hued spectrum of life in the container of the sacred. The relationship with the natural (including the natural and autonomous inhabitant's of psyche's landscape) must be treated with excruciating delicacy and diplomacy. Deeply humbled by the revelations of my dream, I asked myself what inhabitants of psyche had been sorrowfully denied and downtrodden. In connecting with this multiform Underworld presence, I felt a sense of tremendous guilt, a perception of the criminal nature of my negligence and animosity toward the Roach-that-was-Mantis-that-was-the-Spirit-of-Life. Hillman (1979) draws attention to the fact that the depth perspective is concerned with "whatever is below." This has been so since the beginning of psychoanalysis, and its notions of suppression, subconscious and shadow. These are terms for what we see in images: burials, the dead, ancestors; workers in refuse, sewers, plumbers; criminals and outcasts; the lower body, its garments and its functions; lower forms of life that we look down upon; from apes to bugs; the underside of the world, the floor of the sea, the downstairs and cellars, and, in fact anything whatsoever that can be turned over in the sense of hypnoia to reveal a deeper significance. The emotions that go with these images of bottoming are reluctance, loathing, sadness, mourning, inhibition, enclosure, lethargy, or that sense of depth that presses on us as depression, oppression, suppression. (pp. 139-140) The loathing with which I initially greet the Roach-Boy blinds me to his divinity. I can see him as nothing but a feared and rejected Other: The Roach-Boy

I see you cringing

beneath your roachy skins—

but then I don't.

Your sweet grubby face

begs me for recognition

for empathy

for love

yet, I am blinded

by the color of your coat;

and it makes me cruel

in spite of myself. The unknown and denied inhabitants of psyche, much as the denied aspects of the natural world, can be the very core of the story that drives our existence, and as such can provide us with the greatest amount of energy. The grubby faced child dressed in roach skins holds the power of creation in his form. Yet, he also holds vulnerability, a call for nurture and protection, for mothering. These creaturely voices, both from within and from without, cannot find voice when objectified and consigned to the realm of abstract symbolism. Hillman (1983b) concedes that eventually we must go beyond the homeopathic view of the animal as an organ or functional extension of the human and, instead, place ourselves in their skin—Consider the household mouse: it has not merely a single function and its image in a dream is not merely a symbolic representation of that function. That flattens the mouse, making its incursion into the dream too understandable. "Inside the mouse" means to do justice to the rich, complete being that each animal is, with its intricate adaptive manners of eating, breeding, nurturing, moving, its coloring and eyes, its geography. (p. 315) When I placed myself within the skin of my cockroach, he had this to say: I am everlasting, like the gods. I was there in the beginning, and I will survive to the end of time. If I am so abhorrent, how could nature, in all her wisdom, give me the gift of millions of years of existence? My will is insatiable, my love for life keen—to eat, scuffle, scurry, reproduce. I love the dark and the cool, the rich loamy roots of trees and the cast-offs of the human. I take the detritus of the city and the forest floor and make of it a fertile bed from which new things grow. How could you not see my beauty and my power? I found the roach voice to be endowed with essential power and creativity and possessed of a voracious love of life, flesh and creatureliness that I don't think many people maintain past toddlerhood. I can see now that he is "like the gods" in his unbridled and unashamed energies.

Hillman explains the relationship between the gods and the animal eye as follows—"By bringing our superior postures to the level of the creature, kneeling to it, condescension, we begin to see as they do; a transposed eye. Gods retain this animal eye" (1983b, p. 325). Seeing from the vantage of this creaturely eye is an "act of imagining the world so that it appears in continuing animation, in a continuing play of creation, with which human consciousness participates by means of imaginal acts" (p. 325). This wedding of the human and the animal is key and is what inevitably leads to the transposed, or god-like vision. In speaking of the animal-man meldings of the ancient Egyptian pantheon, Hillman says that their "animal heads and animal masks display their animal consciousness. The head of the animal on the human torso maintains the lower, immanent vision of creatureliness, creator and creature, God and animal, in the same figure" (1983b, p. 325). It is just such an animal-god figure that emerges from the cockroach in my dream: The King's Son

And so you rise

in one fluid motion

from that dark, embittered

heap on the floor.

You step forth

from crumpled insect innards,  
 regal and robed  
 the son of a King &ndash;  
 I am amazed  
 And then the animal element of the Mantis is discovered:  
 The Mantis  
 (or The Numinosity of the Inferior) Beneath the human mantle  
 I glimpse  
 your sacred shape.  
 The green of newborn plants;  
 the infinite possibility  
 of Creation.

I did not know

you were a god! Jung found that each complex has, or indeed is, a fragmentary personality at the base of which is an archetypal formation (CW 5, par. 388). What brings wholeness for Jung, or what heals for Hillman, is by nature multi-dimensional and multi-layered. The seemingly schizophrenic figures of Roach-Boy and Mantis-Man, like the Egyptian god Horus, are entities of surpassing energy and resilience. The shifting, elastic figures of myth, fairy tale and dream allow us an inroad into an existence where one state of consciousness and relationship to the world does not become solidified to the detriment and exclusion of all others. Metzger (1992) speaks to the transformative function of the fairy tale: &ldquo;The metamorphosis of the frog into a prince, the prince into a donkey and back again, the brothers who become swans and ravens, like the Beast who is transformed through Beauty&rsquo;s love, are the means by which we come to understand the complex process of change that the psyche undergoes as it develops and struggles with enchantment and with good and evil&rdquo; (p, 138). It would seem that shifting into the animal is the evil enchantment in the fairy tale, but it isn&rsquo;t. In tale after tale it is the animal nature that initiates the hero or the heroine into right relationship, into their freedom to take their proper place in the nature of things. It is the malleable psyche, connected to and imbued with the natural, that finds healing release from the stultifying, stuck, destructive energies of the witch and the ogre, from violence, illness and emptiness. The ability to surrender to the Other&mdash;in nature, psyche and story&mdash;and to have our rigid consciousness transformed (annihilated, as it were) in that surrender, is what enables the inclusive perceptual move. With that comes a reconciliation between the Other in the form of nature, animal and instinct and our &ldquo;superior&rdquo; ego standpoint. The final poem in my dream series speaks to this surrender and reconciliation embodied in the final incarnation of the Mantis. The Magical Maid

And once more

you change your shape &ndash;  
 young, native and strong.

We walk

arm in arm

out on the new lawn.

And I tell you

&ldquo;I didn&rsquo;t know,

how could I have known?&rdquo;

Any you understand

without judgment

and call down

the Spirit of Life. I continue to be rather phobic of roaches, even after extensive work on this dream. This leads me to realize the irreducible nature of this figure&mdash;it will forever hold a charge that is darkly numinous and awe-full, strange and frightening and anciently inhuman. I still sometimes have nightmarish dream sequences where my personal space is overrun with these dark creatures, particularly during bouts of stress or depression where I lose, for a time, a sense of deep and easy connection with being. My dream self initially feels as if there is no comfort or peace in their presence. However, on the occasions that I am able to open my consciousness a bit and allow these Plutonian dream bugs to have a voice, I am gifted with a sense of reconnection with an earthy, powerful, creative force&mdash;writer&rsquo;s block somehow dissolves, I find myself more present to the sun on the leaves and the breeze on my skin, and the need to do that has been driving me becomes balanced by a contentment with simply being. Learning how to host this multiform figure that has the Spirit of Life at its core is, evidently, part of my particular story. References

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