

THE ARK: THE PSYCHE'S RESPONSE TO DISASTER

by Jim Fitzgerald (GAP)

On the mantelpiece of the living room in my childhood home there was a pair of identical china ornaments. Each showed a small child dressed in white sitting in a little green basket. I remember no story connected to this image, but I am sure that at some time, when I learned to read from the illustrated *Stories from the Bible*, I must have connected it with the story of Moses in the bulrushes, that miracle of the survival of innocence in the face of great danger. It is only much later that I begin to realise the propitious nature of this image that witnessed the events of my childhood. Some intimation of its archetypal energy may have imbued my imagination with a sense of hope that, through the ordinary and extraordinary perils of the soul, life endures. But it was only in the process of the current writing that the immense history and significance of the image those little ornaments portrayed became a little clearer.

We live in a time of disaster. In the past few years images of sudden, violent destruction have filled our television screens and newspapers. During the time I had been doing the preparatory work for the talk, we have witnessed the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, the great tsunami in the Far East, the hurricane and flood that devastated New Orleans, and the earthquake in Pakistan and India. We have had bombings on a global scale, from the day-to-day horrors of Israel and Iraq, to those in Madrid, London, Constantinople and Bali, among others. Nature and the hand of man have both been active to bring about destruction and ruin. There have also been the more constant images of war and famine, and the ravages of disease. In the background there is the ominous threat of ecological disaster, depletion of the ozone layer, universal pollution of the waters and the skies, the melting of the Arctic ice, global warming, the loss of species of flora and fauna, the destruction of the natural world. Some say the end times are near, the time of the Apocalypse, and even work to bring it about. The question of survival is

posed to us, and it seems to be a question of the survival of the planet itself and of humanity as a whole.

How then do we live in the face of disaster? What power prepares us for the onward rush of destructive forces, what power preserves us as they strike, what regenerates us as we emerge from their deadly grip? These questions have troubled humans from the earliest times. The fragility of life, together with the possibility of its total obliteration has been evident to people of many cultures throughout history. The theme of a great flood which destroys all but a small remnant of humanity is almost universal. On the individual level, the survival of a helpless infant who is consigned to the waters in a little container, and who thereby survives an imminent threat to its life, is a universal theme of myth and story.

The earliest such story dates from about 2300 B.C. It tells of Sargon, one of the founding kings of the Mesopotamian region. In an early text, he himself tells his history:

My mother was a priestess. I do not know my father. The priestess, my mother, conceived me and gave birth to me in hiding. She placed me in a basket made of reeds and closed the lid with pitch. She put the basket in the river which was not high. The river carried me away and brought me to Akki who was a man responsible for libations. Akki looked upon me with kindness and drew me from the river. He adopted me as his child and brought me up. He made me his gardener. It was while I was his gardener that the goddess Ishtar loved me. Then I became king.¹

This brief summary, one that characterises the trajectory of the hero's life, and that is found repeated many times in subsequent centuries, includes several standard motifs. The unusual circumstances of the birth, a birth that is forbidden, and the threat to the newborn infant: these are seemingly the necessary preconditions out of which the hero must evolve. The lesson is that a comfortable, safe existence cannot promote that creative leap in the psyche that the hero represents. From his very first moment of life, the hero is a

¹ Adapted from Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*, Bantam Revised Edition, 1982, p. 115

survivor. He is an expression of the life force that, in hidden and secret ways, withstands the lethal restrictions of the collective, and ultimately transcends them.

The basket made of reeds is suggestive of a very early stage of the development of human consciousness. Inhabiting the shores of the great rivers, humans learnt the many properties of the reeds that grew along the river banks, properties that have themselves become inherent in human consciousness itself. The strange, unearthly whispering of the reed-beds, even on a still day, has always suggested voices that utter secret things. What better way to express the ever-present ambience of the unconscious, uttering its secrets in an unfamiliar tongue? It was the restless reeds after all, that revealed the secret of Midas: that he had horse's ears. The many uses that have been found for the reed- from arrows to pens, from measuring-rods to music pipes- all have meant an increase and amplification of consciousness. It has been used for many forms of construction, particularly the wattles used for walls, fences and roofs, out of which the first houses were built. Reeds can be woven into containers, such as boxes and baskets, and they can provide a covering for human habitation in the form of thatch. The reed basket, then, represents the response of human consciousness to need. It is the product of human invention, inspired by an intuition that hears the whisper from the unconscious. This response of the psyche expresses itself in the form of human **technology**.

There is a complex of ancient words that relate to the Greek word *techne*, the root of the word technology. In Greek we have two related words: *techne*, meaning a craft or manual skill, and the word *tekton*, a builder or carpenter. In Latin we get the words *tegere*, to cover, and *texere*, to weave. Technology is the art that the reeds have taught us. Weaving is a fundamental technology for the conservation and promotion of human culture. It is the art of building, constructing, covering. It corresponds to one of the basic energies of the psyche, the centripetal force that draws things together in order to promote and conserve life. It is a function of the psyche that responds to the inevitable entropic energies of life itself, holding out a hope that something will endure, as things threaten to

fall apart. This primal energy corresponds to Eros, the Eros of the Orphics, who believed that he was the first to arise from Chaos and create the world.

The container of woven reeds on its own cannot endure. It is a product of the ephemeral world, the vegetable world that grows up and perishes in its yearly cycle. Some other substance fundamental to the survival of life is one which can resist the destructive, disintegrating effect of the world of matter, which the element of water typifies. In a world mostly made of water, in a body similarly composed, we are constantly aware of the forces of decomposition. We have been reminded recently, in the aftermath of the Asian tsunami, and of hurricane Katrina, of the terrible destructive force of water, its power of dissolution that can hardly be withstood. In the earliest historical times, humans discovered an element that miraculously defied the power of water. Pitch or tar has been used from time immemorial to make vessels watertight. It also created a seal, to preserve things, to close up containers, to keep things secret and intact. Pitch can come from either mineral or vegetable sources. It binds and closes and seals, as though human ingenuity had found in nature itself a way to heal what is open and vulnerable, and to make the ephemeral endure.

With reeds and pitch Sargon's mother creates a sealed vessel, setting it afloat on the waters, consigning the infant to the rhythms, laws and directions of nature itself. In a world where the threatening, destructive, forces arise from the human realm itself, it is only by relying absolutely on Nature that we can find a way to survive. In fact, this mother creates a second womb for her infant son, from which he will be regenerated, with a new identity, a new destiny.

The element of trust involved in this reliance on the energies of the natural psyche, on the unconscious, is no small accomplishment. Human consciousness has an irreplaceable part to play here. It is a great achievement for the human ego to resign itself to the power of the Self, the immortal Other, here represented by the River waters. It also has to invent, to

create technology, in order to initiate some change. Once the conscious ego has built its little craft, the unconscious responds, conserving and preserving the new life, until such time as it is viable. This auspicious time is represented in our story by the appearance of Akki, the man ‘responsible for libations.’ This suggests a man open to the gods and the spiritual realm, in contrast to the waters of the material world. Even more significant, says Sargon, ‘he looked upon me with kindness.’ This response represents the capacity of the human being for empathy, an aspect of the feeling function. It is this function par excellence that acts as a conserver and preserver of life. It is the social function of consciousness. It stands for the altruism of humanity, an aspect that belies the theory of the selfish gene.

The little sealed vessel, then, together with its discovery on the river waters, represents a combination of the powers of the mind and the heart, or as we might put it, the powers of the thinking and feeling functions. The manufacturing of the vessel reminds us of the immense importance of the *artefact* in the development of the human mind. Whether it be the stone hand-axe, the steel sword, the wheel, or the computer, man the inventor, or *homo faber*, has transcended the purely natural state, and been able to construct something that outlasts his mortal span of life. The human being has, through imagination, intelligence, and the influence of the heart, been able to achieve a certain kind of constancy within the changing stream of time. The artefact endures, even when the hand that fashioned it, and the mind that devised it, are no more. The artefact has the ability to preserve and in this way, transform life. *Exegi monumentum aere perennis*, boasts Horace: I have raised a monument more lasting than bronze. The structures that withstand Time and its relentless flow are human creative achievements, the products of human culture.

It is the constant, miraculous reality of human life, that from the most unpromising and inimical conditions, the human spirit reaches beyond itself, given the minimum of positive care and concern. It is because of this unexpected turn of Fate that Sargon

eventually attains the kingship, despite not knowing his father, and despite the abandonment by his mother. We can only imagine the conditions inside the little dark, sealed vessel as it is borne along on the waters of the river. Its voyage is a night-sea-journey which transforms the child within. The little craft is carried at the will of the flowing waters. Yet, like the seed that is carried far from its tree, all the elements of its future achievements are contained there, preserved until the conditions are propitious and nurturing for its growth.

The story of Moses occurs much later than that of Sargon. It comes with more specific detail of the threat to the newborn. The Pharaoh's edict was that all new-born boys of the Jews be thrown into the river, to prevent their population multiplying. But when the mother of Moses had given birth, she managed to conceal him for three months.

When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him; coating it with bitumen and pitch, she put the child inside and laid it among the reeds at the River's edge².

When Pharaoh's daughter comes to the river to bathe, she discovers the infant and, feeling sorry for him, she adopts him as her son. Moses' sister suggests a wet-nurse for him and brings his own mother for the task. Unlike Sargon, Moses has the care and attention of his mother during his childhood. The name Moses was given to him by the Pharaoh's daughter, because, she said, 'I drew him out of the water'. This is the Hebrew interpretation; however, the name Moses is found in Egyptian, and its meaning there seems to be something like "water-child", which is appropriate, as he is one reborn from the waters.

The Egyptian setting immediately conjures up several related images from that mythology. The infant Horus is often portrayed sitting on a lotus-cradle, with his thumb in his mouth. Threatened with death by his evil uncle Seth, he was protected while still an

² Exodus 2, v.3

infant by his mother Isis in the papyrus swamps of the Nile Delta. The image of '*Horus who is upon his papyrus plants*' stood for a reversal of fortune, inasmuch as Horus, from being hidden behind the papyrus, in time becomes king of Egypt. The heavenly boat in which Ra is depicted sailing across the heavens after leaving the underworld is a boat made of papyrus. The reeds in which the infant Moses is placed suggest the Field of Reeds of the Egyptian underworld, the place of perpetual spring where Osiris rules, just below the Western Horizon. It is therefore, the place of rebirth. It was the custom in Egypt to place little boats with images of Horus in the river, a ritual similar to that in Phoenicia, where the figure was that of the young Adonis, reborn every springtime. In this way the annual reappearance of the dying and resurrecting vegetation-god was celebrated.

In Egyptian art the papyrus was a symbol of the world which had arisen from the primeval waters. This creation myth was enacted daily in the temples of Egypt. Columns in the shape of papyrus plants held up the temple roofs as if to recreate the marshes of the Nile delta, where life began, and where, later the infant Horus was preserved, against hope and expectation. The papyrus plant was the symbol of Lower Egypt, as was the lotus for Upper Egypt. It came to stand for knowledge and wisdom. It is not surprising, therefore, that it became the medium for transmitting knowledge in the form of paper.

The symbolism of Moses cast on the waters of the Nile, with its association with Horus, is an indication of the heroic, if not god-like, destiny which lay ahead of the infant. As one twice-born, he embodies an heroic ideal, divorced as he was from the ordinary fate of humanity by being cast into the waters. As with Horus, Moses was to become the leader of his people, leading them from darkness into light. It seems to be a rule of the psyche that only by an immersion in the lethal waters, and a subjection to the forces of chaos and dissolution, can the person attain an heroic destiny.

We can hardly discuss the Egyptian parallels without mentioning the greatest of all their myths which mentions a chest cast on the waters, namely, the story of Osiris. His brother Seth, whom we've already met, conspired against him, tricking him to get into a specially made chest, locking him in and then throwing it into the Nile. From there it floated to the coast of Syria at Byblos. There it was cast into a tree which grew up around it. Later, the king had the tree cut down and made into the main pillar of his palace. Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, discovered that the body was hidden there, and eventually managed to obtain it and bring it back to Egypt. This myth illustrates the mystery of death and rebirth, where the waters of the Nile act as the regenerative forces that restore the dead to life. It is a typical vegetation myth, similar those of Adonis and Tammuz.

We find again the motif of the chest cast into the waters in the Greek myth of Perseus. In a further development away from the story of Moses, this myth tells how the infant Perseus is thrown into a chest together with his mother Danae, by her father Acrisius. The oracle at Delphi had prophesied to him that he would be killed by any son she might have. Having in vain tried to prevent that eventuality, he had them both thrown into the sea. The further Fate of Perseus follows from this event: they are rescued by a poor fisherman called Dictys, whose brother Polydectes ruled the island where they drifted ashore. It is this ruler, through his wish to have Perseus eliminated so that he can marry Danae, who sends Perseus on his heroic task to slay the Gorgon Medusa, whose very gaze would kill a man by turning him into stone.

In this story, the maternal aspect is underlined, by having Danae herself shut in with the infant. It may be that the heroic endeavour Perseus has eventually to perform- the confrontation with the terrifying Medusa- can only be undertaken by one who is both abandoned and attended by the care of the good mother. As the father of Perseus is father Zeus himself, this power, too, preserves the infant on the waters. He is the spiritual or sky father, opposed to the dark realm of the earthly waters, whose power Medusa also

represents. She is the force of chaos, the personification of a deadly Fate, which the hero has to overcome.

The special nature of this child who will have an unusual destiny is already prefigured at birth, as we have seen quite clearly in the cases above. All are born into circumstances that already circumscribe their futures. This natal destiny is clearly shown in the Grimm Fairy Tale called *The Devil With The Three Golden Hairs*. It opens quite dramatically:

There was once a poor woman who gave birth to a little son; and as he came into the world with a caul on, it was predicted that in his fourteenth year he would have the King's daughter for his wife.³

The King, naturally, when he heard the story, was not well pleased. Having purchased the infant, he took him away in a box, which he threw into a 'deep piece of water'.

The box, however, did not sink, but floated like a boat, and not a drop of water made its way into it. And it floated to within two miles of the King's chief city, where there was a mill...

The miller and his wife gladly took him in as they had no children, and they said: 'God has given him to us'. As he is a 'child of good fortune,' this is the first of his lucky escapes from death. Like Perseus, eventually he has to undertake an almost impossible, a death-dealing, task. He has to get three golden hairs from the head of the devil, the Lord of the Underworld himself.

This young man had been already singled out at birth for his unusual and sinister enterprise. Being born with a caul was considered to be very lucky, in itself a kind of personal ark in which the infant made its way through the waters of birth and the birth canal. Sailors paid big money for a preserved caul, as it was guaranteed to save a person from drowning. Such an infant might live through traumas which might overcome others, and as an adult might penetrate the darkest dangers and survive. Our young man not only escapes the threat of robbers, but benefits from their actions. He goes down into hell itself

³ *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1975

and manages to avoid being devoured by the devil. This is because he wins the devil's grandmother to his side. The Great Mother herself, Mother Nature, cannot deny him, as it is she who has endowed him with the caul in the first place.

How then can we view these stories from a psychological point of view? What insight can they give us into how we survive in the face of catastrophe and disaster? We can approach them in several ways. First, they present us with a myth of how the human ego first arose from the dark waters of the unconscious. This is the phylogenetic or collective aspect. From the perspective of the emerged ego, there is only amnesia for the state which preceded it. Whatever that may have been, it was part of the natural world, of wind and waters, a place now dreaded as chaos. The original chaos is the place of disaster itself; or rather, every disaster re-presents itself in the form of the original chaos, as we shall see even more clearly in the stories of the universal flood. To help us endure disaster, the psyche, in the guise of the story of the infant abandoned on the waters, offers us a poignant and powerful image of survival: the weakest and most vulnerable, innocence itself, rescued from chaos.

The stories of Sargon and Moses illustrate quite well the conditions in which the human ego first emerged from the waters of the unconscious, and which is repeated in the history of each individual's life. The human ego is a 'technological' product of the psyche, its greatest miracle. It is something woven, from the basic material of the vegetative psyche, but it has also a permanent quality, that outlasts the erosions of Time. What is it that gives this fixed quality, that endures in the changing stream?

I am reminded here of how Jung describes the ego in the Tavistock Lectures. Here is what he says:

The ego is a complex datum which is constituted first of all by a general awareness of your body, of your existence, and secondly by your memory data: you have a

certain idea of having been, a long series of memories, Those two are the main constituents of what we call the ego.⁴

The bodily awareness is like the woven basket; the memory is like the pitch that makes it endure. The construction of the little ark by the mother can be seen as the fabrication of the ego, initiated by Mother Nature herself, in order to withstand the vicissitudes of the material world. The lesson of our myths and stories would seem to be that Nature itself contrived the human ego as a method of survival, in the face of whatever disaster might befall.

The second way we might interpret these stories is to see them as paradigms of how the psyche responds to traumatic events in early childhood. Fate already surrounds us at our birth. It is a web woven out of the conscious and unconscious inheritance of the people and the family into which we were born. This net of collective fate is so strong it may bind us for all of our lifetime. When trauma happens in childhood, of whatever kind, we are cast out of that collective and into our individual fate. The little box or ark becomes the carrier of that individual pattern for our lives, and with luck, we may change our fate into a destiny, as our heroes above do. It is the one destined to be the culture-hero, or founding-ancestor, who most especially belongs to the category of the twice-born.

The ark offers us a fitting image for the survival of trauma experienced in early childhood, before the ego has developed. The miracle experienced daily in therapy is how varied are the methods the psyche develops in order to survive trauma, and to preserve the integrity of the soul. On a personal, psychological level, the ark can stand for all those structures that intervene in a situation of distress, catastrophe and trauma, and help the individual survive. From Freud on, we have had descriptions of these structural adaptations. Whether we call them defences, or the False Self, or complexes, or the emergency ego, the psyche hides itself, within its arks, its own artefacts, where it rides out the forces of chaos.

⁴ CW #18, ¶ 18

These protective coverings may manifest as amnesia or as neurotic defences; they may manifest as addictions or neuroses; they may indeed take on any form the psyche needs in its distress. All our talents, skills, aptitudes, even our habits and pastimes can be woven into a protective layer. As Donald Kalsched suggests, it is the wisdom of the Self that protects and preserves the infant psyche. It is an aspect of Nature herself that installs these saving structures. Contained within, as in an ark, the psyche is enabled to grow until the time it can leave its protection, and dispense with its life-preserving aspect. The ark represents the providential aspect of the Self, that archetypal blueprint which comes with us into the world, and which upholds the survival of the psyche in the face of the most daunting circumstances.

It is clear in all our examples that the Maternal Feminine is involved in the survival of the infant. It is mostly She who entrusts the child to the waters, which are her own realm; it is She who enables its survival there. He (for in our examples it is surely he) has to be harshly initiated into the death-dealing waters of nature itself, in order to be born into the high destiny that awaits him. This phase of the process of initiation which the infant is undergoing is under the auspices of the Great Mother. She both casts him out and preserves him.

The waters of the river or the sea, into which the infant is cast, to whose erratic rhythms they are subject, and from which they are eventually rescued, are symbolic of the waters of chaos and death. Every childhood trauma is such an encounter with chaos, as the child is thrown out of the known into the unknown. The effect of trauma or disaster is disunity and dismemberment. The child is disconnected from a sense of continuity on many levels, of time, place and society. On the surface of the waters, they are cut off from heaven and earth, above and below, past and future. They are cut off from their origins, from their roots, from the natural bonds in their society. They do not belong in the ordinary sense; or rather they belong, not to the human realm, but to that of Nature itself.

It is She who will dictate their Fate henceforth. This sense of isolation, which survivors of childhood trauma describe so well, precipitates the individual into a liminal space, cut off from social bonds.

The element of secrecy is central to the symbolism of the ark. This is not only to be seen in the fact that the infant is usually born in secret and hidden ways, a birth that is forbidden by the collective. The lowly, hidden origins of the child are also emphasised. The ark in itself embodies this element of the hidden or secret. The alchemists understood this aspect well. The ark is the symbol of individuation, the vessel through which the individual is preserved and resurrected. It has to be sealed up, as though to keep secret the process that preserves and transforms the life within.

This element of secrecy is well attested to in Jung's account of his own childhood 'ark'. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* he tells of something he enacted in his tenth year:

My disunion with myself and uncertainty in the world led me to an action which at the time was quite incomprehensible to me. I had in those days a yellow, varnished pencil-case of the kind commonly used by primary-school pupils, with a little lock and the customary ruler. At the end of this ruler I now carved a little manikin, about two inches long, with frock coat, top hat, and shiny black boots. I coloured him black with ink, sawed him off the ruler, and put him in the pencil-case, where I made him a little bed. I even made a coat from him out of a bit of wool. In the case I also placed a smooth, oblong blackish stone from the Rhine, which I had painted with water colours to look as though it were divided into an upper and lower half, and had long carried round in my trouser pocket. This was his stone. All this was a great secret. Secretly I took the case to the forbidden attic at the top of the house... and hid it with great satisfaction on one of the beams under the roof- for no one must ever see it! I knew that not a soul would ever find it there. No one could

*discover my secret and destroy it. I felt safe, and the tormenting sense of being at odds with myself was gone.*⁵

Here is a Promethean feat indeed, to be carried out in secret, for fear that divine punishment might fall on the boy Jung. He says later that ‘The episode with the manikin formed the climax and the conclusion of my childhood.’ Jung was at this point in transition out of the turbulent times of his childhood. It is as if he needed a ritual or image that would transport him into adolescence, and relieve him of the ever-present burden he had carried when young. His soul was in peril: just previous to this story, he has been recounting the perplexing question of his own identity which troubled him whenever he sat on ‘his’ stone. His uncertainty was accompanied by a ‘feeling of curious and fascinating darkness.’ The ark became for him the seed and hidden source of identity.

Jung’s spontaneous ritual inspired a creative piece of technology, a container for his soul, which, left in a safe and secret place, could ripen in darkness until, at a later stage in his life, it could emerge and flourish. It was when he was writing his *Symbols of Transformation*, in his late thirties, that the little ark image emerged into memory, and could be incorporated into the mature thought of the man Jung. We can see quite clearly that for Jung, his ‘ark’ came as an automatic response of the psyche to the chaos of his life. Divided in himself and uncertain in the world, he was in a state of disorientation and disunity. The image of the sealed container, with its precious cargo, enabled his psyche to feel relief and security.

Jung says that he remembered this childhood secret at the point in midlife when he was undertaking the work that would sever him from Freud and propel him into the deepest uncertainty and disorientation, so much so that he began to suspect that there was a psychic disturbance in him. It is no wonder that the image of his little ‘ark’ recurred in order to provide some indication that he could survive the impending chaos. He says:

⁵ C.G.Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, pp36-7

I stood helpless before an alien world; everything in it seemed difficult and incomprehensible...One thunderstorm followed another. My enduring these storms was a question of brute strength⁶.

The memory of his prior survival in childhood, against the fears of the underground phallus, the threatening Jesuit, the inner and outer confusion of home and school, resurfaced in his memory of the hidden manikin. I feel that this image intuitively gave him some strength too.

PART 2: THE UNIVERSAL FLOOD

When we turn from the stories of individuals rescued from the waters to the myths of a universal flood, we are moving from the microcosm to the macrocosm. The previous stories, although they concerned great individuals or heroes, depicted a threat to a single person; in these flood stories, the fate of the whole human race is involved. It is not man the individual, but Universal Man that is at stake, the Anthropos that stands for the whole of humanity. In addition, the whole of the created world is threatened with extinction, and this unique individual is ordained to save it all.

As before, the first instance of such a story comes from Sumer, considered to be the cradle of Western civilization. The earliest version, a fragmentary one from about 3000 BC, concerns the pious king of Sippar, Ziusudra, and the god Enki. In the words of Sir James Frazer:

To reward him for his piety Enki informs him that...it has been resolved in the council of the gods to destroy the seed of mankind by a rain-storm. [The god] bids

⁶ Ibid., p.201

him take his stand by a wall, saying: 'Stand by the wall on my left side, and at the wall I will speak a word with thee'.⁷

It seems that the god speaks to Ziusudra in secret, behind the wall. Eventually, the rains come, but the king is saved in the great boat he had been advised to build. In the end, he is rewarded by the gift of immortal life. He is called '*The preserver of the name of vegetation and of the seed of mankind*', so it is obvious that he had taken on to his boat all the elements that would be required for life to begin again. This latter element is one that is found in most of the stories of a universal flood. It resolves the central issue raised in such myths: the balance of the forces that preserve and that destroy life. There is no indication in this fragment of a story as to why the gods decided to destroy mankind. However, as Ziusudra is commended for his piety, it would seem, as in the story of Noah, that the rest of mankind were not equally devoted to the gods, and so, may have incurred their wrath.

But what about the curious image of the wall in the story? Apart from the rather obvious fact that Enki was speaking secretly to Ziusudra, there is another, more suggestive implication, which leads us back to our earlier stories. This implication is drawn out more clearly in the later version of the flood story included in the well-known *Gilgamesh Epic*. In one account, the gods have reached their decision to send the flood because humans have multiplied to such an extent that their clamour has become unbearable to Enlil, the chief god. Here the favoured human is the hero Utanapishtim, and it is the god Ea that warns him of the coming peril, and the displeasure of the other gods:

[Ea] repeated their plans to the reed-fence:

"Reed fence, reed fence, wall, wall!

Listen, O reed fence! Pay attention, O wall!

O man of Shurruk, son of Ubar-Tutu,

Wreck house, build boat,

Forsake possessions and seek life,

⁷ Sir J. G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 122

*Belongings reject and life save!
 Take aboard the boat seed of all living things.
 The boat you shall build,
 Let her dimensions be measured out:
 Let her width and length be equal,
 Roof her over like the watery depths.”⁸*

Here again we have the image of the speaking reeds, with the voice of the god coming through or in the reed walls of the house. In the river valleys of ancient Sumer, along the river banks, the gods must often have been heard to speak in the mysterious voices of the reed beds. In that flat, watery landscape the numinous had no voice of tree or mountain by which to reveal itself.

But the mystery of the reeds is even deeper. They can transform themselves, even as they promote transformation. As much as they can become the agents or media of the god’s voice, they can also become the mysterious element capable of transforming human destiny. They have sheltered man’s life on the surface of the earth, and they can shelter it on the surface of the destructive waters of the flood.

I don’t know if any of you remember the winner of the Turner Prize from a few years back. It went to a creation called ‘*shedboatshed*’, which as the name suggests, started life as a shed by the banks of the Rhine. It was converted by the artist into a boat, sailed down the river, and then converted back into a shed. I am not sure the artist was aware of this ancient parallel to his work: ‘**Wreck house, build boat.**’ It must have seemed like a miracle to those ancient people that a house of reeds and pitch could equally become a boat to transport them on the water. Again we have the two main elements, reeds and pitch, the ephemeral and the permanent, as those basic to the conserving and preserving of life. These two opposites are indeed the warp and woof of life itself, as they can well

⁸ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. B.R.Foster, p.85

stand for the rational and the non-rational, and for time and eternity, on whose lattice human life is built and maintained.

The three central injunctions to the hero have grave importance, and strike at the heart of human existence:

Forsake possessions and seek life,

Belongings reject and life save!

Take aboard the boat seed of all living things.

As with the command of Jesus in the Bible, 'Leave all that you have, and come, follow me,' it is a difficult thing for humans to do. The security invested in the fixed aspects of life will ultimately bring death, and the submergence in the world of matter. Having projected the Self into matter and material concerns, the life-giving libido can only then be found in all that is fluid, not fixed, all that belongs to the spiritual realm. To reject our belongings in order to save our life! It is the same paradoxical advice given by Jesus:

Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it.⁹

Here we have a clear statement about the conflict of those forces in us that want security against those that wish to preserve life. We can see this conflict in every analysis, when the security afforded by old complexes, old patterns of relationship and old habits, must be left behind. The law of individuation, like the voice of the god, requires it. If we refuse, we must perish in the flood.

The order given to Utanapishtim to take aboard the 'seed of all living things' is one we shall come back to in other deluge stories. Here, we might consider how the single human being is ordained to become the caretaker of all creation, and what that might mean in the context of analysis. The work of analysis is a lonely and isolated one for a great part of the time, especially if the individual has to descend to the depths, or, in the imagery we are considering here, has to lose the security of the whole known world. Cast on the waters of their 'night-sea journey', there may be a faint glimmer of consolation, if they

⁹ Matthew 16, v.25

feel at times that the struggle they are involved in is one which has significance for the whole of creation. In the words of St Paul:

...For the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed... We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free.¹⁰

Paul is dealing here with the same issue as the flood stories: how can we humans survive a life that becomes fixed and rooted in the element of matter, forgetting the fluid and dynamic aspects that bring constant change, aspects which belong to the world of spirit? In the work of every analysis these issues become central, and it is in the resolution of the conflict that the individual connects with the suffering at the heart of all creation. The whole world is contained in the heart of the mandala, in the philosopher's stone, in the bindu point; the macrocosm is contained in the microcosm.

Utanapishtim, trusting the voices of his reed fence, eventually brought his family and all the living creatures into his boat, and so the great flood came. There is a dramatic moment described in the epic after the rains cease:

*When the seventh day arrived,
The windstorm and deluge left off their battle,
Which had struggled, like a woman in labour.
The sea grew calm, the tempest stilled, the deluge ceased.
I looked at the weather, stillness reigned,
And the whole human race had turned into clay.
The landscape was flat as a rooftop.
I opened the hatch, sunlight fell upon my face
Falling to my knees, I sat down weeping,
Tears running down my face.*

¹⁰ Rom. 8: 19, 22-23

*I looked at the edges of the world, the borders of the sea,
At twelve times sixty double leagues the periphery emerged.*¹¹

In every way it is conveyed that creation has returned to its primordial state, all matter had been dissolved back to the *prima materia*. We are left with the stillness and the flatness of the state of being, post-death and pre-life. Those two lines, *The whole human race had turned to clay/The landscape was flat as a rooftop*, convey dramatically, and with irony, the utter transformation that has taken place. The water emulates a house, in a universe without a single human abode, a desolate waste.

The parallels with the biblical story are very clear, especially towards the end, when the boat comes to rest on a mountain, and Utanapishtim sends out birds to see if the waters have receded. In his case, he sends, first a dove, next a swallow, and finally a raven:

*The raven went off and saw the ebbing of the waters.
It ate, preened, left droppings, did not turn back.*¹²

Here is a wise and careful bird indeed, with its priorities right, an unambiguous sign that the natural life-cycle had returned to normal. The final image of this story is one of the reconciliation between gods and humans, after Utanapishtim has made pleasing sacrifices to the gods. In the words of Utanapishtim:

*The Enlil came up into the boat,
Leading me by the hand, he brought me up too.
He brought my wife up and had her kneel beside me.
He touched our brows, stood between us to bless us:
“Hitherto Utanapishtim has been a human being.
Now Utanapishtim and his wife shall become like us gods.
Utanapishtim shall dwell far distant at the source of the rivers.”*¹³

¹¹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p.88

¹² *ibid.*, p.89

¹³ *ibid.*, p 91

As with Jesus' ascension into heaven, or Mary's Assumption, the human Utanapishtim is translated to the everlasting source of Life itself, and hence, is made immortal.

In the Indian account of the Flood, one version of which is found in the ancient epic the *Mahabharata*, it is the first human, Manu, who is saved from the Flood by the agency of the god Vishnu. Appearing first as a little fish in Manu's hand-washing water, he begs Manu to look after him and save him from being eaten by bigger fishes. Manu does so, until finally the fish is so big it has to be returned to the ocean. Once safely there he says to Manu:

*Soon shall all the terrestrial objects, both fixed and moving, be dissolved. The time for the purification of the worlds has now arrived. I therefore inform thee what is for thy greatest good. The period dreadful for the universe, moving and fixed, has come. Make for thyself a strong ship...embark in it with the seven sages, and stow in it, carefully preserved and assorted, all the seeds which have been described of old by Brahmans.*¹⁴

Having survived the flood, Manu is directed by the god to create all living things from the seeds he had preserved. In line with Indian thought, there is no reason for the deluge except that it is the natural end of a cycle of creation. The question holds here too: How is life to begin again if the universe has to be purified through destruction? The opposites, the fixed and moving, have to be dissolved back into their basic elements, but the boat containing the seeds of all living things will float on this solution during the interval between the destruction and the new creation. It is this suspension that is the source of life and all creativity.

This state of suspension is the most difficult stage of the analytic process. Great patience, faith and trust are needed, especially when a person may look back at a previous existence, which is now over, destroyed. It takes great devotion and spiritual

¹⁴ Sir J.G.Frazer, op. cit. p. 186

concentration to overcome the inertial forces of matter that prevent us from moving on. Here are the words of Vishnu concerning Manu:

*By my favour and through severe austere fervour, he shall attain perfect insight into his creative work, and shall not become bewildered.*¹⁵

We can see here the powerful act of spiritual concentration that is required. However, it is a cooperative venture; ego and Self are both involved in the act of new creation. The favour of the God is needed, but the man needs the act of ‘severe austere fervour’, a very succinct definition of analysis indeed.

There is a Greek version of the Flood, which is not found in any extended form, but is retold by Ovid. It concerns a couple, Deucalion, the son of Prometheus, and Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora, the first woman fashioned by the gods. In the words of Frazer, quoting the Greek writer Apollodorus:

*But when Zeus wished to destroy the men of the Bronze Age, Deucalion by the advice of Prometheus constructed a chest or ark, and having stored in it what was needful he entered into it with his wife. Then Zeus poured a great rain from the sky on the earth....But Deucalion in the ark, floating over the sea for nine days and as many nights, grounded on Parnassus, and there, when the rains ceased, he disembarked and sacrificed to Zeus, the God of Escape. And Zeus sent Hermes to him and allowed him to choose what he would, and he chose men. And at the bidding of Zeus he picked up stones and threw them over his head; and the stones which Deucalion threw became men, and the stones which Pyrrha threw became women.*¹⁶

We have here a history of *fashioning*, or *techne* again. Prometheus is the great avatar of technology, he who brought so many gifts of craft to men. In this story, it is he who inspires the construction of the chest or ark. We meet with fashioning again, after the deluge, when the great crafty Hermes himself comes on the scene. After a disaster, how

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 187

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 146-7

does life begin again? For the Greeks, it was represented by the presence of Hermes himself. But prior to his epiphany, there is the matter of the sacrifice. In all the Flood stories, the end of the period of suspension on the waters, and the beginning of the new creation is marked by the survivor with a sacrifice to the God who has saved him.

We have become used over the past year to the various rituals carried out after disasters. People have complained about the habit that has grown up of leaving flowers and trinkets at the site of deaths or accidents, but it appears that the psyche is well aware of what is needed in these situations. We have also witnessed collective religious ceremonies carried out after major catastrophes. The images of sacrifice and of thanksgiving have been evident in most cases. The sacrifice is not only a matter of offering thanks to the God of escapes. It is a means of affirming that a greater power, as in the Twelve Steps Programme, is directing one's life. In other words, the Ego has to acknowledge the greater power of the Self. With this comes the realisation that the old life is over, and a new beginning has to be made.

The re-creation of human beings in the Greek version is quite different from that in other traditions. In the latter, the seeds of the new life have all been carried in the ark, whether human or non-human. Here, it is the earth itself that affords the raw material for the new race. It is as if the earth has been newly scoured and renewed, and now can provide the necessary material. It suggests in a radical way that nothing of the former existence can be relied on to provide the seeds of a new creation.

Now we turn to the version of the Flood story which is probably most familiar to us, that of Noah in the Bible. It is the most profound and detailed Flood story we have. In it the purposes of the human and non-human worlds are clearly shown, together with the place of the human being in the processes of Creation. The reason that Yahweh god decides to destroy his creation are clearly laid out: '*human wickedness was great on earth*', '*corrupt were the ways of all living things on earth*', '*[the human] heart contrived nothing but*

wicked schemes all day long, *'the earth is full of lawlessness because of human beings'*.
'Yahweh regretted having made human beings on earth and was grieved at heart'.

In contrast to the words used on the days of creation, *'God saw that it was good'*, humans have undone His good creation and corrupted it. The question is, can His good creation and human beings co-exist? Has humanity a place in God's creation at all? These are the questions that the story of Noah has to answer. We might also ask the psychological question, In the light of the Unconscious, has the human Ego a lasting and constructive place? Or as with the antediluvian humans, is the ego a corrupter of the intentions of the Unconscious? Certainly, in the way it has dealt with that external representation of the unconscious, the natural world, there has been such corruption that a cataclysm like the Universal Deluge is being predicted. Over the past year in particular, because of the many natural and man-made disasters, much has been said in the media about the inevitability of some major catastrophe. We may well already have heard the voice in the reed fence. If so, we have to find our individual response, as Noah did.

In the great medieval mystery plays, the travails of Noah as he tries to build his ark, especially in the face of his wife's scolding, are told with much humour. As they board the ark, she becomes the voice of all those forces that want us to remain in the known life and resist change:

Yea, sir, set up your sail
And row forth with evil heale,
For without any fail,
I will not out of this town.
But I have my gossips every one,
One foot further I will not go...
But thou wilt let them in thy chest,
Else row forth, Noah, whither thou list,

*And get thee a new wife.*¹⁷

Eventually she is persuaded on board, and they are shut in. In the words of the Bible:

*That very day all the springs of the great deep burst through, and the sluices of heaven opened...and those that went aboard were a male and a female of all that was alive, as God had commanded him. Then Yahweh shut him in.*¹⁸

We are witnessing the undoing of the second day of creation, when God made a vault, which ‘*divided the waters under the vault from the waters above the vault*’. The opposites are now no longer divided, and the state of chaos ensues, embodied in the waters of the flood. In the words of later Jewish tradition it is said:

*[God] opened Heaven’s sluices by the removal of two Pleiades; thus allowing the Upper and Lower Waters- the male and female elements of Tehom, which He had separated in the days of Creation- to re-unite and destroy the world in a cosmic embrace.*¹⁹

However, within the ark the opposites are all harmoniously contained, in a state of suspension. The ark itself was supposed to have been constructed to the proportions of the human body, and now symbolises the creation in microcosm. One of the details of the story of Noah which is always fascinating for children is the entry into the ark of all the animals, two by two. The miracle of the opposites uniting to bring forth new life has an archetypal significance which children respond to. Curiously enough however, the Jewish tradition has it that the opposites did not in fact unite to procreate while it was carried on the waters. It says:

*Noah had parted his sons from their wives, and forbidden their marital rites; while the world was being destroyed they must take no thought for its replenishment. He laid the same prohibition upon all beasts, birds and creeping things.*²⁰

¹⁷ ‘The Chester Pageant of the Deluge’, from *Everyman and Other Interludes*, p.32

¹⁸ Genesis, 7: 11, 16

¹⁹ *Hebrew Myths*, R.Graves and R.Patai, p. 112

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 114

The time of the flood has to be one of abstention from the usual dynamics of life, a kind of dormancy. This state, like that of the chrysalis or embryo, considered also to be the state the dead attain, is an essential preliminary to rebirth. It is a unitary state, beyond the opposites.

The bald statement: *Then Yahweh shut him in*, is one to make us pause. It conveys both the sense of a comforting, benevolent, maternal presence, and at the same time an awe-inducing feeling of authority and finality. It reminds us of the maker of all boundaries, and of the sacred aspect of the *temenos* of analysis. The vessel may be made by human hands, but the seal is put in place by another power, else the transformative renewal of life cannot happen.

The number shut into this ark was the same as in the case of Manu. But here the individuals are further differentiated. In the Indian version, Manu and seven sages went aboard. In Noah's case, there are four couples. Not only does this reinforce the conjunction of opposites that the ark contains, now at the human level, but it creates a symmetry within the significant number eight. The four pairs of opposites, of Noah and his sons, with their wives, constitute a single Great Individual: all are essentially part of Noah. Also, since seven were the days of creation, eight was the day of the new beginning, and therefore of regeneration. This mystery of eight people being saved from the Flood was connected in the Middle Ages to the symbolism of Baptism, which reached its apogee in the octagonal Baptistery in Florence, with its octagonal baptismal font. Eight was therefore the number of initiation and regeneration.

The rest of the story of Noah follows the ancient pattern of the Babylonian epic. The time spent in the ark was much longer for Noah, however. In one part of the account it says the flooding lasted 150 days, and the receding 150 days. Like all his counterparts, however, Noah came to land on a mountain top. For Utanapishtim it was Mount Nisir, for Manu it was Himavat, for Deucalion and Pyrrha, Parnassus, and for Noah it was Ararat. A few

years ago, an expedition set off to search for the remains of Noah's Ark on Ararat, as aerial sightings reported a ship-shaped outline there! It suggests that the ancient image of the ark lies dormant and is awoken by this time of troubles. The image of course, is in Jungian terms, and archetype, the archetype of the God of Escapes, with his sacred saving vessel.

This image of the saving vessel became literalised early on in the history of the Christian Church. The building which contained the saving images and rituals, the font and the tabernacle, was itself a ship. Hence the English word *nave*, in which the congregation gathered, which comes from the Latin word *navis*, a ship. Of course the material church building was merely a symbol itself for the Spiritual, Universal and Heavenly, Church, the container of salvation for all mankind.

There is another difference between the Noah story and the Babylonian precedent. In the latter, three different birds are sent out in succession, to see if the flood has abated: a dove, a swallow, and a raven- from white, through black-and-white, to black, a progression which seems to indicate a renewal of the material or earthy element. Perhaps, too, it indicates the trickster aspect found in the Greek version, for the raven was always considered a crafty trickster bird. Noah, however, sends out the raven first, 'which flew back and forth as it waited for the waters to dry up on earth'. In other words, it looked after itself and brought no news back to the ark. The next bird, as a direct contrast, is the dove, who returns, not finding any place to perch. When he next sends the dove out, it returns with 'a freshly-picked olive leaf'. This is the vegetative *greening*, of which the Alchemist Philalethes wrote:

*When you see the green colour, know that the substance now contains the germ of its highest life.*²¹

It is a sign that life that had been dormant has now begun to regenerate. It is the faithful dove, which represents the utterly gentle, timid and peaceful element, the spiritual

²¹ Quote from website: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/hm2/hm206.htm>

feminine power, the power of Love, that can mediate this new life and that can bring us hope.

The story of Noah and the Flood was a significant one for the alchemists. They saw in Noah one who was their precursor, engaged in a total transformation of the material world. The flood signified for them

...the dissolution of the Stone's matter into the prima material during the nigredo. At this stage of the opus the cold, moist, feminine principle...is said to dominate the hot, dry, coagulating male aspect of the opus...²²

For them the ark was what they called their secret vessel in which this process of disintegration took place, leading to the rebirth of the 'philosophical chick or stone'.²³ For them the flood was 'both destructive and regenerative'.

For the alchemists, then, the story of the universal flood was one of hope, despite the destruction it brought about. But what can it teach us today, in our time of fear and foreboding? In these ancient stories, with their destructive floods and saving arks, there is an attempt to resolve the paradox of survival in the face of disaster. Disaster faces us with the conflict of a basic pair of opposites that impinge radically on human life. We have to resolve that contradiction between the mobile and the fixed, the fabric out of which our lives are woven, and learn how to dwell on the fluid, the moving. We have to live in a house which is also a boat.

If we hear the voice in the reeds correctly, we are meant to learn that we have to disconnect, from all that we know, from everything that keeps us safe and secure. In order to live we have to have roots, foundations, a solid base. Disaster strikes at this fundamental aspect of life. But, by a miracle, we survive, and are reborn. However, we have to learn to trust, which is: to cast ourselves into the realm of chaos, knowing that a

²² *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Lyndy Abraham.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10

greater power upholds us. It means that we have to live immersed in the unconscious, or, as Jung said, to live the Symbolic Life.

The Ark is an archetypal image of Survival, and of Hope. As with every archetype, it embodies both a structural and a dynamic aspect. The structure of the ark represents the providential aspect of the Self, whose source is the Maternal Feminine. As each Fairy Tale demonstrates, there is a saving quality at the heart of things, which contains and upholds us, even in the face of the greatest disaster. The Hope it contains, just like the chest of Pandora, results from an intuitive sense of that Providence that sustains the world. Hope, in the words of Liz Greene,

Is connected with something deep within us which has sometimes been called the will to live, and which- despite being a subjective experience with no visible concrete reason- can often make the difference between life and death...Hope is a profound and mysterious thing, for it would seem that it can transcend anything life offers us in the way of catastrophe.²⁴

Hope is a much-neglected virtue in these cynical, world-weary times. That is why the Ark has become such a significant image today; we are all in search of the Lost Ark.

What is it that keeps the structure of the ark safely suspended in this new form of existence, imbued by hope? It is the pitch that seals the vessel, the dynamic aspect of the archetype. The pitch is that in us which sticks and holds. Attachment is that which keeps us stable in the unstable, that which orders our chaos. Having detached ourselves, or having been forced to detach, we have to find a new form of attachment. It is a feat of Memory, and of Eros. ‘What will survive of us is love’, says the poet Philip Larkin. Love is the attachment that structures the world anew for us. I am reminded of the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams at the Service of Remembrance for the victims of the Tsunami. Quoting that line of Larkin’s, he asks:

²⁴ Juliet Sharman-Burke & Liz Greene, *The Mythic Tarot*, Guild Publishing London, 1986

*What is left when the waters have receded? ...Somewhere, whatever our level of faith or doubt, we need a place where we can say something about what is left when the waters have gone down, where we can affirm the fact that love survives, and so renew our hope.*²⁵

One of the important aspects of these stories that should give us hope is the new role offered to man after the flood recedes. Whereas in the beginning humans had been no different from all other things created by the gods, now they have been cast in the role of co-creators. It is they who save the seeds of all things, so that a new creation can take place. They have indeed been now raised to the status of gods. It is human *techne*, or craft, that saves the whole of creation, not an act of God. It is a very powerful, god-like thing that man has in his hands, this human technology, but with it he may indeed save the whole world. That is indeed a great hope. If only he listens to the voice in the reeds.

²⁵ The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, gave the sermon at a memorial service held in St Paul's Cathedral to honour those who died in the tsunami of December 2004.