

A Lesson in Circulation: Spiritual Oases in the Concrete Jungle by Aurélie Athan, Ph.D.

New York City is the home to countless fountains-- many of which are hidden gems while others are well-known celebrities. What is universal among these diverse oases is the water that flows through them in an endless loop. Each fountain performs its unique dance or poetry. Some drop from on high in a rushing whoosh or shoot up from bellow in syncopated spurts. Others camouflage themselves as sleek mirrors or pose as flowers. The largest weeps endlessly in memoriam.

The fountain's message is an irresistible one, beckoning us to draw near especially in warmer weather. Fountains speak to the thirst of the parched psyche yearning for renewal of meaning, creativity, or joy (ARAS, 2010). They arrest our imagination asking us to stop, watch, listen, breathe, and bathe in their spray. Many of us walk by without noticing, too caught up in the pace of the city.

Nested in the tall midtown towers of the midcentury, these liquid sculptures restored my faith in Psychology. For one year I dutifully walked to and fro supervision with a Jungian analyst 20 blocks away. Every week I chose a circuitous route and every week a new fountain found me. The abundance of fountains dispersed throughout East Midtown led to a discovery of New York City's "fountain renaissance" (Kayden, 2000). The 1961 Zoning Resolution for urban planning offered major incentives to developers to build "higher and higher" towers with street-level plazas that allowed "light and air" to filter to pedestrians (Kayden, 2000).

There are over 531 Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) strewn throughout the city – many of with fountains within them (Kayden, 2000). Those found in POPS are often rectilinear and angular reflecting the corporation's orthogonal ethos to maximize rentable office space and to rationally organize chaos. The public landscape designs of the turn of the century instead focused on including "ornamental fountains." Bragdon (1932) writes that our desire to ornament our surroundings is, "primitive and deep-seated, arising from a psychological rather than physical necessity" (p.71). Unlike their modern counterparts, their intention was to bring the natural world closer to us, to intentionally disrupt manmade grids with soothing circular forms, and to remind the urban dweller of the symbolic Abundance given forth if we remember to orient towards Her (see Pulitzer Fountain, 5th Ave/59th St.) (Huebner, 1986).

Both public and private fountains became my refuge for quiet contemplation, during a trying year testing my limits of performance and comprehension of what was ultimately healing and therapeutic. Even the simplest ones had their offering. My task was to commune long enough with one to reveal its secret; to deeply listen. One peacefully murmured to me. Another nauseated with its churning, yet thankfully drowned out the city with its surround sound. One bubbling cauldron never attained lift off, while another leapt out in style. The worst languished in neglect. A profound insight soon dawned upon me: the existence of an eternal principal of renewal.

This inner wellspring resides *within* us, calling to be attended to. I came to see that our wellbeing depended on the urge to taste the waters of the Self and irrigate our lives with its vitality. In times of stagnation or dis-ease, how might we turn inward and drink from our own ever-flowing spring? The spiritual font required the same devotion I had been showing my manmade fountains. I saw that the city too must renew itself with open, fluid spaces that offer life-saving respite in the midst of the hustle and bustle – a pleasant interjection of nature, in an otherwise unnatural environment (Huebner, 1986).

Water and cities have always been inextricably linked. Without an adequate supply of water, early communities could not have been established. Water was prized and safeguarded as a singular necessity. Fresh water is the essence of life common to all creatures (Berg, 1994). “Even the smallest courtyard or enclosed garden is transformed into a sacred paradise once the burble of water is heard and the air becomes cooler” (Hopwood, 2009, p.27). Fountains create an intangible, not easily defined difference in the spaces they occupy (Huebner, 1986). The Ancients knew this too well, and respected their water deities. “After a long, arid summer, the emergence of cold, pure water from a source hidden within the earth could not help but seem miraculous.” (Berg, 1994, p.27).

The first fountains or “Nymphaeions” were built to appease gods who brought flood or drought. Once merely piles of rocks, fountains expanded their decorative role and were elaborated into artful ensembles of water for ritual, religious, and political demonstration (Berg, 1994). The symbolism of water extends far back into antiquity but remains as powerful today. From Psyche’s perspective so too is soul connected to the life sustaining properties of water and its fountain-like containment. A verse inscribed nearby a fountain at the Alhambra Palace in Granada Spain states: “Whosoever comes to me thirsting I will lead him to a place where he will find clean water cool sweet and unpolluted” (Hopwood, 2009, p.24).

The parallel process of engaging this restorative symbol played out in the cyclical provision of my own psychotherapy, that of my patients’, and its oversight in supervision. The repeated reflection and circulation of our feelings, fantasies, and insights animated what was once inert and potentiated a sense of movement and fluidity in all parties who participated. Critical events that occurred in sealed treatment rooms, spilled out onto the streets. Synchronicities increased in intensity and frequency as if the very cosmos was enlivening alongside us.

Eventually, a new quality of awareness emerged via this circulation of psychic material from below to above, inner to outer. Healing began to take place through the refreshing, tidal flow of unconscious-to-conscious content, rising and returning back to Source, clarified, transformed and integrated. By the year’s end I experientially confirmed the ecology of our humanity’s collective evolution as embodied in the humble image of the Fountain. Now whenever I walk, as I hope you will, through New York City, I peek excitedly around every corner to see if a fountain resides. When I catch one out of the

corner of my eye, I sing to myself: “Loop-de-loop we all turn ‘round, evolve, and spiral together, in one magnificent, interconnected, cooperative reservoir of Life.”

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