

Violence and metamorphosis in the chrysalis of nationalism:
Transformation's necessary unmaking

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United States

Introduction

In recent years, democracy in the United States has found itself encircled by the toughening membranes of both nationalism and tribalism, struggling within a fevered chrysalis of ideologies that would polarize what it means to be a U.S. citizen. This struggle has weakened democracy's ability to integrate its plural identities; as tribalism promotes the fantasy that legal, physical and fiscal barriers will protect this country from the invading "other" that would poison a collective way of thinking and injure a collective way of life.

Jung wrote that the United States, "the land of superlatives" has a tremendous shadow with which it must someday contend. And it appears we are doing just that: wrestling with the intolerable processes arising from within; processes that unmake, remake and unmake again a collective's identity. In my country, the colonial family that birthed US democracy continues to struggle with its original conflict: to whom is democracy allowed, from whom is it prohibited? It's fair to say that when we cage people at our borders, we cage something in ourselves. When we deny our original and ongoing crimes against the once enslaved and Indigenous peoples in this country, we deny all the ability to transform into the fullest expression democracy would allow.

The following analytic case – one born of Active Imagination – reflects how, in the midst of our current, internal un-making, there is no cooling this heat.

Case

Some 4 years ago, Democracy placed a call to my office requesting to come in for an analysis; feeling herself entrapped in the fearful disarray of a transformative time, knowing she was – politically and culturally – up to her neck in the heated *prima materia* of diffuse anxieties.

I wondered, as I confirmed our appointment, “What would she tell me? What trauma would she speak of, what crimes would she confess? And, as with any analysis, what mutual transformation might unfold?”

She was an intelligent, educated woman, but her spirit was frayed at the edges, her shoulders too stooped for someone her age, bowed from the burden of longstanding family strife; strife marked by severe violence and blindness to one another’s needs; strife fueled by collective projections between this group and that. Yet her eyes were piercingly determined, undiminished by despair. And her face mirrored the layers of her history: naiveté evolving through conflict, betrayal, and conflict anew; resolve, without the satisfaction of resolution. She was possessed, as Czech author Karel Čapek wrote, by “the rebellious outburst of the will to live.”

She came with a dream: “I see a group of older white men sitting around a table getting ready to sing in a choral performance. The one in charge tells the others to remove their wedding bands to better ensure their success. He hands the rings to me for safekeeping. I study each gold band and put them on my fingers. I know I mustn’t drop them.

Then the men leave and I see a piece of paper left on the table. There are five transparent chrysalises affixed to it. A single large ant is in each chrysalis. But the insects seem frozen, as if in stasis. I'm uneasy, afraid. Their curved stingers could make such a deep injury. Is their venom lethal?

But when I hold the paper up to the light and look at the largest ant's face, its mouth opens in a grimacing, silent scream of pain. I feel a mixture of horror...and compassion...pain is pain, and silent pain may be the worst of all! I don't know if the grimacing ant is moving through a process or caught in a phase that it *can't* move through. I don't know what to do with it, or for it. I put down the paper and leave for the concert. It's imperative that I hear what these men are singing, and how."

Democracy – caught in a silent scream, feeling horror, compassion, and the imperative need to know what songs are being sung. What valuable vows taken do those gold bands represent, and why have those in charge removed them, and left them in her safekeeping?

She knew the value of the rings. She also knew she was the ant in the chrysalis. Amidst unremitting political and civil unrest, she felt the dissolution of discourse, she felt the violent disassembling of her collective identity.

"Do you know what it feels like to be unmade?" she whispered. She described the churn and twist of being dismantled: her sense of stability disappearing, her longing for order disregarded, her reality dismembered – one loophole and law at a time. Her dream of white male choristers, and her need to

hear “what they are singing, and how” reflected her concern for the harmony and disharmony of her current state.

“So, what were the men singing, when you heard them?” I asked.

“Something like ‘Gimme That Old Time Religion,’” she said. “And they were singing off-key.”

“I have a problem with my family and now with my current lover. I don’t know what to do with them, and they don’t know what to do with me. My family is both tortured and torturous...and my survival completely depends on them.”

She offered two early memories. The first was strictly mentation without image, a disembodied, dawning curiosity about herself: Who would she become? Did destiny play any role? “I was birthed as a brainchild,” she said. “A mirror for another’s purpose. But I’ve grown beyond ideation now. I’ve become embodied in the rule of law.”

The second early memory was an uneasy sense of a split self. On the one hand she identified with the requirement poured into her by her father: that she would reflect purity of spirit, and remain unsullied. On the other hand, the puritanical shadow of original sin lapped at the edges of her awareness. Whose sin it was, and how she embodied it, would prove to be the hardest part of

reclaiming her shadow. It had to do with her mother's suffering, and it had to do with the chaos at hand.

She was of mixed ethnicity, heritage and race; a first generation American born to both immigrant and Indigenous parents. Her father, Western European patriarchy. Her mother, all that that patriarchy disavowed: the enslaved, the indentured, the displaced, the annihilated. Both parents, in overt and indirect ways, shaped her understanding as to whom she could extend herself, and with whom she could affiliate. Her father required order in the service of procurement; her mother, maligned and neglected, lived in the shadows of a disenfranchised world.

"This is where people get it wrong about me," she said: "They describe my birth arising only from a founding patriarchy, like Athena born from Zeus' head."

"What does that narrative overlook?" I asked.

"Their ambivalence about the fact that I was also born of my mother. There are significant implications – if what was done to her, if what is still being done to her – is acknowledged. Recompense, truth and reconciliation. Debts to be paid. Projections to be withdrawn...I was kept from my mother for too many years."

“So is that haunting you now?” I asked. “Parts of your heritage you weren’t allowed to embrace, demanding to make themselves known?”

“Yes,” she nodded sadly. “My early dissociation from my mother has made for devastating consequences.”

Her father was a possessive taskmaster, early in her life controlling her through excessive doting and excessive critique, with intense suspicion around any individuating steps she took. Despite this, she took many.

She dared to explore beyond her original design. She dared to extend herself, through the provision of just law, into sexual and reproductive autonomy, into multi-racial and trans-curious relationships. But each time she was fought over so caustically that her unfolding identity was left singed and bruised.

She never married, but took many lovers – 45 to be exact – and she depended heavily on each of them. And while she wrestled with many and each left his mark on her, she felt that each lover had respected what she called her “fundamental and fundamentally flawed constitution” – until recently. The patriarchal control she knew in her early life had left her vulnerable to manipulation, and she now found herself with a lover who had mastered the art of projection, who bartered in shame, and who, she realized, suffered from such delusions of grandeur and self-absorption, that she had concluded “I am an ‘It’ to

him, an object to be used, an Echo to his Narcissus. He's a highly troubled consort and something about his trouble threatens me."

"Has it occurred to you that something about you threatens him?" I asked.

She nodded. "Perhaps that explains his belligerence toward any limit I try to set. But it's become claustrophobic. I'm pinned in – by his needs, his hungers. He sees me as his possession, says he's entitled to me, to everything about me. He says I was born to serve him...to *service* him...and he feeds on me, not for growth but because he feels entitled to feed, regardless of the cost. He's not alone; many in my family think the same way, they simply use different tactics, different words."

"Yet despite this," I asked, "when you have evolved, what would happen?"

"Infighting in my family, ferocious infighting at each evolutionary turn. For some it was 'What new freedoms might I bring?' Others worried 'What chaos might unfold?' Some would hold me back from where I want to go."

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

“Where I want to go...no...where I *need* to go, is to my mother’s house. I need to know her, to understand her. I’m cut off from her ancestral roots and thus from my own as well. I need to honor her water Goddess, Yemaya, in whose seas and rivers lived my mother’s hope. Hope once thought drowned. I need to honor her Goddess, Grandmother Spider, who wove and re-wove the strands of my mother’s denied history. I need to honor how her Indigenous people’s Great Law of Peace informed my own origins.”

“But this threatens some branches of my family, and my lover over-reacts, and in his rage, he has weaponized hate. When I don’t comply, he enacts a thousand tiny violences...as if to displace me from my own mind. He builds walls around me, walls of ignorance, wealth, projection and fear. I feel them closing in. There’s a name for it, I’m sure.”

“Fear of annihilation?” I asked.

“Fear of *suffocation*” she specified. “Either way the outcome is the same, I’m pinned in, like the ants in the dream. What if I’m caught in stasis and there’s no way out?”

“What does he not want you to see, this lover of yours?”

“The thing he can’t see in himself, the thing many in my family don’t want to see in themselves: the continued crimes against my mother, the denial that she remains disenfranchised. So, he distracts the family and fuels the fighting: over inheritance, faith, inclusivity and exclusivity, over whose body is granted autonomy and whose is not. They’re still fighting my parents’ fight! Who will be oppressed? Who enslaved to the other’s agenda? It’s all shadow-dance and evacuating shame into one another based on the assumption that it’s a zero-sum game.”

“Where does that leave you?” I asked.

“Fearful of their fear. Fear of loss haunts their dreams. So, they keep running to avoid atoning for our collective crime. They would have me collude in the systemic denial of my mother’s oppression through minimizing and abasing narratives.”

“So, your mother’s silent screams haunt the family as well,” I said.

“If I cannot graft my mother’s history onto my heart, I’ll never be who I’m meant to be. Her trauma is as much a part of me as is my father’s patriarchy. Reclaiming it means a *necessary* violence, a shredding that would dismantle

normalized oppression; that would withdraw projections grown too stale, too untenable to maintain.”

Nightmares plagued her: macabre clowns threatening assault. Riots, rape, and conflagration. Dreams of hands around her throat, finding herself unable to give voice. And dreams of her mother...in the streets...running...running away, running toward. Dreams of her mother’s children being torn apart.

“How can I witness such injustice and not be changed by it?” she asked.

“I think that’s the point,” I said, “that we let it change us. What is the cost if we don’t allow ourselves to be changed?”

“Stasis,” she said, “like the ant, caught in the scream. But must I be unmade so completely in order to evolve? Will my sinews knit together again? Will I emerge more conscious than before?”

Untethered from her original identity, Democracy felt the pull for regression to the known. But she knew there was no safe haven in regression. She painfully explored the ambivalence seeded in her younger psyche: white privilege, what she called “lavish plunder” had benefitted so many aspects of her youth.

“They mulled over what they had, and they wanted more,” she said. “But I cannot un-see what the thirst for wealth has done...I *must* go through this reckoning.”

“And the cost to you if you do?” I asked. “If you do honor your debt to your mother?”

“Did you know the word chrysalis comes from the Greek *chrȳsós*?” she asked. “It means “gold,” like the golden sheen of a butterfly pupa. The gold rings that the men took off – they were symbolic reminders of their vows, easy enough to forget when one rids oneself of the reminder. They took a vow not to abandon me. They forgot.”

“Then it’s important that you don’t,” I said.

In her final session, she asked “Given what has been, given what is coming, will the center hold? What emerges when the center cannot hold? What old way of being dislodges and dissolves?”

“When the center doesn’t hold, what do you fall out of?” I asked

“I fall out of my family’s monomyth. *That* is what’s being dismembered in me: the monomyth that we are indivisible in our power and our might. But that monomyth was fractured from the start.”

“And what do the fractures offer you?” I asked.

“The understanding that in my evolution I might reclaim those fractured projections, that they might actually intersect, interconnect, interlock.”

“And the result of that?” I asked.

“A multi-verse of ideologies,” she answered, “a plurality of personhood...I’ve been meaning to confront you...what’s this business about having gendered me a “she” in this Active Imagination?”

“It’s how you originally appeared to me,” I said.

“And why do you think that?” Democracy asked.

“Because I too am a daughter of the patriarchy” I said, “and gendering you female evokes feelings of protectiveness. I must feel protective of you.”

“As do many in my family” came the reply. “But there’s a shadow to patriarchal protection. It implies ownership of me, and we know how that can morph into oppression. It doesn’t fit, it *mustn’t* fit, this ‘she’ you’ve imagined me to be.”

“I think I understand,” I said. “You’re meant to be multi-dimensional, polymorphous, polyphonic, not limited by bias or prejudice or singular identity.”

“Yes,” came the response, “I must emerge from this chrysalis as a plural self. It’s different than a schismmed self, you know? I’ve been schismmed, I know the difference. I must emerge with conscious connection between the disparate parts within me, extending myself to all the parts that live in me. I have to survive not as *me* or *I* but as *us*. As *we*.”

“We?” I asked. “We...as in?”

“We, as in We the People” they said.

And with that, Democracy stood up, and strode out of my office, preparing to reclaim that which was lost.

In Closing

Peace was never the goal of Democracy's treatment. No Eden awaits. Only the striving, the enlarging, the continued willingness to remain unfinished, always in the chrysalis of transformation, always unmaking and remaking, and within each remaking meeting the possibility that these currently dis-United States might integrate into themselves the vital parts of their disavowed history, and in doing so, might save themselves from a suffocating stasis.

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