

Wounded Healer/Wounded Earth:
The Wound Is In Me/I Am In The Wound
Anthony Rankin Wilson, 2017

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“The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of a crisis of mind and spirit. There could be no greater misconception of its meaning than to believe it is concerned only with endangered wildlife...and pollution. These are part of it, but more importantly, the crisis is concerned with the kind of creatures we are and what we must become in order to survive.” Lynton K. Caldwell, 2004

Our human woundedness has spilled over extravagantly into the body of Earth. In these times of ocean and climate change, of the sixth major extinction event, and of the accumulating scientific and on-the-ground evidence of human caused ecocide, I am preoccupied by the intersection of human woundedness and the woundedness of our planet’s web of life. We who are psychotherapists and analysts will be increasingly called upon to relate to our patient’s anxieties about environmental destruction and loss of ways of life, and to our own.

What wounds of “mind and spirit” are made visible through our assaults upon ecosystems? In 1972, analyst Harold Searles wrote that “Mankind is collectively reacting to the real and urgent danger from environmental pollution much as does the psychotically depressed patient bent upon suicide by self-neglect”. What is the relationship between my story of a family ghost and his suicide, and my haunted sensitivity to the environmental crisis?

Vincent’s Story

My paternal grandfather is a phantom. I know little more than what was told, years ago now, by his youngest brother, my great-uncle Vincent. These are his written words:

“In 1927, Rankin was found dead in bed one morning having committed suicide. And alongside him there was a note which read, ‘do not touch this cup, poison.’...the coroner brought in a verdict of suicide...And this was printed in the newspapers of the day. Sometime later I remember seeing Teresa, his wife, and two of her children, Jack, and his younger sister Teresa, sail from Liverpool on the Empress of Canada.”

Jack’s Story

Jack was my father. As far as I know, he never spoke of his father’s suicide to anyone, including my mother, until Vincent wrote a family history and opened Pandora’s box in my mid-twenties. I didn’t hear him speak of Rankin after Vincent’s revelation. Jack was 19 when, in Vincent’s

words, the “terrible blow” happened, and he emigrated to Canada with his mother and sister shortly after. In subsequent years my father rebuffed, with utter silence and passive withdrawal, any attempts I made to get to know Rankin through him, and to salvage something of an ancestral connection to my grandfather and his tragic end. Frustrated and angry, I didn’t speak to my father for several years. I was 36 when Jack died at 78 years of age. On good speaking terms before his death, we were, however, never able to break the secret’s spell. The unsayable became darkly enshrined.

My Story

“The wound...brutally brings awareness to the fact of limitation....”. James Hillman

No, we never broke the spell. But the invisible narrative limited and saturated everything. The silence, deafening. Through the subsequent years of aged hindsight, following Vincent’s shattering words, I see more how the secret powerfully permeated the emotional atmosphere of my home and family. The thin air of Jack’s aloofness was most pronounced with his sons. His cool physical restraint placed a chill upon any body contact between father and son. Shame seemed to draw a shadow across his gaze. Beyond a glance I have no visual memory of him looking into my eyes, nor me his.

It seems bizarre, and somehow a cry from the grave, that my middle name is Rankin. As was my father’s. Until my mid-twenties I had no idea where this unusual moniker had come from. I don’t remember asking. Such was the force of this sequestered and repressive trauma-zone. I was inevitably struck with inexplicable shame when, in primary school roll-call, I had to stand and declare that I was “Anthony Rankin Wilson”. I remember walking along 123rd Street, grade two lunch time, and a classmate taunting me with the strangeness of my middle name. I didn’t speak about these experiences. I have been haunted ever since by Vincent’s opening of Pandora’s box, by this “enduring presence of an absence”, in the clinically poetic words of Samuel Gerson (2009).

Like Hephaestus, the archetype of the wounded craftsman or healer who was credited with creating Pandora, I have tried to make meaning out of this void. I’ve written songs and recorded them so that I could listen back to a voice that too often sounds like someone other to myself.

Don’t cast your shadow from the grave.
It’s not what namesakes are for,
A target for the light you never gave,
I’ve been living in your shadow for so long.
I’ve been singing what you left unsung.
(Anthony Rankin Wilson, unpublished)

I have come to understand that we who are wounded healers must repeatedly circumnavigate our wounds, penetrate the scars of unfeeling, and find redemptive meaning in order to serve those

who come to us for help with theirs. Our therapeutic conversations then can unfold through an atmosphere of shared embodied woundedness, sometimes in unusual ways.

A patient speaks of crushing an endangered species of snake in a terrified rage, much like the childhood experience of his father's stunting emotional abuse. I was, at first, most identified with the snake. I internally cringed and was enraged at the mindless violence. This reptile silenced forever. It's kin, one member closer to being extinguished. My grandfather's self-silencing suicide. My father's cruel crushing silences. My patient knew well of my environmental sensibilities and was surprised that I did not crush him with judgment. It was through this embodied identification with the snake that I could first connect more deeply with his terrifying experiences of his father's rage. My patient then went on to feel the memories of several unremembered emotionally abusive encounters with his volatile father.

Such deepening identifications, as with the bludgeoned Massassauga Rattler, arouse my desire to also serve the wounded other-than-human. Better known as "Nature", a flawed concept whose most common meaning, that Nature is separate and 'out there' and we are skin-encapsulated and 'in here', has come to perpetuate dissociation and denial of our psychological, emotional, biological, and spiritual interdependence and kinship with the Others of Earth. Air. Robin and Dragonfly. Water. Plankton and Blue Whale. Soil. Earthworm and Oak.

The Wound

My father was lost in his shame. I became lost in his. Traumatized, my father was frozen in time, and I fell under the muting, timeless spell of the unspeakable. I don't remember my father's touch. I can't imagine it now. He was committed to the secret, and once exposed, to it's disavowal. The tragedy was real and at the same time unreal by virtue of unrecognition. This madness created a liminal divide where he was neither here nor there. There was no tender hand on my back, nor mutual father and adolescent chest thumping bellows of challenge that serves to build masculine muscle. He hid behind my mother and sacrificed me to her needs for him.

I grew familiar with the feminine, too familiar, with little magnetic masculine to draw me into the mysterious phallic world of men who can penetrate the world with heart. With courage. The inexplicable shame handicapped the aggression I required to gather my gifts and make my unapologetic mark. I became too relational and nice. This masked a dissociated rage and cruelty. A low-grade depression kept the beasts mostly under control. Ancestral continuity had been truncated and fed my taste for unbelonging. This is a wound of interminable longing. A phantom limb. Rankin. And myself. Adrift in a universe of absented generational lineage. The wound says, "If there's no past, then how can there truly be a present, or a future?"

The Wounded Healer

"...the parent is the wound can metaphorically mean that our wounds can also parent us. Our wounds can become the fathers and mothers of our destinies." Jean Shinoda Bolen, 1990

A function of the wound is to enable embodiment, to open the emotional body to feeling, and disable inflated images of a self that is whole and has it all together. This is particularly important for the analyst and psychotherapist. It became vital to me. I emerged from my family of origin armed with pride to defend against the shame, and an image of myself as special. This inflation also protected me from its opposite - the feeling that I was nothing to my father except a bother and a threat - to his Oedipal status and to his secret. I imagine that I was also a threat to his fragile and defended self that teetered over the abyss of exposure and mortification.

After 41 years of practice, having been kept in the dark by my father's traumatized and traumatizing refusal, I more deeply understand my original draw to the profession and the plethora of secrets it provides. I repeatedly discover my emotional arousal and attraction to the scent of the unspoken. I resonate with analyst Susie Orbach's (2012) reflections: "It took me a long time not to be interested in the secret(s) per se...the thirst has gone. My interest has turned to curiosity: Why and in what way is something held to be a secret?"

And, why and in what way has the slowly unfolding environmental crisis been held as a secret by our governments, and by my profession? From the beginnings of my curiosity and concern about such symptoms of the crisis as climate change and species loss, I have wondered about the nature of this compelling personal and clinical preoccupation.

What is its relationship to secrets and the unspoken? What connection exists between my bewilderment at political and professional silences, and my archaic structures that cry out into a parental vacuum, "something is wrong, but what is it?" In largely ignoring the environmental crisis, I wonder about how evolving clinical models continue to make the crisis, as analyst Donna Orange (2010) writes, "...invisible...or [relegated] to the background because it [does] not fit the theory". Does this trigger an earlier outrage at being kept in the dark and feeling invisible to my father?

What of my states of apocalyptic anxiety and doom? Does this forward falling shadow of inevitable destruction and tragic loss arise from the vicarious trauma of my father's shame infused secret? Are these dark moods of mine more representative of a pathological accommodation that expects, in analyst Bernard Brandchaft's (2010) words, a "...scenario of catastrophic predestination..."? Or might these states also be conjured by my wounded sensitivities to the experience and perception of a culture - and profession's - denial or disavowal of lost species, of lost connections to familiar and loved habitats, of impending losses of ways of life? And further, loss of the future's imagined certainties?

Jack failed to provide a witnessing function for me that would have substantiated my claim to the benefits of continuity, to a grandfather enfolded through story. I have come to believe that this partially underlies a passionate desire to provide that for others, and in these times, for the other-than-human. For the past 3 years, unbidden and certainly odd to myself, I have been compelled to keep my own ongoing list of threatened and endangered species, 183 and counting. The

eastern sand darter. The cobblestone tiger beetle. The piping plover. The bowhead whale. The pacific pond turtle. The woodland caribou. The slender popcornflower. I often wonder why I took this up and why I bother. Is the impetus, in part, a witnessing rising from the soil of Rankin's hidden grave? "I will say your name. I won't let you disappear into silence, unacknowledged."

Silence

It is questions such as these that I ask in this second decade of the 21st century. In my 65th year I am no longer able to separate the personal and the environmental. The wound is in me. And I am in the wound. Rankin, my grandfather, tragically silenced himself. My father, Jack, used silence to hide his shame. I experienced the silence of my grandfather and father as an incomprehensible void. I have tried to undo this silence through providing others with a safe place to break the intimidations and vulnerabilities of secrets.

What do my wounds mean, and yours, to collapsing ecosystems and species disappearing without felt human grief? Perhaps, through experiencing and relating to our human woundedness, we are called upon in these unprecedented times to make the other-than-human our witness, as earlier peoples have done, and to serve as a witness for the other-than-human as well. Perhaps, then, our wounds may indeed prove to be the "fathers and mothers of our destinies", personal and planetary.

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