

THE RETURN OF THE GREEN MAN

A sermon for Earth Day delivered by the Rev. Phillip Hewett to the Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo, April 22, 2007

It's just a year ago that I was last here for an Earth Day service, and as I look back I marvel at the amazing transformation there has been in public attitudes during that one year! So short a time ago I still felt that although we who gather here for a Unitarian service might be well aware of our planet's peril -- a peril that Carolyn Merchant in a book I reviewed more than a quarter of a century ago called "The Death of Nature" -- none the less it remained an uphill struggle to promote such an awareness on the part of the general public. But now, at this late stage in the crisis, we have reached a point at which you can hardly open a newspaper or listen to the CBC without encountering fresh news and views about climate change or other evidences of the critical state of the world's ecology. True enough, there are still some who are in denial, and they can often muster considerable financial resources to push their propaganda, but they have come to be more and more regarded with the same scepticism that we saw when the tobacco industry tried so hard to convince people that there are no ill effects from smoking.

And yet.... and yet.... although there is such a widespread demand that something be done, a demand that has forced politicians of all stripes at least to say the right things, we still have to ask just how deeply most people really have absorbed at a feeling level our need for radical change in the way of life that has led us into this crisis. It's one thing for scientists to come up with masses of unassailable statistics; it's quite another thing for people as a whole to achieve the revolution in consciousness that in a strictly logical sense those statistics ought to produce. Human behaviour seldom follows the dictates of logic. You don't need to have studied much history to know that. In order to revolutionize our view of the world and our way of behaving, something has to happen inside us at a level deeper than the purely intellectual processes by which we assimilate scientific facts. It has to involve what we describe by terms like imagination and will -- even such traditional religious terms as repentance and conversion. These are processes within the psyche that take place below the level of conscious calculations, going down to the basic presuppositions of all our thinking and living, the way we understand our place in the whole scheme of things.

We are now coming to understand how such processes rise into consciousness as symbols and myths and legends, not as logical propositions. These are pictures and stories with which we can identify. Isn't that why the ancient legends of the various religions, told again repeatedly during each cycling year, maintain their hold upon the lives of people who don't for one moment believe that they describe happenings in real history. Not too many people are going to put principles at the centre of their religion in the way we Unitarians have tried to do in recent years. They are looking for colourful personalities and suggestive symbols and stories and parables.

If that is so, then the question I have to ask is this: is there a mythology – a story of what G.K. Chesterton called “the things that cannot be and that are” -- that can activate what we need to do now to redeem the state of our world?

I was still wrestling with that question when I spoke here a year ago. Then, just a few weeks later, some of the pieces began to fall into place, at least in my picture. Looking back now, I’m not even quite sure of the sequence, no doubt because so much of it was working at a subconscious level. I vividly remember attending a workshop conducted by Matthew Fox, during the course of which he screened some pictures taken from a book I had already bought on impulse but hadn’t got around to reading. Now I did read it, taking it with me as a companion on a trip to Europe shortly afterwards. It was this book, *The Green Man*, by William Anderson, who was not a scientist but a poet. When I bought the book I somehow felt it was important, and yet up to then I hadn’t read it. Perhaps I was not psychologically ready, although I had done so much reading about the havoc our culture has been wreaking in the natural environment. I don’t know. What I do know is that once I started reading it, it caught me in its grip, and led me not only to imaginative reflection but to active exploration.

Here let me pause for a moment and mention a phenomenon that is familiar to all of us. As we go about our everyday business, we are highly selective in filtering in or filtering out the things to which we feel it’s important to pay attention. There are multitudes of other things that we pass heedlessly by, until perhaps someone may bring one of them so forcefully to our attention that it emerges from the background, and for a while at any rate occupies centre stage. For me, that seems to be true of what I want to talk about today. I grew up in England, where, as you know, one can’t go very far without passing ancient medieval buildings, particularly churches. I spent six years in Oxford, which is particularly rich in such buildings. I passed them every day. I even accumulated some books on their fantastically carved gargoyles and pediments and roof bosses, and on the misericords under choir stalls on which the medieval wood-carvers let their imagination run riot with representations of whatever had caught their fancy. Yet, although the Green Man was right there in this galaxy of weird shapes, I had never particularly noticed him. And in that I was by no means unique. Despite his presence in thousands of churches and other buildings all over Europe, his presence was virtually ignored – until recently.

William Anderson’s book was published in 1990. A decade later his photographer and colleague Clive Hicks wrote another book, which I also bought last year, in which he writes: “Ten years ago, ... one might have been excused for thinking that the idea of the Green Man had all but vanished from the public imagination. ... But the idea was quietly waking up....The public imagination of the western world was uneasy about environmental trends that were, and are, causing real damage to the world, and uneasy about ideas of human domination of nature. It was ready to accept a sign that would symbolize human connection with nature. The idea of the Green Man has provided that symbol, a figurehead for the regeneration of nature and the western mentality. There is every sign that the idea is gaining greater and greater relevance and importance.”

Well, as I said, this is something I feel personally. But here is something strange: Clive Hicks in what I have just quoted speaks of “the idea of the Green Man”. Normally we use that word “idea” to speak of something emerging in thought that we can express in words. But the fact is that although there have been so many depictions of the Green Man in art and sculpture, practically nothing about him was ever put into words. There he is, confronting us visually but enigmatically. Those who put him there never bothered to explain what they were doing and why, if indeed they knew! It has remained for those calling attention to him today to venture their own interpretation of who he is and why he can command such a fascination once you really look at him.

At this point let me quote what William Anderson wrote as he attempted to give his interpretation, based on much research and reflection. “The Green Man”, he said, “signifies irrepressible life. Once he has come into your awareness, you will find him speaking to you wherever you go. He is an image from the depths of prehistory: he appears and seems to die and then comes again after long forgettings at many periods in the past two thousand years. In his origins he is much older than our Christian era. In all his appearances he is an image of renewal and rebirth, ... as a composite of leaves and a man’s head, [he] symbolizes the union of humanity and the vegetable world. He knows and utters the secret laws of Nature. When an image of great power such as the Green Man returns as he does now in a new aspect after a long absence, the purpose of its return is not only to revive forgotten memories but to present fresh truths and emotions necessary to fulfilling the potentialities of the future.”

He went on to describe how he had travelled around various countries looking at innumerable Green Men. The cathedrals in England, France and Germany are particularly rich in them, and Clive Hicks photographed a great many of them. They vary a little in their design. In most of them the foliage is issuing from the Green Man’s mouth, but sometimes from his nose and ears and even his eyes; sometimes it is so much a part of his whole face that there is little that isn’t leaf. Just why it is always only a head that is depicted raises more unanswered questions. Anderson suggests that since this symbol belongs to the western world it may be related to the intellectual emphasis of that part of the world, which, as he put it, is the chief cradle of modern science.

One interpretation of the image he presents seems to me to be particularly fruitful. He calls it an archetype, which is the term Jung used of images arising out of the deep collective unconscious shared by all of humanity. In this sense it is universal, though the precise form it takes will be determined by the civilization in which it from time to time emerges. He draws attention to Jung’s theory of compensation, according to which “an archetype will appear in a new form to redress imbalances in society at a particular time when it is needed.” Continuing the story, the Green Man archetype is linked with others, which appear again and again in conjunction with it. Prominent among them are the serpent, the Great Goddess and the sacred tree. All these fill out what is lacking in the Green Man image itself. For instance, with rare exceptions that image is exclusively masculine, so gives only half of what is needed for a full interpretation of life.

If Anderson is correct in making these connections -- and I have no time to explore that today -- then some very interesting conclusions follow. The serpent appears in two forms. In one it is swallowing its own tail and forming a perfect circle, which is a symbol of time being transcended in eternity. It's fascinating to note how that particular symbol was adopted as their own distinctive logo many years ago by the Transylvanian Unitarians, though I have never been able to get from them a satisfactory explanation. The second form of the serpent is the caduceus, the traditional symbol of healing, and accepted as such by the medical profession. This is really a combination of the serpent and another archetype, the tree around which it is entwined, which again is expressed in the ancient legend of the Garden of Eden. As for the tree itself, in Anderson's words: "There would seem to be few cultures in which the Sacred Tree does not figure: as an image of the cosmos, as a dwelling place of gods or spirits, as a medium of prophecy and knowledge, and as an agent of metamorphoses when the tree is transformed into human or divine form or when it bears a divine or human image as its fruit or flower."

As for the archetype of the Goddess, well, we are all aware of how prominently she has re-entered the scene in recent years. Anderson points out that the the cult of the Virgin Mary, who was the traditional Great Goddess in a new guise, arose in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which was precisely the time at which the cathedrals were being built in which the Green Man appeared in sculptures. In the book there is even one picture of the Great Goddess giving birth to a Green Man. The Goddess too is linked with nature and vegetation, as illustrated in Botticelli's great painting, *Primavera*.

Let me add one further piece to the overall picture. What I have thus far been calling the Green Man was not originally called by that name. He had no name, and when he was described it was by some such trite term as 'foliate head'. Not till well into the 20th century was he called the Green Man, though that term itself has a much longer history, as can be seen from the large number of old pubs in England called "The Green Man". It was originally applied to men who dressed from head to foot in leaves for spring celebrations to invoke fertility in woods and fields, also to foresters and folk who lived in the forests and dressed in green, like Robin Hood, a name that is really a contraction of Robin of the Wood. Anderson admits that there is no hard evidence to connect his Green Man with these earlier green men, though he thinks that both of them arose as symbols out of the same sources deep in the human psyche.

But now we come to the most important issue of all. We have to move away from being simply interested bystanders looking at a fascinating picture, and ask ourselves, as Anderson asked himself, "What is the significance of the Green Man's return at this time, and what does he demand of us?" Each of us will have our own answer to that, as we respond to this ancient and powerful symbol, this archetype. I can speak only for myself. For a long time I have been wrestling with the question of just how we find the motivation to do what we need to do in face of the threat of ecological collapse -- the "death of nature". When I was here a year ago, I used as my reading the poem-prayer by John Drinkwater which ends with the lines,

Knowledge we ask not -- knowledge Thou hast lent;

But Lord, the will – there lies our bitter need.
 Give us to build above the deep intent
 The deed, the deed.

Where do we find the force to empower that will? I have been in the habit of pointing out that we live in a land where the original inhabitants lived in a harmonious relationship with a nature they regarded as sacred, and sustained that harmonious relationship for century after century. I was fond of quoting Margaret Laurence's aspiration to adopt those people as our ancestors too, be adopted into their family and share their feeling about our place in the world, rather than continuing headlong along the path that in the short time of our dominance here has produced such desolation.

I still believe that this can be a fruitful course of action, if we have the courage and imagination to embark upon it. But perhaps even more powerful is the inspiration we can gain from people who, after all, were our own biological ancestors, and who left us those carved reminders of the way in which they too understood our oneness with nature. They lived at a time when such a consciousness could come naturally, when the natural world with its cycle of seasons was inescapably present and human dependence upon natural processes we could not control was very evident. We live in a time never before seen in history, when a majority of our population lives in an urban rather than a rural setting, and we are only just emerging from a period dominated by the delusion that nature was simply a collection of resources that could be exploited mercilessly in pursuit of our own short-sighted goals.

William Anderson ended his book with these words:

“Our remote ancestors said to their mother Earth: ‘We are yours.’
 Modern humanity has said to Nature: ‘You are mine.’
 The Green Man has returned to the living face of the whole earth so that through his mouth we may say to the universe: ‘We are one.’

I don't know how to improve upon that.