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Jerome Bernstein: A Powerhouse of Wisdom and Knowledge

review by Van Waddy

Jerome Bernstein is a Jungian analyst interested in bridging the best between Navajo and western healing approaches. His impressive book, *Living in the Borderland*, is a plethora of information and insight into what ails the western world on so many levels and how to address this.

Bernstein sees the very structure of our western psyche evolving in a way that is allowing our overspecialized ego to connect once again with its natural psychic roots in nature. He sees this happening in what he calls the Borderland personality – an individual with a heightened sensitivity to and apprehension of nonrational, archetypal reality in such a way he or she has a *feeling* connection with nature and the natural world as a living, breathing organism and can *listen* to that nonhuman, archetypal, spiritual reality in an I-Thou relationship.

We can trace the origins of this split between our overspecialized, rational ego and nature, says Bernstein, to the book of Genesis and our collective unconscious. Our instinct to “rule over” the earth and its inhabitants in order to advance and specialize was a natural evolutionary dynamic. This new psychic construct in human evolution elevated logic and left brain thinking to the exclusion of irrational, intuitive, right brain functioning. The development of the alphabet and writing, says Bernstein, which emerged from the collective unconscious, allowed western man to develop his reflective consciousness and, eventually, to separate out his particular western psyche from nature (and from God) in service of the ego. The numinous moved from the outer to the inner, from trees to ideas, from nature to psyche.

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This overspecialized, higher ego, says Bernstein, though crucial for mankind’s evolution, is poorly adaptive for its own survival. Mankind lost access to the ritualized “world center” where deep healing occurred for eons, lost his ability to “listen” to nature and to the transpersonal, archetypal dimension of his psyche in a way that allows the Self to inform the ego and intervene naturally into his life.

I found this thorough and insightful exploration of this “evolution” instinctively satisfying. I identified as well with many aspects of what he calls the Borderland personality. I identify in particular with the Borderlander’s dynamic of finding nature to be a positive, primary caregiver, often healing aspects of the attachment drama that childhood could not.

Bernstein shares examples from his clinical practice of Borderland personalities. These patients report experiences from a parallel or archetypal reality (they can *feel* spirits’ presence in animals and nature) that he considers non pathological. These patients built up defenses when others treated their experience as if it needed to be defended against as regressive and unreal. Sometimes therapists, dealing with Borderland personalities in therapy, deem them unhealed and defective. Therapists must *feel*, not *think* about what the Borderland personality is sharing in order to be a healing presence. Better to *feel with* than to understand in this case.

As a therapist, I was intrigued with Bernstein’s ability to separate out the differences and similarities between what he calls the Borderland personality and the Borderline personality. Though they share certain common dynamics (both share a degraded state of non-differentiation, be that from their parental introjects or nature), Borderlines portray more splitting, para-

noia and anger. He experiences emptiness in Borderlines, whereas he experiences a deep sadness in the Borderland personality. This “Great Grief” experienced by Borderlanders is both *in* them and *for* nature and the human decline. Bernstein sees this sadness as coming from the collective unconscious and felt by these sensitive persons who are receiving the message about civilization’s impact on the natural world.

A Borderline cannot self soothe, he says, cannot manage his own anxiety, often seeking out others to contain his anxiety, whereas a Borderland personality’s connection to nature redeems him. This is not “spiritual bypass”—escaping real-life connections for this connection with nature—but a need to stay in touch with the sacred rather than be distracted by the more mundane.

Reverence seems to play a major factor here, often lacking in our western culture. It is understandable, then, why Bernstein finds in the Navajo healing approaches a worthy model. For the Navajo, there is no split between mind and body. The Medicine Man is a facilitator/mediator of the transference between the patient in front of him and the Self (not the transference between patient and therapist). This “Hatathli,” or chanter, recounts and enacts the central myth of their cosmology and serves as the embodied, linking function of the Self of the patient – the link between the archetypal realm and the patient. He evokes the transcendent function of the patient.

In ceremonials and sand paintings, the personal mythological origins of the patient are danced out in front of him and witnessed by his community and, in the process, healed. Their sand paintings are like our dream work, but on a body level, not a symbolic level, as the dream content of the sand painting is applied directly on the patient’s body. Witnessing and body work are both clinical dynamics here. Bernstein believes we need both our western model and the Navajo model of healing approaches to work together to offer a single transcendent treatment model.

Bernstein’s attention then turns to the subject of synchronicity and transrational or archetypal data provided by dreams. Using case studies from his own practice, he demonstrates how patients’ dreams provided him with insight into physical problems not otherwise conscious to the patient.

Environmental illness is also explored, suggesting a transrational or spiritual dynamic to the nature of illness. Multiple organ symptoms, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, multiple chemical sensitivities and countless other diseases are explored, among other things, as the mobilization of the psyche in defense of the body. Patients have been trained, Bernstein suggests, to think of health and sickness in terms of a split between psyche and soma. Some patients have even been told their illness is “all in their head,” thus dismissing them, demeaning them. The way to heal from many of these environmental illnesses is not to *isolate* from nature or the suggested source of the illness, but to assume responsibility for one’s own healing and to adapt one’s life. One can choose the positive pole of nature without having to choose to identify with the negative pole.

Often complex, always informative and insightful, Bernstein’s book is a worthwhile ride for those who take the time. He builds on Jungian concepts, explores transrational reality as a vital avenue for understanding clinical and developmental issues, and looks at the evolution of consciousness in a way that is both positive and hopeful for the future.

As our November speaker and workshop leader, Bernstein offers us the opportunity to learn more about healing the split between psyche and soma, about Navajo healing approaches, about the transrational or archetypal dynamic in our dreams and daily experiences, and how this might contribute to a “third” possibility in our dualistic way of looking at illness, environmental issues and human consciousness.

Rich indeed.