

Sarah Palin, Mama Grizzlies, Carl Jung, and the Power of Archetypes

by Arianna Huffington



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I've been thinking about this paradox: the most important political ad of 2010 so far did not play on television, and came from someone not currently running for any office. It was Sarah Palin's latest web video, "Mama Grizzlies."

For those who haven't seen it yet, the video features footage of women of various ages taken at an assortment of Tea Party and Palin rallies, accompanied by audio clips from a recent Palin speech. Among the choice sound bites:

"It seems like it's kind of a mom awakening... women are rising up."

"I always think of the mama grizzly bears that rise up on their hind legs when somebody is coming to attack their cubs."

"You thought pit bulls were tough? Well, you don't wanna mess with the mama grizzlies!"

It's classic Palin. And, as often is the case with Palin, the video doesn't feature a single word about policy—as many of her critics have pointed out. But they are completely missing the point. Indeed, this video and the response to it are a perfect illustration of why we need to widen the scope of our political analysis.

We are awash in crises right now—crises that require smart and creative policy fixes. So why is somebody who so rarely deals in policy fixes so popular? It's because Palin's message operates on a level deeper than policy statements about the economy or financial reform or health care or the war in Af-

ghanistan.

To really understand her appeal, we need less policy analysis and more psychology. Specifically, we need to hear from that under-appreciated political pundit Carl Jung.

It's not Palin's positions people respond to—it's her use of symbols. Mama grizzlies rearing up to protect their young? That's straight out of Jung's "collective unconscious"—the term Jung used to describe the part of the unconscious mind that, unlike the personal unconscious, is shared by all human beings, made up of archetypes, or, in Jung's words, "universal images that have existed since the remotest times." Unlike personal experiences, these archetypes are inherited, not acquired. They are "inborn forms... of perception and apprehension," the "deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity."

This is the realm Palin is working in—I'm sure unintentionally—and it's why she has connected so deeply with a large segment of the public. In fact, her evocation of mama grizzlies has a particularly resonant history in the collective unconscious. According to the Jungian Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, "The bear has long fascinated mankind, partly because of its habit of hibernation, which may have served as a model of death and rebirth in human societies."

As a matter of fact, another very popular Republican politician once used the image of a bear in an ad. The bear was used differently, but to powerful effect.

There's a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the

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bear? If there is a bear...

Simple. Forceful. Policy-free. And a very successful ad for Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign in 1984. It raised the question of whether Walter Mondale would be strong enough to stand up to the lurking bear—in this case, the Soviet Union. Reagan won 525 electoral votes to Mondale's 13.

Like Palin, Reagan was not thought to be a policy heavy-weight, and, like her, he was often ridiculed by the punditocracy. And, like Reagan, Palin has come to prominence in a time of national crisis, a state of affairs in which appeals to the collective unconscious are much more powerful—and dangerous—than in normal times.

Jung himself was exquisitely aware of such a possibility, saying that during troubled conditions experienced by large numbers of people “explosive and dangerous forces hidden in the archetype come into action, frequently with unpredictable consequences. There is no lunacy people under the domination of an archetype will not fall prey to.”

What's more, Palin not only has the ability to tap into archetypes, she also has a variety of social tools ready to help her do so. It's impossible to “refudiate” her mastery of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. And, as Michelle Cottle writes in *The New Republic*, Palin is using them to speak directly to her audience, going around the filter of the mainstream media:

It's an unconventional media strategy... Yet it's hard to deny that Palin's P.R. approach has not only succeeded but succeeded brilliantly. How? The most obvious element at work here is that Palin operates not as a politician but as a celebrity... The rules are different for celebrities: Palin's megawattage enables her to command attention for every word and gesture, even as she largely stiff-arms the *New York Times* and *Meet the Press*.

Which leads Cottle to conclude:

Any political strategist who orchestrated such brilliant success via such unconventional means would instantly be dubbed the P.R. genius of our time. But, as far as we know, there is no crack communications team charting Palin's course. At some point, even Palin haters may have to face the possibility that the P.R. genius is Sarah herself.

And, as Dave Weigel put it in *The Atlantic*, it's not as if the media really even cares about policy as much as it likes to think it does. “This media is not going to care about her policies,” he writes. “If policies come up during debates, and she gives the same answers she gives on Fox now, and Mitt Romney pounces on her, the story will not be that the GOP's frontrunner gave a pallid answer. The story will be that Mitt Romney pounced.”

In the end, Weigel concludes, “it's hard to imagine Palin competing at the policy level the press claims she needs to get to, but easy to imagine her competing at the level they actually play on.”

So if you think Palin's lack of policy prowess is somehow going to slow her ascent, think again. With unemployment predicted to hover just below double digits for possibly years to come, our vaunted recovery acknowledged to have stalled, and Americans' faith in practically every economic and political institution at an all time low, it's no surprise that people might respond irrationally. That's what people do when they're afraid. And in the absence of a coherent narrative that makes people feel reassured and hopeful about their lives

and their futures, they'll gravitate to whatever fills the vacuum.

Especially mama grizzlies.

So isn't it wise to get a handle on Palin's true appeal sooner rather than later? Because, to quote that other archetypal ursine ad: “Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear?”

Adding to Arianna's Reflections on Jung, Archetypes and Sarah Palin's Mama Grizzlies

by Dr. Robert Aziz

The idea that within all human beings there exists “instincts” or innate patterns of behavior was widely accepted prior to Jung. Jung, for his part, took things a step further when he identified, based on his own clinical observations, the existence of innate patterns of meaning. Initially, Jung spoke of the collective unconscious as containing both instincts and archetypes. In later theoretical revisions, however, Jung would describe the archetype as such as having two poles—one producing transpersonal behaviors, the other producing transpersonal apprehensions.

The hero archetype could be used as an example of how this works. It is not uncommon for people to put themselves at risk to help others who are in danger. It is not uncommon for individuals to take action without thought or regard for their own safety. Jung would see this as an example of the instinctual side of the hero archetype taking over. On the other hand, it can also be observed that bystanders watching this unfold will often feel deeply moved by what they are watching. For Jung the highly charged, spine-tingling feelings of those observing the rescue are attributable to the transpersonal meaning that has been triggered within them by way of the archetype. This is to say those who are observing the act are not simply experiencing one individual rescuing another; rather, under the influence of the archetype of the hero, they are experiencing an act of mythological proportions. This is why people are so readily compelled to attach the title of hero to those who place themselves in harm's way to help others.

Yet such labeling, we should also understand, might not be

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without ill consequence. There is indeed an enormous difference between acting heroically under the influence of the archetype and being a hero in an absolute sense of that term. True heroic action is seldom a question of choice and it is equally seldom that those who act heroically feel entirely deserving of the credit they are given for their actions. To the extent, then, we identify an individual with the archetype, to the extent we impose by way of concretization the transpersonal on the personal, to the extent the transpersonal supplants the personal, we risk dehumanizing the individual for whom we have such high regard.

Archetypal energies can have tremendous power over us and it clearly is no easy task bringing personal and transpersonal energies into a functional and balanced relationship, even under the best of circumstances. Historically, the ideologies and ideals of secular and religious worldviews have served to propel us into the archetypal realm. More problematic still, is when individuals or groups use the archetypal to manipulate and exploit others. So we must always ask, what is it to touch the ground? What is it to touch the ground, not in terms of how we view our fellow citizens ideologically, but rather, as human beings? What is it to touch the ground in terms of the genuine needs for healthcare and education? What is it to touch the ground in terms of the realities of the costs of war, human and otherwise? What is it to touch the ground, not in terms of the collective or religious values with which we concretely identify ourselves, but in terms of how we actually treat people? What is it to touch the ground in marriage, not in the sense of being married to the concretized ideal of marriage, but in terms of a genuine process of intimacy? What is it to touch the ground, and here we come back to Arianna's important point, in terms of the formulation and presentation of genuine political policy, rather than simply using and abusing the archetypal image of "Mama Grizzlies" to deflect attention away from that critical task?

To the extent the archetypal becomes a substitute in our political forums for the formulation and presentation of substantive policy, we find ourselves on a road that history has more than shown bodes unfavorably for democracies. The archetypal bereft of substantive policy has historically been the language of demagogues. Similarly, the grotesque and altogether shameless archetypalization of culture has been the hallmark of totalitarian states. Would we want to continue down this road? I think not. Hopefully, we will never see the day when the archetypalization of our leadership would render policy discussions to be of no political consequence whatsoever. Hopefully, we will never come to a place where our Presidents and Prime Ministers, moving in the same archetypal orbit as Sarah Palin's Mama Grizzlies, would be portrayed in word and image as omnipotent and omniscient leaders bereft of human attributes and limitations. Hopefully, for the sake of the evolution of our culture, we will not succumb to such mindlessness.