

Living Intelligence: A Traditional Weltanschauung to Promote Appreciation of a Meaningful Universe

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Abstract

A materialistic and objective view of the world has predominated in science for centuries; and a strict scientific view renders the cosmos as random and personally meaningless. However, traditional medicine views nature and the cosmos as intimately related to our personal experience and growth. While the traditional view has been termed "animistic" and considered primitive by modern science, this paper will propose that the traditional view may be a more useful and productive view of reality. Looking at examples from Native American and personal experience, this paper proposes that a traditional perspective helps foster a view of the universe that promotes psychological wellness and better fits emergent science and psychology.

Keywords: shamanism, disenchantment, Jung, magical consciousness, collective unconscious, trickster archetype

Introduction

We live in a disenchanted world. It is an argument made by many and particularly by a founding father of sociology, Max Weber. Weber borrowed the term 'Entzänberung der Welt' from Friedrich Schiller and suggested that the modern world had become more rational. Mystery and the magical had retreated in the face of scientific understanding and a more calculated bureaucratic and objective view of the world (Gerth & Mills, 2009). Another son of Victorian society, Sigmund Freud, suggested that religion was an illusion, close to delusional, a belief system common to children, mentally ill, and the primitive (Freud, 1961). The mystical and magical was extricated from

the intellectual domain. The modern 'secular' view left us in a relatively random and meaningless existence, albeit objective and understandable. However, traditional and indigenous views continued to see the world around us as intimately related to us. For traditional cultures, our needs and concerns were reflected in our environments and knowledge was obtainable, not just by observing, but by asking. In fact, this worldview is not lost to history but very much alive in traditional healing practices, as well as modern esoteric religions such as Wicca and western paganism.

This paper will argue that the traditional worldview which sees the universe as alive may in fact offer an important correction to a strict materialist, deterministic, and scientific view. The traditional view was termed 'animistic' by 19th-century religious scholars and social scientists (Taylor, 1871/ 2010). Animism was a view considered to be primitive and is still associated with immature or psychopathological thought processes. However, traditional practices still persist. For example, an eagle flying overhead may signal a message to a native medicine person and the message may help dictate a course of action. I believe that this perspective has persisted because it offers psychological advantages to those who understand how to think magically in a sophisticated manner. Thinking in a traditional way, thinking magically, offers a correction on a detached and antiseptic approach that too often leads to poor bedside manner in medicine.

Thinking magically in a sophisticated way, as I view it, consists of cultivating an awareness of one's environment and how it affects the perceiver, as well as how the perceiver is effecting his or her environment. It involves cultivating intuition, a mindful approach to one's surroundings and a sensitivity to gut feelings; an awareness of unconscious processes as they emerge into preconscious realms; a hypersensitivity to our relationship with living things which feels as though one is communicating with them, that is, with plants and animals. Traditional medicine people would argue we can communicate with them.

There are examples of this type of communication, what I call 'magical thinking,' in modern psychology and medicine. For example, Carl Jung talked to Philemon, a winged male figure that he came to appreciate as a manifestation of the 'old man' archetype. Jung understood Philemon to be a representation of superior insight (Jung,

1963): “I understood something in me which can say things I do not know and do not intend, things which may even be directed against me,” while Philemon argued that Jung “...treats thoughts as if I [Jung] generated them...in his view [Philemon] thoughts were like animals in the forest” (Jung, 1963, p. 183). He felt that engaging the imagination in a deep way, a way that honored the autochthonous characteristics of the archetypal, helped one to facilitate personal ‘individuation,’ his idea of psychological and spiritual potential. Josef Goldbrunner explains, “Individuation does not lead to individualism but breaks down the barriers and walls which the ego has erected between itself and the surrounding world” (Goldbrunner, 1966, p. 122). Goldbrunner continues to argue that the process toward individuation leads to true objectivity.

To be objective means knowing the real object and acting with it, not with some illusory object that is “desired....The process of differentiation from the Persona and the removal of the personal unconscious which occur in the cause of individuation make one sensitive. It is as though a protective skin had been removed and the naked soul exposed to reality and its own experience. (Goldbrunner, 1966, p. 122)

Furthermore, there is a field of literature that argues doctors can cultivate an intuition of other’s health and illness that allows them to appreciate signals and messages from patients that supplement their objective analysis with an understanding that is deeper and more effective, essentially a ‘radical empathy’ (Hefner & Koss-Chioino, 2006; Schulz, 1999; Shealy, 2010).

There is a tendency in the training of modern physicians to diagnose, analyze, and cure illnesses as a mechanic diagnoses a dysfunction in an automobile. As the problem is objectified and fixed, the patient and his or her illness is objectified and the person is sometimes forgotten. As the world is objectified, it becomes a resource to utilize rather than a vibrant living being to interact with and a source with which one can build a relationship. However, the traditional healer assumes the world and its constituents are beings with whom we can build a relationship and with whom we can communicate. Let me give an example that comes from my friend and colleague Don, himself. I was visiting in Albuquerque, New Mexico and needed to pick up some extra clothing. We went to a

used clothing store on the outskirts of the city and I started looking through the racks of men's shirts, searching for those that were my size and ones that I thought were fashionable. At one point my friend came over to me, watching me carefully.

I had narrowed it down to a few shirts that I thought I might want to buy. Don reached in and started to handle the shirts. He pulled one off the hanger and felt it, holding it in his hands with a look of concentration and thoughtfulness. He held another shirt stating something to the effect of, "You *don't* want this one," he laughed and said "Someone probably died in this one." He handled a few more shirts and then held one in his hand and surprisingly said something to the effect of, "This one has got nothing. It's like it's brand-new or had never been worn." Then he suggested I get that one. As I looked at the shirts and him somewhat perplexed, he looked back at me and said with a shake of the head, "You should learn how to do this."

A worldview that defines the universe as alive and intelligent is common to shamanistic and indigenous spiritualities across the world. My Native American friends and colleagues in North America communicate with nature and are sensitive to information that they can feel in items in the world around them. Likewise, shamans in Asia interact with nature spirits and European pagans collaborate with fairies or powers in the forest. The anthropologist Susan Greenwood (2005) defines this mode of thought as 'magical consciousness.' She argues that this mode of consciousness does not see the material world as inert but rather as vital. She makes an alternative point and does not distinguish magic from science or the irrational versus the rational. Rather, she argues that magical consciousness is an expanded awareness that is common to earth-based or nature-based religions.

[M]agical consciousness is an expansive awareness—one that actively develops the imagination in making connections between other things both seen and unseen—that constitutes the basis of magical practice. Above all, magical consciousness concerns the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world. (Greenwood, 2005, p. 7)

Being sensitive to messages in the world around you involves ways of thinking about consciousness and human behavior that push the boundaries of our present understanding in psychology and psychiatry. Dean Radin (2013) goes as far to argue that the potential

for superhuman abilities is outlined in ancient yogic texts. He explains that they are now finding scientific confirmation. However, even a fundamental shift toward an animistic worldview opens us to psychological insight and growth that we would otherwise not foster. Mental practices described by Radin may lead us personally and collectively to greater spiritual awareness and amazing feats. However, I believe that merely cultivating a more intuitive and sensitive presence in the world can surely open us to self-improvement. Let me share a story of my own attempt at fostering this type of consciousness.

I remember driving to the north section of Chicago to pick up some supplies for a weekly gaming meeting that I attended with my son, Matthew. I was in search of a place called the 'dice dojo' that sells board games and gaming equipment. I was actually excited as I was looking forward to purchasing some items to enhance the weekly role-playing games that had become inordinately important to me. Each week, I took my son to meet some of his friends and their dads to delve into pure fantasy: Adopting new identities, solving puzzles, and battling evil. The role-playing games at the local comic book store had become one of the few creative outlets that I had at the time. These social excursions of 'pretend' were activities that I looked forward to, perhaps to an unreasonable extent and I fear, at times, even more than my son.

'Gaming' had become one of the few creative outlets I had in a period of life where most of my time was spent preoccupied with managing a business, business activities I had come to loathe. I had to fight with insurance companies to get paid for work rendered to people in much need of psychological services. However, the tendency to have claims denied and thus work hard for nothing was frustrating, difficult, and draining. Not getting paid had made work at the hospital aversive. I came to crave the short periods of time spent engaging in pure fantasy, critical thinking, and play.

So, driving to the north side was a moment of peace, in spite of the fact that I was driving through Chicago. Streets come together at odd angles, the L (elevated train) rides overhead and buses stop abruptly to pick up passengers; passengers dart across the street, often oblivious to traffic, bicyclists, moms with baby carriages, it is all cacophony. However, I am pretty happy to be in it, for the most part. I am exploring the city and heading to the game store.

Briefly, under the elevated train track and peeking out at me from a shop window is an image of a laughing skull topped with a jester's hat. The shop was tucked away among a variety of stores at a strange juxtaposition of streets next to a triple intersection and train tracks. It seemed a bit hard to get to and crowded by other advertisements, signs, and pictures. Yet the image stuck in my mind. It was a skull, laughing, colorful and menacing. I continued to drive thinking, "Hum, what the hell was that?" But it stuck, I was intrigued, curious and I promised myself, that when I had time, I would go back and explore.

This jester of death came to haunt me over the next several days and continued to captivate my imagination. I have come to collect quite a few T-shirts, cups, and other items with depictions of similar images which I have come to refer to as the 'Skeletal Jester.' The gaping mouth and grinning teeth of the skull, laughing, wearing a hat so colorful with bells dangling. It is an interesting juxtaposition of images, death and the fool. It is an image that speaks to antiestablishment feelings, mocking and foreboding. It also connotes mortality and perhaps a fair amount of menacing morbidity. Certainly it is associated with a rebellious sentiment. When I returned to explore the area, my Skeletal Jester was on the window of a store that sold smoking paraphernalia and water pipes. This was truly an interesting excursion; this was definitely a subculture of rebelliousness. After all, medical marijuana was not yet legal in Illinois, certainly not recreational use. I had not seen a store like that since high school in the 1970's or at least since I had visited Amsterdam several years earlier. It was funny and it definitely stirred up feelings of rebelliousness and freedom, but combined with some self-consciousness—I mean, I was a 50 year old psychologist hanging out in a head shop. Still, this image became something of an obsession and I began to grapple with unconscious impressions that I felt were trying to tell me something.

The Skeletal Jester or 'death and the clown' is an old juxtaposition of symbols. It is a notable theme in the works of Shakespeare (Shickman, 1998). It is maybe best exemplified by the following quotes from one of his plays, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in which a young prince looks death in the face.

Hamlet Act 5 Scene 1

Hamlet is in a graveyard with his friend Horatio and picks up the skull of his father's jester 'Yorick,' holding it in his hand.

Hamlet: Alas, Poor Yorick! I knew him Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! (Barnet, 1998)

Hamlet is literally looking death in the face and imagining his old friend's fleshy face, as he knew him. At the end of his speech he says,

*Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.
Horatio: What's that, my lord?
Hamlet: Dost thou think Alexander looked o' thus fashion I' the earth?
Horatio: E'er so. (Barnet, 1998)*

Shakespeare uses the Skeletal Jester to make a point. The jester, the fool, was the only one in the court who could question and poke fun at the King's opinions. His mocking could challenge, asking: What is really important? What is true? Likewise, death is the great equalizer of all people, kings and fools both. All vanities, power, and prestige are nothing in the end.

Arguably, the Skeletal Jester is an example of the 'trickster,' a symbol found across cultures. In traditional societies, the trickster is not merely a literary device but is sacred. George Hansen in *The Trickster and the Paranormal* argues that C.G. Jung's idea of the archetype is useful to understand the trickster's role. Trickster tales across cultures involve themes such as liminality, loss of status, questioning the status quo, and supernatural manifestations (Hansen, 2001).

The image continued to weigh on me with a fair amount of emotional curiosity and temptation. I began to engage the Skeletal Jester and I am suggesting that everyone can work at cultivating an awareness of these types of messages. It is a conscious effort to awaken intuition. To awaken one's intuition, we need to challenge ourselves to break the bounds of our habits and daily limitations, to broaden our awareness to thoughts and feelings beyond our immediate consciousness and to notice the messages around us. This is in fact what the shaman does.

The Skeletal Jester, elaborated in interactions with my own unconscious, was telling me to focus on what was important. Not just time with my son but making sure I allocated proper time for creative outlets and spiritual searching. This trickster questions the status quo, and too much focus on the mundane and social business can be psychologically and spiritually stifling. The imaginal and creative must receive its due and be given proper attention.

The type of worldview I am advocating was also proposed by Carl Jung in his paper, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (Jung, 1960). Jung argues that a non-causal principle is at work in the collective unconsciousness. He argues that processes in the external world can have relevance to our psychological processes and events may be connected by meaning rather than causal determination. Meaningful coincidences reflect a profound underlying structure to the universe that is entwined with consciousness and he believed that the new discoveries in physics at the time were relevant to understanding this deep structure. Jung engaged in discussions and correspondence with Wolfgang Pauli, a cofounder of quantum physics (Atmanspacher & Fuchs, 2014). They suspected that consciousness has a deep relation with the very fabric of reality, an idea that continues to this day (Lindorff, 2013).

Now, to return to my personal example of the trickster, and perhaps an example of Jung's idea itself, I will reference a video that was posted on social media by a friend after I had started writing about the Skeletal Jester. In July 2015, CBS News, Channel 2 in Chicago, Illinois ran a news report that showed a video captured by a young married couple at a cemetery less than 2 miles from where I live. Around 10 pm, the couple was driving by the cemetery which houses the final remains of several historically famous individuals from the state of Illinois, such as the financial moguls Richard Warren Sears and Aaron Montgomery Ward; Charles Dawes, who was Vice President under Calvin Coolidge; and John Shedd of the Shedd Aquarium.

The couple noticed a tall clown, slowly waving at them from behind the fence. He or she must have broken into the cemetery, as the gates are locked in the later afternoon. They quickly took a video of this jester, slowly waving in the dark with the tombstones in the background. The wife stated she was "freaked out" when she noticed someone in the cemetery. She reported, "When we get closer, we

realize it's a clown, which is super weird." As the interview goes on she acknowledges that somebody put a lot of effort to do this, repeating that it was "weird," "really weird," and "super weird" at various points in the interview. Clearly, the experience unnerved her and she concludes, "I just think it's creepy and wrong."

I was happy to come across this news report as I was working with the idea of the skeletal jester. The clown in the graveyard presents the same juxtaposition of death and the fool. Furthermore, I was not surprised by the wife's reaction although I believe it supports my hypothesis. The trickster's purpose, in this case the Skeletal Jester, is to poke fun at our cultural assumptions, and challenge our complacencies, our inauthenticity. His job is to make us feel uncomfortable and shift our view to the big picture, to stir our existential concerns, to challenge our ethical and aesthetic assumptions. Apparently, clowns in graveyards are a phenomenon found around the USA. The news report stated examples from California to New York. I'm not sure how aware or philosophical these clowns are? I suspect they are predominantly pranksters. But nevertheless, I feel their efforts reflect the archetypal theme I have presented. The Skeletal Jester is alive and well, and I would like to think they are suggesting that everyone question their assumptions, challenge their beliefs and think outside their comfort zone.

Taking traditional worldviews seriously can help us all think outside our comfort zone and expand our awareness of ourselves in the world. A traditional worldview has something to offer modernity, and as Jung suggested, a rectification of a strictly mechanistic and rational perspective. Focusing on subtle sensitivities and careful observation has arguably lead the human race to great insights, scientific advancement, as well as psychological and spiritual growth. However, science often gives little credence to information provided by subtle senses. For example, meditation has been around for thousands of years, yet only considered a legitimate object for scientific examination when modern technology offered ways to observe and measure meditative phenomena in the 1970s (Goldberg, 2013).

The shamanistic, the magical, the traditional views of the world focus on cultivating sensitivity to our own interiority and how our inner world relates to and reflects the outer world. Traditional perspectives fostered intuition; they recognize internal impressions

catalyzed by communications and interaction with the world. The outer world and our inner world become more interactive and less distinct. I would argue that this type of sensitivity to the world results in greater respect for all and a greater appreciation of our environment. Realization of our interdependence with the world leads to greater responsibility and appreciation of our fellow human beings and living things in the world. Furthermore, keeping in touch with those liminal realms helps foster messages from our unconscious which leads to greater creativity and encourages greater contributions to society. Finally, paying homage to the trickster helps us not just to attend to the status quo but to 'what might be,' and helps us question authority in productive ways that lead to better ways of being in the world. It can lead to what William James argued is the sense of something missing in life, which promotes our own confrontation with spiritual urges and promotes our spiritual development (James, 1982).

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