On Animals, Wandering Anabaptists, Water, and Other Mysteries

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Amid a great deal of talk about bodies and animals at the 2022 Mennonite/s Writing conference at Goshen College, a goodly portion related to Rachel Yoder's brilliant, unsettling novel *Nightbitch,* in which a young mother, isolated with her toddler son, fears she is turning into a dog. Yoder read from her novel and discussed it with pastor and poet Sheri Hostetler during a memorable plenary session. In her Sunday sermon, Hostetler followed up by mentioning a curious passage in Carl Jung's *The Red Book.*[1] Jung's persona, on a sort of dream-quest, meets a wandering band of Anabaptists who crowd into the kitchen of a house he is visiting. The leader, Ezechiel, says that his band has no peace, asks if Jung might know what this is, and reaches "greedily and uncannily" toward him. Jung responds at once: "Let go, daimon, you did not live your animal" (294).

Not long after, Hostetler published a full, fascinating essay on Jung and "living your animal"[2] in which she focuses on an extended account in Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*[3] that resembles the "crowd in the kitchen" passage. Jung says in this volume that the experience inspired him to write the arcane *Septem Sermones* (Seven Sermons), which he distributed only to a few friends while alive but were published as an appendix to *MDR*. Both passages contain a crowd of the dead, although Jung never uses the term "Anabaptist" in the latter passage (190-1), and the timelines and details differ considerably, as Hostetler recognizes. The crowd in *The Red Book* is going *to*

1 C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: A Reader's Edition.* Ed. Sonu Shamdasani. Trans. Mark Kyburz, John Peck, and Sonu Shamdasani (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2009).

2 Sheri Hostetler, "Live Your Animal: Carl Jung and the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Life* 77 (2023) n.p. https://ml.bethelks.edu/2023/07/11/live-your-animal-carl-jung-and-the-anabaptists/#_ftn16 (accessed May 15, 2024).

3 C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* revised edition. Ed. Aniele Jaffe. Trans. Clara Winston and Richard Winston (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1973). Hereafter referred to in the text as *MDR*.

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Jerusalem, but in *MDR* they are coming back from the city, empty-handed.

The character of Ezechiel and Jung's conversation with him are only in *The Red Book,* as is this central passage, which deserves to be quoted in full:

> "Why do you have no peace if you died in true belief?"
> "It always seems to me as if we had not come to a proper end with life."
> "Remarkable—how so?"
> "It seems to me that we forgot something important that should have been lived."
> "And what was that?"
> "Would you happen to know?"
> With these words, he reaches out greedily and uncannily toward me, his eyes shining as if from an inner heat.
> "Let go, daimon, you did not live your animal" (294).

Are these really the same events, the same crowd, that had come to Jung's door? The more I look, the less certain I am. In *The Red Book* the scene does not lead to Jung writing the *Septem Sermones,* but ends suddenly with him being carried off to a mental hospital. It is true, though, that the *Sermons* are a kind of overview or summary of the material in *The Red Book* and offer an alternative to orthodox Christianity. They begin by noting "The dead came back from Jerusalem, where they found not what they sought. They prayed me let them in and besought my word, and thus I began my teaching" (*MDR* 378). Notably, there is no mention of "living your animal" in the *Sermons*, or of the recoil and refusal to speak further that occur in *The Red Book's* account.

In that account, on the way to the asylum Jung pulls out a copy of *The Imitation of Christ,* which he has been reading and pondering with considerable skepticism: he says that rather than trying to imitate Christ, each person must instead work out their own salvation, with Christ as inspiration and guide rather than model. Now he finds himself in a new crisis: "I can no longer say that this or that goal should be reached, or that this or that reason should apply because it is good; instead I grope through mist and night. . . henceforth all is error" (295). He then shifts abruptly to second person: "it

becomes clear to you that you have fallen into the boundless, the abyss," and then to third: "Every man has a quiet place in his soul . . . where everything is simple and clear, with a manifest and limited purpose" (339). Jung then insists that "man" must break out of this illusory calm and confront the "overwhelming stream of chaos" and the figures of "the thronging dead of human history . . . who look greedily through the empty sockets of your eyes, who moan and hope to gather up through you all the loose ends of the ages" (296). This seems perhaps an opening to what Jung elsewhere calls "the shadow," here described as "Whatever you renounced and damned, everything that was and could have gone wrong" (296).

Confronting the dead, Jung says, is necessary but dangerous, because they "fell prey to power, broken by force and not by themselves . . . If you accept them, they fill you with delusion and rebellion against what rules the world." And then the circle closes at last: "They would have nothing to do with the small lives of men. They lived on the heights and accomplished the lowest. They forgot only one thing: they did not live their animal" (296).

> The animal does not rebel against its own kind. Consider animals: how just they are, how well-behaved, how they keep to the time-honored, how loyal they are to the land that bears them, how they hold to their accustomed routes, how they care for their young, how they go together to pasture, and how they draw one another to the spring. There is not one that conceals its overabundance of prey and lets its brother starve as a result. There is not one that tries to enforce its will on those of its own kind. Not one mistakenly imagines that it is an elephant when it is a mosquito (296).
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> He who never lives his animal must treat his brother like an animal. Abase yourself and live your animal so that you will be able to treat your brother correctly. You will thus redeem all those roaming dead who strive to feed on the living. And do not turn anything you do into a law, since that is the hubris of power (296).

Now this is curious, isn't it? I was ready for some urgent demand to recover the body, dwell in instinct and impulse; it seems shocking to be told instead

to accept my place in the herd and be grateful. Was Jung critiquing the Anabaptists for their earnest rebellion against the established order of their day? He lived in Zurich where the movement began, and was a student of history; clearly, he knew about them. But he was certainly no defender of the religious status quo, often insisting on the need for rebellion, if not downright rejection, of stultifying conventions; some sources see Jung himself in full-fledged revolt against Christianity. The pages that follow are knotty with exhortation and imperative:

> Do not throw yourself against what has become, enraged or bent on destruction. What will you put in its place? . . . Then turn to the dead, listen to their lament and accept them with love. Be not their blind spokesman, there are prophets who in the end have stoned themselves. But we seek salvation and hence we need to revere what has become and to accept the dead who have fluttered through the air and lived like bats under our roof since time immemorial (297).

I have struggled for months to understand all this, and still feel, like Jung, adrift in a chaos of words and images. One way is to read this as self-talk, Jung trying to convince himself to be more generous and understanding. The warning about "prophets who have stoned themselves" seems obscure, though intriguing. But I do love those bats, hanging upside down under the roof, fluttering out at night to feed on bits of life in the holy darkness. That just might be an animal I would like to live.

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Hostetler notes that Jung later claimed "Ecclesiastical Christianity had repressed the animal, as well as Nature and the flesh . . . This exclusion of the animal led Westerners to see themselves as inappropriately distinct from these 'lower' life forms . . . Animals, he said, were more pious because they fulfill the divine will more completely than humans ever can. Animals cannot deviate from 'natural law'; humans can." Thus, Jung's critique, she argues, is of the Anabaptists' perfectionism, their "alarmingly abstracted, overly spiritualized and intellectualized" approach to life—though they certainly had

their own pointed critiques of ecclesiastical Christianity, and they insisted that the Gospel message of peace and service was meant for actual living, not mere inspiration. Is there an entirely anachronistic critique of Harold Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" lurking here, somehow?

I cannot resist the temptation to probe these claims briefly in terms of the real lives of animals. Jung's notion that "in nature the animal is a well-behaved citizen. It is pious, it follows the path with great regularity, it does nothing extravagant" does not fit well with the mink who slipped through chicken wire to kill eighty of my friend Ray's chickens but could get none of them out of their coop, and so left bloody but without its feast. It does not fit well with the grand-dogs who greet us with entirely extravagant, outland-ish, sometimes dangerous yelps, barks, and leaps whenever we turn up at their door. And the red macaws who screeched like banshees as we watched them zoom from tree to tree, carrying their bold colors like the markings of pacifist jet planes, were entirely gaudy and indifferent to human notions of propriety.

But we should be no more bound to mere fact and reason here than Jung was when recording his complex, obscure fantasies and riffing on them. The church and Western culture has, indeed, often sought to convince us that we are somehow not animals, but immortal spirits imprisoned temporarily in flesh. Rather than labor this well-known theme, let us instead explore the final, marvelous move Sheri Hostetler makes. Returning to Jung's insistence that we need to take up the unsolved problems of the dead, she recalls a long-ago experience when she found a strange voice seeming to speak to her, offering what became her poem "The Woman with the Screw in Her Mouth Speaks." This envisioned woman, an Anabaptist martyr, offers a compressed version of persecutions and the "quiet in the land" response, but ends with a startlingly original perspective:

> For the most part, outsiders would not see us, and
> when they did, they would see only perfection.
> And now what has happened to you? Some of the ancestors
> are not pleased. They fear for you; some fear for themselves.
> They would tell you not to be messy and bold. Don't take us down
> with you, they say. But listen to me. We oldest ones remember:

> The dying was worth it, every pain. We were chosen to bring something new into the world. They had to keep us from singing. They had to keep us from singing.

"In my imagination," Hostetler comments, this woman "embodies the integration with the animal that the Anabaptists who haunted Jung had lost." Her refusal to recant, her insistence that the martyrs' sacrifice was "worth it" to "bring something new / into the world," makes the repeated final sentence a claim that their sacrifice was indeed triumphant, that their "singing" was not fully or truly suppressed.

I love this woman's unrepentant message, as spoken through Hostetler, and the call to be "messy and bold." Even so, it seems in considerable tension with Jung's claim that "The animal does not rebel against its own kind," that animals are "well-behaved" and "keep to the time-honored." This woman, unlike Jung's roving band, seems quite at peace with her martyrdom and the drive to "bring something new / into the world." And she defiantly suggests that being "messy and bold" is the *right* thing to do.

To encounter tensions and paradoxes, if not downright contradictions, in Jung's complex and often reckless prose should not surprise us. For all his advocacy of "well-behaved citizens," earlier in *The Red Book* Jung makes an equally strong case for wildness: "To the extent that the Christianity of this time lacks madness, it lacks divine life. . . But know that there is a divine madness which is nothing more other than the overpowering of the spirit of this time through the spirit of the depths" (238).[4]

I cannot resolve these seeming tensions. Is it wrong to bring them forward, as it has taken me months of contemplation to do for myself, and then try to find some sort of uneasy but possibly productive poise among them? I do believe in treating our fellow beings, human and otherwise, with consideration, with "a certain courtesy of the heart," as William Stafford once put

4 When this article was nearly complete, I read in the brand-new *Essential Dale Suderman Reader* a long review of Richard Noll's hostile book on Carl Jung. Suderman, a Mennonite intellectual and sometimes gadfly, also brings up this passage, but relies on Noll's summary and interpretation: "Jung wrote the Seven Sermons to the Dead to offer them an alternative pagan philosophy, featuring the god Abraxas" (127). *The Essential Dale Suderman Reader,* Ed. Daniel Born (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024).

it to me. I also believe in mustering all the resistance we can to the evils and dangers and injustices that beset us on all sides, and in the need to continue to break out of our stale conventions to bring new ideas, images, stories, and metaphors into the world and into our own beings as well. Jung also saw such a process as essential:

> If you remain within arbitrary and artificially created boundaries, you will walk as between two high walls: you do not see (228) the immensity of the world. But if you break down the walls that confine your view, and if the immensity and its endless uncertainty inspire you with fear, then the ancient sleeper awakens in you, whose messenger is the white bird. Then you need the message of the old tamer of chaos. There in the whirl of chaos dwells eternal wonder. Your world begins to become wonderful. Man belongs not only to an ordered world, he also belongs in the wonder-world of his soul. . . This inner world is truly infinite, in no way poorer than the outer one. Man lives in two worlds. A fool lives here or there, but never here and there (*The Red Book* 229).

Reading Sheri Hostetler's poem, I was reminded of one of my own, also bound up with an uncanny experience. I was at a Mennonite camp on a writing retreat, with a little group of fifteen or twenty others. The dedication is to two of that group—Julia Kasdorf, a well-known Mennonite poet and a long-time friend, and Ginny Stoller, who was then my brilliant, thoughtful student and for years now has taught high school English. Ginny and I had driven out together, and had four hours of the kind of slow, ruminative conversation that driving a long way allows.

The group of us had talked, sung, written, and listened all morning. When free time came, Ginny and Julia set off to talk (someone always wants to talk to Julia!), but I managed to sneak off by myself. After a bit of walking, I sat down near Jacob's Creek and was given this poem.

Old Water

-for Julia and Ginny

If I had known, if I had known, would I ever
have thought to cross the bridge, to
shuck my clothes and slide into the cool water?
In the fall, leaves languid on the lip
as the girls who'd never look at me.
Oh please . . .

When I went under what was waiting
touched me, wrist and thigh, and held firm,
strong, and settled deep with me.
I was desperate, then wild and then
my panic drifted off like an old whiff of skunk
and left the new stars dazzling, scent
of oniongrass and violets, the shape below me,
warm and smooth, the body nestled
inside the intimate water.
You could be so free, it whispered,
you could be so good.
I could not speak—and yet
I said *Not this way.* I said
Not this time. What did I mean?
I could barely think of apples and children,
another life, and then the voice . . . *All right.*
All right. You won't go far.
Do I remember
after that? Mud, the hard sticks,
light splayed along the surface. Damp clothes
and my hands among them. Then traffic
and trees and this step, that step, thin
rusty slats of the stairs leading down.

So it's all about God, is it, or else not,
or else it's me and the stream I yearn toward
day and night, hour and year,
the stream I can hear and almost see
as two lovely women swing past
on the other trail.
They do not see me
and I let them go. But oh,
the beautiful saunter
of those women deep in their talk.
They walk the path up the mountain
and the old, old water tumbles down,
tumbles down.[5]

I hadn't looked closely at this poem in years; I had to re-type it from the book where it later appeared. And I'd read almost no Jung when I wrote it. But it seems now so much akin to the dream-visions he recounts, and to Hostetler's poem . . . No, I didn't go in the water, in truth. But that moment of being grasped from below, that strange conversation—who is it, down there? Some demon? God? A dead pilgrim? It did not seem a gentle or welcoming presence. It was, of course, just my imagination. But Jacob's Creek was and is real, and was in full flow, loud enough to drown the nearby highway. There was a thin, rusted metal stairway along an outbuilding, and I walked it just because it seemed I should.

A small digression: one college summer a few of us went to somebody's parents' pool after our factory jobs. I drank a beer, got in the water, and started swimming underwater lengths. For some reason this was my favorite way to swim—maybe because my other strokes are all choppy and awkward. But I had done two, even three lengths of this modest backyard pool; a good push off the end would carry me halfway.

I took a bunch of deep breaths at the shallow end. This time I was going for four lengths. I was confident, but if not, I'd just surface, as I had before. I remember making the second turn and pushing off, feeling strong . . . and then my head was clunking against the side of the pool, people were

5 Jeff Gundy, *Rhapsody with Dark Matter* (Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2000), 22-3.

all around me, and my wife was shaking my arm. I'd passed out, settled to the bottom, and she'd happened to notice and yelled. Two of my friends had jumped in and pulled me out, splitting open an eyebrow in the process. That got me a trip to the ER, where they put a few stitches in, told me that I'd probably hyperventilated and blown off so much CO2 that I'd suppressed my breathing reflex, and told me not to be so stupid again.

Maybe this experience connects to the imagined non-drowning in the poem, maybe not. But what about those women at the end? I was glad to see these two people I cherished a great deal meeting and getting to talk, maybe the one real chance they'd have. Maybe I was a little jealous that they were talking without me, but mostly I was caught up in the images and narrative that were unfolding as I wrote. Yes, there's a bit of yearning in that "beautiful saunter," but there's also the recognition that their journey is not mine, that we share the world but not the path, that it's the "old, old water" that tugs at me most strongly.

We're all woven together, the women in their talk and their wandering, finding the way that they need, even while I'm on another journey, without a human companion but with the water's voice providing plenty of company. Someday it will be time, no doubt, to dive in once and for all.

There's nothing particularly "Mennonite" in my poem, though Julia is a birthright Menno, and Ginny belongs to an even stricter Anabaptist-related group. There's no history other than the implied personal histories involved, and those are shadowy. Looked at one way, I suppose this is another drama of the individual soul, the sort of thing I've regarded with suspicion much of my life. Or is it an escape from that drama, into something else, more spacious, if less clearly defined?

"If you find you no longer believe, enlarge the temple," the poet W. S. Merwin wrote long ago. I don't know if my temple has any boundaries at all, though I know how little use I make of most of it, how much remains hidden. But I find my way into the water now and then, and I still like to take a deep breath and hold it, slide under the water, and push off hard toward the deep end. It's not the ocean, but it's what I have.

But What Then Shall We Do?

If we pay close, careful attention to the things of this world, Jung suggests, "a wonderous life arises in things. What you thought was dead and inanimate betrays a secret life and silent, inexorable intent . . . Nothing happens in which you are not entangled in a secret manner . . . The stars whisper your deepest mysteries to you, and the soft valleys of the earth rescue you in a motherly womb" (*The Red Book,* 260).

Like Jung, I have tried now and then to open myself to these mysteries, within and without. As the *Dao De Jing* reminds us, the name that can be named is not the true name. Even to recognize, deeply, that the world grays off into uncertainty in every direction, and that what we can know is the merest sliver of the full nature of the world, is difficult but ultimately (I have found) freeing. But even within such ambiguities and mysteries, let us not abandon the possibility and necessity of care for the world, as well as contemplation.

Perhaps a clue is in Mennonite historian Alan Kreider's claim that *patience* is the overlooked, essential element of the early church's way of being in the world. In his careful study, Kreider suggests that it is possible to practice a patience that presses for justice with all available means, while constantly examining those means lest they destroy the end they are meant to achieve. "[T]he early Christians grew in number . . . because their habitual behavior (rooted in patience) was distinctive and intriguing."[6]

Kreider does not advocate for the weak sort of patience that merely accepts the wrongs of the world; as a good Anabaptist, he is all in for the claims of justice, peace, and mercy on us. It need hardly be said that the problem of right action is enduring and difficult. The Russian invasion of Ukraine challenged pacifists in ways perhaps unknown since Hitler, and as I write, massive protests of Israel's overwhelming assault on Gaza, in response to the horrific Hamas attack of October 7, are in the news, and (as always) the protests are drawing complaints of being "ill-timed" and "too radical." Long ago now, Martin Luther King Jr. famously warned that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

6 Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 2.

"Letter from Birmingham Jail" is both a landmark call for nonviolent action and (in its continued relevance) a testament to the need for continued action and the sort of patience that does not give up on a cause merely because it has not yet succeeded.

And now I wonder whether this sketched-out version of what we might call active patience meshes, at least in part, with Jung's claims about "living the animal." Through his theories, writings, and influence, Jung disrupted and resisted his own time and place in deep, rigorous, and relentless ways. Agree with him or not, like many edge thinkers he offered conflicting advice, and like most of us, he would surely agree, he contained multitudes.

Many Anabaptists, of course, were following something like Jung's path long before he was born; for centuries, retreat from "the world" to live as "the quiet in the land" was a key strategy to avoid being persecuted for their disruptive faith. They spread thinly but steadily across Europe, North America, and to much of the rest of the world as time passed. But instead of rehearsing that story, I think of another one, fictional but strangely resonant. It comes from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* and his protagonist tells this one early in the novel:

> He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men. . . "Learn it to the younguns," he whispered fiercely; then he died.

This advice bewilders Ellison's invisible man, who finds blending into the racist American society he encounters impossible, and eventually retreats to a brilliantly lit underground hideaway to preserve some part of sanity and

self-respect. I might suggest that it is Ellison the author, in the act of writing his brilliant, fantastic, uncompromising novel, who truly "keeps up the good fight," trusting in the phantom powers of language and narrative to resist a culture that itself proves harshly resistant to change.[7]

As Jung says, power properly used cannot be primarily selfish, but must be somehow bound into a larger concern for humanity and love for our neighbors: "What does power avail us? We do not want to rule. We want to live, we want light and warmth, and hence we need yours. . . A sunless spirit becomes the parasite of the body. But the God feeds the spirit."[8]

Within the great mysteries, I have come to believe, the phantom powers can and must be instruments both of exploring those mysteries and of working for resistance and change in the everyday world—the sort of change that respects all life and leads toward its flourishing. If power merely serves domination and violent competition, only destruction will result.

Thinking further into these matters brings me again to the power of doubt, a theme I have explored in earlier work. Jung also takes it up: "As soon as you separate good and evil you recognize them. They are united only in growth. But you grow if you stand still in the greatest doubt, and therefore steadfastness in great doubt is a veritable flower of life. . . Doubt is the sign of the strongest and the weakest. The strong have doubt, but doubt has the weak."[9] One aspect of "strong" doubt is to acknowledge the complexities and uncertainties that remain even within our most cherished traditions. Here, too, Jung claims that "ambiguity is the way of life. . . You say: the Christian God is unequivocal, he is love. But what is more ambiguous than love? Love is the way of life, but your love is only on the way of life if you have a left and a right[10]

After all this time with Jung, I still find him both fascinating and frustrating, brilliant and opaque almost in the same moment. But I have come to love his willingness to look deeply at even the most cherished conventions, and to follow his own impulses and intuitions as far as he was able—and

7 This essay is part of a work-in-progress on "phantom powers" in which the concept is explored in much more detail.
8 Jung, *The Red Book,* 286.
9 Ibid., 301.
10 Ibid., 244.

then recognizing that they would never lead him to spurious, shallow clarity. Indeed, we often say "God is love," and I love those words, but if they really settled, much of the world would surely be a very different and better place than it is.

What do I know about living my animal? A little more than I did, I think. Right now, my personal animal believes that it is time for lunch.

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