

The following is an interview conducted, for Seattle MEN Magazine, via email in 1997 with the eminent author, editor, and scholar of myth William G. Doty. Originally published in two parts, it appears here in whole, with a few minor corrections and updated biographic information.

An Interview with William Doty

BY DANIEL DEARDORFF ©1997

It is surprising... that poetry, literature, and the humanities in general are so undervalued in our postindustrial society, when poetry and myth have shown time and again that they can outrace by centuries the insights of the scientist.

—WILLIAM IRWIN THOMPSON¹

To safeguard what has *value* is ‘conservative.’ The *conserv*-ation of ancient and indigenous wisdom is the gift of myth and ritual; yet wisdom has fallen beneath the cutting-edge of “the fact” and the “power of information.”

The Old-Welsh “minstrels,” unlike the ordained “Royal Bards,” did not perform in the courts of the aristocracy—the minstrels were considered uncouth and unlearned; their songs, stories, and poetics dismissed as absurd—and yet they were richer by far than the “gentlemen” who mocked them. As Robert Graves describes these wandering singers: “It was they who kept alive an astonishingly ancient literary tradition... some of which goes back as far as the Stone Age. Their poetic principles are summed up in...

Three things that enrich the poet:

Myths, poetic power, a store of ancient verse.”²

In the terms of what might be called a *neo-mythopoetic praxis* [praxis: practical application or exercise of a branch of learning] the above motto would read: “three things that enrich a *humanbeing*.” However, the central human quest has devolved to one of “status” and “survival”: to get-ahead or merely stay-afloat. Yet even in this we seek—however misguided—the basic sources and means of initiation and authenticity. Among the standard or typical *Kinds of Power*, described in James Hillman’s aptly titled study [*Kinds of Power*—Hillman, 94], we do not find “poetic power.” In part three—“Myths of Power—Power of Myths”—Hillman clarifies: “Now we will go beyond typical ideas and personal styles as we move from typology to archetypology.” The *typical* ideas of power do

not include the archaic and mythopoeic because, myth and *poesis* [*poiesis*: from the Greek *to create or make*] are devalued—no longer recognized as conducive or advantageous to our aims and ambitions.

When we choose to *value* and recover powers and intentions that are no longer recognizable to “society” we choose the margins—the edges, the *liminal* spaces. Here, we find ourselves in much the same predicament as those ragtag minstrels of Olden Wales: grown men banging drums and singing in the forest? telling fairy stories? painting their bodies and dancing in the firelight? saying poetry and weeping?— uncouth, unlearned, and dismissed as absurd. As the minstrels did not falter—for only they conserved the old ways—we too must keep faith, and trust that our *participation* will “grow corn.” As did those wandering minstrels who’s legacy is all we have of the *Arthurian* legends; thus is the wisdom of the ancestors conserved and carried forward.

One reason that it enriches us is that myth confirms *value*; myth perceives what empowers us: autonomy, affinity, beauty, ferocity. The deep-image *associates*, by means of value, across boundaries— from the rough, ugly, and small, to all the unfathomable grandeur of the universe. When we live in-touch with myth’s essential power to perceive and receive value, we become empty enough to experience *fullness*: the acceptance of our lot, where we no longer care so much for the mass-man’s approval—in Bly’s phrase: “we can dance with only one leg.”³

So long as we proceed from the model of facts out there, and the observer over here (the infamous Cartesian subject/object dichotomy), we are not going to gain any sort of sympathy for the myth-maker or myth believer, because the structure of the argument is set in just such a way as to deny any validity to the observer’s entering emotionally into the relationship and thereby bridging the dichotomy.

—WILLIAM G. DOTY⁴

If we choose to *enter emotionally* into what Campbell called “the joyful participation in the sorrows of life” we must resolve in courage and fidelity to persevere through the devaluation and dismissal of society. To “dance with only one leg” is to come into ‘wisdom’—vision and doom—vision and fate, the old and the new; in this dance we seem to settle for less [one leg] because we are secretly enriched through myth, poetic power, and a store of ancient verse.

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DD: In his Pre-Face to *Technicians of the Sacred* Jerome Rothenberg tells us “imagination [is] a process of both “energy” and “intelligence.” Energy, here, is meant in the Blakean sense as the “instinctual” and “intuitive” urges of the body. With this in mind lets begin with the example of a man who's poetic imagination is activated by and involved with the deep images; someone who has found that the telling of stories and poems allows the energies to unfold and blossom in his body, so that he participates with the world in a more vital way—the images are alive to him and in him. What, in your experience, does the Multidisciplinary study of Mythography offer such a man?

WD: Here, with the importance of “the imaginal,” we are before some of the basic stuff the post-Jungian such as Hillman brings us: the imaginal/poetic not as what lets one fly into the ethereal beyond, but what pushes one down into the contextual, material sites in which our experiences are true/real. “Multidisciplinary” study of mythography or psychology means just that: refusing the traditional patriarchal dominance of just this or just that, the transcendental logos/universal. Something learned for many of us from immersion in feminist thought, the first break-through into a late twentieth-century gender exploration/transformation that otherwise might well have been lost because of the Teflon coating and Disneyfication of our public world/s.

DD: One function of myth is to bring the individual into accord or conformity with the group or community. Images that are taken as universal work to instill a sense of affiliation and kinship across cultural and biological boundaries. And yet it seems that myth and poetry also work to an opposite end: to prepare the collective for inclusion and incorporation of the strange, the aberrant, and the extraordinary.

WD: Myth is, yes, conservative; but it is also an important source of change. It e-du-cates, draws forth some of the possible means of revisioning ourselves, both individually, first of all, and then (and most importantly) socially. Much of my work phases quickly into my art-critic role, where I do a lot on the importance of understanding the social context, the artist's

role of finding the deep metaphors to face the coming time. Imaginatively rather than literalistically, fundamentalistically, that is the point: trickster-art sees precisely across the divide into the new and untried (I do a lot with trickster imagery). Hence my interest in Dada, postmodernism, anything that breaks with the ordinary because it stifles growth, progress, as well as a sacred respect for the past.

DD: I am fond of quoting Victor Turner's suggestion that "ritual is transformative and ceremony is confirmatory"; with this distinction in mind, and knowing that confirmation comes in being recognized and accepted in community, it's clear that there is a great deal more ritual-transformation than ceremonial-confirmation in our society. The modern lack of a "confirming community" leaves the individual stranded in the liminal condition; which brings us back to the Trickster, who is perhaps the key when negotiating the isolation and longing of liminality.

WD: Turner tried to deal with this in the concept of the "liminoid": a sort of secularized liminal—we can't be truly liminal because ritual can no longer be truly religious—but liminality is important because this is, as Turner described, the realm of poetic creativity, where cultural change/growth can happen. This is so because Trickster energy provides this sort of bounded freeplay, where it's safe to hear these stories—many of which are scatological (but note that aboriginal audiences do not laugh where we do: they weren't embarrassed at that, but at non-aboriginal behaviors!). Secondly, there is the great importance of disclosing the dark side, lunar (my "Spring 95" essay); The Trickster is a contra-establishment figure who is ambivalent to antithetical categories like good/evil... but also the Trickster is simultaneously transformer, creator, and culture hero. Finally with the Trickster the body dimensions are always present, which is so important, in opposition to our heady, logicalities.

DD: Among the many functions of myth is the "shared and defining belief." We find many unconscious myths in modern society. James Hillman has said, "the new religion is the economy," and in *Mythography* you show how myth functions in "advertising." I am troubled by this unqualified equation and would prefer to categorize the preceding examples as "parasitic" or "invasive-myth." Founding our human-image on this kind of myth is like eating cardboard, it fills you up but it cannot nurture and sustain your life.

WD: The idea that the new religion is the economy shows the closeness of ideology and myth; it is the development of social values around a mythic worldview. Tracking such

worldviews today means that one recognizes that traditional Western values have long been subject to economic/advertistic/mass media (but of course we fail to recognize the importance of Marxian analysis, hence some strange deities from beyond determine what any fool can see is simply capitalistically driven).

DD: What seems to be missing in these worldviews is that generative function of myth: to form a living connection to trans-human mystery and the sacred world. A connection that puts us in-touch with the vertical plane, a mythos or cosmo-vision that gives the individual an “oriented location” within the various levels of being [i.e., Time, Eternity, community, identity, etc.] and this alignment gives us access to “the extraordinary.” As I interpret Blake: mythological thinking brings Time and Eternity into relationship [Eternity loves the creations of Time] , and thus, strengthens our mature ability to participate, to embody and hold the tension of paradox.

WD: There is of course a generative function of myth, but also the purely secular—as in the gaylook that led to the beautiful body tyranny instead of the earlier leather/cowboy type. Straight Stallone and Schwarzeneger give way before the “buffed” look. Generative can be coopted, as in Sunday's NYT magazine add for pretty Polo balls. As to our participation in mystery more important to me right now is the moral/ethical appropriation of some of these model-tyrannies [See Hillman, *The Soul's Code*,—ch. on Hitler—“The Bad Seed”]. It is more important today to see the ways we have all become insensitized to the long-term social/communal results of such idolization of a few body types, a few models of masculinity/femininity, thus leaving the ordinary Joe/Judy adrift because he/she thinks the only things that matter are commercial/financial. MBA grads are leaving school today at an average of \$100,000 take-home; PLEASE! I've been teaching since 1965, and that's almost twice what I earn after all these years. I'm delighted for them, but ask what a culture values: manipulation of arbitrary numbers = “money” today, or long-lasting cultural values/incentives toward change and improvement of society???

DD: Robert Graves once said “money can be redeemed from the Biblical curse put on 'filthy lucre' only by reviving in it the lost sense of a love-gift...” [*Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965) p.4], in a culture that has utterly severed love and money in the widest possible dichotomy, such a “redemption” could be carried off only by the most cunning of Tricksters. As James Taggart rightly observed most American men place work before love. If, as I believe, Myth is the means of perceiving “value” then the study of the

world's various Mythologies must bring us closer to an essential value where money, love, and work are understood to be expressions of the same generative energy.

Following Eliade and Campbell, I have held the opinion that the universal is the deeper matter, that the particular and local are less potent and often misleading. But recently reading Taggart, who looks beyond the local to the personal, has made me wonder: [returning here to Rothenberg] “ideas of poetry—including significantly, our idea of the poet—began to look back consciously to the early and late shamans of those other worlds: not as a title to be seized but as a model for the shaping of meanings and intensities through language. As the reflection of our yearning to create a meaningful ritual life—a life lived at the level of poetry...”. The shaping of meanings and intensities through language is, in my view, the essence of the Mythopoeic task. Perhaps “mythological thinking” and “poetic imagination” are polar ends of the same faculty, a faculty which strives to bring the universal, the local, and the personal into relationship?

WD: Why do they have to be polar ends of the same faculty?; “polar” so readily leads into dichotomy, which leads into patriarchal reduction to the same old, “kill your opinion, I'm top dog, get out of here.” I have a real dislike of “the mythopoetic men's movement” and similar usages of “mythopoetic” As I point out in “Myths Of The Masculine” [56f]., it is a term firmly entrenched within literary studies, where its original context was Harry Slochower's “Mythopoesis: Mythic Forms In The Literary Classics,” [1970]; in literary contexts, it refers to the reprocessing of older material. And in a sense, that's cool, but I don't appreciate taking a word with a firmly established historical usage and applying it in such a narrow context. But I think you'd agree with my usage, p. 57 “Mythopoeic” or “mythopoetic” in the men's movement today primarily refers to the careful heeding of stories and narratives as important cultural storehouses.

Eliade and Campbell are important, but primarily when one recognizes the modernist constraints under which both operated, constraints which we no longer respect: again, patriarchal, universalizing. Mythopoetic: I resist this just as in “Myths Of Masculinity,” Why do we have a history, if we refuse to honor what it means? There is a cheapness about the men's movements that says we do not need to respect the past—and I despise that—the sense that only the current is worthy of attention.

DD: I agree with you about the “cheapness” of any “movement” in which “only the current is worthy of attention.” Mythopoetics, from my perspective, is precisely concerned with, what you called, “the artist's role of finding the deep metaphors,” and as such—beyond any identifying “movement”— must draw on the archetypal wisdom and authority of the ancient

and the ab-original as essential to any authentic creativity; as Campbell puts it: “Blake, ...Goethe and Emerson, saw the need for it. Their effort was to restore the poet to his traditional function of *seer* and mystagogue of the *regenerative vision*.” [J. Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander* p. 59 (my italics)]. This “regenerative vision” is rooted in a shamanic-poetics that seeks to embody [Rothenberg's] “most universal of human traditions.” Hence again Campbell: “Poetry and art, whether “academic” or “modern,” are simply dead unless informed by *Elementary* [universal] Ideas... their force lies not in what meets the eye but in what *dilates the heart*.” [Ibid. p.48 (my italics)]. “What dilates the heart” has everything to do with the “moral/ethical, value/incentive” deficiencies of our culture, and yet you attribute universalizing to the patriarchal [= modern constraints]: Here the categories of “universal” and “particular” seem reversed; where I would see the “particular” [at its worst] as limiting and *monovalent*, and the “universal” as inclusive and *multivalent*, you have associated the universal, in the most negative sense, with “traditional patriarchal dominance.”

WD: *Here* is much of the difference between us: I'm a mostly deconstructed postmodernist with a highly developed allergic responses to any hint of Master Narratives/Universals. Likewise to Archetypes, with a capital “A.” Obviously we have to speak of cultural continuities and similarities, but it is very important when distinguishing ethnologic *types* and socio-historical *settings* which are particular phenomena such as neo- (or, pseudo-) shamanism. [See my final chap. in *Picturing Cultural Values in Postmodern America*; or 1st and 11th chs. *Myths of the Masculine*., on hero imagery.] This vision, of course, *can* be regenerative, but I'm very leery of so many calls to shamanic consciousness (Tucker's *Dreaming With Open Eyes*, which attributes everything including poopy white bread to shamanism in the arts; Noel's newest book on how true Jungianism is shamanism; a review in the *San Francisco Jungian Institute Library Journal* likewise, finding Jung the first true shaman). There's a corrective article in something like *Natural History* noting how *real* shamans never step outside without a gun—they are so feared/suspected of being sorcerers in the negative sense. So much of the usage (I've been doing slide lectures on the subject for ages) today confuses shamanism in small-scale, non-modern/techno societies with the incredible intelligence and emotional sophistication necessary to survive in our postmodern world. In pretty much the same vein, I'm leery of people going ga-ga about tricksters!

DD: When I suggested that the Mythic and Poetic were polar, [at the risk of seeming to have “gone ga-ga] I had in mind the kind of mingled contradictions embodied in the Trickster—again the universal/particular—where the poetic imagination finds the key to

extra-ordinary mythological thinking *in* the ordinary. I believe it is the Trickster addressing us, in the guise of Crazy Jane, when Yeats has her say:

“...*love has pitched his mansion in*

The place of excrement;

For nothing can be sole or whole

That has not first been rent.”

This certainly argues against the “beautiful body tyranny” or any other oppressive invasive-mythos. One clear function of the Trickster is as “initiator”; the initiator's first task being to deflect or bemuse “our heady logicalities.” The monistic rational-mind is too narrow and so must be set aside, as you have said: “We must be wary of the implicit monotheistic longing instilled in us by the slant of our own cultural science and theology, lest we miss the originative polytheisms...” [“Hermes as Trickster,” in William J. Hynes and William G. Doty ed., *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993)]. The initiator can short circuit the rational-mind by confronting it with a profound ambi-valency—love & excrement—that cannot be *conceptualized* and so must be *imagined*. In a certain way Crazy Jane is saying that “nothing can be sole or whole” that is not able to hold the inescapable ambivalence of *hierophany*—manifestation of “the sacred.”

WD: Allen Chinen's great book on the late-life trickster; also a short version of his argument in Simpkinsons' *Sacred Stories*—you'll like it in particular because he develops the role of the trickster in *initiation* [...the ambivalence of the sacred]: just what is ruled out by Western traditional Enlightenment thought—result = the Sacred; is so totally *Other*—it is no longer revered/relevant, and the secular is antipodal, “bereft of the Sacred”; but bringing it *into* the secular has the longest religious history—the mystical or devotional pattern. Del McNeeley, *Mercury Rising*, is excellent on the combination of opposites in the trickster figures (and in giving us sustained attention to *female* trickster figures.)

DD: Surely, as you suggested, one of the foremost gifts of feminism has been the removal of “modern constraints” [of which I consider “secularity” to be derivative] and the blinders of the patriarchal mind-set—a mode typified in Frazer—where the feminine and the primitive

are held in a kind of condescending contempt and characterized as simplistic, inferior, and foolishly mistaken...

WD: Yes, I think that secularity is part of the “Iron Cage” that Durkheim saw descending with the Twentieth-Century. It was here in essence earlier, but (see below) it became most dug-in within my lifetime (Freud died and the WW2 began the year I was born).

DD: As we follow feminism toward a more inclusive egalitarian mode we must take care to avoid the blunder of throwing the baby out with the bathwater: “For this radical shift in direction, sideways rather than up and down, new sins replace the old. Ruthless leveling—no head dare stick up too high. No one to look up to is the price of not looking down on any one. Respect, admiration, awe go by the board. Other kinds of conformism and political correctness begin to dominate. A new tyranny emerges: the absolutism of equality.” [Hillman, *Kinds of Power* p.99] I see the mythopoeic-vision as an attempt to dump the dirty water but hang on to the baby, which in this case is the vertical dimension. ...

WD: “Mythic reality” very nice combination; I would add the *emotions*, perhaps *sense* of history and *Mitmenschlichkeit* (untranslatable German word: perhaps *feeling for one's fellow persons*).

DD: Yes, I want to believe in, I have experienced, a *mythic reality* that acts on the human being in a harmonizing manner to bring instinct, intellect, and intuition [*feeling* and rationality] into accord. It is a *reality* that brings the total being into sync with “the sacred.” Of course I am aware that our inborn hunger for a “living connection” can be manipulated—by people and industries that thrive on control and oppression—but no matter what “myth-substitute” they provide it can never actually connect us to the sacred, it can never bring us into that integral *accord*. I believe this is the primary distinction between, what I would call, the “native” and “invasive” forms of mythos, and that this distinction presents the most compelling case for our necessary exposure to sacred myth, and the mythic image. Obviously, understanding the ways invasive-myth works on the psyche is very important in our effort to resist assimilation and manipulation, but the lesson to avoid rotten food will not, in and of itself, provide the nutrition we need. We can receive “manna” only “by thinking [ourselves] into existing myths and using them as instruments for [our] own thoughts, or by inventing new myths and using them in the same way.” [Elizabeth Sewel—as quoted by you in the preface to *Mythography*]. And as you add to this “...mythopoeisis ultimately constitutes the matrixing mode and activity for any and all our endeavors.” I want

to discern a native-mythos that awakens the “poetic-sensibility” of embodiment and gesture, as utterly distinct from the “invasive” which kills the imaginative, the expressive, the creative, and the poetic.

WD: I find it more helpful to distinguish *appropriation* rather than *type* of myth (although I have a classifying essay underway); the Teutonic materials that the Nazis revamped were not evil in origin but in application (Hillman's chapter “The Bad Seed,” in *The Soul's Code* is super here). This is the *religious* issue (I mean that not in terms of a particular sect or practice, but etymologically, strictly speaking: to round up within a *ligature*: *religare*, root of religion): finding what is sufficiently semiotically laden to shed long-term meaning on one's humane projects: what one works *at*, but also plans ahead, what one gives the energies to. In that sense “old atheist” Doty is a religious person: I believe (except at the ends of semesters) in the power of the educational scene to enliven ethical positions and quicken intellects. But I go ballistic when faced with claims for the Great Books, or for a single normative “feminism” or “masculinism” (one reason for appreciating NOMAS—National Organization for Men Against Sexism—is its wide span of masculinisms.)

DD: Here in the end, with “long-term meaning” and the “quickenning of intellect” we arrive precisely in the matter of the “phenomenology of religion”: which is the individual and collective experience of sacrality. As Eliade tried to show “hierophany is found in ancient times and has to be brought back if humankind wants to become human again.” [*A New Dictionary Of Religions*—Blackwell Reference]. It would seem ill-advised to approach the world of myth with no appreciation for the hierophanous images of divinity, destiny, and the invisible world of angels, spirits, and the ancestors, which are so essential to the mythic imagination. As difficult as it may be for an “old atheist” and a “polytheist poet” to come to terms, in essence our views don't seem so far apart: that the study/practice of myth and ritual enriches and clarifies our lives.

¹ William Irwin, Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light: Mythology, Sexuality & the Origins of Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

² Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux).

³ Robert Bly, *Morning Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁴ William Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1986) p. 92.