



The Lost Analyst and the Phoenix: Image, Word, Myth, and the Journey from Dissociation to Integration

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ABSTRACT

The Phoenix myth is commonly thought of as a simple Egyptian parable of re-incarnation. In contrast, this analytic dyad found that the visual images evoked by its elaborated mythemes (sub-plots) related to the various existential moods and affects characteristic of trauma identified by Stolorow (2007), suggesting a psychological purpose, that of emotional self-renewal. Mythology has most consistently been adopted for use in Jung's analytical psychology, but this article demonstrates this myth's usefulness with a contemporary relational psychoanalytic approach, that of intersubjective-systems theory. This was effective for an analysand whose former analysis had been abruptly terminated. It was found that the dialogic exploration of possible meaning in the mythemes brought dissociated experience into language, assisted with the emotional integration of the trauma, and restored the analysand's diminished sense-of-being. Images bring together diverse somatic, cognitive, and verbal information, normally separated into different communication "codes" (Bucci, 1997a). This ancient myth's longevity may be due to a useful psychological function; its images can aid the organizing of unformulated unconscious chaotic experience and assist in the process of bringing dissociated or preverbal emotions and moods into language. The utility of the Phoenix myth in a relational dialogical process that helps symbolize unsymbolized unconscious content could assist in work with other survivors of catastrophic loss.

THE PHOENIX: The phoenix was said to be as large as an eagle, with brilliant red and gold plumage. Only one phoenix existed at any one time, and it was very long-lived. As its death approached, the phoenix fashioned a nest of aromatic boughs and spices, and it was consumed in flames. From the pyre miraculously sprang a new phoenix, which, after embalming its parent's remains in an egg of myrrh, flew to Heliopolis in Egypt, where it deposited the egg on the altar in the temple of the Egyptian god of the sun, Re. [Encyclopædia Britannica.com, 2017]

Mia, a fifty-year-old analysand, suffered a catastrophic loss when her beloved analyst of ten years suddenly disappeared. After more than a year in a traumatized state, she was helped by the Phoenix myth, which both comforted her and was highly useful to the analytic work of symbolizing affect from raw experience. I propose that imagistic symbols that arise when working with traumatized analysands should be carefully plumbed, because they serve as preverbal symbolizations of dissociated or unformulated experiences.

The ancient myth's subplots provide stimuli for rich mental images that appear to be directly related to the emotional phenomenology of trauma described by Robert Stolorow (2007, 2011). These images can support the connection of disconnected aspects of soma and psyche, and organize preverbal, dissociated, and chaotic unconscious experience (Bucci, 1997a, 1997b Modell 2000, 2011), into the possibly universal, often unfamiliar existential emotional patterns of response to trauma. This organizing occurs preverbally at first, in a process like that involved in the phenomena of transference (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 2000). The images draw together resonances from both new and remembered

traumatizations but, with the myth as a screen, at a more bearable intensity than the original event(s). An ‘environment’ is created in which non-symbolized material is ‘held’ between story and the forming image, facilitating the organization and crystallization of affect in the presence of an attuned other. The myth provides a visible equivalent to the invisible, facilitating release from dissociative process by providing something that could be spoken.

The importance of the yin/yang nondual interconnectedness of image and language became clear within the common ground the myth provided for the dyad. My analysis, Mia’s experiences could be recognized, validated, and articulated in dialogue to achieve *linguisticity*—defined as a rendering of experience in language—important to intelligibility which is relieving and necessary to bearing and integrating painful affect. Mia could then process the trauma, rather than unconsciously protect herself against it.

The Phoenix story, heritage for possibly more than 4,500 years of human experience, has endured, even as religions, languages, and civilizations arose, flourished, declined, and were forgotten. Primarily associated with Egyptian, Phoenician, and Zoroastrian mythology, it can also be found in contemporary folklore worldwide, including Europe, China, India, and the Middle East. Its longevity can be explained by the useful function of providing images that relate to the emotional phenomenology of trauma, but are phantasmagorical and, so, safely distant from immediate experience. Originally part of an oral tradition, the myth’s telling would have involved embellishment to fit context. The myth’s series of iconic subplots, called *mythemes*, were elaborated in various ways across cultures, but consistently marked by a central key motif, such as tree, fire, egg, etc.¹. This dyad found that mythemes were frequently able to be interpreted as addressing an emotional aspect of traumatic loss described by Stolorow (2007); existential angst (anxiety pertaining to being-toward-death or loss), uncanniness, isolation/alienation, a diminished sense-of-being, traumatic temporality, resoluteness, and solicitude (2011). The phoenix’s nest, for example, is both cot and coffin, indicative of change from comfort to catastrophe, the arc of life itself, and a symbol of uncanniness, the experience of inconceivable events intruding upon and unraveling the previous norms of life, and their perceived replacement by a coldly indifferent world of uncertainty. In addition, I have added *perfecting*, the idealization that is part of grief. When considered as a whole, the myth is a concatenation of imagistic symbols useful for integrating emotions relating to trauma. The phoenix’s endless reincarnation, like Nietzsche’s (1882) eternal recurrence, is, from a psychoanalytic view, the repetitive re-enactment of trauma.

When articulated in therapy, or between intimates, myth is returned to its originary malleable form, which can serve as a potential bridge between unconscious, unsymbolized, preverbal private experience and verbal, symbolized, shared experience. It first connects the sufferer to a transcultural narrative that carries an implicit shared collective home and, second, to a potential “sibling-in-the-same-darkness,” a “relational home” (Stolorow, 2007, pp. 47–51) or attuned other, who can tolerate hearing all that has occurred and deepen understanding, reducing the existential isolation that is common post-trauma. Discussion about mythemes will promote the symbolization and articulation of experience into words, the facilitator of self-knowledge, and kinship. The analytic dialogue returns the fluidity of the original oral tradition allowing an emergent discovery of subjective meaning because the intimate setting permits the mythemes to be imaginatively explored, expanded, and reinterpreted.

Perspectives on the role of imagery, metaphor, and mytheme

A situation taken up into a metaphor loses its transitory, painful and unstable quality, and becomes full of significance and inner validity, the moment it passes wholly into an image. [Rilke, 1906, p. 223]

¹It is of interest, but beyond the scope of this article to compare these findings to Jung’s (1959) concepts in *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*.

Contributions from cognitive science by Bucci (1997b, 2001, 2007; Bucci and Maskit, 2007), help us understand how there can be fluidity, via image, between mythemes, memory (including dissociated or unformulated experience), and linguisticity (symbolization into language). Images, she explains, form a site where modes of communication can connect.

Bucci identifies three pathways (“codes”) by which information is processed: the symbolic verbal; the symbolic nonverbal which processes all embodied channels—visceral, motoric, the five senses etc.; and the subsymbolic which makes distinctions, is process-oriented, and anticipatory, and uses parts (or components) of entities (1997a, pp. 154–156). These three codes have a coordinating “referential process” that connects the multiple parallel trails of the nonverbal system to the unitary pathway of verbal communication. Images are crucially important to the creation of these connections. Images become a platform that mingles all three codes, linking them, and amplifying resonances between every level of sensory experience, memories, themes, cognitions, etc., across lived time and space. Bucci stated, “Images, with their transitional properties—modality specific, like subsymbolic representation; discrete and generative, like words—are pivots of the referential process, organizing the nonverbal system and facilitating connections to words” (2001, p. 51). Like words, images can combine to create new forms, but unlike words, they usually resemble the objects they depict have subjective associations, “overtones, and colorations that provide the core of emotional meaning...” (Bucci and Maskit, 2007, p. 1362), giving personal texture to the imagined likeness.

For Bucci, dissociation is the disconnection of links. She compared working with dissociated material to the art of poetry whose scant words exhume affect from: “the manifestly trivial and irrelevant details of specific events—whose meaning sweeps and reverberates far beyond the event or image that is described. ... [The poet] seeks metaphors that open experiential doors beyond what he already knows or intends” (2001, pp. 51–52).

Although they have a family resemblance, a mytheme is more complex than an ordinary metaphor, its meaning deeply hidden to allow for displacement. Metaphors are figures of speech that exchange things or concepts in order to suggest a likeness between them. Mythemes have symbolic narratives and imaginary worlds that can be re-contextualized and reorganized, but contain unchanging elements. Most metaphors are consciously understood while a mytheme’s meaning emerges from the mists of unconscious process. Nevertheless they overlap and turn into one another, especially in dialogue.

Following Freud’s (1900) example, myth has been embraced by psychoanalysis largely as an analytic object of pure form. A systems perspective brings new possibilities. Due to the mutual influence and embodied resonance of dialogue, a mytheme can be richly informed by the diversity of many sensory modes on both sides of the dyad since, like all metaphor, its modes can change from verbal, such as *apple of my eye*, to visual, or vice versa. Kaminsky (1992) explained that “the word ‘metaphor’ is derived from the Greek prefix ‘meta,’ meaning over, and the root, ‘pherein,’ to bear,” (p. 186) signifying that there is a process of displacement or transference involved between mytheme and subjective associations. Orange (2011a) wrote that meaning-making in the dyadic process is one in which “the shared search for the more and more adequate metaphor becomes the search for emotional truth” (p. 201). She suggested the term “dialogic metaphORIZING” (2011b, p. 232) and summarizes the process: “Having our metaphor met, and taken up by the other, and given back enriched, resembles having the spontaneous gesture met and a world begun” (2011b, p. 231).

Experiences of loss: A theoretical perspective

Knowledge of human existential vulnerabilities to loss, to traumatizing experience and even our own death, are as natural a part of being human as knowing how to breathe. Disagreeable and frightening, they are often disavowed to avoid undermining our optimism and going-on-being (Winnicott, 1965). Trauma evokes new pressures to either develop additional defensive process, or find a context where experience can be integrated. The work of Stolorow (2007, 2011) on the signature emotional experiences of loss fit well with the Phoenix story.

Mia's most urgent symptom was that she felt that her sense-of-self had diminished, leaving confusion, passivity, and a lack of vital aliveness. Stolorow (2007) offers insight into the source of this ennui in an aspect of selfhood he named “sense-of-being” (p. 29). The sense-of-being is centrally about intimacy with the fullness of our emotional life and it is compromised by any interruption of the full symbolization of affect into language (such as dissociation) and by relational danger. Stolorow argued that fully symbolized affect establishes our “intelligibility to ourselves in our futurity and finitude” (2008, p. 119), and the more integrated our affectivity is, the more of an authentic emotional life (including vulnerabilities) we can choose to bring to interactions, intentions, activities and choices, and so the more we live and express our *me-ness*. When affects are unknown, there are lacunas in our self-understanding disrupting the ability to accurately interpret the significance of events, blocking the ability to integrate experiences of harm, suffering, and their significance, and difficulty perceiving a transformative way forward.

Linguisticity is so central to intelligibility, affect integration, and self-experience that, throughout life, developmental (selfobject) relational experiences function primarily to stabilize or enhance selfhood via “the desomatization and cognitive articulation of affect states” (Socarides and Stolorow, 1984, p. 108). Caregivers gradually give words to the child’s moods, needs, wants, etc. At first, verbal skills are part embodied, part symbolized. Nursery rhymes, fairy stories, children’s picture books, movies, and media provide bimodal image-with-word symbolizations that can assist in this process. Mythemes and metaphors serve a similar comforting and (implicitly) identifiable scenario for adults lacking words for their traumatized states. The availability of an attuned other can be a prelude to articulating unbearable experience and restoring a sense-of-being. Stolorow (2007) wrote: “It is in the process of somatic symbolic integration, the process through which emotional experience comes into language, that the sense-of-being is born” (p. 30).

Primary process, myth, and trauma

First discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), primary process, a mechanical agent that explained how content moved from mobile cathexis in the unconscious to bound cathexis in the preconscious, became the key that unlocked Freud’s theory of dream work and the topographic theory of mind. Dreams, the young Freud thought, revealed this process that functioned to separate meaning from image, and further hide it with condensation and displacement. Myths, dreams, and primary process confusingly exhibit instinctual behavior, wish-fulfillment, dream work mechanisms, and mutually contradictory impulses and wishes. Freud was interested in myths as literary texts that support his idea that narratives have latent content (Carroll, 2009). I have not been able to find evidence that Freud knew of the Phoenix myth, but it lends itself perfectly to the concerns of his late analysis: the triumph of Eros over Thanatos, the possibility of incest or patricide, guilt, reparation, and religious ritual. He reified these themes, however, into universal metaphysical concepts, rather than subjective clinical phenomena.

Emotional dwelling: Working with trauma today

In contrast to Freud’s time, contemporary psychoanalysts recognize the essential role of an attuned other in the articulation of the meaning of dissociated material. Applying the phenomenological-contextual perspective of intersubjective-systems theory (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2002) to the clinical context of Mia’s traumatized state—a vague unmotivated, disconnected, drifting, foggy unawareness—I understood that her experience of shock and upheaval required an unconscious protective process to control her levels of pain and vulnerability, and to preserve her psychological stability and practical functioning. The price of this protection was to limit the encoding of traumatic experience into language. Mia needed my help on her journey toward the ability to tolerate symbolizing the unsymbolized to restore her vitality. Stolorow describes this work as requiring the analyst to be a relational home practicing “emotional dwelling” (2013, p. 388). Such an analyst is able

to open herself to, and stay in contact with, a silent emotional re-experiencing of her own comparable traumas, while sustaining attunement with, and care of, her analysand. Stolorow (2014) explains that the language and practice of dwelling goes beyond that of empathy and Atwood and Stolorow together describe, it as akin to “walking a tightrope” (2016, p. 103) between self and other. Their imagistic metaphor describes the precariousness and importance of maintaining a balance with one foot, while the other dips into the world on one’s own and then the other’s side, oscillating back and forth, but not losing either one. The analyst can then provide language with precise tone, rhythm, cadence, resonance, modulation, etc., that closely and accurately articulates the analysand’s likely unformulated affect. Further, the analyst understands and welcomes powerful affects and thereby allows the analysand to gradually increase her tolerance of emerging emotions. Attunement, trust, and safety become established over time through a process of enhanced responsiveness to the analysand’s affects and experiences and by interpretations that reduce the grip of convincing troublesome organizing principles and defenses.

Examples of dwelling demonstrate emphatic image-evoking symbol-rich language. After his wife Dede died, Stolorow (2014) reports that Atwood declared: “You are a destroyed human being. You are on a train to nowhere” (p. 82). The effect was to help Stolorow integrate dissociated emotions, and he could articulate his felt experience. In very few words, Atwood had evoked images that reflected Stolorow’s felt experience of shock, horror, and devastation. Atwood improvised the process I see in the use of myth by working in reverse. He used his autobiographical experience to dwell in somatic and affective resonance, found images, and created attuned verbal metaphors.

Early in the work Mia needed the Phoenix myth because she could not let me be her attuned other when it would mean giving up hope for the return of her beloved analyst and ownership of the impact of his “abandonment.” From her multiply traumatized perspective, an investment in a relationship with another analyst could lead to more loss. She used the myth as an impersonal surrogate that provided partial symbolization and some sense of relief. This myth was not used to remedy hidden primitive instinctual urges, as Freud would have thought, but helpfully symbolized the phenomenology of her relational losses in a generalized and universalized narrative form that, unknown to her, could lend itself to being subjectively interpreted, articulated, and shared. The myth brought understanding, linguisticity, integration, and connection, and with these, the restoration of hope—a conscious wish fulfillment!

Dyadic process

If the trauma is the loss of a beloved person who has provided this integrating process amongst other graces (Mia’s situation), the survivor may remain paralyzed between their longing for support from an attuned other, and loyalty to the previous relationship. Letting go can feel like betrayal of one of the central relational experiences, being cared for by the other. In cases where there is a history of untrustworthy caregivers, there is additional resistance. Unable to take this step, the traumatized may rely on antidotal impersonal supports—addictive, distracting, or mythological. Lonely, they exist marginally, half in and half out of the world.

My analysand was like a child in her lack of insight and her inability to talk about her traumatizing experience and its impact, so our journey began in foggy chaos, took us through a mythic preverbal landscape, into a dialogue augmented by physical gesture (just as storytellers add a mime for emphasis), which assisted us by conveying subjectively pertinent modifications.

“Only one Phoenix existed at any one time, and it was very long lived...” begins the myth. An engagement is evoked, Wittgenstein explained, because “we feel that we can’t point to anything in reply ... and yet ought to point to something. ... A substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it” (1965, p. 1, quoted in Shotter, 2007, p. 5). Oscillating between mytheme and varying strengths of embodied resonance, the analyst finds parallels amongst her store of personal associations and blueprints of the human existential situation. Meanings are emergent from variations, rhythms, forgetting, elaborations, emphasis, surprises, pauses, the articulations of the narrator’s body and counter-moves by the

listener, an orchestration of remembrances, emotions, dreams, assertions, experiences, stories, fantasies and more. Our dyad became entranced in this process, bringing the preverbal to verbal, the analyst stretching out a helping hand to her existential sibling. Through dialogue, the myth was composed anew in the shadow of Mia's tragedy, and the story was told again—for the first time.

Phoenix case study

Lonely one ... You will be a heretic to yourself, and a witch, and a soothsayer, and a fool, and a doubter, and unholy one, and a villain. You must wish to burn thyself in thine own flame; how could you wish to become new if you have not first become ashes! [Nietzsche, 1891, p. 176]

Mia's psychological homelessness derived from an experience of heartbreak. Her story was as follows: Two years ago Marshall was late arriving for the third time. He seemed particularly flustered, and minutes into their session she noticed there was dried blood in his ear. He "tripped on a couple of stairs" he said; "it was nothing." She felt this was, at best, a half-truth, but his defensive tone stopped her inquiries. The next week she waited, yet again. Glancing at the clock and fighting nausea, Mia's world darkened. His colleague introduced herself and explained Marshall's absence in a manner appropriate to a business arrangement. Marshall had been having a series of minor strokes and he had moved to Texas to live with his family, she said flatly, giving referrals. Mia felt a chasm open and watched a distant replica of herself carry on.

Mia wrote a long, loving note to go along with the licensing board paperwork she needed signed by Marshall, and handed it to this woman. Mia silently wondered "Was he alive? Why didn't he call her and tell her himself?" These and other painful questions would loop without end for the next few years. They had shared a special connection, but it was evident that he had forsaken their loving relationship like she was merely a number in his little black appointment book. His cozy office had been her second home for a decade, and she had furnished it with gifts that surely were now thrown away. It seemed as if he had cut her out of his heart, annihilated their caring, and, yes, love. "Had it all been fake? How was this possible? Who was he really? Had she done something terribly wrong?" A dream series depicted one apocalypse after another, and their conflagrations reminded me of the phoenix. Mia was intrigued.

The signed papers were returned promptly without a note and Mia's world collapsed into ashes. Before Marshall, her heart had been hidden in a secret walled garden, safe from further harm caused by phoenix incarnations, the result of a repeating pattern. She would become involved with ambivalent men who allowed her to love, nurture, and give her all, but then they would leave Mia in a state bereft of material and emotional wellbeing and needing to start over again. "How could he drop me exactly like the people I came to heal from? He knew the story!" she puzzled. It seemed that she had hidden certain circumstantial factors from herself and had woven a creation from her developmental transference needs, imagination, a focus on the preferred side of relationship ambiguities, and use of Marshall's subjectivity and affectivity. I speculated that the asymmetry of their commitment to one another showed up but had been quickly passed over and a quick return to the forward edge of her growth had averted the full experiencing of ongoing necessary disillusionment. He had probably diverted a thousand smaller frustrations from an admixture of misguided compassion (because she was a phoenix), reluctance to disturb her process of creative blossoming, or because he could not tolerate her disappointment in him. Mia had dared to reopen shattered yearnings for a shining future and her heart had come alive.

Alone in Los Angeles, lifeless and empty, she was driven to seek my help. I anticipated Mia's likely difficulty trusting me and the magnitude of hurt and anger that might be unleashed behind the agonized fears for Marshall's life, which had only subsided after over a year of daily online checking for news. Fears about his death were replaced by the enigma of the irreconcilable contrast in the behaviors of the *before* and *after* Marshalls. Mia could find nothing of interest to pursue and experienced her life as empty. "Nothing matters when a world chock full of hope can end without warning" she stated. To emotionally attune to her I remembered when my significant other disappeared and made a suicide

attempt, and how it had been a long week before I heard that he survived. Was suicide the answer to Marshall's silence, I wondered? Mia's and my traumas had given us a pronounced awareness of the reality of mortality, the being-toward-death highlighted in a Persian variation of the phoenix myth in which the creature sees the destruction of the world three times over in its lifetime, and is born at the death of its parent. I asked Mia to tell me her vivid nightmares as if they were happening now, to help her connect with her affects. Nuclear bombs dropped on her house, her vehicle, and many dream landscapes, the ground opened under her. Her nights were full of terror.

The warmth and intimacy of their analytic relationship had far exceeded that of other relationships in her life, and Mia's emotions could not be controlled by rational talk of limits and context. Marshall had clearly enjoyed her and responded, becoming remarkably engaged. She suffered bouts of self-loathing and guilt over her "badness" for "exposing" Marshall to me, and she reacted defensively to protect their relationship from her worry that I didn't believe in their mutual love or that I saw it as a transference "distortion" (Freud, 1912, p. 104) that signaled immaturity or resistance. I could see that the elaborate renditions of stories were to convince me of the validity of her experience. This repeated an old strategy that had protected her from feeling her history of neglect and use by early caretakers. Mia could not make peace with Marshall's silent disappearance because to do so might destroy the creative child-self within her still hoping to be born. I wobbled along the tightrope between her idealization and my darker censorious private thoughts about his "abandonment," an unconscious binary shared between us.

When Mia's fantasy of asylum (an antidote to older tragedies), was again destroyed, it was a disaster, the last of a multiplicity of losses including, finally, the erasure of hope that had now become a dangerous emotion, forevermore associated with anticipated doom. Their unspoken agreement that analysis could be a sanctuary was an agonizing mistake. Marshall's misguided resurrective dream of releasing the hidden child, although not explicitly articulated, had functioned to shore up her world. When it went up in smoke the losses derailed her dreams.

Like Marshall, I, too, felt the longing to locate the forlorn little girl. His invalidating erasure of love had traumatized the child who had withdrawn to her treetop. Mia's adult consciousness knew she had silenced misgivings and now felt naïve and humiliated. I held my breath, expecting to hear of some misconduct, but there was simply a romance that had seduced, captured, and broken a vulnerable heart. The myth told of the myrrh resin (a traditional anti-inflammatory) lining the phoenix's nest, symbol of relational healing—containing, soothing, but now only relatively safe.

In her grief Mia perfected Marshall. Already under the influence of the myth, the processes involved in the Egyptian tradition of mummification occurred to me: The unwanted parts are removed, usually all organs except the heart, sealed in canopic jars, and kept separately (*unwanted aspects of character are dissociated*). The body cavity is rinsed with wine and oil, and the body covered with salt for over a month, which dries it (*memories are honored and preserved*). The body cavity is then stuffed with linens and bandaged (*a fragile avatar is formed*). The mummy is placed in the sarcophagus (*a secret room in the mourner's emotional world*) and given a lifelike face so that the spirit can recognize its own body for use in the afterlife (*lives on as a mirage in traumatic temporality*).

With this perfecting, she could gradually stabilize her feelings, breaking what would otherwise be a fall into chaos. Eventually, the capacity to bear the complex and contradictory could be developed. The sudden tearing away of a world of shared meaningfulness exposed existential issues, and although memorializing his strengths protected her from the impact of loss, it also deepened resistance to grief and the work of differentiation and transformation.

Smoke and mirrors, flames and cataclysm, were apt representations of Mia's longings, her passionate nature, and the dramatic twists and turns of oscillating euphoria and disappointment, signs of the emergence of emotional aliveness that had blossomed with Marshall.² The color red formed a theme in Mia's symbolic materials. Mark Rothko's painting *Orange and Red on Red*, (1957)

²For an account of an enlivening process of change in psychoanalysis, see Starr-Karlin (2015), The analyst as muse: The expansive dimension of the transference. *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*, 10: 33–52.

had a vibrancy that captured and illustrated her experience that analysis had been a life-giving womb. The Rothko and the apocalyptic fires of her dreams expressed either side of her analytic experience. She claimed Marshall had been a life-giving inspiration that liberated her from a constraining past and encouraged her to discover who she was, to play, create, risk, stretch, learn, and be fully alive. He was shamanic, she declared. Shamans, I thought to myself sardonically, may not know a cruel, from a clean, cut-off.

Mia's relationships had invariably ended with desertion. The losses began in her childhood and continued unceasingly. When she was less than two, her brother died, casting her parents into alternating depression and hyperactivity. Her older brother angrily left home before she was seven and has not been in communication. Soon after, the death of her beloved grandmother stripped the family of its source of maternal nurturing. Then, political turmoil forced the family to abruptly emigrate to the United States. She married and had two children, but after a stormy marriage her philandering husband left. Her adult children live out of state. She had been a school counselor and recently became a licensed social worker.

The myth provided image-evoking stories in words reflecting states such as not feeling at home in the world and self – the estrangement following an experience of *uncanniness*. This mood frequently leads to isolation like that of the lonely phoenix, unlike any other worldly creature, living in an eyrie atop the Tree of Life that grew in the middle of the World Sea. Mia's expectations based on her perceptions of their bond, left her unable to trust herself. She languished, avoiding social events, and associates' friendly but uncomprehending care, and was disinterested in almost all activities. Uncomfortable, she strove to resist the magnetism that persistently returned her to reminiscences, imaginary conversations, and "living Marshall forward in time" as an ongoing invisible companion. Yet this was the only way she could feel alive. Unaware of time slipping by, Mia would suddenly become agitated as her former self-experience resurfaced, but she quickly fell back into nostalgic preoccupation. She drifted, disconnected and sad. Her only vitalizing emotions were forms of grief—love in another form. Mia gave little attention to her present or future, unless triggered and shocked forward in time and the usual three dimensions of subjective temporality flattened into only one: the repeating past. Mirroring this phenomena the phoenix (or sunbird) was originally a solar myth that provided an answer to why the sun repetitively set in the west but rose in the east, a distance explained by a nighttime underground battle with the forces of chaos. This dislocation in time, *traumatic temporality*, is symbolized in the myth by abrupt transitions between the fabulous bird's death and birth. Mourning was the fulcrum of Mia's existence—the retelling, the reliving, and the remembering in light of what had transpired—a time and place for weeping and ashes. I sustained dwelling in my remembrances to be with her in hers. Mourning gradually overtook my office, taking up residence in every nook and cranny. Time passed, yet little integration of her two worlds seemed to occur, the work was stuck and repetitive. We were suspended in time between what was and what would be. Something had to change.

"I guess the last phoenix died accidentally without an offspring—and so it became an echo, a fable," Mia said. I felt she was communicating something important about the abortion of their relationship and her ghostly existence. I interpreted, "Perhaps you feel annihilated?" She withdrew a little. Shifting gears, I offered "loneliness?" There was no resonance. Then, attuning to my own memories of bereftness, and seeing with my mind's eye an image of those circumstances, giving emphasis to the words of affect, and embodying the fragile posture of the isolated, I offered with emphasis: "That beautiful bird *endures* five hundred years of *aching* loneliness, *different*, *doomed*, and *profoundly alone*." Finally, my deep identification allowed for a somatic resonance in whose sibling presence her defensive process could not prevail over her need to come home to mutual experience through language. Mia sat stiff, tears running down, "Yes, that's me," she groaned.

We had begun to restore her *sense-of-being*, the vitality that flows from bringing language to her unformulated experience. This much desired outcome is implied in the phoenix story of India, in which the bird used its huge wings to bring shade, or spread sunlight, symbol of enlightenment and

logos, the word. In other versions, The Temple of Heliopolis is associated with hieroglyphics, embalming, education, philosophy, and the arts of time and religion.

Next session, she said sadly, “The phoenix gave birth from a dead body, and never knew her child.” She grew silent. She had returned to this topic multiple times without direction or associations, often trailing off, getting stuck, or changing topics. I felt sure that she was referring to the vulnerability of life and to a lost future seemingly impossible without Marshall as its guide and guardian. “I tried to be my best self,” Mia sighed with her whole body, “but he rejected it all.” I sighed in attuned solidarity. “Mia, you are a burned-up phoenix!” I whispered, consolidating the implicit connection, bringing words to the inchoate innuendos she had impressed on me through our months together. She repeated them, began to sob and feel the welcome relief missing for so long. Finally, Mia was grieving and her eyes brightened as energy returned: “Oh, I’ve been mourning the end of all happy possibilities for me!” she realized.

Mia imagined phoenix was in love with the sky-bound sun, for they were companionate in color, solo, and although they could never touch, his warmth and fertility were everywhere. She imagined the youthful phoenix trying to get the sun’s attention, gradually realizing his only response would be to shine warmly or coldly, to hide coyly behind clouds, or to blaze ferociously. “How did she attract his attention?” I asked. A pause, then: “Phoenix turns herself into a rainbow to celebrate his return after a storm,” she stuttered “and at the end of the day when he seemed to come nearer to the land, she longed for connection so she spread her feathers into a sunset!” I enjoyed the opening “How did it go?” We laughed, sharing our first truly connected moment as Marshall’s presence between us faded and her imagination took flight. She now connected with me as a witness to her suffering. I relaxed, as did she, but then her foot jiggled. “A chaste but passionate sublimated union,” said sorrowfully, “was enough to pursue him to the horizon of all possibilities.” A good therapist already, Mia added, “I wonder if those fiery sunsets were reminiscent of a forgotten memory of conflagration?” And, “as the Sun disappeared, her lonely heart would break as the light faded, along with hope,” she mourned.

The World Egg (or womb) often begins many creation stories worldwide. Within the egg, there is chaos and a captive new world soul, from which gods are born. In modern reimaginings, ingenious reassembly of pieces of the old seems to be part of the creation story (Chalquist, 2006). Our task was to sort the remains of her lost world for anything that could be saved, and repair her ability to trust wisely. Stolorow (2011) suggested that there are two emergent characteristic traits once traumatic affects are integrated—resoluteness and solicitude. Resoluteness (a realization of the brevity and contingency of life leading to a prioritizing of what is subjectively important) is represented in the story of the chick gathering the remains of its parent and making an egg by rolling the remains into the immolation-softened myrrh resin and flying with it in its talons and depositing it on the altar of the god Re in an act of solicitude, care for another. Mia’s egg was composed of her relationship with her children, her counseling career, music, writing, and performance, and the potential to develop the changes made under Marshall’s influence, provided they were authentic—and some were not. Re, the Sun God, metamorphosed from being Marshall to a combined Marshall-Mia-wisdom-self. Now, she and I could seek what was meaningful for her and identify the new beginning she must construct, not as a repetition, but as authentic future directions.

Post-myth, into a new world

When we began, Mia’s ennui could be understood as an unconscious refusal to know (or dissociation of) what had happened to her by disconnecting the “cooccurrence” (D. B. Stern, 2009, p. 84) of emotions with knowledge. This happened when it was beyond her ability to identify distinctive emotions, because to do so would require the bearing of unbearable affect (Krystal, 1974) that would end all hope for the return of her transformational other. She could not leave the old world, nor enter the new.

Our embodied dialogic work with the myth helped the traumatized state to recede but “portkeys” (Rowling, 2000, quoted by Stolorow, 2007, p. 18)—associations that instantly transport the survivor

between dimensions of time from the calendrical present to the time of the trauma, or back, remained prevalent. These triggers reversed the usual pattern of portkeys by bringing Mia back into the present. They were most acute when new visual information, such as holding her new license or seeing that an old friend had aged, marked the passage of time from ground zero (that day in the waiting room), and evoked uncanniness and more grief. I realized that she was continuing to live in world of suspended time in which she was “as if between sessions with Marshall.” Day to day, she had coexisting separate emotional worlds belonging to two different periods of her life. The between-sessions world was preserved due to the continuing prohibition of the encoding of her loss into language. As I gingerly approached this last defense against integration, Mia, once she grasped this concept, suggested that she return to Marshall’s consulting room. What she found there was visually poignant—a new shingle, a change of paint, carpet, and furniture, and a locked door. This precipitated a period of great sorrow, but also of liberation.

Mia’s compliance had caused her to set aside her own muted intuitive sense of what was right for her and she had to find herself again. Anger was helpful both because it protected against hurt, and because she could summon up a certain clarity of vision about the importance of her feelings, set aside in sentimental, sad, or compliant moods. Her neglect of self-care, friendships and the development of other areas of her life were a source of shame and yet exactly where she must invest. Concern about the magnitude of what she wanted to achieve filled her with anxiety about time and focus because she had to achieve it without Marshall’s embodied inspiration and support.

Mia did not hear from Marshall and she could not forgive him this one thing. Long aware of the binary I was holding, I thought I may be subtly influencing her, despite my effort to remain as unbiased as possible about her former analyst. I needed to work hard against the convictions rendered by my own experience, to disentangle our mutually reinforcing organizing principles on themes of loss that would influence all explanations of his inaction. Could there be another way to understand this situation? Sadly, I recalled how my feelings changed during the crisis with my fiancé. His reaction to a family situation, the attempted suicide, its indication of mental vulnerability, and its impact on me (before I was in this field), caused an involuntary shift that turned my affection for him into a withdrawal into self-protectiveness and distancing. Relating this to Marshall’s situation, I imagined that some further terrible trauma had befallen him since he could not tend to Mia, someone who relied on and loved him. My attitude shifted as gentle compassion modified my judgments. I began to feel sorry for Marshall. We all have blind-spots, I thought. Inconsolable, Mia felt invalidated when I shared such thoughts. It seemed that she must live with the mystery and anger until she no longer needed it to protect herself from the devastating loss. His silence in light of their loving connection was an irresolvable contradiction and she could not be free until she found her own way to peace with it. She had to give up an idealization and call their entire relationship into question, surrender to change in which case no witness to their love would exist, or come to a reconciliation of the two Marshalls.

Soon after, she arrived with a children’s book—*The Heart and the Bottle* (Jeffers, 2010). The story is about a little girl who loses her daddy. She is so sad she puts her heart in a bottle and wears it around her neck and forgets about it. Unfortunately, locking up her heart included losing her capacity for curiosity, delight, love, and aliveness. She grows up and lives a dull practical existence. One day at the beach, she encounters a little girl full of *joie de vivre* and realizes what she lost and wants it back. She tries and tries but can’t get the heart out of the bottle. She must ask the inventive child. The little girl is, indeed, able to reach the heart and give it back to her, and the woman places it where it belongs. They played and held hands. ... Mia decided that Marshall had put his heart in a bottle because something really bad had happened to him, and hoped that one day he would be able to retrieve it and contact her.

Mia gave herself a highly organized and directed two years to follow her intuition and observe what activities and people gave her vitality, to revisit old interests and wait for slowly emerging authentic gestures. She began to follow her own muse, deciding to move to New York and take advantage of the cultural richness. Beyond that, she does not know the next step, but tells me she has done reincarnating, and found a certain limited nirvana.

Discussion

Stories are genuinely symbiotic organisms that we live with, that allow human beings to advance. [Gaiman, 2015]

Mia's attraction to the myth was a signal of readiness to address the work. In the context of high relational danger, as the inheritor of her trauma from many phoenix incarnations, she resisted attaching to me and could not allow me to substitute for Marshall as her relational home. Due to unknown circumstances Marshall had unwittingly and disastrously duplicated her deepest catastrophe, retraumatizing her. Although micro retraumatizations are to be expected in analysis, even necessary, the magnitude of distress she suffered should make analysts pause. It can, indeed, be a dangerous method. Fortunately, she was courageous enough to risk again.

The myth became a source of rich visual stories and I became her partner in dialogue, leading a pilgrimage to linguisticity, and eventual integration of her losses. It became clear that the phoenix myth is a carrier of mythemes that express the expectable phenomena of trauma—*angst* and being-toward-death, uncanniness, traumatic temporality, isolation, a reduced sense-of-being, resoluteness, solicitude, and perfecting—in imagery that is useful to organizing and bringing into language, unformulated, chaotic or dissociated experiences of trauma. With the help of a relational home, mythemes assist in the understanding and integration of tragedies.

As Bucci (2001) explained, imagery has access to a multitude of subjective associations making all manner of sensate and psychological phenomena available for meaning-making and assists in the vital process of bringing unformulated or dissociated experience to linguisticity. The power of mythemes clearly lies in the dynamic process between words and imagery, and, because imagery is so essential to the communication system of private self-experience, the question of why linguisticity is central to the sense-of-being is only partially answered by a focus on intelligibility. I suggest that image is to selfhood as language is to *being-in-the-world*. Words bring us awareness of the collective concerns of our era, culture, family, and friends, thus locating us in the human experience and allowing us to participate and belong. Imagery and language are complimentary hubs of vast networks of connection that bring together selfhood and context. In analysis, word and image foster the integration of life experience and the ability to be authentic with others, facilitating healthy relationships and greater happiness. For the traumatized, and we are all more or less traumatized, connection means safety and a place in which healing can be found, and hope restored.

Notes on contributor

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