The Two Million-Year-Old Self

Anthony Stevens

Foreword by David H. Rosen

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Anthony Stevens is a bridge builder. In this quintessential product from his pen, he makes connections between analytical psychology, anthropology, behavioral biology, dream psychology, psycholinguistics, psychiatry, and alternative modes of healing. Stevens once wrote to me: “Since childhood I have had a love of building bridges. Being a psychiatrist and an analyst as well as having been trained in experimental psychology, I am naturally interested in bridging the gaps between these three disciplines. In particular, I feel drawn to examine ways in which their disparate findings and theoretical constructs may parallel, complement, and ultimately fertilize one another.”

Like Jung before him, Stevens meaningfully links analytical psychology with related developments in other disciplines, thus making the hypothesis of archetypes amenable to empirical study. This process began with the publication of his Archetypes: A Natural History of the Self in 1982, in which Stevens argued that comparative studies (mainly between ethology and analytical psychology) can throw light on the ways in which the archaic influences our lives in such fundamental areas as the development of attachment bonds; the contribution of myth, ritual, and religion to the development of personality; and the maintenance of group solidarity. In that book, he also began to as-
sociate basic Jungian concepts with structural elements of the human brain.

In his second book, *Withymead: A Jungian Community for the Healing Arts*, published in 1986, Stevens examined the primal need for community and the capacity of a group for constellating the archetype of the extended family in order to heal psychiatric illness. In his third book, *The Roots of War: A Jungian Perspective*, published in 1989, Stevens drew attention to the ease with which the primitive masculine leads us into armed conflict and killing. This volume, one of his best, also offered us ways to bring about peace.

In his fourth book, *On Jung*, which came out in 1990, he applied analytical psychology to Jung himself in a uniquely creative, biographical, and developmental treatise. In this work, he highlighted how the two million-year-old Self had helped Jung to heal his own wounds.

*The Two Million-Year-Old Self* is thus the product of years of excavating by Stevens in his pursuit of psychic archeology. He reveals how the archetype of the Self becomes manifest in our dreams, myths, and illnesses, and he shows us how its elemental wisdom holds the key to open the door to the therapeutic quest and the healing of our wounds.

In chapter 1, Stevens focuses on “knowing the unknowable,” which is similar to exploring the “reality of the unseen” à la William James. Stevens looks at Jung’s life-long objective of making the unknown known and pushing back the frontiers of the unknowable. Stevens, as a cartographer of the psyche, takes us on a journey into the mysteries of the collective unconscious where we encounter archetypes that are unknowable in themselves—in other words, not accessible to direct knowledge. Like atoms, their existence can only be inferred from their manifestations. Stevens postulates that the two million-year-old
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Self lives within the dark subterranean labyrinth of the psyche. He reveals how dreams illuminate the blackness of the primeval underworld, allowing us to discover the ageless Self in this prehistoric archetypal world.

Often our egos want to know only the knowable and to dismiss the unknowable. However, as Jung experienced—and as is built into the training of all Jungian analysts—we can also know the unknowable. In order to do this, the conscious ego must surrender to a higher force, the Self (the Imago Dei or center and totality of the psyche); then through the experience of symbolic ego death, we can know the numinous mysterium. Paul Tillich arrived at this point of spiritual affirmation by having the courage to be in the face of nothingness. If we are patient, the light of the holy glows in the vast darkness of the seemingly chaotic collective unconscious of our inner world or psyche, which is a mirror of our outer world or universe. We can know (in the sense of gnosis) that we are a mere creative and animated spark in the never-ending process of divine evolution. How do we glimpse this?

In his second chapter, entitled Dreaming Myths, Stevens helps us open the window to our psyches and our experiences of this inner world when we dream. Stevens argues that the dream is attempting to bridge from the inside world of the psyche to the outside world. He maintains that the inner bridge builder responsible for this enormous undertaking is none other than that original genius, the two million-year-old Self. Stevens demonstrates that this supposition is in keeping with neuroscientific evidence that dreaming activity begins in the phylogenetically ancient parts of the brain. According to Stevens, “to encounter the two million-year-old within is to experience the phylogeny of our species as a personal revelation.” He asks, “What could be a more amazing adventure?” Yet Ste-
vens laments that for most of us this primordial figure, who is the constant companion of our every waking and sleeping moment, is entirely unknown.

The Talmud says, "A dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read," and Stevens unravels a most interesting contemporary dream produced by Gary, a young farmer and one of his patients. He deciphers its archetypal components, showing how an ancient myth was dreamed and how it relates to Gary's situation and problem. This patient dreams a myth that allows him to transcend his neurotic conflict and proceed with his own individuation process.

People who ask "What is my personal myth and how do I live it?" have embarked on their own individuation processes to seek answers. These answers involve healing wounds as part of in-depth therapy, as suggested by Sir Francis Bacon's maxim that "wounds cannot be cured without searching." Stevens finds in his third chapter, The Healing Wound, that the search involves the two million-year-old within, who is struggling to adapt to the present world. Stevens maintains that this struggle provides us with a fundamental principle of psychopathology. He contends, "Where contemporary circumstances permit the archetypal needs of the two million-year-old to be fulfilled, the result is that form of psychic adjustment we call health, but where contemporary circumstances frustrate the archetypal needs of the two million-year-old, the result is maladjustment and illness."

To illustrate his thesis, Stevens describes the complicated psychiatric case of Jennifer. She presents with multiple psychiatric symptoms: anxiety, phobia, depression, obsessive thoughts and compulsive acts, and schizoid withdrawal. Stevens shows how all these symptoms are comprehensible as pathological exaggerations of entirely normal patterns of response for the two-million-year-old survivor. He shows how by uncovering, be-
friendling, and casting light on the dark mysteries of this ar-
chaic inner being, Jennifer was able to overcome almost all of
her obstacles. For all of us, he concludes, acceptance, empathy,
bonding, and affiliation with this aboriginal Self residing in our
psyches is the key to adaptation and health. In this way the so-
called disturbed individual can become individuated and have
a trusting and more fulfilling life.

Elisha Bartlett once wrote: "Therapeutics is not founded
upon pathology. The former can not be deduced from the lat-
ter. It rests wholly upon experience. It is, absolutely and ex-
clusively, an empirical art." In his fourth chapter, The Thera-
peutic Quest, Stevens considers the empirical art of healing. He
looks into the success of alternative methods of treatment, such
as acupuncture, chiropractic, aromatherapy, and homeopathy in
the light of the two million-year-old's understanding of what
it means to be ill and what is required for healing. He argues
that modern medicine and psychiatry, with their emphases on
science and technology, leave the two million-year-old feeling
disoriented, unsupported, and misunderstood. Stevens uses data
from comparative anthropology and analytical psychology to
elucidate the archetype of the healer and to identify the basic
principles and practices of healing that have been known to our
species since the beginning of time. Stevens echoes Jung's posi-
tion that the psyche represents a natural healing force. Stevens
relates this to helping our inner two million-year-old Self to
feel more at home in our outer contemporary world. He con-
jectures that we have to change our attitudes, our institutions,
and our environment in order to bring the natural life of our
species once more into harmony with the natural life of our
planet.

This book connects a personal myth of Anthony Stevens
to an archetypal myth of healing—healing ourselves and our
world. It is a profound exposition, comprehensive in its breadth
and inspiring in its depth. This volume is an important and timely reflection on how we must befriend the two million-year-old within and put this ancient collective wisdom into action to save ourselves, our entire human family, and our earth. We need to realize that the two million-year-old Self will continue to survive only if we survive.

I believe that in Anthony Stevens’s insight lie the seeds for making the adjustment of the two million-year-old Self complete. Greater consciousness of our incarnation of the collective experience of not only humankind but other life as well would transform us and our world into a healthier state and place. Then we would truly be a united human family—harmonious and at peace with ourselves, each other, and our planet.

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