

GODS, HEROES AND GROUPS

Relational Dynamics through
Mythic Archetypes

Brant Elwood & Aodhán Moran



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About the authors

Brant Elwood has an MA in Social-Organisational Psychology from Columbia University and is a therapeutic consultant. He has held leadership positions within several therapeutic treatment organisations. During the pandemic, he directed a non-profit that utilised myth and archetypal theory to conduct rites of passage work with young men in the southeast US.

Brant draws from the mythopoetic lineage of Robert Bly, Robert Johnson, and others in an attempt to establish a novel style of thinking about groups in communities and organisations. He first attended a Tavistock-style group relations conference in 2015.

Aodhán Moran has one foot in psychology and the other in technology. Starting his career in tech and e-commerce, Aodhán worked various roles in start-ups and scale-ups across Galway, San Francisco, and Toronto before pursuing a career in clinical psychology.

Aodhán is a certified executive coach through Dr Simon Western's Eco-Leadership Institute. His practice is grounded in the analytic-network systems psychodynamic lens, which he uses to coach young entrepreneurs toward self-awareness in their work.

As a student of group relations since 2019, Aodhán has attended multiple group relations-style conferences in member, trainee consultant, and staff roles, including The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations' Leicester Conference. Aodhán draws on Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Jonathan Pageau, René Girard, Simon Western, and others in his explorations of individual and group dynamics.

Aodhán is particularly interested in the intersection of psychology, mythology, and religion, and how these areas can inform our understanding of individual and group behaviour.

Foreword

Dear reader,

You are about to embark on a journey that I hope is the first in a series. This text by Brant and Aodhán is the material of our time and it is my wish that this will lead on to further, deeper exchanges.

It is now 2024 and we are facing war on every continent, brutality, greed, and corruption at every level of social, political, cultural, and spiritual systems. We need a new set of narratives and ways into understanding what has brought us here, and what may help us make a new road.

Through the lens of mythos, Brant and Aodhán have opened a vista for new sight and a capacity for new thought about our social ills and compulsions. This book looks at myths across cultures and historical periods and enters a realm of imaginal narrative in which the contents of the collective unconscious can be seen and connected to the reader, wherever they are in space and time.

In order to engage in a balanced, harmonious future, we need people and systems to be able to hold the complexity of our social field and revisit our mythical matrix—moving beyond the binary and reconciling ourselves as integrated Mythic-Beings.

It is a long Hero's Journey for all of us, and this text is a vital map on our way. This book is a welcome text to help us put ourselves back together.

Dr Leslie Brissett
Group Relations Programme Director at the Tavistock Institute of
Human Relations, 2017–2023

Introduction

How does a Norse creation myth warn us about obstacles that groups face during their forming phase?

How can Odysseus' escape from the Cyclops inform modern leaders about navigating the mob mentality within a group?

We wrote this book because we wanted to read it, and it did not exist. Advice about group dynamics and leadership is plentiful, as is the application of mythology to personal psychology. Yet the application of mythology to modern group psychology seems to be largely unexplored territory. Both authors contributed to every chapter in this text, but some of the experiences in organisations belong to one or the other. When not specifically noted, the use of 'I' refers to Brant's first-person perspective.

We hope to introduce a different approach to conceptualising groups; an approach that investigates group psychology through the lens of mythology. We wrote it for anyone interested in building a better understanding of group processes—leaders, therapists, and group facilitators may find it especially applicable.

Interpretive work of any kind is more of an art than a science, and this may be especially true when we focus on groups instead of individuals.

As a result, there is a level of open-mindedness and tolerance to mystery required from you, the reader.

This type of work asks us to indulge in the dramatic, since the mythic storytelling elements possess a certain grandeur. Marion Woodman (1998) speaks to the function and necessity of grand metaphor in *Sitting by the Well*. In short, metaphorical connections amplify the meaning we imbue into our experiences.

Myths seem to capture patterns of the universal human experience, and this is because they deal with archetypes. Popularised by Jung, archetypes are inherited psychobiological structures common to all of humanity. Joseph Campbell (1949) wrote his mega-hit, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, because he perceived the same Hero archetype across different historical periods. Campbell observes its manifestation in ancient epics, folklore, and the lives of great religious heroes like Gautama Śakyamūni and Christ, as well as within case notes of modern psychiatric patients. These archetypal patterns are brought to life as gods, demigods, heroes, and Titans in our favourite mythological stories.

I (Brant) have always been impressed with certain colleagues' ability to connect the seemingly mundane to the mythical. A skilled therapist might say of a client: 'His story is the Icarus myth. His parents haven't held boundaries, he parties until 3 am, and he's ended up in the hospital twice from overdose. He flies too close to the sun, and our work here is to ground him in an identity that allows him to keep his feet on the earth and get a sense for limits'.

As Woodman (1998) states, the application of mythic metaphor takes things to a deeper, more meaningful level, into the realm of the psychological archetype. A curtain is pulled away, and the possibility of deeper self-knowledge and richer associations becomes apparent. We touch something ancient and primal when mythology is brought into the mundane.

Another distinct skill that I admire in colleagues is the ability to manage complex group dynamics and steer groups towards productive ends. In wilderness therapy, where I began my career, most clients attend involuntarily and carry anger and resentment as a result. Many bring a history of intense maladaptive behaviour, and all of them have extensive defence mechanisms in place. Yet somehow, the best therapists and field

instructors consistently get extraordinary outcomes. Skilful facilitation enables these groups to hold emotionally safe environments that allow connection and sharing at a deep level. With the right guidance, the group becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

During graduate school, I was introduced to the group relations work of the Tavistock tradition. Group relations conferences usually last three to five days, and instead of lecture formats, they involve visceral interrelational experiences. Most of the time spent at a conference centres around the task of assessing the group dynamics as they arise. It is difficult to explain such an experiential process in words, but there are two defining characteristics of group relations work that changed my perspective on understanding groups.

The orientation of the work assumes a group-as-a-whole lens. This means that we accept that the group has a mind of its own, and that understanding the group psyche (especially the unconscious) is the goal. Further, this means that individuals' actions are assumed to mean something about the group, first and foremost. We avoid indulging in explanations for behaviour that focus on an individual's motivations. If a member leaves to go to the bathroom during a session, for example, the assumption is that this means something about the group-as-a-whole. Some part of the group wanted to flee the room, perhaps. We can be agnostic to this concept and still benefit from the process. The idea is to suspend disbelief and ask, 'What if the group has a mind of its own that is pulling the strings? How does this individual's action serve the group-as-a-whole?' The value of this becomes clearer with practice.

The work is done in the here-and-now. The task is to analyse the group dynamics 'in the room' as they are happening. This means that politics, childhood struggles, or outside persons are only relevant as they relate to a dynamic currently in the room. This practice leaves most participants feeling naked, in a sense. Group members cannot hide as easily behind past stories of themselves, or the distractions of broader society. In group relations work, the facilitators (consultants) confront the group when the group moves to topics that are not 'in the room'. For example, in groups that find themselves constantly bringing up politics from the outside, a consultant might remark to the group, 'This group seems to enjoy the fantasy that they can run away from difficulties in the room

by uniting around a dislike of Donald Trump. I wonder what it is that is hard to look at in this group right now'. The group has the choice to take this comment up for discussion or not, of course, and each option says something about the inner workings of the group-as-a-whole.

I left my first conference feeling angry and indignant, but I realised that anything that could offend me could also teach me, and I attended my second conference one year later. This work spurred an 'Aha!' moment for me, as I began to look at groups in a different light and started asking different questions. I started to observe the subtle ways that groups use individuals, and the unwritten contracts to which individuals adhere when they join groups. Nuanced roles develop, and behaviour changes drastically for individuals as they step into these roles. A heightened sense of these underlying forces is a kind of superpower for any group member, especially for someone in a leadership role.

Both mythic interpretation and group relations work serve to expand our understanding of the psyche. What happens when we examine group dynamics through a mythological lens?