

Along the mythopoetic path: hunter turns from fish to fish art

Publisher's Note: This is the first in a series of articles from Dragonsmoke readers about how mythopoetic material has made a difference in their lives. William Kovel lives in Connecticut and can be reached at www.oceanart.org. If you are interested in submitting an article please contact us. *PF.*

"Mankind owns four things that are no good at sea: rudder, anchor, oars and the fear of going down."

—Antonio Machado *translation by Robert Bly*

What is it that causes a 37 year old man with no previous experience in art or sketching to pick up a pencil and draw out some fish shapes on plywood, cut them out and paint them? Because I was not fulfilled in my work life, and as a result of a life long attraction to the ocean, I found myself making repeated 100 mile solo voyages out toward the Continental Shelf, out to the rough waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, out to the canyons where the whales, tunas and sharks live, where everything big lives, to catch huge fish. I was a hunter looking for something. This is a place far out where no one can help you, where you may not come back, where personal ritual is born. It was a place to discover what to do with a life. Out there I witnessed a rapid decline of all the pelagic species within just a short ten year period and it rocked me. Suddenly art, beauty, ecology, balance, creativity, visual poetics, myth, stewardship and pelagic ocean life were all connected.

Being simultaneously exposed to and studying the mythic and poetic material helped prepare me for and understand this connection. A transition was also in the making, one that I was not aware was happening. I began to also read and write poetry. While making these fish shapes, I continually asked the question, do these things that I am painting and creating have any value, are they any good? The answers would come out of the poetry and myths themselves. I had already contended with and passed through my father's words that all artists were "kooks and weirdos." I always wondered how it was that my father had talent as a cartoonist but his life never followed that path. My brother had taken art classes in grade school and was designated the "artist" in the family carrying whatever small amount of being artistic that was allowed into our family fabric. I was designated to follow the rules, to be the success. I got a degree in biology and ecology while going nowhere inside and every year getting further estranged from myself. My overly indulgent and doting mother died. I went off to dental school and immediately and literally went numb becoming depressed, suffering daily chronic and migraine headaches. This began a downward spiral that lasted over 25 years. It was daily a constant struggle during those years just to keep up the semblance of a functioning, productive member of society when inside I just felt like "shit" terrible almost all of the time. There was no more life or laughter inside. I took pills and alcohol to shut out the real world. A broken marriage engagement forced me into therapy. In depth therapy I learned healthy relationships with myself and others. I found self esteem yet I still lacked a real purpose. When I was held in the depression however, I began to read, looking for some way out because I could do no other, and discovered myth, stories, mythic poets, culture and art. I read Joseph Campbell's "Historical Atlas of World Mythology" and listened to his tapes



William Kovel in front of one of his fish sculptures

on world religions. I learned that many peoples around the world had different stories to tell equally as valid and interesting as mine and the culture I grew up in. These stories defined who they were and why they were. I began to read about James Hillman and attended some of the early weekend sessions with Hillman, Bly and Meade. I was also learning about the definition of art from studying Thomas Aquinas in the 15th century. From

Hillman I learned about beauty, the Italian Renaissance and befriending your daemons. From Bly I was empowered to learn how to find my own path apart from the father, and about mentorship. From Meade I learned about the non-intellectual, unencumbered energy and enthusiasm that comes from the body. When I make art, I have to move a lot. I don't know what that means but Meade made it OK to be like that. From Somé I resonated with ritual and learned to honor my connection to my grandfather who taught me about using my hands creatively and about compassion and community. I now work on such large scale public art projects that I'm always in community as part of the work. From Etheridge Knight I learned about guts and self respect and individuality. I listened to all the tapes by Bly, Hillman, Meade et al and read a lot of poetry and their books as well, and couldn't and still can't get enough new ways to see. I found that through their works, I was receiving their blessings to continue my artistic and

personal development and art projects. I learned that the parts of me that I was most ashamed of were the places where my strongest passion resided. These passions had just been undervalued and unnoticed and were just sitting there waiting to be rediscovered — to burst forth, to be free, that there was a lot of repressed bound up energy to call on. The mythopoetic material has profoundly empowered me to become someone and something unique and something outside of what my family of origin would call an acceptable or "normal" path. And so over a period of a long number of years out of the ashes I grew to become a public artist focusing on the fish and creatures in the oceans of the world. I learned how to risk and how to take a strong artistic stance publicly. My public and municipal art has been publicly praised, ridiculed, elevated, vandalized and trivialized. I learned that without allowing "failure" and rejection one can never succeed. What I learned from myth and poetry was also how to tell a story, how to tell the truth, your truth, that it's both OK and imperative to tell your story (your truth).

Recently some of my time has been spent as a speaker on creativity and the imagination in the public schools. I talk about the art projects as a way of raising the students awareness. This empowers the young people to let them know that one person can make a difference that they too can create a life with and of meaning. I talk to high school art classes, middle grade school and grammar school students and bring them into the studio and talk to them about following that tiny little voice inside that says do it this way, or that says what about this, or how about this feeling or this way of thought. I tell them, "That's God talking to you".. They work in teams of 4 or 5 to get the idea of "community" yet they can still use their own individual ideas and together assemble unique marine creations that they then take with them and paint up. I tell them that art is about ushering in new ideas not about decoration and that all you have to have is passion about something to do it. I tell them we are globally connected by the sea, the water connects everyone on the planet so what happens here happens everywhere.

—Wm. Kovel