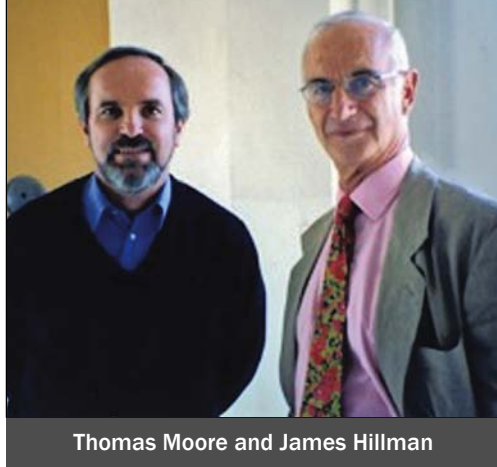

Remembering James Hillman: An Interview with Thomas Moore

Rob Henderson



Thomas Moore and James Hillman

Thomas Moore was born in Detroit. At 13 he entered the Servite religious order of the Catholic Church in preparation for a life of teaching and ministry. He left the order before being ordained. He received his Ph.D. in religion from Syracuse University. His many publications include: *Care of the Soul*, *The Soul's Religion*, *The Soul of Sex*, *Dark Eros*, *Rituals of the Imagination*, *The Planet's Within*, *A Blue Fire*, *Writing in the Sand*, *Soulmates*, *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life*, *The Education of the Heart*, *The Book of Job*, *Original Self*, *Dark Nights of the Soul*, *A Life at Work*, and *Care of the Soul in Medicine*. He and his wife, Hari Kirin, live in New Hampshire, with their two children, Siobhán and Abraham.

Robert Henderson is a Pastoral Psychotherapist in Glastonbury, Connecticut. He and his wife, Janis, a psychotherapist, have had many interviews published in *Psychological Perspectives*, *Quadrant*, *Harvest*, *San Francisco Jung Library Journal*, and *Spring Journal*, and are the authors of the three volume book *Living with Jung: "Interviews" with Jungian Analysts*. Address: 244 Wood Pond Road, Glastonbury, CT 06033. Email: rob444@cox.net

RH: Last October James died and you lost not only a dear friend but also a mentor. You had said then that James taught more to you in his lifestyle and your conversations than his writings. What was it about his lifestyle and your talks that held meaning for you?

TM: James Hillman walked his talk. When I first met him in 1976, I saw right away that the way he wrote and the way he talked were one and the same. He never turned off his search for insight and his delight in discovering a new way of seeing something, anything. In *A Blue Fire* I called him a naturalist of the psyche. He was always in the field doing his research. I don't mean at all that he was pedantic about it. He was a fiery person who seemed compelled to take a deeper step into everything. So, just by being with him I was always learning new ways of seeing and catching his enthusiasm to probe.

As a close friend, he was also the kind of confidant who was both compassionate and confronting. Once, when I was going through a bad time, he came to my house with an old bottle of port and some warm and penetrating advice. I remember that he suggested I carry my strong emotions

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of the moment in a suitcase, keeping them close but not letting them overwhelm me. I never forgot that image.

I've never understood why James and I hit it off so well. We have opposite temperaments. He's Aries, I'm Libra. That says a lot. But our friendship was deep. We shared an interest in classical ways of thought and classical literature combined with a therapist's eagerness to respond to suffering. I didn't see the heightened sensitivity to ordinary pain in his books as much as I saw it in his company. James was strong in his points of view but soft in his capacity for empathy.

One of the key things I learned just from being with him was the breadth of his imagination and heart. He felt that the soul first shows itself in highly eccentric behavior, and he was able more than anyone I've met to appreciate the messes we get into when our souls are coming to life. He was slow to judge that kind of thing, though he had no patience for stupidity. He didn't suffer fools, but he tolerated the foolishness of being captivated by some movement of soul.

I learned from him to be outrageously tolerant of the many ways people get

into trouble as they try to live true to a deeply felt intuition or impulse. A few weeks before he died he called me on the telephone and asked if I would officiate at his funeral. It was the most poignant conversation I ever had with him on the phone. I told him it was difficult to talk about, and he said, "Don't get sentimental on me." I said, "I'm not being sentimental, I'm being emotional. There's a difference." I was surprised to hear him agree with me.

RH: What did James teach you about being a Jungian?

TM: I first heard about James Hillman in a class taught by David Miller at Syracuse University in 1973. I read Jung's *Collected Works* carefully twice through at Syracuse, and David assigned some readings from Hillman. I was very taken with James's ideas and wrote to him. He sent me some of his articles, and that began a steady correspondence that lasted 38 years.

I appreciated his way of honoring Jung while getting into substantial discussion with his key thoughts. I liked the idea of psychological polytheism and quickly saw the sentimentality in notions like wholeness, integration and unity. I was also happy to see Hillman take the notion of *anima* and *animus* away from gender matters and explore each on its own. In later years, when Jim and I became close friends, I saw that he was not interested in using Jung's psychological types for simple labeling of character, following, by the way, Jung's warnings about this in his foreword to the Argentine edition; nor was he apt to discuss the first half and second half of life, though he was always interested in aging. These and many other revisions of Jungian thought thrilled me and made me want to know both Hillman and Jung much better.

I was approached a couple of times by Jungian analysts asking me if I'd like to become an analyst myself. I was tempted, but something kept me away. Jokingly, I often responded by saying that I had already been a Catholic. I meant that I sensed an orthodoxy and a hierarchy as well as strong father issues in the Jungian communities that I knew. I think my own neuroses from the monastery days kept me out of the new fold. I had several Jungian friends, and when some of them saw me developing a friendship with Hillman, they pressured me to choose between them and this rebel. One told me that Hillman wasn't worthy to tie Jung's shoes. But I never faltered there and never felt that I had to choose. Hillman just made me appreciate Jung more. I never write a serious piece now with consulting both Jung and Hillman thoroughly on the matter.

In my classes I used to say that I read Freud through Jung and Jung through Hillman. To me, these are three giants of equal magnitude in the development of psychological thinking. I place Hillman on top because he did not fall into the systematizing that weakened both Freud and Jung and because of his genius for taking any theme and shedding serious, fresh light on it. Reading Hillman also led me to distinguish between Jung the psychological doctor and Jung the *magus*, the one who could be at home with astrology, theology, alchemy and UFOs. I like both and have learned much from both, but I prefer the *magus*, the man of *The Red Book*.

Over the years I have lectured at many Jung societies and have thoroughly appreciated how they have brought depth to cultural studies and to therapeutic issues. I'm proud and happy to be associated with them. So my early concerns about becoming an analyst are not a criticism. They really do stem from my own experience in religion. I'm not a joiner; I'm not very sociable and I need my individuality and personal freedom to an insane degree. I only wish I could be closer to the Jungian community as Jim was. (By the way, I've always called Hillman "Jim." That's the way I met him and the way he signed his letters all those years.)

RH: Jim loved animals. What are some of your memories of that love?

TM: I have only a few memories of Jim's affection for animals, but they're powerful. For example, once he was giving a lecture and quoted a passage about the killing of an elephant. Maybe it was from Hemingway. Anyway, as he read the description, he broke down. I had never seen him so overcome by emotion that he couldn't go on speaking. He also loved cats and would hold them and talk to them. At his home in Connecticut he had a chicken coop and devoted time and attention to his chickens. I remember that on my first visit to him there, he was like a proud father showing me his chickens and talking about their egg-laying schedule. At his funeral, his wife Margot placed two freshly laid eggs, from that morning, on his casket, reminders of his affection for his chickens.

These are simple instances, but if you knew Jim's constant intellectual curiosity and his work schedule, this fondness for animals would stand out as another aspect of his character. I think he saw his intimacy with animals as part of a life dedicated to the soul—relating heart to heart, curious about the smallest details of character and behavior, and seeing personality where others might overlook it. I know from my own experience that spending your days and nights writing about the soul and studying it has an impact on who

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you are. I always saw Jim's interest in animals and affection for them as part of his life work, not separate from it. You could even say, though I can hear him deny it loudly, that his studies made him something of a mystic, someone who could overcome the barrier between the human and the animal and perceive and communicate in mysterious ways. I would watch him looking out for his chickens and wonder what he saw and what form of community was taking place there.

Shortly before he died, I was sitting with him as he lay in a hospital bed in his house. It was fall, and the colors of the trees were exceptionally beautiful. He could no longer go out to the coops, but he talked about his chickens lovingly and was thankful that he could smell the fresh air, see the colors and catch a glimpse of the animals he had lived with now for many years.

RH: Jim lived his final years in eastern Connecticut, not far from where I live, in a small town. What are some of your impressions of his home and his office?

TM: First, let me caution you that my impressions are my impressions. Others who knew his home better than I certainly would have a more accurate description. Jim's home in Connecticut is an old house with many nooks and crannies. It's simply furnished and not at all ostentatious. I can imagine Emerson living there. He and I spent most of our work time together in a small upstairs office, not his writing room, where the walls were filled with books and a small table lay clear and ready for the intense editing he was accustomed to. It was clearly a work space.

On one visit I noticed his to-do list pinned to a post and clearly visible. I got the impression that he was fairly organized, more so than I am. He had made some changes to the downstairs area, extending a living room and installing a fireplace, as I recall. He also put in a hot tub, and at least on one occasion he and I sat in the tub talking philosophy and psychology for a long time. I remember that once, while we were sitting there in the water, he said he wished he had the fifteen year's difference in our ages. He loved

life and didn't like to see it coming to an end. He was working on projects almost to the day he died.

When I was in his house, often there were friends visiting from Europe. I first met his good friend Pierre Denivelle there and Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig. Later I would enjoy the hospitality of Pierre Denivelle and his wife Bianca Garufi in Rome, sometimes with Jim. I also remember quiet lunches with Jim in his simple and neat kitchen.

Two weeks after he died I had a dream in which I was visiting Jim at his Connecticut house. There was some trouble with cars, as it was the day of his funeral. In the dream I was happy to be with him once again at his house with a group of friends. He wanted me to use a different car from the one I had driven there, and he wasn't interested in having me stay long. On waking up, I was reminded how often he urged me to go in my own direction. Once, he told me to stop citing him so often in my books and just work with the material we shared in common.

I've heard that some people around him were not happy with my way of working with Jim's basic ideas, but he never gave me that impression. He was always supportive. I remember the day in his upstairs office when I first presented him with my working manuscript of *A Blue Fire*, an anthology of his writings to that point. He looked shocked. I can understand that. Someone gets hold of your life work and gives it a fresh context and form; it would take a while to see whether or not you could live with it. In the end, Jim gave me his imprimatur, though I have no idea how he evaluated it in his own private thoughts. I told him at the beginning that I would do the job only if he let it be my book, not his. I wanted his blessing, but I wanted the freedom to present his work in a way I thought would be proper and effective.

My memories are for the most part intimate and quiet ones: He and I working and stopping for lunch or to feed the cats and chickens. I enjoyed those precious moments, the two of us in his ordinary and spotless kitchen, enjoying real food and talking about the issues we always discussed. Jim and I were different in temperament: He was strong and vocal in his positions, and I was quiet and understated. But we took pleasure in each other's company, recognizing a deep common source and appreciation for life. He was always curious about my background in music, suspicious of my Catholicism and former life as a monk, and interested in my obvious love for my father. We talked a lot about fathers. One of the last conversations we had was about my father, who had just turned 99. Though exhausted from med-

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ication and his cancer, Jim called out to his wife to tell her about my father's birthday. These were all conversations that I associate with his house.

RH: James believed that his work was soul work and the soul was very important to him. How do you think he tried to take care of his soul?

TM: First, I never heard Jim use the phrase "care of the soul." Care is a soft, *anima* word. I often joke that my use of it comes from my mother complex. Jim responded to his soul by being strong and honoring his considerable anger. Jim often said that he wrote from his anger, and his audiences know that his anger was never far beneath the surface. He was born in Aries and was a Mars personality.

On the other hand, Jim's anger was not essential to him. I don't know exactly how to put it. When you saw his anger, you also saw his compassion and his innocence. He had a marvelous, developed sense of wonder that never left him, even when he was in a fight of some kind. He read widely and deeply in the European tradition and saw events through that tradition as it was interpreted in his own archetypal style. He never let anything stand untouched, not imagined more thoroughly and often in directions exactly opposite the common understanding.

So, I'm saying that he cared for his soul by allowing his *daimon*, that force that moved so constantly through him, to have expression. He could seem possessed by it. When he stood to give a lecture, which was his own art form, you knew that you were going to hear a carefully developed argument moving in unexpected and original directions. He cared for his soul by putting his heart into his highly intellectual pursuits. One of my favorite essays of his is "Thought of the Heart," about Aphrodite and beauty and an intelligence derived from them.

I learned from him and our mutual friend David Miller to value ideas and to champion the intellect, pursuing it with the deep power of the *anima* and not just the *animus*. As Jim would say, our ideas have archetypal images behind them. Jim cared for his soul by being electric with his thought and expression. I remember once I wrote an article for a book he

was editing and publishing. I was describing a bull. He added the descriptive phrase, “with a great scrotum.”

I thought that these words said something important about Jim, that his imagination was a good example of Jung’s *animus* and showed a familiarity with male power, though Jim’s persona was not so masculine and bullish. His style perhaps was pointed and Mars-like, but his essence was light and soft, even tender. I saw people devastated by his glance or hardly-veiled verbal challenges, but I never felt that kind of sting from him. I believed that I saw through the veneer of the soldier to see the boy-like wonder that lay behind it and protected by it. Because I saw it, I always felt that Jim dealt with me through it and not through the militant persona he put on for his fights.

There was one time, though, that I felt he lost sight of our friendship. We were asked to give a workshop together on the theme of inspiration. We agreed to study each other’s work more closely and speak about what the other was trying to do and how he was inspired. I came prepared to show Jim’s genius in many passages from his writing, but he came to criticize my ideas where he thought I had gone wrong.

I felt some betrayal that time, but on the whole the workshop was a success. I wasn’t defeated by his attacks. I remember that he didn’t like the attention I gave to 19th century New England writers. He didn’t seem to like Emerson at all, especially the idea of “self-reliance,” which I think Jim understood as a failure of community. I still think he was wrong about that, if indeed that was his position. He didn’t like Emily Dickinson because of the sentimentality he saw in her. But I quoted a passage from her in which she admitted her pagan sensibility, and Jim was impressed. I scored one that day. Friends assured me that Jim came prepared that day for battle because he came out of the European intellectual tradition of debate. That makes sense to me.

I don’t want to make the notion of caring for one’s soul sentimental. If you must interpret it that way then I don’t think you’ll find it much in Jim’s work. But if you see it as a strong advocacy of one’s imagination, *daimonic* direction and innate proclivities, then you can see how Jim’s work and his style were a way for him to honor his own soul in all its individuality.

RH: It is one thing to meet a person like James Hillman who becomes a mentor and it is something else when that person dies. What has it been like to lose a mentor?

TM: It was important to me to have some private, extended time with Jim shortly before he died. I feel better now than I would have otherwise. We said some concluding things. But as a mentor he continues uninterrupted, pages and pages of his writing there to be discovered or re-read.

He is ever-present. I miss his post cards, which a friend in Ireland told me was his way of texting, and I miss the possibility of a new theme developed in his inimitable style. You see, I believe that he is the greatest thinker who ever lived: more important than Aristotle, Plato, Heidegger, and Blake. No one pushed the imagination into the world and actual life to the extent that Jim did and with such immediate relevance.

Though he was heavily instructed by Jung and was loyal to him, more than those who copy Jung or repeat his system, I don't see James Hillman as a Jungian. He was his own person. He avoided the jargonizing tendency of Jung, whom I admire immensely. James Hillman was more mature as a thinker—to take nothing away from Jung.

I don't expect to see another of James Hillman's ilk in the future, in my future. I had an immense grace to be his student and his friend. I have been affected through and through, though I don't want to be his disciple.

If I made Hillman a founder, a notion he rejected strongly, I'd be making a big mistake and I'd be betraying him. I see myself as an individual writer. I don't care if people complain that I'm not part of a system, a follower, or suited to their world views. This I learned in part from Hillman. I appreciate his bold integrity and hope to learn from it still.

James is alive. Resurrected. Accessible. I hope the world at large discovers him. Few other writers, so popular, are worth reading, in comparison. Skip those who are less and read Hillman. He's a difficult read for a lot of people. So is the Bible. So is Robert Frost. Certainly, so is Emily Dickinson. Yet, he's worth the effort, worth cracking your mind open to him.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not speaking hero-worship. I'm making observations—an assessment, being honest. I don't think I'm naïve in making so much of Jim's genius. Being close to it was like being close to fire, perhaps a cool blue fire.

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