

EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF HERMES.

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We are all used to hearing that the present is different from the past, that the future will be different from the present, that change has become the only constant, that the only thing we can be certain about is uncertainty. Some of our gurus assert that we are moving into a post-industrial society, a post-capitalist society, even a post-bureaucratic society. We hear that we are now in the Information Age, that information and communication technologies are changing not only what we do but how we think. We hear a lot about globalisation, and the dissolution of national and economic boundaries, and we hear how this is a good thing. Other voices tell us the world of our grandchildren will indeed be different from our world, but that with the planet's population exploding, its resources of oxygen, fresh water and arable land running out, temperature rising, pollution out of control, and pandemics becoming increasingly difficult to contain, the only foreseeable future is catastrophe. We find an explosion of scientific and technological knowledge coupled with an increasing pessimism about the capacity of science to save us.

We are living in interesting times. And it sometimes sounds more like a curse than a blessing. Whatever we think of it all, we have to admit that something interesting is going on. And schooling can't help being in the middle of it.

We can look at schools through the neo-liberal lens and see that if schools are to be engaged in meaningful activity they must come to terms with a world described in all the magic words associated with the New World order: globalisation, corporatisation, privatisation, commodification, technology, deregulation, individualism, managerialism, market forces. The message from the world bank, the IMF, the OECD, the transnational corporations and the right-wing think tanks is that salvation, happiness and prosperity depend on everyone accepting that this is how it is going to be, and that if governments don't want their education systems to be left behind they had better get them on board.

We can look at education through the lens of information and communication technologies, and come to the conclusion that these technologies are changing the way we communicate and learn so radically that schools as we know them, and the face to face teaching and learning that are a part of them, are on the point of obsolescence. Education in the near future will look very different and make its impact in very different ways.

Likewise, we can look through a post-industrial lens and see that the assumptions about teaching and learning which served and sustained schooling and industry in an industrial age no longer match reality. We need to stop repeating the past and start to prepare our children for the future – or at least for the present.

We can look education through the lens of scientific and technological progress and see that our commonsense understandings of the world and our place in it bear little relation to the world as it is being uncovered by science. And it bears little relation to the world made possible through the merger of the biological with the microelectronic. Artificial intelligence,

nanotechnology, robotics, biotechnologies, virtual reality and the rest promise to change human lives (in that part of the world which can afford them) more than we can imagine.

We can look at education through the lens that the philosophers of the “postmodern condition” constructed in the seventies, when they observed that the people of Western Europe were experiencing a sudden shift in the way they experienced life, and surmised that this might be part of a broader pattern. From this perspective we can see that schools exist in a world of information overload, the relativisation of beliefs and values, the commodification of knowledge in an unregulated market, the collapse of “grand narratives”. It is a world of constant change, of diversity, of mobility. The fantasy that human beings can control nature is being abandoned. The fantasy of inevitable progress has gone already. Boundaries which once seemed permanent have gone. Image has taken the place of substance. Truth has become very slippery. Even science, which once sought certainty, now expects to find paradox. Effective education in a world like this is not achieved through a national curriculum or standardised quality assurance procedures.

We can look at education from the perspective of the Polish cultural philosopher, Jean Gebser, who argued in the mid twentieth century that European culture is in the midst of a major shift of consciousness, as significant as the shift from mythical to mental consciousness we experienced some three thousand years ago. What we find emerging is a way of experiencing the world which is arational, aperspectival, free from the old static notions of time, space and ego.

We could look at education through other, narrower lenses. A feminist lens, a post-colonial lens, or an ecological lens would enable us to become aware of particular aspects of this pattern. The point I want to make is that there is a pattern, a complex one, and that all these aspects are part of it. I’ve used the image of a lens, because I’m taking the postmodern position that we are not talking about the truth about the world here, but about different ways of imagining it. There are all kinds of fundamentalisms – religious, political and economic – which claim to possess the incontrovertible truth, but I want to avoid them.

My preferred lens for examining the patterns in our personal and collective behaviour – and more particularly of that aspect of our behaviour that we call education – is the lens of archetypal psychology, a way of thinking based in the work of Carl Jung and , more recently, James Hillman.¹

Jung did not have a great deal to say about education, but he did say a lot about the patterns he found in human behaviour, both individual and collective. Jung’s observations of the patterns he found in the behaviour of his patients led him to the conclusion that these patterns were not simply personal, but that they were common to the human species, across history and across cultures. He tried several different ways of explaining how this might be. For instance he suggested that the patterns of images, feelings, values and ideas that he called archetypes were hard-wired in our biology. That is, these images and ideas were the non-physical expression of what we generally call instincts. At other times he took up Plato’s idea

¹ Hillman argues that the proper work of psychology is seeing through our personal and collective experience to the archetypal image behind it. He argues that we always see the world metaphorically. In fact, according to Hillman, we have no other way of seeing it. See *Revisioning Psychology*. Harper and Row, 1976.

of timeless entities (Forms or Ideas) of which everything in our ordinary experience is some sort of imperfect copy. He sometimes suggested that innumerable repetitions of particular experiences have resulted in these patterns becoming part of the structure of our brains. At other times he suggested that the archetypes form the structure of a species-wide collective psyche, of which our individual psyches are just particular, localised manifestations.

In spite of Jung's often unsatisfactory attempts to explain what archetypes are and how they come to be, he had no doubt that our behaviour, particularly our unconscious behaviour, is patterned in particular ways. When he observed the behaviour and examined the dreams of his patients he saw them acting out the themes he found in ancient myths and in the personalities of ancient gods. When he looked at the collective behaviours which led to and sustained the conflicts of the twentieth century, he was confirmed in this conviction. Following Jung, archetypal psychologists are inclined to see gods as personifications of ways of apprehending the world that had their origin in human experience thousands of years ago and have become embedded in us through constant reiteration.

Archetypal psychologists suggest that all behaviour is archetypally constellated. All our thinking and behaving is done within one archetypal fantasy or another. When Jung referred to archetypes as "modes of apprehension", he was suggesting that not only the ways we perceive the world, but the ways we think about it, feel it and make judgements about it are shaped by particular patterns which people once called gods and represented in the stories about them. We may no longer be accustomed to talk about Zeus and the rest, but our behaviour is still largely framed by the same patterns and energies that earlier peoples acknowledged as gods.

How do these archetypal energies frame our ways of imagining education. In recent times we have seen the fantasy of education as the transmission of culture (a fantasy which belongs to the "old" gods - Uranus, Kronos and Zeus) and the pursuit of meaning (an Apollo fantasy), successfully resisting the fantasy of education as a context for growth, creativity and relationship (Demeter, Dionysos, Eros). Most recently, we have found our education systems dominated by two distinct fantasies, which are sometimes compatible and sometimes not. On the one hand we find schooling legitimised only through its capacity to train students in useful skills. At the same time we are urged to remember that the only value an education has is its exchange value. The conflict between these views, which is rarely acknowledged, is representative of a conflict between two different ways images of life, and goes way beyond the classroom. One of them we associate with a modern, and the other with a postmodern consciousness. In the language of Greek mythology, which is the conventional language of archetypal psychology, we find Prometheus – god of the industrial age – on one side, and Hermes – god of the information age – on the other.

The kind of consciousness that characterises the post-modern, post-industrial, information society which is now the context of schooling is not something entirely new. The Greeks of classical times would have recognised it readily enough as a consciousness dominated by Hermes. It is Hermes, the god of transformation whose feet never touch the ground, that I want to talk about here.

The Homeric Hymn to Hermes tells us how, to avoid the gods, Maia, the nymph who was Zeus' lover, dwelt in a deep cave, where she bore a son

who was a shrewd and coaxing schemer,

*a cattle - rustling robber, and a bringer of dreams,
a watcher by night and a gate-keeper, soon destined
to show forth glorious deeds among the immortal gods.²*

The hymn shows Hermes as a most precocious infant who, as he leaves the cave on the day he was born, comes across a tortoise. First he plays with it as any child might, then he kills it and makes a lyre out of its shell. (The first recorded instance of value-added production?) Accompanying himself on this instrument, he sings the very first song, which is about his parents' love-making.

Having joyfully and ironically sung of his parents, he moves on to other things. He feels a craving for meat, so he leaves his lyre in his cradle and sets out to find some. For a rogue like Hermes, there is one utterly obvious way to obtain the meat he craves. He steals it. When twilight falls he seeks out the cattle of Apollo where they are grazing, and cuts fifty of them out of the herd.

To fool Apollo, he drives the cows backwards so they look as though they are walking the other way, and uses foliage to make the first pair of sandals, in order to disguise his own footprints.

Having invented stringed instruments and sandals, he now invents the fire-stick, and builds a fire. Next, he invents both cookery and religious sacrifice. He takes two of the cows he has stolen, slaughters and roasts them. By this time he has obviously forgotten about his hunger, for instead of making a banquet for himself, he takes the meat (which he stole from the gods in the first place) and offers it to the gods (including himself), making sure that he packages the carcasses in twelve equal pieces. (He is, after all, the god of packaging) Having performed the sacrifice, Hermes returns to his cradle, and lies gurgling and playing like any other baby. His mother scolds him for his thieving, at which Hermes vigorously declares his intention of becoming the Prince of Robbers, so he can support the two of them in the manner they are entitled to.

The next day, Apollo arrives at the cave, having tracked the cows there, and angrily confronts his baby brother Hermes. Hermes lies shamelessly. He declares that he was only born this morning, which is true enough, and then goes on to swear by the head of Zeus that he has never seen a cow in his life. Apollo won't accept this and picks up the baby Hermes to carry him to their father Zeus for judgement. Hermes' belly rumbles so loudly that Apollo drops him in disgust. Before the throne of Zeus, Hermes continues to lie, well knowing that nobody believes him, and eventually charms his way out of punishment by getting Zeus to laugh. Nevertheless, Zeus exacts from Hermes a promise not to lie again (though he need not necessarily tell the truth!) and sends his sons off together to find the cattle. Realising Hermes' great strength, Apollo tries to bind his hands together, but Hermes the illusionist is far too slippery a character to be bound. Hermes then charms Apollo completely by taking his lyre and playing.

So Apollo gladly exchanges his cattle for the lyre. Apollo takes responsibility for music while Hermes becomes the god of herdsmen and shepherds (as well as cattle-rustlers), and of

² Apostolos Athanassakis (trans) *The Homeric Hymns*. .. John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 31: 13 - 16.

barter and negotiation (as well as stealing and deception). They become the best of friends. Hermes promises never to steal from Apollo again. He receives from Apollo his staff, or magic wand, for it is fitting that he should be a god of magic and illusion. Finally, he is designated messenger to Hades, the god who guides souls to the underworld. Meanwhile,

*Little is the profit he brings, and he beguiles endlessly
the tribes of mortal men throughout the night.*³

Most contemporary Western societies seem to be inflated by the Hermes archetype.

In psychological inflation, as Jung developed the idea, the individual is "blown up" by a particular archetypal pattern. A person's perceptions, values and behaviour are driven by an image and energy which has its source outside the individual, in the collective or objective psyche. Personal identity is engulfed by the archetype. One's perceptions of the world, one's thoughts about it, one's values, are shaped by a single image. This process is often driven not only by the energy of the archetype as experienced by the individual, but also by the archetypal image projected on to the individual by others. Analogously we can talk about cultural inflation, in which a nation or society, or at least a substantial part of the population, is taken over by an archetype, so that the group's perceptions, self-image and behaviour are formed by a single archetypal pattern and driven by a single archetypal energy.

It seems apparent that we have been worshipping the god of the marketplace over-enthusiastically for some time. We see an infatuation with the magic hand of the marketplace, enthusiastically supported by political leaders from both right and left. (the god of the marketplace is also the god of disguise, and has no difficulty disguising himself as a socialist.) In their fantasy, education is no longer a public good. It is a product that we purchase (perhaps with some assistance from the state) for ourselves or our children, a product whose only value is its exchange value. If we buy wisely, our children will be able to trade their education for a good job, self-respect, a place in society and more or less prosperous life.

There have been many attempts to pin down whatever it is that distinguishes the intellectual sensibility of the late twentieth century. If we take Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*⁴ as our text we will be inclined to view postmodernism as an inevitable consequence of the information revolution. According to his analysis, the transmission of information has become a matter of far greater significance than the content of that information. Information has come to need no source or justification outside itself. Our society is characterised by a constant flow of information, which has become essential to the maintenance of that society, regardless of what the information is actually about. This frenetic exchange of information is carried on the back of a runaway computer technology, which appears to be headed towards a total exteriorisation of knowledge. Knowledge has come to depend less and less on the existence of some one who knows. The notion that the acquisition of knowledge is somehow associated with the training of minds appears to be obsolete.

The information society is guided by the fantasy of the marketplace, in which exchange is an end in itself – a fantasy of deregulation, free interchange, the commercialisation of knowledge. We see relations between people that used to be based on bonds of family or loyalty being replaced by loose, temporary, opportunistic arrangements. Education, along with

³ *ibid*, p. 47: 576 - 8

wisdom, healing, relationship and pleasure were once found in the stable institutions of community – family, tribe, village or religion. Now we can buy all of these from strangers.

We can find Hermes in the postmodern mind's preference for dealing with reality aesthetically rather than rationally, its tendency to deal with images rather than with ideas, its readiness to give credence to subjective experience, its inclination to be more interested in impressions and interpretations than in facts. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we seem to be experiencing the triumph of image over thought, of process over substance, of impression over reality and interpretation over meaning. We are witnessing the loss of shared meanings, a relativisation of values, and a transformation of knowledge into a commodity whose only value is its market value. All of these symptoms of the "postmodern condition" can be readily perceived as manifestations of the Hermes archetype. No matter how "post-everything" we like to think ourselves, a quick look at Greek mythology will show us that this is an old pattern, not a new one. Collectively, we now seem to be living the myth of the deceitful, playful bringer of dreams, who is at the same time the god of process and transformation. This is not the first time European culture has experienced this particular inflation. There are historical phenomena (the culture of mediaeval Venice, for instance) that parallel our own experience in interesting ways. However, mobility and information technology add enormously to the strength of the present inflation, and make it potentially global rather than merely local.

Whatever we think about the goals of education, this seems to be the context in which our schools exist.

It is not just that too many of us have accepted the story that schools exist the marketplace, that their key justification is an economic one. Hermes is present also in the push towards privatisation in schooling and the fragmentation of state education systems, in the rush to information technology, the slipperiness of the education bureaucrat who cannot be pinned down to any commitment, the difficulty many teachers find in teaching values, the re-emergence of exotic religiosity among students and their parents, the disappearance of history as a subject worth careful study, the increasing numbers of children and adolescents who do not feel complete without a mobile phone glued to their ear, the disappearance of socially critical education, the appearance in our classrooms of so many children who have been travelling since birth unable to find a place where they can belong, the blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction, the collapse of the old boundaries around the roles and responsibilities of teachers, the evidence that image has displaced reality as the focus of concern – where students, teachers, principals and bureaucrats all know that seeming to do well is much more likely to be rewarded than actually doing well.

If some of these developments are a cause of concern, we should note that Hermes is present also in the movement towards a student-centred education, in the recognition of multiple intelligences and diverse ways of learning, in the increasing demand that schools be flexible and able to adapt to changing contexts, in a recognition of the emotional, relational and spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning, in the accessibility of information, in technologies that enable students to communicate across vast distances and significant cultural differences, in a new focus on the process of learning and a growing realisation that education must prepare children to create a future rather than repeat the past.

⁴ Jacques Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press, 1983.

All these developments have clear points of reference in the myth of Hermes, the boundary-crosser, the god of travellers, who carries messages on winged feet, who barter and deceives and does magic, who invents religious service, whom shining Apollo cannot tie up or pin down, who is interested only in making connections, talks his way out of conflict, and spends a great deal of his time chasing nymphs.

The Greeks did not have a sense of a cosmic conflict between good and evil. They had nothing in their mythology which approximates to Satan. The destructive or nasty or pathological aspects of behaviour were shared out among all the gods. Archetypal images have both negative and positive aspects, and this is manifested in the personalities of the gods. Hermes is no exception. He is not only the god of thieves and con-men. Having no commitment to the status quo, he is also the god of transformation, the god who enables us to let go of the old in order to move into the new. The deceit and dishonesty, the opportunism, the entire lack of ethics which characterises the infantile Hermes, are justified by him as destabilisation of an oppressive system. "Mother", he says, "I'm only doing it for you."

Jung warned us that in every inflation we will find pathology, as the negative aspects of that complex get full expression. The ancient Greeks would have put it another way. They would have warned us of the dangers of monotheism. If we give all our worship to one god, not only do we sentence ourselves to suffer the pathology of that god, but we find ourselves under attack from all the others.

Hermes both supports and subverts the power of Zeus, so that we may find on the one hand a rhetoric that encourages a flexible curriculum in self-managed schools and, on the other, an increasingly centralised control of educational outcomes through the imposition of "national standards", "performance benchmarks" and "accountability processes". We find a vision of student autonomy and engagement in learning, side by side with a practice of forced compliance.

If we worship Hermes as the god who points out that all the squabbling gods must be worshipped, as his myth insists we do, we can find in a Hermes-consciousness the flexibility and inventiveness which may yet save us from the catastrophe to which our excessive respect for Zeus' authority and our excessive faith in Apollo's logic and Prometheus' technology seem to have condemned us. The god of transformation, conciliation, negotiation, magic, playfulness, intuition, imagination, ambiguity, paradox, mobility, irony, has destabilised a pattern of thinking and behaviour which was, in its arrogant assertion of its own truth, destroying the planet. For Hermes, truth is far more problematic than it is for either Apollo or Prometheus. Truth is a flash of beauty, glimpsed for the briefest of moments and always alluringly elusive, like the nymphs that ancient Greek travellers glimpsed for a moment in the forest, pursued, and lost, never sure that they had really seen anything.

However, Hermes cannot solve our problems. He has no messages of his own; he bears only the messages of the other gods. He offers no guide to community. If we want community we will have to look elsewhere – to Zeus for the community that comes from respect for legitimate authority and traditional values, to Hera for community founded in social bonds and mutual responsibility, to Demeter for the community of caring and nurturing, to Eros for the community of intimacy and relationship, to Artemis for the community of sisterhood, to Gaia for the community of earth-consciousness, to Ares for the community of passionate activism. We will have to look to Apollo for the community of reason and to Aphrodite the community of pleasure. We will look to Dionysos for creative

community and Hestia for the community of simply being together. We will look to Hephaistos for the community of honourable work. And we will have to look to Prometheus for the community of shared mission and Athene for the community of democratic citizenship and the community of cooperation. We will not only have to accept and respect the values and perspectives of all the gods; we will have to accept and respect the tensions between them. If we want to build educational community we must realise that the foundations are complex, diverse and, above all, deep.

The Age of Hermes gives us plenty of cause for concern. The world has become slippery, unpredictable, complex and dangerous. Hermes promises us a world where communication is easy and information flows freely; what we get is increasing stress as information and communication technologies come to dominate both our working lives and our relationships. He promises us a world of creative flexibility; we get the stress of constant change. He promises the dissolution of national and cultural boundaries; we get a return to tribalism. He promises us increasing mobility; we get roads jam-packed with slow-moving vehicles. He promises us access to a rich diversity of cultural narratives; we get cultural fragmentation. He promises us freedom from the tyranny of ideology; we find ourselves in a world where we don't know what to believe. and where our national leaders appear to believe in nothing but self-interest.

On the other hand, the Age of Hermes offers teachers and schools a host of possibilities. It is an opportunity to escape the imprisonment of past assumptions, to enliven and enrich our curriculum and the lives of our students. We live in a time of letting go, a time of transition and transformation. Unfortunately, we have no guarantees about where we will be when transition and transformation are complete. Hermes is more interested in the journey than the destination.

We would do well to remember that while Hermes is the friendliest of the gods, he can't always be trusted.

Table 1

Table 2

Table 3.