Why-Arrow and the Wounded Heel

Unsure where to begin, I reach for the Yarrow stalks, bundled in their blood-red cloth and untouched for too long now. Lighting a candle, I set the mind's flurry of concerns off to one side and focus on the suddenly daunting task at hand: articulating the gifts of Yarrow, master plant teacher and linchpin of the ancient Chinese oracle, the Yijing.

Here I can't help but pause for a moment and smile. Plant teacher? Ancient oracle? All this would sounded highly questionable not so many years ago, before a growing curiosity in matters mystical sent me headlong down the rabbit hole on a fool's quest for gnosis. Teacher plants and the Yijing (I Ching) played key roles in the ensuing journey, a passage that was to turn my mind inside out and stretch my sanity to its limits…

With a half-rueful shake of the head I return to the present and unwrap the fifty Yarrow stalks. Setting a single stalk along the top edge of the rectangular cloth, I begin dividing, counting, and re-dividing the rest. In fact, I have trouble recalling exactly what to do, for I've fallen into the habit of resorting to more expedient means of consulting the Yijing: coins, or even (I cringe) a smartphone app. Performed with the stalks, Yijing divination is laborious enough to forestall silly questions, time-consuming enough to help one settle into a receptive state. Seduced by the bustle of city life, I seem to have forgotten these things, and am duly chastened. It's back to basics today, then—back to the root.

I take up the stalks once again and manipulate them with my query in mind—a simple plea for guidance in the writing of this piece. One by one the *yin* (broken) and *yang* (whole) lines emerge to form a "hexagram": in this case Hexagram 62, *Xiao Guo*. This symbol has two *yang* lines sandwiched between two *yin* lines above and another two *yin* below, giving *Xiao Guo* a squeezed look like a board in a carpenter's vise. Neither this visual nor the juxtaposition of the symbol's constituent trigrams—Mountain below Thunder—is yielding me much at the moment, however. I turn to Liu Ming's careful translation to reference the relevant bit of text. Paraphrasing Liu, Hexagram 62's main text might be rendered:

The small succeeds, not major expeditions. Down, not up.

Therein lies an answer, but an answer to what? Are these gnomic phrases somehow key to Yarrow and the Yi itself, or did they appear as advice for me as I set about writing? Experience suggests that the answer may well be 'both'—and more besides.

I pause to consider. 'Less is more', the oracle seems to be saying. (I make a mental note to pare down these many words). 'Start small. Pay attention to details.' And perhaps: 'don't get too big for your britches'—this last being sound advice for one whose insights outstrip his ability to act on them.

I linger a moment longer with the hexagram text. One phrase in particular stands out: *down, not up.* I look down and am greeted by the sight of my own feet—and something growing beside them. Feather-leafed and low-to-the-ground, this herb's unassuming looks belie the deep roots of its medicine.

The Wounded Heal

Yarrow or *Achillea millefolium* is named after the legendary Achilles, best-remembered today for his vulnerable heel. Achilles learned the use of Yarrow as a vulnerary herb from the centaur Chiron, his mentor in both martial and healing arts. Since then, "soldier's woundwort" or *herba militaris* has been valued on the battlefield to staunch the flow of blood from severe wounds. Yarrow's medicine runs deep as the blood itself; to run with it, we must follow the blood-line back to the mythological body, and enter it through the portal of a wound: a wounded heel, to be exact.

What is it about feet that makes them vulnerable? As storyteller Michael Meade explains, one of them is well-adapted, the 'best foot' we 'put forward' to climb the ladder of success. The other foot, however, is a bit weird:

> "and *weird* means to have one foot in the otherworld…this malingering foot carries our limp and holds us back, but it also remembers essential things that we keep forgetting and leaving behind when we rush ahead…We may put our most adapted foot forward when practicality is called for; but when it comes to our actual calling in life, it is our mythic, awkward, and dream-bound limb that knows the way we must go. Because it causes us to limp and long for unseen things, it usually becomes covered up. We disguise our weirdness in order to seem like others or to get ahead in life. Yet the weird within us has its own ways of slowing us down and even stopping us cold. if we ignore this symptom-bearing limb too long it can cause an accident or an illness that stops us in our tracks. In the end, we can only go as far forward as we can reach back. And the weird within us would have us reach all the way back to the dream we brought to life and all the way down to where our deepest wounds seek to be healed" (Meade, *Fate and Destiny*, 170-1).

The limping foot results not from an incidental injury but from a fateful wound: a painful opening to transformation. Such wounds are part and parcel of the process of initiation, i.e. events that

> mark a man or a woman's life forever, that pull a person deeper into life than they would normally choose to go. Initiatory events are those that define who a person is, or cause some power to erupt from them, or strip everything from them until all that is left is their essential

> self…there is a departure from daily life, a suffering of ordeals and dramatic episodes, and a return as a marked and different person (Meade, *Men and the Water of Life*, 11-12).

Initiations come in many kinds. Of interest here are the ones that release the healer archetype that has lain dormant in the psyche. The full-blown initiation of a healer classically entails a brush with death and a subsequent rebirth. Often the trigger is an actual near-death experience, or else an ego-death such as those mediated by entheogenic substances in the shamanic cultures of the Amazon.

Meade's words, together with the myths he draws on, have helped me to understand my own initiatory passage, a yearlong period of teaching and testing, punctuated by ritual and retreat. The details of that passage belong to another story. But taken as a whole, the period marked for me both the threshold of adulthood proper and the beginning of embodying my chosen role as healer. In the midst of the often-exciting, sometimes-terrifying sea change, it came as a real relief to find that a warm, wise elder understood what I was going through better than I did myself. Yet recognizing the nature of the transition is consoling only up to a point; the treacherous waters of psychic upheaval still have to be navigated. These are the waters in which the mystic swims and the madman drowns, as the saying goes. From them I came crawling and sputtering, battered but breathing. I had been shaken to my foundations, and once the dust settled I found myself possessed of a dramatically re-oriented perspective. But here Meade had foreseen the challenge to come, for initiation is only a beginning: "the radical changes that initiation precipitates take a long time" to integrate. I sometimes wonder if a lifetime is sufficient for the job.

At any rate there was a more pressing problem: my initiation had entailed an opening to what might be called the spirit world or archetypal realm, but this psychic rift was not so easy to close up again. It amounted to a subtle but deep and troublesome wound. It wasn't until I encountered the myth of Philoctetes, however, that I realized the nature of the wound.

A contemporary of Achilles, Philoctetes was the wielder Heracles' mighty bow and poison arrows, a gift the still-living legend bestowed upon Philoctetes from atop his funeral pyre—for Philoctetes alone consented to light the pyre of Heracles, writhing in pain and seeking an end. Armed with this storied bow and arrow, Philoctetes sets off with Odysseus and company to besiege Troy. It's the great war of their generation and a golden opportunity for ambitious young heroes make their name and fortune. En route the Greeks stop at a temple to seek the blessing of Athena, goddess of war and patron of heroes. There, however, Philoctetes is bitten—on the foot, of course—by a snake.

Though he survives the initial bite, Philoctetes' wound festers. The stench is so awful and his moans so piteous that no one can bear to be near him—a state of affairs that may resonate for many a socially-marginal artist or healer. When the situation only persists, the Greek leader Agamemnon commands that Philoctetes be abandoned on a deserted island, Lemnos.

Accounts differ on what happens to Philoctetes on the island. In one version of the story he dies there, while in Sophocles' play Philoctetes survives telling the protagonist but is unable to heal himself—eventually he is cured by a son of the divine physician Asclepius. The presence of the snake suggests a third alternative, however. Symbols of metamorphosis, snakes bring painful and dramatic transformation if one only survives their poison-as-medicine. A poisoned wound or snakebite, then, represents a healer's initiation; the great physician Chiron himself suffered such a wound, and his student Asclepius, bearer of a snake-wrapped staff, was known for administering snake venom as a curative agent.

We may well imagine that, bitten by the snake, Philoctetes crosses an inner threshold and begins a descent into pain and darkness. Abandoned on an uninhabited isle, he must delve deep within himself and uncover hidden inner resources if he is not to lose his life and sanity. Cradled in the bosom of nature, far from the vanities of men, Philoctetes must undergo a kind of death and rebirth. No extant version of the story tells the details of this deeply personal passage: of what demons he faces, or how he finds the strength to go on. Only after the wound is opened and cleaned can it heal properly; but how does he find the courage to cut open his dirty wound and face the corruption that could kill him?

It is a risky and painful procedure, but Philoctetes succeeds, as attested by the name he give to the island of his exile: Acesa—from *akeomai*, 'to heal.' He has been opened up, and re-opened; now he has been made *sanum*—at once healthy, sane and sanitary enough to comport with others. He is ready to rejoin the drama of outward life and to approach his destiny.

From the site of his healing, ironically, that destiny will bring Philoctetes to the shores of Troy, to bloodshed and glory; for Philoctetes as for so many other legendary heroes, the arts of healing and of war go are as intertwined as the snakes on the caduceus. After his transformative sojourn Philoctetes may no longer value fame as the highest good, for he has no doubt gained new appreciation for the simple gifts of life and health. Nevertheless he will decide to take up the famous bow and play his crucial role in the toppling of Troy. Having learned how to heal, now it is his turn to fight.

Wounds are opening for change; poisoned wounds and snakebites are especially transformative, just as they are especially dangerous and difficult to work with. Those who survive them do so by learning to heal, starting with themselves. Yet even after healing cleanly, such a wound leaves its mark in the form of a scar or limp. A scarred veteran himself, Meade honors the limp as necessary and even beautiful:

> In the common light of day our limp can be covered up; but truly walking our walk requires that we also limp our limp. On the path of our dreams and in pursuit of our greater sense of self, our limping becomes more pronounced…When seen from the other end of life, our affliction is a sacred wound secretly connected to the hidden gold" (*ibid*, 171).

We must learn to thank our afflictions for the teaching and transformation they bring, for it is the the lowly wounded heel that reminds us of who we are and what we are here to do.

Divination: Tracing the Wyrd Thread

Modern society's skepticism towards teleology notwithstanding, this 'who' and 'what' have long been a subject of great interest. The wealth of the world's cultural heritage includes myriad means for answering precisely these questions, including the rich tapestries of myth, various rite of passage ceremonies, and the kinds of sacred games collectively known as divination.

Divination methods—'games of the gods'—were and are intended to "provoke omens" (in Robert Moss' memorable phrase) in order to help people become conscious of their particular threads of affinity, purpose, or karmic entanglement. These weird threads (from the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*, or fate) are the themes we rub up against again and again at life's fateful junctures as we seek to untangle the snarl and free the gifts we've brought with us to life. Meade again: "Gifted and wounded, that's how we arrive in this world…gifted and wounded, wise and crosswise, the human soul carries its complexities and seeks to unfold them" (*ibid*, 215).

One of divination's primary aims is to shed light on these matters of fate and destiny. Doing so means tapping into what Meade calls the 'otherworld', the Chinese call *tian* (heaven) and Jungian psychology calls the archetypal realm. But bridging the gap between this world and that one calls for extraordinary measures, since nothing entirely *of* this world can reach *beyond* it. A quantum leap is in order, and with it a surrender to a higher order of meaning. This opening to the unknown is something divination achieves through appeal to chance, the companion of fate. Casting bones, marking sand, counting sticks, or pounding palm nuts are all ways to generate what amounts to the world's oldest computer code, a binary language whose words are sequences of whole

and broken lines. These barcode-like figures serve as keys to vast bodies of symbols, stories, aphorisms, rituals—all in a sense 'prescriptions' to re-connect the querent with her original nature and innate potential. In this sense divination's intervention is at the level of narrative: it helps people reconnect with the larger story they're here to live, as opposed to the petty, distracting stories with which we get entangled.

Of course divination is commonly used for more mundane concerns as well as heavenly ones, and in the many gray areas in between. Here's an example of how it can work.

A mother was having trouble with her teenage son. Despite her pleas, threats and cajoling, he wasn't coming home from school to look after his little sister; he was staying out late and generally refusing to take responsibility. She in turn was punishing him by withdrawing his privileges. They were at a stand-off. At her wit's end, the woman consulted an Ifa diviner. He consulted the oracle on her behalf, and upon seeing the resulting *odu* (divination figure) told her: 'Ifa says a prince without a kingdom is no end of trouble. Ifa says give the prince a key.' *A key to the house*, thought the woman? *That's crazy! He and his friends will destroy the place*…but the diviner was firm and the woman, having consulted the oracle, decided to give it a shot. She gave her son a key to the house. Shortly thereafter, he began coming straight home from school, taking care of his little sister, and generally acting like part of the family. The counterintuitive advice turned out to be the perfect remedy for the situation; in entrusting her son with responsibility it was as if she had summoned the responsible part of him into being.

One other brief example from my experience with the Yijing: I once cast the oracle for someone in crisis. My heart sank when I saw the hexagram, number 29. Representing an abyss or chasm, it is one of the darkest and most difficult of the Yi's sixty-four hexagrams. *Great*, I thought, *more bad news*…yet the woman I was casting for clearly felt this was the appropriate symbol for her situation: perhaps for the first time, its gravity, difficulty and danger were being recognized. The darkness had been named—and in being spelled out, it could begin to be dispelled.

These limited examples only hint at the healing that divination can trigger in ways subtle yet powerful. On the other hand, divination methods can also occasion tremendous confusion and corruption. The key factor in determining which way the wind will blow is alignment.

The Warrior's Why-Arrow

We have seen how, in its reliance on randomness, the diviner's art works via quantum weirdness, synchronicity, or "psycho-magic" (to borrow a Jodorowsky-ism). First,

though, divination depends upon *alignment* between the mundane self and other, otherworldly part of us—the 'higher self' above, and the ancestors below.

In this context Yarrow emerges as a natural plant to use in divination, for Yarrow strongly represents the *axis mundi* or vertical pole threading the earth together with the subtle realms positioned, in esoteric cartography, above and below. This emphasis on the vertical is apparent in the form of the plant, with its straight, rigid stalk, and equally so in the herb's name. Yarrow is *Y-Arrow*, like the *y*-axis in an algebraic graph. Like master marksman Chiron, Yarrow helps us focus and aim unerringly at our target: in this case our destiny, our "why." Yarrow is *Why-Arrow,* a guide to aligning with purpose.

Unlike axes, arrows are directional—so which way does the Yarrow's vertical point? *Down, not up*. Like the letter Y itself, its gesture is to receive from above and transmit downwards. Yarrow helps us ground the signals from the subtle realm. It directs our feet to help us walk our walk (and limp our limp) here on earth while staying connected to higher purpose and inner truth.

'Higher purpose and inner truth' may sound well and good, but living in accordance with them means coming into conflict sooner or later with the less noble elements of our mixed-up world. In an off-kilter society, to align along the (wh)*y*-axis is to take a radical stance. One who commits to such alignment and to limping the soulful limp of the healer must also develop the virtues of the warrior: courage, first and foremost, to stand up for what is right. The archetypes of healer and warrior turn out to be inextricable. Yarrow helps us embody them both as we dance, limp, and stumble our way through our stories. Yarrow teaches us to honor or wounds and to heal them; to walk our walk, limpingly if necessary, as we learn to dance.

Stumbling feet, wounded feet, dancing feet; if Yarrow is the healer's herb, and a master of word play (*wyrd* play) to boot, then it is also the herb of heeling, as in reining in, stopping. The healer must learn to heel, to say 'no' to the forces of disease. Yarrow is used to strengthen boundaries. The plant itself likes to grows around edges and perimeters, and that's where it gravitates in the body: to what Chinese medicine calls the *taiyang* (great *yang*), our outermost physiological layer. The *taiyang* boundary constitutes both the epidermis and the mucosal lining of our digestive tracts. Yarrow helps to tighten both, in effect helping us say 'no' to would-be infiltrators in the form of ill wind, pathogens, or allergenic food proteins. For this reason it is useful for all kinds of hypersensitivity, both allergic and emotional, as it effectively erects a screen to fortify our defenses and deflect the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"—except where fate would decree we be pierced.

Yarrow's affinity for the peripheral dovetails with the archetype of the wounded healer in another way: as Philoctetes' story demonstrates, the wounded warrior/healer is often a liminal character, occupying borderlands; ironically given her ability to serve as a central conduit, the medicine woman is classically found on the outskirts of town.

Fittingly, the acupuncture point nearest the Achilles heel lies on the Bladder channel, the Bladder being (along with the Small Intestine) a *taiyang* organ. In the body politics of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic (*Huang Di Nei Jing*), the Bladder is described as being the official of the border regions—necessarily, then, a kind of warrior, prepared to defend the interior from any and all invaders. Not only is the acupuncture point in question associated with this border official of an organ system, but the point itself is called Kunlun, a reference to a mythical mountain (not to be confused with the Kunlun mountain range in Central Asia) that was revered as an *axis mundi*. Like Yarrow, the point Kunlun, Bladder 60, has to do with vertical alignment, vulnerability and the spiritual warrior. In psycho-spiritual treatment, one might apply Yarrow (as essential oil, ideally) to Bladder 60 to mark a beginning of or renewed commitment to the sacred path shared by warrior and healer alike.

Yarrow's connection to the Bladder organ system is also borne out by Yarrow's efficacy in treating a host of urinary issues from UTI's to incontinence. Meanwhile, Yarrow's resonance with Achilles is supported by its actual capacity to staunch severe bleeding (it's for "cuts to the bone", according to herbalist Matthew Wood). 'Connecting heaven and earth' is admittedly a more abstract function to assign an herb, but millennia worth of Yijing consultations bear out Yarrow's capacity in this regard as well. So does a 7th century Chinese *materia medica*, the *Xinxiu Bencao*, which lists Yarrow (*shicao)* as "able to treat all kinds of Pi syndrome". Pi is a reference to the Yijing's Hexagram 12 Pi, which describes a state of blockage between heavenly and earthly energies. "Pi" is a not-infrequent diagnosis in the Chinese herbal world; treating this condition is equivalent to restoring the connection between heaven and earth.

If part of our tragicomic human predicament is to be caught between these two realms, with one foot in eternity and the other right here in the mud, then it is our burden and privilege to serve as conduits between them. Yarrow stands here with us in vertical alignment. Serving as sentry, it guards the threshold to the path of the healer-*cum*-warrior pierced by time, wounded by fate, dripping our heart's blood onto the witnessing earth. Veteran Yarrow reminds us of the necessity of our wounds, without which our inner light could not leak out for the world's benefit. Our wounds are sacred portals that needed to be opened—but that also, as Philoctetes' story tells us, may be healed. "Pursuing one's destiny depends upon…healing one's inner wounds," Meade

writes. He reminds us, too, that "once healed over, the wounded places often become stronger than normal tissue. Healing makes a person stronger than before the wounds were faced and treated" (*ibid*, 217). Healing, we gain the courage to fight our battles—and to help others heal.

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