

“Dear James”: The Academic Crush and the Arc of Influence

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*Dear James,*

*My name is Jennifer Selig, and I'm a Pacifica person, on the faculty since 2005, currently serving as the creator and program chair of the Depth Psychology M.A./Ph.D. degree with an emphasis in Jungian and Archetypal Studies. You were to have spoken before my students last Thursday evening, 40 students in their first year of studying Jungian and archetypal psychology, a very committed and enthusiastic bunch, some of whom are very familiar with your work, others new to it, but all passionately looking forward to their studies, driven by their desire to bring this work out into the world.*

He was to have spoken, but he was dying. The synchronicity was not lost on you, that as he was dying, an academic program dedicated in large part to the legacy of his work was birthing, birning. As he was slipping past twilight darkness on the east coast into his own midnight hour, it was early morning on the west coast. The ouroboros of time was bending into an arc in preparation for a taste of its own tail.

*It occurred to me then that though I've introduced you to groups of students in previous years when I was chair of the Depth Psychology program, I've never spoken more than a few words to you personally, and certainly never shared any bit of my journey to Pacifica with you.*

This is disingenuous, Jennifer, and cowardly. It didn't just occur to you that you hadn't spoken to him much. You acutely and consciously avoided him at all accounts and at all costs. You were always cowardly when it came to this man. You could listen to him forever, but you couldn't entertain talking to him for a minute.

Remember that time you arrived on the Ladera campus to defend your dissertation? You were nervous, as anyone would be, but when you saw him coming down the stairs into the parking lot, you got back into your car and almost drove away. The thought of him being in the room *listening to you* was unfathomable. Of course, he wouldn't be listening to you because you would be paralyzed, unable to speak. You could have traded a Ph.D. for an A.B.D. if it meant avoiding that anxiety.

*It is because of you, if you'll forgive me for being so linear and causal*

He won't.

*that I came to Pacifica as a student in 1998. Though many students find their way to us because of an encounter with Memories, Dreams, Reflections, or because of the Joseph Campbell connection, it was when I heard that you had selected Pacifica to house your archives that I knew I must come.*

*It was We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World's Getting Worse that hooked me. It was an introduction to your thinking both accessible and profound, and I nearly threw out my neck out nodding with affirmation at*

*the content. Yes, yes, and YES! I bought more of your books, pouring through them as one does with work that is both strange and familiar. It was epiphany, James, reading your work then. It remains so today.*

Look at you, gushing. Your academic crush on him continues unabated. This letter is slightly embarrassing and highly revealing of your own psychological silliness. You should probably crumple it up and go lie down on a therapist's couch.

*I'll never forget the first day of my courses on the Lambert campus. It was lunch, and I was sitting around the table with my new cohort members. We were talking about your work, and I stepped out of the conversation for a moment and said to myself, "I can't believe I'm sitting around a table with people who know James Hillman's work. I can't believe I'm having a conversation about this." It was a moment of pure joy and wonder coupled with affirmation.*

You do know how ridiculous this will sound to the 99% of the world who do not worship at the altar of intellectual gods. If this were a schoolgirl letter to Justin Bieber, they would be more likely to understand.

*Thirteen years later, and I found myself tonight sitting around the dinner table with my colleagues, some of whom are your dear friends—Robert Romanyshyn, Ginette Paris, Dennis Slattery—and we're having a conversation about your life and work, and I feel that same feeling, that same sense of blessing, of grace, of being in the right place. And wonder—in addition to being a student of your work, I am now one who is bringing your work to students, hopefully in ways that are both accessible and profound.*

You felt another emotion—sadness. It was like being told about a great party that you just missed. Or, like being the generation *after* the great generation. Who are the intellectual gods of your generation? Who among you will steer the boat, will chart the course, will set students a'sail on the arc of influence?

*I can't believe I'm sitting around this table, either. I have coined a word for this phenomenon—anachronoincredibilis—that anachronistic sense that hits you (in the present): if someone would have told you then (in the past) that you'd be here now (in the future), you wouldn't have believed them (in the present)—it's simply too incredible.*

If someone told you when you were sitting around that table discussing Hillman's work on your first day as a student at Pacifica that you would one day create and run a graduate program where you would bring Hillman's work to your own students, you wouldn't have believed them. You still barely believe it yourself, and you're living it right now.

*You would not recognize my face if you were to speak these words to you in person. Every occasion I was around you, I was small, too tucked inside of my own complexes to reach out and tell you what your work has meant to me, what your work does mean to me. This is my regret, this being so impossibly human*

*that I couldn't honor where honor was due, couldn't say this into your piercing brown eyes, which always seemed to me blue. Still, at Pacifica, I carry out my commitment to you.*

*Your student,*

*Jennifer*

You hold the envelope to your heart for a brief moment before you send it off. Of course, you never imagine a reply, but one later arrives in your email box. The subject line reads *From James Hillman as dictated to Margot*. You don't open it right away. After all, it took you 15 years to write your academic love letter to him; how could you be expected to open any reply of his anytime soon, and without shaking. This shocks your friend who finds it disrespectful, but you know it's not. The ouroboros takes her time. She slowly opens her mouth for her tail.

Then one day, hunger strikes, and you ready to open completely.

*Dear Jennifer,*

The first paragraph is lovely, pure acknowledgment of your letter and your devotion to *our common work*. The *our* thrills you inordinately. Not his, not mine, but *ours*, you think. The academic crush becomes the alchemical marriage; we, James and I, devoted to our common work.

The second paragraph switches tone.

*I have one critique. At the end of your first paragraph, you write the phrase "driven by their desire to bring this work out into the world". The alchemists often warned against the reddening coming too fast. Jung's Red Book shows the importance of the investigations altogether apart from utility or wider understanding. The urge toward the world needs analysis. Else you become a missionary.*

What? But wait, you think. Isn't the urge toward the world the very thing he was suggesting in the very first book of his you read? *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*—isn't the urge toward the world part of what will help the world get better instead? I thought you said. . .

Suddenly, you realize it. He is still teaching you. He is still confounding you, still confronting you, still challenging you, still doing and undoing anything, everything he has said. He is still making you think and making you feel. You are ever and always his student for life.

And after his death, you receive an email from one of your students who wants to run a paper topic by you, and who lightly, at the very end, confesses to having an academic crush on you and coming to Pacifica because of you. You smile. You are no James Hillman. You will never strike such fear in the hearts of your students or become anyone's intellectual god. But you are here because of him, and someone is here because of you. The ouroboros bites his tail. The arc of influence comes full circle, complete.