

**Cultivating Non-Conformity:  
The Muse, the Sacred Fool, and the Trickster**

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To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.

~ Jiddu Krishnamurti

Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth.

~John F. Kennedy

If conformity is the jailer of freedom, as JFK averred, then transgression (of the norms and rules of conformist society) is a regular and unavoidable act on the path to liberation, personal or spiritual development, and cultural evolution.

**The Conformist**

The Conformist is the most common psychosocial role in contemporary Western society. This is to be expected because, when the paths to authenticity, wholeness, and visionary leadership are suppressed by society, the most attractive alternative is one with compensatory egocentric rewards — security, comfort, money, consumer products, social admiration, professional prestige, and power over others.

The Conformist's greatest fear is that he'll be abandoned, left behind. He does whatever is necessary — submission and subservience — to meet the membership requirements of whichever group grants him the most desirable socioeconomic status. Most Conformists adopt the secular, military, and/or religious values and roles of mainstream society and its institutions. But others conform to the behavioral code of a gang, an ashram, a protest movement, or a personal-growth program. The more pleasing and impressive the Conformist's self-presentation, the better the social standing and rewards he'll be granted.

Everywhere we turn in the mainstream Western world, we run into the same materialistic message: A person's goodness or popularity is a matter of how much she owns, how good he looks, how well she follows the rules and norms, and how much he controls. This is the common underlying theme in contemporary politics, business, education, and much of egocentric religion, as well as in Hollywood movies, popular books and magazines, TV programming, and other forms of culture-degrading advertisement. And this is the subtext in a large percentage of conversations people have every day in egocentric society.

Conformist roles such as worker bee, consumer, paper pusher, casino zombie, or soldier are mind numbing and heartbreaking and are often soul violating, people harming, and world wasting. In order to have enough people willing to occupy these dreary and deadly roles, the innately lavish human imagination must be crushed with an array of blunt tools, including contemporary television programming; corporate and political propaganda; teach-

to-the-test “educational” methods; fear-mongering religious indoctrination; and the widespread hawking of vitality-suppressing addictions such as hi-tech screens, pornography, and the modern human-diminishment pharmacy of alcohol, painkillers, tranquilizers, crack, amphetamines for children, and antidepressants for the masses.

### **Transgression: Stepping Across the Open Threshold**

To the Conformist mind, any movement by others toward freedom — social, economic, political, or religious — looks like community-damaging transgression. And during the most formidable opportunities of our own personal development, when we’re poised to break out of an old shell or a psychospiritual prison (whether imposed by ourselves or others), our own transformation or initiation often feels transgressive (which, at its root, simply means to step across an open threshold).

Today outside your prison I stand  
and rattle my walking stick: Prisoners listen;  
you have relatives outside. And there are  
thousands of ways to escape....

~ William Stafford<sup>i</sup>

Support we need to break free of our psychospiritual prisons can be found in several elements or archetypes of our own natural psyches. Three of these “wild mind” archetypes are The Muse, the Sacred Fool, and the Trickster. Although all three are suppressed by Conformist society, they can be cultivated by us, individually, if we choose to.

### **The Muse**

The Muse is our own unique and wildly creative way of looking at things — the wellspring of our deep imagination. By deep, I mean that its symbols and metaphors arise unbidden from the wild indigenous nether lands of our psyches, in contrast to the relatively shallow ideas and fantasies mustered by the everyday ego.

In the mainstream Western world, we’ve forgotten the ancient understanding that the strategic mind (the everyday ego) does not, by itself, possess the ability to determine what’s worth doing in life. This ability belongs to a partnership between the soul and the Muse.

The soul<sup>ii</sup>, if and when we’re psychologically ready, reveals to us our individual destiny on the metaphorical, mythopoetic level — “your own truth at the center of the image you were born with,” as poet David Whyte writes. Our soul illuminates how we uniquely fit in the more-than-human world and the nature of the mysterious and singular gift we were born to contribute to the Earth community.

But it is the Muse who inspires the choice of delivery system for the soul’s mythopoetic desires. The Muse holds the key to selecting a particular career, craft, or project that is meaningful, fulfilling, life enhancing, and culture evolving. It is the Muse who imagines the underlying form of each original and distinctive thing we create.

In contrast to both the Muse and the soul, the mature ego has the vital task of implementation — of manifesting the desires of the soul and doing so by drawing on our Muse’s deep imagination in addition to our skill, knowledge, and strategic thinking; our

wisdom and innocence; and our emotional passion and terrestrial-rootedness.

When too many egos decide where they're going independently of the soul and the Muse, that's when community and culture fall apart and become jailers of freedom and enemies of growth.

We now live in a culture that understands too many things too precisely and in too small a way, rendering our lives and our world too predicable and controllable, too sterile, too artless. We would be much healthier if we could regularly imagine the impossible, be open to surprise and unexpected discovery, and change course, turning on a dime, especially when something alluring crosses our path. We tend to dwell too much in "farmer consciousness": focused and intent on getting a rationally predetermined thing to grow in a specific place with a particular expected result. We haven't sufficiently honed our native human "hunter consciousness": diffuse, open, always scanning, and attuned to the arrival of subtle clues, the unexpected, novel associations, and the idiosyncratic, quirky, and outlandish.

The Muse is an inventive and visionary hunter: a lover of diversity, wildness, freedom, revolution, evolution, and transformation.

Everything we do is more fulfilling when done with a wild imagination. Indeed, most things worth doing — raising children, teaching, creating art, doing science, resisting oppression, striving for justice, making love, cooking, praising the Divine, seeking a vision for one's life, or romancing the world — cannot genuinely be done at all without a dynamic imagination.

It is our vibrant, norm-transgressing imaginations that we so urgently must resurrect, that we must protect and encourage in our children, champion and cheer in our teenagers, and consciously cultivate in ourselves, as if our lives and the lives of all other species with whom we share this planet depend on it. (They do.)

### **The Sacred Fool and the Trickster**

For the sake of true freedom, we might also call upon the Sacred Fool and Trickster, two related transgression-prone archetypes that exist as potentials within every human psyche.

The Sacred Fool doesn't play by the rules or standards of everyday society. Not caring what others think of him, he's neither for nor against social niceties, conventional morality, or even sanity. She's not interested in progress or getting somewhere other than where she already is. She's beyond or prior to custom, etiquette, propriety, and protocol — and sometimes even personal safety. In card zero of the Tarot, we see him strolling blithely ahead, seemingly unaware that he's about to walk off a cliff.

The thirteenth-century Persian mystic Jelaluddin Rumi audaciously expresses the archetype of the Sacred Fool in this way:

Conventional knowledge is death  
to our souls, and it is not really ours.  
We must become ignorant  
of what we've been taught,  
and be, instead, bewildered. . . .  
Forget safety.  
Live where you fear to live.

Destroy your reputation.  
Be notorious.  
I have tried prudent planning  
long enough. From now  
on, I'll be mad.<sup>iii</sup>

In common parlance, “fool” and “sage” appear to be opposites, one connoting ignorance and the other wisdom. At their depths, however, both exhibit a nonattachment to form or outcome. The Sacred Fool acts from what often seems to be innocence, insanity, or lampoonery but is no less wise for it. We think of a sage, in contrast, as strictly sober; but because she doesn’t strive and doesn’t seek positions of elected or hired leadership, the true sage has neither investment in sobriety nor compulsion to comply with rules.

The Sacred Fool dimension of our own psyches merges the innocence of the child and the wisdom of the elder. Both draw on the capacity to perceive simply and purely, to be fully present to the moment and to all things existing and happening within it.

In resonance with the Sacred Fool, the Trickster within us exposes our illusions and evokes in us a larger understanding of events and of ourselves by devising pranks and creating mischief, confronting us with paradox, and helping us lighten up in the midst of our oh-so-serious business of work, love, and spiritual development.

The Trickster — in others or in ourselves — helps us grasp the big picture by poking fun at himself (and, in so doing, at all of us) or by making fun of us directly. He also might respond to our solemn questions and conceptions with perspectives that reject or reframe our most cherished assumptions.

Psychologically mature comedy and clowning have their roots in the archetypes of the Sacred Fool and the Trickster. Some spiritual approaches seamlessly combine wisdom and comedy, as seen, for example, with Roshi Bernie Glassman, the Zen master and clown. Wise comedy is never only about laughs. Roshi Glassman, for example, is internationally recognized as a pioneer and role model of socially engaged Buddhism. By embodying the jester or clown as Sacred Fool or Trickster, he can fly beneath our everyday-identity-defending radar, nudging us to see the larger picture that galvanizes our social, environmental, political, or cross-cultural activism. In early twenty-first-century America, we also see this role brilliantly embodied by comics such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

Possessing countless cross-cultural forms, the Sacred Fool or Trickster shows up in myth and ritual in guises such as Nasruddin from the mystical Sufi tradition of Islam, the familiar Native American Tricksters Coyote and Raven, the Heyoka clowns of the Navajo or the Mudheads of the Hopi, American rodeo clowns, European court jesters, and the clownlike figures in Japanese Kabuki theater.

The Sacred Fool is at once an innocent clown and a sage teacher. She helps us break out of the common trap of taking ourselves too seriously, a hazard as common in our spirituality as it is in our work, play, and love lives. Sacred Fools help us see the psychospiritual armor we might be inadvertently sealing ourselves within.

The Sacred Fool or Trickster can appear anytime in our own psyches when, against all odds, we suddenly lighten up about matters we had been treating so solemnly. We’re able to laugh at ourselves, appreciate our immediate circumstances from a larger perspective, and then, in partnership with our Muse, step across conventional boundaries, break free of

limiting stories, and transgress into visionary realms of cultural transformation.

Note:

Portions of this essay have been adapted from the book *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche* © 2013 by Bill Plotkin. Published with permission of New World Library.

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<sup>i</sup> William Stafford, "A Message from the Wanderer," in *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1998), p. 52.

<sup>ii</sup> By *soul*, I mean "a person's unique purpose or identity, a mythopoetic identity, something much deeper than personality or social-vocational role, an identity revealed and expressed through symbol and metaphor, image and dream, archetype and myth. Some other ways to say this: Soul is the particular ecological niche, or place, a person was born to occupy but may or may not ever discover or consciously embody. With the phrase *ecological niche*, I mean that soul can be defined by a person's unique place not in human culture but in the more-than-human world. A person's cultural place is expressed in the social roles he enacts, including the ways he socially or vocationally embodies or manifests his ecological place (these embodiments being his delivery systems for soul). The concept of soul utilized in this and my previous books is equally and simultaneously ecological and psychological (and neither cultural nor religious). Our souls belong to the natural world as much as they do to our psyches. This is analogous to light having properties of both a wave and a particle. Or you could say that each human soul is an element in the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*." Quote from Bill Plotkin, *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche* (Novato, CA, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Jelaluddin Rumi, from "A Spider Playing in the House," in *Feeling the Shoulder of the Lion: Poetry and Teaching Stories of Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), pp. 56–57.