

Column

MAGIC & POLITICS: An Exploration

Sagewoman #42, Summer 1998

Theme: Magic & Politics

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The theme for this issue had me baffled. How to speak of magic and politics in the same sentence? The two subjects seem like apples and oranges, especially these days when politics is condemned as “dirty” and magic dismissed as “woo-woo.”

On the other hand, one of the best-selling books of the last twenty years, *The Mists of Avalon*, spoke directly to these two subjects: the main theme of that novel concerned the dialectic between the politics of King Arthur’s court and the magic of Merlin’s realm, as played out in the life of Morgaine. I suspect that my own fascination with her story had to do with precisely that tension, the interplay between what we might call the left (political) and right (magical) sides of the brain.

This process, the integration of opposites within the self, what the great researcher into the unconscious, C. G. Jung, called the mystic “inner marriage,” is lifelong. I do not pretend to understand it. But I can perhaps offer some hints, a set of notes — on politics, magic and their possible interconnections.

Let’s start with politics, a subject that has always fascinated me. Both the idealistic version, what we learned in World History courses — men in togas conversing civilly in

the great open agora, the “polis” — and the current, deeply cynical version: U.S. politics, displayed recently through Clintonian peckerdillos.

I don’t want to look in the dictionary to find the meaning of the word “politics” — or any other word. (The dictionary, remember, is a patriarchal document.) I want to understand the meaning of “politics” by reflecting on the content and context of my own experience. When is a situation called “political,” when not? In what kind of context does the word “politics” tend to arise?

It seems to me that a situation begins to be interpreted (and thus valued, or *devalued*) as “political” in situations that involve perceived scarcity: when there is something that at least two people want, and not enough of it to go around. (The “thing” in question can be one or many, concrete or abstract. Objects, people, projects, qualities, money, territory, status — all count.) The question then becomes, who gets the thing that is perceived as both rare and valuable? And the specifically “political” question seems to be, *how* do they go about getting it? For some ways of behaving are more likely to earn the label “political” than others. And, I would guess, the more complex (confusing) and many-layered a situation, the more likely it is to carry “political” overtones.

Conversely, the more primitive (unlayered) the context, the less likely is the situation involving perceived scarcity to be seen as “political,” or to be resolved “politically.” In a conflict between only two people, for example, one person eventually gives way, sometimes as the result of the threat or actuality of the other’s direct application of force. This scenario begins in early childhood. “Mine!” says one two-year-old. “No, mine!” says another. A tug-of-war, or a chase follows, and the situation resolves when one triumphs over the other, by being bigger, stronger, faster, more aggressive, etc.

Now, suppose a five-year-old also wants the toy the other two are fighting over. But she is more savvy than they; her world is larger, includes more elements, or energies, within it. Instead of joining the fray directly, she goes to her mother, and says, “they are fighting over the toy.” She knows that her mother will probably take the toy away from

both of them, put it on a shelf, and after a certain amount of time has gone by, she can sneak it from the shelf unnoticed.

For the two-year-olds, the situation is experienced as a territorial contest, to be resolved through direct application of force. The five-year-old, however, understands the situation to include not just two, but four people — she knows that her mother is dominant, and she knows how her mother will react. Thus the five-year-old is able to manipulate her perception of the (larger) situation to her own advantage. She gets the toy eventually, without any of the other three realizing what her motives were in bringing the fight to her mother's attention.

Her actions were political, savvy. She was acting in her own self-interest, even though, as “mother's little helper,” she did not appear to be doing so. In politics, this is usually the case, for all parties. A many layered and confusing differential thus opens up between what appears to be going on and what is really going on.

What drives all parties involved in a political situation is to get the thing that is perceived to be both valuable and scarce, while not appearing to want it, or to want it only for themselves. Underneath, everybody is acting in his or her own self-interest, though for various reasons, they are all usually pretending otherwise. All parties manipulate the meaning of the situation in different ways, and they all vie to make their interpretation (now called “spin”) of the situation be the dominant one. Meanwhile, though usually denying it in their own case, everybody assumes that everybody else is operating with his or her own more or less hidden agenda, or subtext. These hidden agendas feel like swirling currents of energy and usually involve actual or seeming alliances with some parties in opposition to others.

The real, hidden energies flow undetected, or barely detected underneath the appearances, or false fronts which each party strives to maintain. What these real, hidden energies actually are, however, changes according to who is feeling them. Thus confusion operates at every level; there is no “bottom line.”

What is called “diplomacy,” in politics, is the art of working with all parties to resolve the political situation in a way in which they can all “save face.” When

“diplomacy” fails, the resolution of the situation often regresses back to the two-year-old phase mentioned above, that of undisguised, direct aggression.

“Oh what a tangled web we weave!” I become depressed just thinking about politics.

Magic, on the other hand, though it also works with hidden energies governing situations, interests me much more. And I think this is because ideally, unlike politics, magic does not have to do with ego, self-interest, personal desire — unless we call that type of magic “black.” In the case of “black magic,” we could say that the two, politics and magic, would be not just connected, but fused.

But what do I mean by magic? Men in black sawing women in half? Pulling rabbits out of hats? No. By magic, I refer to a realm that lies above or beyond or underneath what a culture agrees to be the boundaries of “common-sense.” In our culture, to call something “magical” is to say that it cannot be explained rationally. Magic exists and operates within a larger (let’s call it *suprarational*; no, it’s just “irrational,” says common-sense) dimension of reality.

Unlike politics, however, the motivation for contacting the larger realm of (white) magic is not self-interest. Magic does not satisfy any kind of basic or contrived need, unless it be simple curiosity, the desire to know dimensions larger or, in some sense, “beyond” — the ones that we are taught exist.

This, for example, is what Castaneda’s *Don Juan* books were about — they distinguished between two different kinds of reality, the “tonal” (consensual reality) and the “nagual” (magical reality), and they taught techniques to invoke the latter.

Sorcery, shamanism, intuition, all sorts of parapsychological capacities — all of them are “magical,” because they all invoke realities that transcend the Newtonian scientific paradigm still confounding western culture’s understanding of the world.

The current focus on synchronicity — the idea that there are no accidents, that everything is connected — is a wonderful example of what those fettered by the scientific paradigm would call “magical thinking” (and thus bad, wrong, illogical, even certifiably

insane). When we stop to actually think about the implications of synchronicity, it strips our minds of both logic and boundaries, blows them wide open — to dwell within an infinity of connections, in a dizzying ecstatic surrender to the vastness, the profoundly intimate *isness* of the universe . . .

We don't understand magic, but it *is* real. We know it is real, because we have *experienced* it. It presents itself to our puny little brains, and all we can do is break out in a smile, a laugh, a shuddering *aha!* We shake our heads in wonder, at the vast mystery of which we are a part, and which, we intuitively know, no matter how much we learn, is always infinitely larger than our finite understanding of it.

For example, I think of the time when I was driving on a narrow, winding canyon cliff road with a raging river below. It was snowing heavily and I was a bit nervous, driving a front-wheel vehicle for the first time and just learning how it behaved on snow. At one point I saw a bus coming towards me, and was glad that we were to pass each other on a straight stretch. I must have lost concentration for a moment because when I woke up, my right front wheel was off the road, into soft snow. I jerked the steering wheel to the left and the car started to spin into the other lane, right into the path of the oncoming bus.

What happened next was as if in a dream. Time slowed way down as my hands left the wheel and I surrendered to a blinding blaze of white.

The next thing I knew, my car was parked by the side of the road, faced in the opposite direction, about ten feet from the cliff's edge. I had no idea what had happened meanwhile. All I knew was that the bus did *not* collide with my car, even though by the laws of physics, it should have. I knew that I was not just lucky, I was saved. It was not my time to die. A higher set of laws had intervened.

That, to me, was certainly magic! Also interesting, in this experience, was the fact that jerking the wheel was my final conscious act in this unfolding event. My hands then left the wheel and I surrendered. I was either going to die or not. It was not up to me. There was nothing "I," my ego, that which I use to control or manipulate reality, could do.

Again, this to me, is a defining feature of magic, as opposed to politics. Politics is ego-driven, where we try to control events; magic can only be invoked through surrender, releasing control.

Another situation, this one involving magic and politics both: in 1972, when I was 30 years old, and fresh with a newly minted PhD, I was hired as a professor of philosophy in an experimental California college. At the time, I saw myself as different from other teachers there, because I felt I was in touch with other dimensions of reality, all of which I wanted to share with students.

Being young and naïve, I did not realize that touching into these other dimensions (invoking them, surrendering to them) could be used, by the ego, to manipulate one's own position in relation to the group. For that is exactly what I did — and became politicized, indeed polarized, with another teacher who was utterly skeptical of any dimension beyond the physical but who was, like myself, both charismatic and egocentric.

Eventually I was fired, officially because I was “too experimental,” but really, I see now, more than 30 years later, because I was too arrogant. I thought my magical perspective made me not only different, but better than others. And I tried to wield power, accordingly.

In that one short year I learned an invaluable lesson: only as I integrate my ego into a larger, more impersonal self can I trust myself to work in the realm of magic without danger of political contamination.

I learned that lesson relatively easily in the public arena. In the personal arena, involving relationships with those close to me, I continue to explore multiple permutations of that same lesson.

Perhaps the most telling difference between magic and politics is that in accessing dimensions larger than the physical, we invoke realms where the notion of scarcity or perceived lack simply does not arise. How could it, when the universe we are only dimly aware of, is, we do sense, both infinite and expanding?

So maybe the cure for politics is magic. For if the universe offers abundance, then there is no need for conflict of any kind; for there is no scarcity, and no need for conflicts over territory. We all grew up assuming that “survival of the fittest” is the natural (and national) state of affairs. But such a state of affairs is not natural, but man made.

In reality, once we attune to the magic of the universe, space opens to offer plenty of room for everyone and everything. We all get exactly what we need, and so much much more.

Update 2010: Contemplating this piece, which I recall writing in one long swoosh, I can think of nothing that I would change. I might add that inside anything magic, there may be politics, and vice versa.

Another approach to the difference between these two approaches to reality, might be the old saw, “Politics is the art of the possible,” as distinct from Magic, the art of creating new possibilities.

Update 2023: Within the past several years, I’ve learned to associate Politics with 3D and Magic with 5D.