

From: **Tracking the White Rabbit: A Subversive View of Modern Culture**
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“. . . No one is only one-dimensional; no one is only a victim.

A careful therapy of an adult who was wounded as a child requires not just regression to recall and relive the wound; it also requires progression through remembrance of what that child has, and might have otherwise, become. This is a remembrance not of all that was true or false, but of all the maybes, the thousand maybes and might-have-beens. As long as that early painful experience remains the central and defining experience of one's life, no real creativity is possible; life is lived in reruns - no new ideas, no new characters, no new plots, no new possibilities.

This is not blaming the victim. It is rather de-victimizing the person who has suffered painful blows in childhood; it is a refusal to tag the person with an eternal label of "victim," a label of choice for too many therapy clients. This label has been handed out by psychologists, journalists, and lawyers, who keep referring to such persons as victims - not as adults, not as individuals who have experienced anything else, not as persons, but as victims. The Muses assist us to disidentify with the victim archetype by calling us to reshape the context and import of those experiences of childhood which wounded us, so that we may honor the wound without having to suffer it daily, centrally, eternally.

You cannot look at Michelangelo's sculptures or read Maya Angelou's writings and know for certain whether they were abused as children. What matters is what they have made, the enduring images in stone and words they have given the world. Their works are full of suffering and power and so they speak to everyone, regardless of personal history or individual circumstance. But we know that Michelangelo suffered all his life from the mean-spirited and self-serving manipulation of his father, and we know that Maya Angelou had endured enough shattering pain by the time she was ten to fill a lifetime. But Maya Angelou is not a victim: she was our national Poet Laureate. And Michelangelo became immortal when he first struck chisel to stone." (64)

Chapter 7

The archetype of the victim

Cordelia: We are not the first who, with best meaning, have incurred the worst. For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down....

Lear: Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense.

(Shakespeare, King Lear, Act V, scene iii.)

The archetypal figure of “the victim” is fraught with social connotations, religious associations, and psychological paradox, but I will limit my scope here to two aspects: the secular and the sacred. I will speak less of the psychosocial experience of literal victims than of the victim figure in the psyche, an archetypal image appearing in as many forms as there are woundings, injustices, and sacrifices.

We are all victims, though some of us, in whom the inner victim figure is denied or projected, may not be aware of a deeper psychic resonance in those critically important moments when suffering is inflicted. We all suffer, randomly, or by some seemingly inscrutable design. We all have far less power to control our sense of well-being in an increasingly chaotic world than we would like.

The archetypal victim image is a personification of how an individual or group imagines itself in its suffering. This is the “sacred victim,” with its attendant associations of eternity and transcendence. The sacredness of the victim image refers primarily to its “set-apartness,” its interiority as a psychic figure and its inner meaning.

By distinction, a criminal act upon a victim is a literal event which forces a condition of victimhood upon an individual or group, usually through violent means. The locus and temporality of this victimization makes it secular: it happens in the world, in the dimension of time. The distinction between the secular and the sacred, the “out there” and the “in here,” does not make them mutually exclusive; to do so would split the archetype.

In our culture and time, the word victim evokes the negativity attached to the darkest and most painful experiences: suffering, injustice, powerlessness, and death. We almost always think of “victim” in its secular sense, perhaps because we have lost much of the sense of the sacred in the mundane, and feel only with difficulty (if at all) the deeper resonance of ancient claims of near-forgotten gods and goddesses being made upon us. Our world is largely and one-sidedly secular and we are confined in it. Having no other “world” to appeal to for help or justice, the victim in contemporary America is indeed a victim of the world of crime, homelessness, contagious disease, and drug madness.

The word victim evokes as well the terrible fear and insecurity of arbitrary randomness, or the equally terrible fear of having been singled out, “chosen,” for unbearable pain. We use the word in connection only with those experiences we dread: cancer victim, rape victim, crash victim, victim of mental illness, victim of starvation. Whoever or whatever does the victimizing is important to the constellation of the victim experience, for it is these agents - cancer, rapist, car or plane - that create the context in which a person becomes a victim. Part of the horror of victimization is the realization that victim and victimizer share a terrible affinity: something in one may be found in the other. This does not mean they are simply two sides of the same coin; rather, both may be constellated in one person at one time. One may victimize oneself. To the victim, the agent of victimization has the power to inflict suffering and pain, to deny justice, to

cause death. And since the victim is, by definition, powerless, the primal emotion that always accompanies victimization is fear.

Yet, just because it arouses such fear and complete negativity, it is possible that no other archetypal image so constellates the human psyche's need to make suffering meaningful as the figure of the victim. The first desperate cry of the victim is, "Why me?" The horror in that violent act which creates the victim cries out for some meaning in pain, some purpose in anguish; there can be no acceptance of, or coming to terms with, one's victimization without the psyche's constellation of the sacred victim. We may be able to endure much pain, far more than we ever deserve or think ourselves capable of enduring; but Jung was right when he said that human beings cannot tolerate a meaningless life.

Keeping these two aspects of the victim image together provides a way of imagining the victim which incorporates a multiplicity of meanings and emotions without denying the raw terror and despair that accompanies the psyche's constellation of the victim image. It may also be that the only way out of the senseless hell of secular victimization is through the purposeful hell of sacred victimization - a shift in perception that moves the victim from the despair of random happening to a sense of conscious purposefulness.

The secular victim

The New Age is not a favorable climate for victims; the New Age is for winners, not losers. The relatively unconscious "victimizer" in the American collective psyche seems to be increasingly hostile to victims; indeed, such hostility is probably producing more victims. One need only look at the rising numbers of victims of violent crime, child abuse, drugs, AIDS, environmental toxins, scams and -isms of all kinds.

The apparent antidote to victimhood is paranoia: trust no one, use deadbolt locks in your home, practice safe sex in your own bed, buckle up in your car, wear a hard hat and keep a cool head at work, know your rights when dealing with smooth-talking salespeople, police, and therapists. The assumption is that the more you protect yourself, the less likely you are to become a victim. The image of the victim has been devalued by the long-cherished American conviction that victims are merely losers who didn't try hard enough to win.

The image of the secular victim and the situations that create it turn negative attention toward the victim, usually in the form of blame. Since the meaning of victimhood cannot be divorced from the cultural value context in which it is experienced, the victim will always appear blameworthy and at fault in a culture that most highly values dominance, conquest, power, competition - just the things needed to victimize.

The victim embodies those qualities that conflict with, threaten, or challenge that value system. The most obvious example of the previous century is the Nazi (mis)perception of the Jews as an "infectious" and powerful people who would poison the purity of Aryan society and take over the world. Projection happens everywhere, in everyone,

collectively and individually. Secular victims are thus made by projection: those who support and maintain the culture's dominant values project their own fear of powerlessness, helplessness, weakness and vulnerability on to whomever can be victimized. And since our culture does not have an equitable distribution of power, there are more victims than perpetrators: victims are likely to be individually victimized as women, people of color, children, animals; or collectively as Blacks, Jews, Native Americans, lesbians and gays, old people, handicapped people, and so forth.

It is of course the victims who are blamed for whatever trouble befalls them. Since the victim sustains the effect, she or he must in some way be the cause. Perhaps the root of this odd situation lies in the old Christian idea that sin invites retribution, while goodness deserves blessing. In this view, the victim's suffering is understood as retribution by divine justice through human agency; where there is retribution, there must be sin. The idea is still alive and well, though cast now in secular terms: whatever the victim "gets" the victim "deserves." In New Age terms, the victim "created" his or her reality.

But we do not, in fact, always create our own suffering; to think otherwise is to assume a grandiose godlike capability to make awful things happen. For the sake of psychological maturity, we must be able to separate the dictum that we are each responsible for our actions from the assumption that victims are responsible for their own victimization. If we cannot make this differentiation, the victim then becomes a pathologized figure, neurotically and one-sidedly regarding the world as victimizer. We are then unconsciously identified with the victim, either introjecting the guilt or projecting the blame. The psychological task, however, is not necessarily to eliminate blame but to learn to place it where it properly belongs.

The victim's horror, shame, and powerlessness at the hands of a perpetrator, and the collective blame that reinforces these feelings makes the victim a figure of no value in a culture that despises weakness. But at the same time, it is precisely the horror and shame and powerlessness that evokes our sense of tragedy, empathy, outrage against injustice, and sometimes even love. We perceive the victim as that figure in each of us who is weak, who suffers, feels wrongly accused, and is powerless to command justice. It is perhaps because the victim figure embodies the paradox of bearing unbearable suffering that it is able to move us so deeply to compassion, empathy, grief, and love. Only a psychopath is impervious to the suffering and power of the victim, because the psychopath is untouched by the power of Eros to be in some relationship to pain.

It is the experience of the victim figure in our own psyche that makes us conscious of our human capacity for sacrifice.

The sacred victim

While most dictionaries define victim primarily as a person who suffers from an injurious or destructive action or agency, personal or impersonal, the older meaning of the word retains the sense of the original root:

“victim” as “sacrifice.” The original meaning of the word victim, from the Latin word *victima*, means “sacrificial beast,” and refers to any living creature that is killed and offered to a god or godlike power. The word sacrifice comes from the Latin word *sacer*, from which we derive the English word sacred, meaning that which is holy, set apart, “devoted for sacrifice,” dedicated to a god or some religious purpose.

It is significant that *sacer* also means “forfeit,” “accursed,” and “criminal.” The victim, then, may be both innocent and accursed at the same time. While this “accursedness” may not accurately describe the nature of a victimization, it often corresponds to the victim's feeling of being cursed, singled out for punishment. The victim image often appears in psychic life as “the accursed one,” as in the scapegoat figure, the one singled out for the sins of the many - precisely because it is innocent and undeserving of its fate.

In his essay, “Cancer in Myth and Dream,” Russell Lockhart notes the paradox in the word victim, having in its older Latin roots the meaning of “increase” and “growth.”¹ (In Greek, the root of “victim” is *auxo*, meaning “increase” or “growth,” and is one of the names of the Charities, *Auxo*, “the waxing.”) The victim image thus unfolds as a complex weave of apparently contradictory meanings. It is an image simultaneously evoking collective emotions and ideas of fear, negativity, divine power, holiness, persecution, doubt, innocence, anguish, growth, sacrifice, condemnation. Thus the victim image may present itself in its secularity as ugly, fearful, and secretly despised, or the victim image may appear as sacred, beautiful, and desirable.

How the victim consciously perceives her/his suffering can give meaning to personal victimization: one is not only sacrificed but becomes capable of making, or enacting, a sacrifice. Victimization, then, is as much a condition of some meaningful relationship with a god as it is a condition of meaningless suffering.

The realms of the sacred and the secular are not mutually exclusive; the terms are merely devices to help us differentiate aspects of experience. The psychological task of the victim is to perceive them as joined, to make the secular sacred, to make a worthy sacrifice of one's suffering: to honor the wound, value the vulnerable, cultivate compassion for one's injured soul.

The person who perceives or feels him or herself as suffering for (not only from) a deity, a cause, a principle, or a beloved, experiences a different aspect of victimhood: the value of sacrifice. What redeems the suffering and anguish of the victim is not necessarily the cessation of suffering, but the experience of meaning in it. Simone Weil reminded us, “At every blow of fate, every pain, whether small or great, say to oneself, ‘I am being worked on.’”² The willingness to sacrifice has long been regarded by some religious systems as a moral virtue, antithetical to the sin of selfishness. But my focus here is not on morality or virtue or selfishness, but rather on the capacity for sacrifice when the experience of victimization makes sacrifice psychologically necessary.

It goes against the grain of all our ideas of justice to place the burden of sacrifice on the victim; it smacks of victim-blaming. But it is precisely within one's capacity to offer sacrifice that one finds meaning: the victim who is able to make a sacrifice becomes psychologically active in her or his affliction, a participant in the holy work of making meaning out of incomprehensible chaos. Whether the sacrifice consists of one's naïvety, innocence, cherished ideal, or self-image, one's capacity to yield to a deeper necessity is tested in victimization.

The value and importance of the figure to whom the sacrifice is made, or on whose behalf it is offered, is paramount in the making of meaning, for an unworthy object demeans the one who sacrifices. The perpetrator of a violent crime is never worthy of the victim's sacrifice; he is merely a mindless agent of archetypal forces, enacting their impersonal cruelty. Neither he nor those godlike powers he serves are concerned with the individual fate of the victim. The victim must find a worthy altar in her or his own psyche on which to lay that which has been taken. Thus the victim "redeems" what has been lost not by revenge, but by a sense that some deeper purpose in life has been served. Choosing what has already happened and giving conscious assent, not consent, to the reality of one's victimization is the beginning of conscious sacrifice. On a collective level, the demand for sacrifice historically has been disproportionately placed upon women in ways that most men (and many women) do not regard as truly or worthily sacrificial. Perhaps because of this legacy and the ongoing reality of woman-as-victim, it is difficult for many women, as well as many men, to imagine that anything is to be gained by making or being a sacrifice for any reason. Self-sacrifice goes against both self-absorbed New Ageism (where it is now called "co-dependency") and some of the deepest and strongest currents of feminist thinking.

Yet, surely, there must be a place for sacrifice. Is there a place in life for the value of suffering or enduring pain for the sake of someone dearly loved, or for a cherished cause? What else can it mean to be "holy" or "set apart" or "dedicated" unless there is some person or idea worthy of such devotion? Of what value is all our strength and power if we cannot yield them up and submit them to a greater value? Are we so consciously determined not to be victims that we have become incapable of sacrifice? If we cannot or will not give up or yield anything, have no sense of deeper ethical claims upon us than our own small selves, we have lost not only a vital capacity to relate to one another, but a fundamental experience of being human. Because it entails irreparable loss, it seems a tragedy to become a victim under any circumstances. But it is an equally terrible tragedy to be unwilling to sacrifice, because this signifies an inability to love.

The need of the victim to find meaning in her or his victimization is not the same as finding a "reason" for it. There may be no "reason" why one particular person becomes the victim of a drunk driver at a particular time and place. The "reason" why one becomes a victim may be profoundly different from the meaning the victim takes from the experience. And because each victim comprehends her or his victimization differently, the discovery of meaning is always an individual experience.

The first cry of the victim is, "Why me?" Since there is rarely an answer, it may be that "Why not me?" is a more productive question. Victimization tends to make one visible: one has been "chosen" by a victimizer. But the experience of victimization makes aspects of the victim visible to herself or himself as well, and with the shocking emotional immediacy characteristic of genuine trauma. From whatever circumstance or agent, victimization reveals the victim's courage or lack of it, the victim's limited control over circumstance, the victim's depth of fear and shame, the victim's capacity for self-compassion, or the depth of the victim's self-recrimination.

Contained within the figure of the victim is a lesson concerning the nature of the god to whom sacrifice is being offered, for the victim bears the likeness of the god. The ancients believed there was a profound, though sometimes hidden, affinity between the sacrificial victim and the god to whom such offering was made. In Jewish tradition, the justice of God required a sacrificial animal to be innocent and well-formed; hence the lamb without blemish. The Christian myth requires that the sacrificed Son be like the sinless Father. In that region of the soul where we are victimized, through whatever circumstance, we must look for the likeness of a god, and there build an interior altar to ensure that our sacrifice is made holy. The wisdom to be discovered is not that "you brought it on yourself," but that it brought you to your Self.

How we treat the inner "sacred victim" is the measure of how we treat the "secular victim" in the world. If our response to the injured animal or abused child in a night dream is to banish it (by forgetting the dream or denying the disturbance) or blame it ("bad dream," "didn't make sense," "made me afraid so I hit it with a shovel"), our ruthlessness will enable us to banish out-there victims from sight, memory and responsibility, or else we will treat such victims with the unconscious contempt that appears as pity. Anything but real concern, real compassion, real love.

The psychological necessity is not that we save the inner victim from all hurt and pain, but that we learn to accept and care about it in its woundedness. This means a sacrifice of the "savior" role, consciously and voluntarily giving up our fantasies of total independence and self-sufficiency. We cannot save ourselves, and we are not sufficient unto ourselves. Only someone with a pathological compulsion for autonomy and do-it-yourselfism would argue this. But the temptation to save and heal the victim is very great, and perhaps nowhere is it felt more deeply than among psychologists and psychotherapists who work with victims and are expected to do just that.

For this is where we take our inner victim: to the doctor. We go with our victim-feelings as to a healer-god regularly (as to church), bringing sacrifices (as in fees), making confessions, feeling vulnerable and defenseless behind our mechanisms, feeling betrayed and enraged when our expectations (as in prayers) are not answered. We want rewards for humility, solutions to problems, recognition for hard efforts, safety always, and, most of all, we want the doctor to love us while it hurts, and then stop the pain. For some, being a victim becomes confused with a misunderstood need to stay in pain to ensure that the love will not stop. The doctor may become a victim too, especially when she or he has an unconscious affinity with the patient. In those areas,

the healer falls victim to the wounded, the persona of professional capability collapsing under the weight of impossible demands and expectations. The torment of the patient becomes the doctor's own.

Some victim images have exceptional power to move us emotionally because they incorporate nearly all the most essential characteristics of the archetypal victim. The image of Jesus, broken and bloody on the cross, is a complete and singular example of the sacred victim figure, embodying holiness, innocence, unjust persecution and suffering, and voluntary sacrifice. As a collective example, the Jews historically have been forced to enact the victim role with such repetition that the very name of the people has become practically synonymous with "victim." Photographic images of skeletal death camp inmates have given us an austere visual definition of archetypal victimization, which is why Jews began referring to the Nazi genocide as a holocaust, literally a "burnt offering." Most recently, we have seen pictures of blind rabbits, gassed cats, and tuskless dead elephants - victimized animals who, though sentient beings, cannot willingly sacrifice themselves for humankind's benefit (and no doubt would not, if asked). These are images whose strength is derived from the innocence of the victim (Jesus), the magnitude of suffering (the Holocaust), and the utter helplessness of the victim's condition (animals). Then, if Eros is awakened and illuminated by Psyche's lamp, these powerful images may call us into relationship with them and evoke our compassion and love.

As noted earlier, the root of the word victim carries an ancient meaning of "increase" or "growth." However, I am not suggesting that victimization ought to be considered an occasion of "positive growth." To do so minimizes the horror and fear and shame or represses them completely. The injunction to the victim to "grow" through adversity is a subtle appeal to the victim's ego to leave the victimization experience behind (a form of denial). "Growth" in this usage is defensive, the demand of an anxious parent who does not know what to do for a child in pain (as in, "Grow up, stop crying, stop feeling sorry for yourself").

A deeper objection to the demand on the victim to "grow" is that it keeps the experience of the victim within a fantasy of the child. Whatever complex meanings victimhood may have for the soul are obscured and reduced to false simplicity by forcing them into the single perspective of the child archetype. Thus the victim appears passively childlike or irresponsibly childish. This may be one reason why our culture takes a profoundly ambivalent attitude toward victims: either total neglect and abuse or idealization and galvanic convulsions to rescue. (Remember little Jessica McClure, who fell down a well in Texas in 1989? The whole country vicariously participated in the rescue operation.) When perceived through the child archetype, the victim is infantilized: whatever injury has been done can now only be understood as a sign or consequence of psychological immaturity - the naïvety of a child, the innocence of a child, the carelessness of a child, the abuse of a child, the child who cries for grownups to play fair. Instead of an adult drama deep in the soul's sacred interior, victimization is seen as one of many misfortunes that befalls a child. We demand either excessive responsibility of the victim

("She should have known better") or expect him or her to be as helpless in trauma as a child.

The victim figure needs rescue not from victimization but from the child fantasy. The idea of "increase" in the root of the word refers to something other than developmental "growth." What happens to us happens, avoidably or not; what we do psychologically with those happenings is what makes for "increase" or decrease. Russell Lockhart writes:

The psychology of ... unwilling sacrifice is quite different from that of the willing sacrifice. There are moments and seasons in one's life when genuine sacrifice of the most valued thing is essential for further growth. If this sacrifice is not made willingly, that is, consciously and with full conscious suffering of the loss, the sacrifice will occur unconsciously. One then will not sacrifice to growth but be sacrificed to growth gone wrong. 3

When the inner victim figure is thrown to the lion of the great goddess Necessity (Ananke), it is in that arena - wherever we are torn to pieces by pain or injustice - where blind Necessity must be turned into purposeful Fate. The events and experiences that bring us to pain, loss, grief, injury, and abandonment are the rites of passage and sacrificial offerings that "increase" us, that force maturation upon us.

The victim figure within us, wounded and helpless, is sometimes rescued by interior reflection, when the interior victimizer is also acknowledged. We may be victimized by any of our own thoughtless follies, character flaws, failures of foresight, errors of judgment, or self-betrayals. We may fall victim to any deity or archetypal power whose service we have neglected: Eros taunts us with insatiable desire, Saturn holds our joy and freedom hostage in his prison of depression, Hera drives us mad for monogamy, Aphrodite tortures us with jealousy and the insecurity of love.

But the interior victim is not always to be rescued: indeed, once rescued, it is no longer truly a "victim." That suffering, powerless figure within derives its meaning precisely from its suffering and powerlessness: it is this acceptance of human limitation and woundedness that is offered up as sacrifice to the powers, deities, gods, or archetypes that rule psychic life. It may be that the archetype of the victim, with its infinite loneliness in pain, is that image which holds the deepest knowing ("gnosis") of what it is to be "human." To know the "sacred victim" in oneself is that experience of the fatefulness and finitude of life that makes submission to one's humanity possible, sacrificing the very human desire to be god in all things.

Notes

1. Russell Lockhart, *Words as Eggs: Psyche in Language and Clinic*, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983, p. 56.
2. Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1956, p. 266.

3. Lockhart, op. cit., pp. 57-8.