

## PUER AETERNUS

The name *puer aeternus* was given to a god of antiquity and although I am sure the concept and the longing for eternal youth, the power and energy this represents for us, has always been present in the human imagination. The phrase itself comes from the Latin poet Ovid's *Metamorphosis* where it is used to describe the child god of the Eleusinian Mysteries - the transforming and healing rituals that took place at Eleusis in ancient Greece. Later this child became identified with Dionysius and the god Eros, seen as the god of eternal youth.

The *puer aeternus* means the boy or youth who never ages and grows old. Jung used it to describe a particular archetype which is in us all, and of course in women too, representing the eternal girl. In Jungian thinking more emphasis has been given to the eternal boy, but the eternal girl shares many of his characteristics, for instance wanting to remain young, having the need to act out flirtatious and seductive roles, often with older men as father figures, and not finding it easy to take on the role and duties of motherhood, and so on. The *puella aeterna* remains the eternal daughter or sister, more concerned with her love life at an intensely personal level and tending to avoid the commitment of being wife and mother. Sometimes she finds it hard to leave home and stays caring for mother and father, rather than becoming able to lead her own life.

Yet the *puella* and the *puer aeternus*, when fully understood, remain an essential part of us which we can relate to creatively and not destructively, as can happen all too often when we are 'taken over' by them without understanding what is happening in our behaviour and the way we live life.

I would like to look at both the destructive and creative aspects this archetypal image holds for us. It has always been a feature of myth and legend; Narcissus, captivated by his own image reflected in the water, and unable to move away from it - in other words from the gratification of seeing his own image. There was Eros, the son lover of the goddess Aphrodite who could not cope with her revenge on his love affair with Psyche which he cannot really deal with because he has not grown up enough to become his own person, separate from his mother. There is Icarus who flies too high and falls to his own death, and of course, James Barrie's Peter Pan who cannot grow up into life as something beyond him. And I wonder if Alice in Wonderland's capacity to see the world reflected through her imagination as being both real and not real, is not a female equivalent.

The enchanting and yet troubling image of the eternal child connects us both with the outer world of nature and our enchantment with ourselves, and the way in which we relate to life. And in some ways this has become of particular importance to us, not least through the role of the media, and new methods of communication that reach far and wide. At the same time, the search for ecstatic experience through the use of drugs and alcohol (also symbolising the search for spirit), can be misplaced and at times dangerous, in so far as it takes us away from ourselves, from who we really are and could be. Perhaps it is also a reaction to the predominance of the work culture so anathema to the craving for eternal youth represented by the *puer aeternus*.

The negative aspects represented by him are most often about the magic spell of being young, along with the wish never to grow old, together with an inflated sense of ego. The capacity to enchant and be enchanted can be dangerous unless it is fully recognised and does not remain unconscious, when it can be positively worked with. When this does not happen there can be difficulties in commitment resulting in a certain lack of empathy for others, an indifference to life and its problems, wanting only to see the positive elements and deny the negative. One

could describe it as a state of unadaptedness, of not being able or not wanting to adapt to the demands of society and life in the everyday world.

There is also a deep denial of the shadow which may appear too frightening when everything we do not want to be fills us with shame, so it is easier not to be aware of it. And of course when the shadow is denied, it gets even darker. Yet without the recognition of the shadow there can be no substance; everything stays insubstantial and ungrounded.

The *puer* is always more concerned with personal aims and concerns and forms of expression than with accepting social responsibilities; he or she has always the need to move on, and is afraid of being tied down. The *puer* has often lacked a salient father figure with whom he could identify in childhood and adolescence. So he becomes the opposite of the Wise Man and cannot identify with this image, even in more mature years. He is afraid of carrying weight, of slowness, of learning through experience, instead of always having to reach out to the new and the untried. It is hard for him to be more content with familiarity rather than novelty.

Today this concept of eternal youth, of somehow not being able, or not wanting to grow up, often seems connected to the individual who cannot get beyond their adolescence, and the underlying conflict between the need to be both dependent on mother and independent of her. Time gets lived through with the notion of "not yet", or with the idea that one's own time has not yet come, so one is always preparing for change but never quite ready for it. This means that certain life patterns keep on being repeated again and again without the achievement of any real inner or outer change.

The negative aspect of the *puer aeternus* is really this inability to outgrow the need for mother at a very basic child level, together with not wanting to see the need to do this and get beyond that neediness. This means being unable to outgrow the youthful stage but remaining fused with it, and not being able to see it as being separate from the potential more grown-up part of him or herself. The *puer* may have a rich fantasy life which he cannot use creatively, and so life remains un-lived.

If he cannot use his imagination creatively, his fantasy life, which is the unused imagination, uses him. For his creativity to have real meaning, he has to learn to distinguish between fantasy and imagination that he can use creatively; then he can begin to move away from being the eternal child or youth. It will always be there as part of himself but will not need to dominate. Part of growing up is about learning to play with the different parts of ourselves, getting to know them and the roles they are needing to play for us.

The *puer* image is not all negative and it is important to recognise this: being open to new beginnings, being imaginative, inspirational, and a dreamer in the positive sense. Perhaps the *puer* could be seen as personifying aspects of the spirit in its height and in its depths. And I think being able to relate to the positive aspects of the *puer* is essential to the development of our own creativity, however this may be expressed in our thinking, our actions, and the ways in which we live our lives; not getting stuck and being able to make creative use of opportunities.

The positive nature of the child is something we need to keep alive and relate to, for the child represents inner possibility - intense aliveness - and there are moments when we truly need this, together with the possibility of renewal.

In dreams, the child can represent the need for new experience and new ways of seeing and so relates to our capacity for imaginative capacity, without which we cannot fully experience life and know who we really are.

The inner child can also be a uniting symbol bringing together the more separate and dissociated parts of our personality. As a symbol the child can represent the potential of the psyche - the Self as distinct from the ego, though of course it can represent that too.

The image for personal development encoded in the Self has to do with the need for the early attachment to mother or mother substitute becoming loosened around the time of puberty. From early times in human history, initiation rites evolved as a means of facilitating this loosening both for the individual and for the society in which the child will take on an adult role over and beyond the family.

For Jung the child symbol is essentially about the need to look beyond the dependence in which the eternal youth can become stuck in finding their own individuality and becoming the person they were meant to be. This cannot happen without undergoing a process of detachment from mother and father at an internal level, not only an external one. Hence the themes of abandonment and danger, the trials and ordeals suffered by all child gods and youthful heroes of myth and legend which reflect back to us the human condition of which we are all a part.

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