

*La Belle et la Bête: Utilizing Insights of Archetypal Psychology in Couples Therapy – a transcultural perspective.*

By Marilia Baker

***L'enfance croit ce qu'on lui raconte et ne le met pas en doute. Elle croit qu'une rose qu'on cueille peut attirer des drames dans une famille. Elle croit que les mains d'une bête en a honte lorsqu'une jeune fille habite sa maison. Elle croit milles autres choses bien naïves. C'est un peu de cette naïvité que je vous demande et, pour nous porter chance a tous, laissez moi vous dire quatre mots magiques, véritable 'sésame ouvrez toi' de l'enfance... " Il était une fois..."***

***Jean Cocteau, La Belle et la Bête (1946)***

The ancient tale *Beauty and the Beast* has been a favorite of mine since I was a child in São Paulo, Brazil. Over the years it became a professional interest, as I started learning about marriage therapy and experiencing in real life the complexities and vicissitudes of couplehood. I have gone back to the story many times, revisiting its many versions and forms. The story of *Beauty and the Beast* has long been a source of inspiration and insight for me, particularly since I first saw Jean Cocteau's surrealist masterpiece (1946)<sup>1</sup> at some point in my youth. Subsequently, throughout my adult life I have had a scientific interest and respectful curiosity in learning how two human beings are brought together – actually, *harnessed* together – by Nature and Love, as life partners. I have witnessed in my clients and have undergone myself the *pleasures* and *vicissitudes* of becoming a couple, and I have marveled at how couples 'make things happen', as *if* by magic. It is, as Cocteau observes above, a truly "open sesame" treasure trove of hidden wealth in adult life. It is fascinating to me to observe their joint and separate life projects; their collaboration styles; the intricacies of their partnership; the meanderings of their developmental journey, as well as their

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Cocteau, *La Belle et la Bête*. Film, originally released in France, October 1946. Written and directed by Jean Cocteau. DVD Format (Criterion Collection, 2003)

psychological evolution as ‘separate and together’ individuals within the *aegis* of couplehood.

The story of *Beauty and the Beast* is very useful to my work as a couples’ therapist in the multicultural world I live in here in Arizona. Its theme is a universal metaphor, a powerful archetype, and as such it reaches the depths of the human psyche in any culture. The narrative and its amplified manifestation on the screen is an excellent tool for educating young couples in the premarital phase, and it is very useful as an illustration for couples stuck in the *power struggle*. The story is multidimensional in its applications with couples in any other stage of the marital cycle and whatever ethnicity, sexual orientation, or culture they come from<sup>2</sup>.

I also have utilized it as a heuristic device in my therapist training workshops in Brazil, Mexico, Europe, and the United States. Metaphors, fairy tales, folk stories can be applied therapeutically to make a point, to bypass resistance, and to facilitate psychological growth. Utilizing *archetypal psychology* in hypnosis and brief therapy with full awareness of the powerful archetypal forces in *couple-making* may facilitate concise, precise, and to-the-point clinical interventions. This is my deep belief as an Ericksonian therapist, who has a Jungian, archetypal orientation.

My professional interest in marriage and couplehood has also to do with my own experiencing the complexities and vicissitudes of this fascinating existential journey in a cross-cultural, transnational partnership for the past 44 years – I am Brazilian and my husband is from Kansas. Throughout the decades, I have experienced “many marriages within my marriage”.<sup>3</sup> That is to say: I have undergone and continue to undergo - along with my life partner - the psychological growth stages and life tasks characteristic of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Usually I recommend that the couple read the story and watch the movie versions at home, in their intimate realm; that they discuss the important points for each, separately, then together. Only afterwards we discuss the meanings to the couple, within the needs of this or that particular couple. The same with the students.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Phoenix area psychologist, Jim Mackenzie, for this insight.

“journey along a path of development.”<sup>4</sup> This “many marriages within the marriage” idea is based on the concepts developed by California psychologists Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson, illustrating how a couple undergoes many normal and natural stages of psychological growth along their journey together. Bader and Pearson’s profound, fascinating insight – that a couple’s developmental stages replicate the ‘psychological birth and evolution of the human infant’ is extremely useful in my working with couples<sup>5</sup>.

There are five basic stages according to their model, which focuses *away from* pathologies and emphasizes the challenges all couples face: 1) *Exclusive bonding* or *symbiosis*: this is the romantic stage, the time to experience “oneness” – a foundational stage which prepares the dyad for the growth it passes ahead; 2) *Differentiation*: managing anxiety over differences, which emerge, per force, as part of a healthy struggle to individuate; 3) *Exploration* or, steadily moving away from the *exclusive bonding* stage, and a *differentiating* phase toward a more individuated one: moving from “we” back into the conscious “I”; 4) *Re-connection* or *Rapprochement*: navigating through the back and forth movements and patterns of intimacy; a more fully conscious sense of “we” as two separate individuals with healthy boundaries, and finally, 5) *Synergy* -- when the couple reaches a sense of *selfhood, plenitude* (individuality within the dyad) and moves freely, back and forth, through independence and interdependence. As the authors state: “Deep intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional sustenance abound safely within the couple”<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D., authors of the classic *In Quest of the Mythical Mate*, (1988) by Brunner/Mazel: N.Y., have been an excellent and immense source of knowledge and inspiration to my clinical work. Their developmental model is highly instructive in the diagnosis and treatment of growth impasses. They are founding directors of *The Couples Institute* at Menlo Park, California. Website: [www.CouplesInstitute.com](http://www.CouplesInstitute.com)

<sup>5</sup> Their model is adapted from the research findings of Margaret Mahler et al. published as (1975) *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>6</sup> These five basic stages unfold into many other combinations depending on where each partner is on their psychological evolution. For instance, one individual may have progressed from the symbiotic phase into the differentiation phase, whereas the other may be still symbiotic. Treatment then is designed to appropriately assist

The title: *La Belle et la Bête* dates back to the emergence of the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the 1700s. It is based on a much older story, *Cupidon and Psyche*<sup>7</sup>, from the ancient North African and Greek lore as retold by the Afro-Roman writer Lucius Apuleius, around 170 A.D. Important to point out here a concept fundamental and omnipresent to my awareness in multicultural therapeutic work: the nature of what I came to know as *cross-fertilization* of ideas, interpersonal relationships, and the *constant evolution* of cultures. Apuleius, for instance, was born in North Africa in the Roman colony of Madaurus, today known as M'Daourouch, Algeria. Apuleius extensive travels and studies in philosophy, literature, and religion - as well as being anointed as 'a priest of Aesculapius' indicates to me that he was what we consider nowadays a physician/psychiatrist and a psychotherapist. His extensive traveling throughout the Roman world in the Mediterranean region is quite similar to the cross-fertilization and dissemination of therapeutic modalities carried out by myself and my Ericksonian colleagues. *Multiculturalism* in action.

*Beauty and the Beast* quintessentially is about human transformation and transcendence - within a couple - through self-knowledge, sacrifice, moral capacity, intentional dialogue, conscious marriage or partnership. In essence, it is about the *vicissitudes* of living in relationship, and the emergence of Consciousness. It presents us with the developmental steps toward selfhood and instructs us about the *transformative power* of committed love, while tapping into the roots of our Soul. For the couple's therapist, awareness of archetypal forces in *couplemaking* as mentioned above may facilitate concise, precise, and elegant, tailored-to-need clinical interventions.

---

**'stuck' partner to evolve in the relationship. Therapeutically, if there are psychopathologies they are appropriately addressed, tailored to individual needs. Further consult: [www.CouplesInstitute.com](http://www.CouplesInstitute.com)**

<sup>7</sup> You will also find this story under: *Amor and Psyche* or *Eros and Psyche*'. Apuleius master work is named the *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*. Consult Erich Neumann's rendition (1956) as well as Robert A. Johnson's *She* (1989). There are several versions. I strongly recommend these two studies.

The story under the title *La Belle et la Bête* was originally written in France by the noblewoman Madame Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve (1695-1755) whose extensive literary production was quite respected. It first appeared in her collection: *Les Contes Marins et la Jeune Américaine* (Short Stories of the Sea and The Young American Girl), in 1740<sup>8</sup>. The intriguing element in this title is the allusion to the stories told by an old governess to a marriage-age young woman over an ocean voyage to settle in America. We can trace back to Apuleius story as we cross the Atlantic to the New World with the old governess. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is this equivalent of the 'old governess', or the 'story-teller' – the psychotherapist - initiating the young women and the young men into “learning the skills of living together...”

It is fascinating to note that de Villeneuve's rendition and the version by Madame Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1756 - the most widely known to us in the Americas - emerged during a time when democratic ideals were brewing in the national consciousness. These democratic ideals fermented both in the American colonies for many decades before 1763, towards independence in 1776, as well as in France prior to its Revolution in 1789. Both movements were against *tyranny* in all forms, seeking liberty (*liberté*), equality (*égalité*) and solidarity (*fraternité*). Modern marriage, based on individual freedom to choose; equality between the partners; and solidarity - understood as companionship, conviviality, a meeting of kindred spirits, was powerfully emerging on both sides of the Atlantic as a *true possibility*.

*Fraternité* or solidarity can be conceptualized as active dialogue, in-depth conversation, and *pleasure* in the company of one another. In essence, this is our modern concept of **intimacy**. The sacred marriage between the god Eros - the life force - and of the mortal Psyché - the life of mind - produced a child who was named Voluptas (Pleasure, Delight, or Bliss). *Fraternité* - solidarity, intimacy in marriage - to my view, is an exercise in pleasure, bliss, delight - equality, and freedom.

---

<sup>8</sup> Recently reissued in France by Honoré Champion Publishers (2008) ISBN 978-2-7453-1638-7. *La Jeune Américaine et Les Contes Marins (La Belle et La Bête) – Les Belles Solitaires – Magasin des Enfants (La Belle et la Bête)*.

*La Belle et la Bête* is also a timely story. In our times, early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we are experiencing many cultural changes – such as powerful movements toward legalization of same-sex marriages. To my view, the term *lasting solutions* paradoxically utilized in conceptualizing brief therapy, is an appropriate metaphor for committed partnerships. A couple is the *core dyad* of our biological and societal fabric. It is the basic matrix – the source, the *within* from which our families emerge. Healthy, well-functioning couples are vital for our success as a viable human community.

There is today, as there was when Apuleius traveled throughout North Africa, Greece, and Rome, as well as when *La Belle et la Bête* emerged from the deep waters of fairy tale literature in Europe, an urgent call from the collective Unconscious: the fabric of the world's Soul -- the *Anima Mundi* -- is in need of repair. Synchronistically, *Eros and Psyché*, a chapter in Apuleius major opus, *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*, was written at a time of profound upheaval and changes, when religious and political worldviews were clashing. The cult of Isis in North Africa was under attack, and the old Greek-Roman religions were dying; there was a new religious, socio-political order emerging: Christianity.

The same happened when *La Belle et la Bête* emerged in the European storytelling scenario in the 1700s. The ideals of the American and the French revolutions were brewing, engendering the primacy of individual choices and human rights. A recently published book, *The Birth of Pleasure* by acclaimed Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan is pointing out the way toward an even deeper level of healthy possibilities for human relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Even though I frequently utilize Jean Cocteau's immensely powerful version in my work, I will focus on this essay solely on the American animated version – truly an *operetta* - little known to adult therapists on both sides of the Atlantic. In both instances I suggest that couples or students watch and study these stories before coming to session.

---

<sup>9</sup> Carol Gilligan. (2002) *The Birth of Pleasure*. Alfred A. Knopf: New York. Gilligan contrasts her research on young girls - in search of truth in relationships - with the ancient myths of Oedipus, and *Amor and Psyche*. Pleasure, Voluptas, Desire, Well-Being, Beatitudes, is the child conceived by Eros and Psyche.

The 1992 Walt Disney Pictures<sup>10</sup> masterful version of *Beauty and the Beast* is highly instructive for our understanding of *couple-making*. The team of writers, composers, animators and artists appear to have been touched by the *archetypal* experience, through images, especial effects, emotional affect and sounds. Where and how do I see all that?

To start with, we are presented with a prince, turned into a beast - a monster, living in an enchanted castle, frozen in time by an ancient curse. All creatures in this kingdom are under the spell of an old witch, an enchantress who turned the spoiled, willful prince into a beast. The spell will only be broken when Beast *learns* to love and is loved in return. Couples therapists are quite familiar with this picture: individuals, male or female, couples, seeking help, frozen in time under the transgenerational curse of his/her family of origin issues, childhood wounds and developmental impasses.

Belle is a dark-haired, intelligent, independent minded, hard working, young woman living with her industrious, inventor father. She is highly tuned-in with her intuition and curiosity - a book lover above all. She has high aspirations and ideals; she dreams of a brilliant future and wants out of her small-minded, provincial town. There is group pressure in the village for her to conform, particularly if she accepts to marry Gaston, the village beau. By rejecting him, Belle has already placed herself at risk, but she remains true to her own Self. Much more will be asked of her by Life.

Again, this scenario is quite familiar to couples' therapists. The challenges all young women face are unfolding before our eyes: psychological separation from the family of origin, most particularly from the father; dreams and illusions about relationship, marriage; desire for intimacy; conflicting pursuit of ideals, career; remaining true to her inner self versus submitting to limiting beliefs, family, and group pressure.

---

<sup>10</sup> Walt Disney's surname originated in Isigny-sur-Mer, Normandy. Accordingly, Disney's family descends from Robert d'Isigny who left for England with Guillaume le Conquérant around 1066. *D'Isigny* was later anglicized to Disney.

When the father becomes a prisoner of Beast, Belle offers herself instead. This is a crucial, pivotal moment in the story: she accepts to stay *forever* in the castle. Beast is surprised by her action. He releases her father with the words: “She is no longer your concern.” Unconscious/conscious forces are at play: the two youths are thrown together *forever*. Belle’s moral capacity is stretched to its utmost limit – she will sacrifice herself to free the Other - not before asking Beast to “come into the light.” Beast has an inkling that Belle could be his redeemer from the curse. As the plot unfolds we witness the psychological movement from unconscious attraction, to power struggle, to romance, to in-depth dialogue, toward conscious marriage, conscious awareness, freedom to be, and the triumph of Love<sup>11</sup>.

The Disney animated version – as with any opera on stage - is *fabulously* rich in meaning. Cocteau’s 1946 version is, likewise, extremely rich in detail. I strongly encourage the reader, if interested, to study both versions carefully, meticulously. Over and over the human psyché will find meaning and purpose in the symbolism. This is the *formidable power* of archetypes and fairy tales for human transformation. This is the evolving *consciousness* in action.

Every detail, from images, to songs to lyrics, to dialogue, to the presence of enchanted, benevolent helpers, invites deep reflection. In the Disney version, Gaston, the narcissistic beau (Avenant and Ludovic in Cocteau’s version), a shadowy character, could be a representation of hypocrisy, false societal beliefs, driven to his own destruction by his arrogance, his self-importance, and inability to empathize. We are entranced by the helpers: Lumière, the enlightened, that part of ourselves who helps us to follow our hearts. Mrs. Potts, the wise, helpful container, who nevertheless, as an adult, does not pay that much attention to her truth-saying child, Chip - the cracked cup – the crack implying our own narcissistic bruises, our childhood wounds. Equally entranced by Cogsworth, the delightful,

---

<sup>11</sup> These concepts are found in psychologist Harville Hendrix’s work (1988) *Getting the Love you Want*. Harper Perennial: New York. He and his wife and co-author Helen LaKelly Hunt have been finely tuned into these archetypal stages. Their *Imago Relationship Therapy* model has also been very important for the development of my own ideas. See website: [www.imagorelationships.org](http://www.imagorelationships.org)

pompous clock, who wants to be always right, like our Ego. The red rose, probably representing love, passion, and mature sexuality, is urgently calling upon the Beast to find healthy ways to break the curse. The magic mirror (an element already present in the ancient Greek myth and widely utilized by Cocteau) is essential to enable us to see our truths reflected in the eyes of the Other. That is to say: to have every experience reflected back to us in the service of our growth, our consciousness, and our evolution toward Consciousness.

Beast will only become human again when he *learns* to love and is loved in return. The same happens to Belle, when she *accepts* that the object of her love *is imperfect* – therefore, the animal -- and *learns to see beyond* the appearances. The implication here is the *learning* of ‘the skills in living together’ process, the awakening to a conscious relationship, toward a conscious marriage (according to Hendrix a cornerstone of ‘getting the marriage we want’). Interestingly enough, *and profoundly important* to our therapeutic work, when Beast is returned to his human form by the power of *conscious love*, so is his kingdom – his castle, his staff, and his people. The implication here, as Harville Hendrix suggests, when we have a conscious marriage, the positive reverberations will free society as well. A fundamental inter-relational, ecological concept, which therapists and policy makers need to pay attention to. The boy Chip, the former cracked cup, asks his mother in the end: “Mama, mama will they live happily ever after?” Mrs. Potts responds, “Of course, my dear, of course.”

We, couples therapists know otherwise, *n’est ce pas?* If you please excuse me, I must go now. Belle and Prince Ardent are waiting for me at the office. We have an appointment at noon. This is a few years into their marriage, they have children now, and they are having some growth impasses. I am honored to oblige.

© 2011 Marilia Baker

*Marilia Baker, MSW, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, lives in Scottsdale, Arizona where she is on the Board of Directors of the Phoenix Institute of Ericksonian Therapy. An International Consultant & Advisor to Centro Ericksoniano de México and Advisory Board member of Phoenix Friends of Carl G. Jung, Ms. Baker specializes in Clinical Hypnosis, Couples' Therapy, and Midlife Coaching. As an international presenter and trainer she conducts workshops in Brazil, Mexico, Europe and the U.S. An Invited Faculty of the International Congresses of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation, she is currently Institutes Editor of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation Newsletter. Her book, A Tribute to Elizabeth Moore Erickson: Colleague Extraordinaire, Wife, Mother and Companion, has been published in Spanish (2003), Portuguese (2004), English (2004), and French (2006). Plans are under way for versions in Italian and Japanese.*