

On the Archetypes Hermes & Hestia: Notes toward a Hermeneutics of Leadership Studies

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In 1995, both James Hillman and Charles Handy published books about leadership in which they used the imagery of archetypes or “gods” to describe types of leadership. Handy, for example, wrote about Zeus, Apollo, Athena, and Dionysus. Since then, other authors with an interest in leadership have turned to the language of archetypes, including Carol Pearson, whose books avoid naming the archetypes as gods, but instead use more generic personifications, such as the Warrior, the Sage, and the Magician (e.g. Pearson, 2001). Recently, Mark Chater (2005), Neil Remington Abramson (2007), and Karen Morley (2008) – to name a few – have found ways to use this language of mythology, archetypes, and the gods to talk about leadership.

For those unfamiliar with Archetypal Psychology, the personages or gods represent aspects of the psyche and not actual figures living on Mount Olympus. They are (to borrow a phrase from Patricia Berry) condensed knots of meaning correlating with the way we imagine. The premise is that the mythology about the gods persists because it fits the way our minds work. Certain features or attributes cluster in such meaningful ways that they deserve being named. These gods are products of our imagination – an imagination we do not entirely control (see generally Hillman, 1975).

This article relies on the claim that the imagination is crucial to understanding leadership. Toward that end, it introduces two divine personages from ancient Greece, namely Hermes and Hestia. Their pairing signifies a psychological relationship of contrast and interdependence that leadership studies might consider in its investigations. For it is not my purpose to proselytize on behalf of pagan religion, but instead to exploit the mind’s capacity to populate its interior with vivid characters that reveal something about how humans imagine both the world and their places in it.

How did Hermes Appear?

The ancient Greeks recognized a god known as Hermes, whose identity was later found to be equivalent to the Roman god Mercury. Hermes had been a son of Zeus and therefore a half-brother to Apollo. He was ordained to the tasks of bearing messages on winged feet and of guiding souls toward their fulfillment at death. Although he tended to operate at night, he brought the unmistakable glow of divinity with him. Given his restless energy and his mission to journey from place to place, rather than dwell on Olympus, Hermes was thought to be the god of

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travel. His image frequently adorned intersecting roads in Greece. Homer called him the “Wayfinder” (Kerényi, 1986, p. 16, citing the *Odyssey*, book V). Thus, he was both a herald of divine announcements and a leader or guide of souls.

Not coincidentally, Hermes’ night of conception had been what the legend referred to as the fulfillment of the mind of Zeus, the achievement of a divine purpose (Kerényi, 1986, p. 20). This language – strange though it might seem to describe a sexual act – is important. In this sense of the fulfillment of the intentions of Zeus, Hermes became the mediator of divine purpose to an unsuspecting humankind that otherwise would wander abroad in the darkness. He finds wayward travelers and makes disclosures for the journey. Other texts choose to describe him as the one who allows humanity to “see through” things – a divine gift! (Kerényi, 1986, p. 26).

Unlike his half-brother, the remote and majestic Apollo, Hermes makes direct encounters with individual human beings. In these encounters, Hermes discloses something of the divine purpose, which it is his objective to accomplish by means of humans, creating a reality more attuned to the will of Zeus (Kerényi, 1986, pp. 51 & 54). As such, he governs a kind of in-between or middle realm: of a life underway and not yet brought to rest, of a project conceived and not yet finished, of non-being and being (Kerényi, 1986, p. 77). In these encounters, the illumination he brings causes an outpouring of the human soul to take initiative (Kerényi, 1986, p. 87).

In his infancy, Hermes had stolen the cattle of Apollo, and for that reason was known as a herdsman, the one who drives, escorts, and otherwise guides those who would otherwise not travel. This power of deft guidance, as Karl Kerényi put it (1986, p. 45), parallels the belief that Hermes herds the flitting, dead souls toward their final destination, in a different kind of darkness. Thus, Hermes was both an ambassador and a psychopomp (or one who delivers the dead), revealing purpose and then leading onward toward the realization of that purpose. As such, he occupies an intermediate position, neither remote and wild nor intimate and domesticated, but instead bridging two realms (Kerényi, 1986, p. 50, quoting Otto, 1954). Of course his willingness and ability to encroach on his mighty brother’s territory shows him to be a master of stealthy border-crossings. Hermes is essentially liminal.

Kerényi concluded that Hermes represents an understanding that exceeds or transcends ordinary practical observation as well as scientific investigation. He never stays still. He says just enough. He renders intelligible that which had seemed opaque, but only enough to give direction in the moment, at this intersection (Kerényi, 1986, p. 55). By means of his statue, the erect penis pointing where next to turn, pious Greeks indicated his value to the lost (Kerényi, 1986, pp. 64f & 78).

If the metaphors of a dark night and being lost are not enough, Kerényi indicated that Hermes can be found in another place of obscurity, specifically in that “innermost nook” we call the human soul (1986, p. 83). There, his delightful incursion enralls us in our “deep primordial darkness where one expects only animal muteness, wordless silence, or cries of pleasure or pain” (Kerényi, 1986, p. 88). The task of Hermes can be regarded therefore as “the conjuring of luminous life out of the dark abyss that each in his own way is” (Kerényi, 1986, p. 91).

Hermes is not without his liabilities. As a thief, he can be untrustworthy. As a messenger, he can delight in ambiguities. James Hillman viewed Hermes as the dominant archetypal figure in today's interconnected, global, instantaneous communication networks such as cable television, satellites links, and of course the internet, though his power has grown out of all proportion to his rank. People are becoming more addicted to information – rapid and jumbled information – than to meaning (2007, pp. 259-275). In a manner of speaking, Hermes also can be associated with abstract time, the relentless progression of uniform units, the minutes and seconds. This hastening world had become “intoxicated” with Hermes, looking to him for news when there is nothing in particular for him to report from the other gods. Instead, we feed his vanity and cry out for the latest update, the looping weather radar, the scroll across the bottom of the screen, so he gives us what he has: i.e. data. Abstract time and a plethora of scraps of information – inciting us to live desperately for the future, never content to let the truth unfold at its own pace, in the fullness of time (Hillman, 2007, p. 273). We now separate the image of receiving information from the divine message such information is supposed to convey (Hillman, 2007, p. 280). We have become greedy for facts and disdainful of wisdom.

All of which is to designate Hermes as a sympathetic messenger and guide for those who cannot otherwise find the way... swift and unpredictable, garrulous yet vague (Doty, 1980). He is a wayfinder, illuminating the darkness and pointing toward the numinous.

As it happens, the ancients understood that no god appears alone (Hillman, 2007, p. 278). The stories about restless Hermes in dark places were interwoven especially with another figure, the guardian of the hearth, Hestia. Their pairing suggests a kind of counterweight or complementarity, at opposite ends of a spectrum, in some respects, yet part of the same whole. Let us turn to Hestia next.

How did Hestia Appear?

Just as Hermes races against time to appear in many places and facilitate adventure, Hestia was assigned to one spot (Hillman, 2007, p. 237, quoting Paris, 2005). In fact, her place was at the epicenter of human habitation, “a symbol of permanence, of fixity, of immutability, of centrality...” (Goux, 1983, p. 92). Hermes flew just above the surface of the earth; Hestia's power is entirely earthbound (Goux, 1984, p. 92). If Hermes suggests urgency and future-oriented striving, Hestia represents “endurance” and “perpetuity” and “continuity” (Goux, 1983, p. 92f). If Hermes lapsed into abstraction and ambiguity, Hestia was affixed to a very specific place and kept a stolid vigil over the home fires – simple and concrete (Hillman, 2007, p. 238, quoting Paris, 2005). Whereas Hermes delivered light to darkened and wayward humanity, Hestia tended the light at the hearth. She embodies in her image the preposition “in” – interiors, indoors, insight, within enclosed spaces (Hillman, 2007, 230-241). She represents the “idea that what is most sacred...is inside” (Goux, 1983, p. 98).

Hermes without Hestia becomes free-ranging, spastic, happy to scurry about delivering pointless messages that have no other sanction, jerking his victims this way and that, living in anticipatory anxiety. He becomes, like humanity, a vagrant (Goux, 1983, p. 97). Hestia, on the other hand, keeps things at home tidy, grounded – in a word, focused, by which we mean “disciplined attention” (Hillman, 2007, pp. 235 & 269; Kirksey, 1980). There is a stillness there

... inside. While Hermes transgresses from the beginning, Hestia's very name derives from the Indo-European "to abide" or "to inhabit" (Hillman, 2007, p. 235) – to stay or stand within the boundaries and preserve an atmosphere of welcome. In a word, Hestia counterbalances or brings to dignity the mercurial Hermes.

It is instructive, I think, that as a goddess Hestia was tended more by political leaders than by religious leaders. Political leaders had a stake in preserving the polis, seeing to its perpetuation, the practical affairs of executive office (Kajava, 2004, p. 5). There was even a public hearth and not just the private hearths at home, and it was the duty of these civic leaders to maintain it – in homage to Hestia (Goux, 1983, p. 92). Plato and Aristotle advised that judges subject themselves to the presence of Hestia before they render a decision (Goux, 1983, p. 99).

And though we are all familiar with the idea that Hermes delivers tidings, Ovid exclaimed that it was in contemplation of Hestia that "my ignorance was enlightened and my errors corrected without the help of an instructor" (Goux, 1983, p. 93, quoting Ovid's *The Fasti*). The point is that she does not deliver a message. Her mere presence is enough. She even convinces the poet not to depict her in any way, which is consistent with her unique status as the divinity both Greeks and Romans were reluctant to portray in their art (Goux, 1983). She conveys no image. Presence has to be enough because she is not to be approached; she is inviolable (Goux, 1983, p. 95). She is forever – by choice and by decree – a virgin.

Barbara Kirksey speculates that it is by means of Hestia that we can imagine, which means that she is the light by which we see and not the object of our seeing; she is not unlike the spotlight for a stage. The audience does not turn and look at the light bulbs (1980, p. 109).

Eventually, the myth leads to confusion if our purpose is to detect direct analogies. Is Hestia the essence of the sacred that is not to be touched, or the virginal composure of the soul as it awaits the impress of God? (Goux, 1983, p. 97f). In either case, wrote Cicero, Hestia is the custodian of innermost things, where these profound encounters take place (Goux, 1983, p. 98, quoting *De Natura Deorum*).

Kirksey offered several useful lessons on Hestia that are relevant to our purpose. If Hermes is the wayfinder by the side of the road, Hestia is the center, both home and hearth. By being so "inward" we would say that she is intimate, connected, at the place where the psyche encounters the cosmos – like the omphalos, a scar where we were attached (1980, p. 111).

Hestia represents a gathering place or focus. But then, she remarked, focus requires adjustment, a kind of subtle shifting of the lens to bring convergence, which in photography we might call the "sharpness" of the image (1980, p. 111). It is we who must adjust, adapt, fiddling with the mechanism by which we see – or "bringing" it into focus. In this sense, Hestia not only illuminates and makes manifest, but also governs the delicate fine-tuning we must undergo to remain connected.

Why would it have been helpful to become acquainted with Hermes and Hestia?

Perhaps the most obvious reason to consult mythology is that it shows the continuity of symbols over time. There were primordial analogues to philosophy, science, and the arts. Retaining this continuity, in one form or another, tends to strengthen the insights of an investigator, because if he or she had completely invented a new story, without any continuity at all to the prevailing culture, then the community would have been resistant to that message. The existing symbolizations make communication easier. A Sigmund Freud can find references to the story of Oedipus helpful in explaining his hypothesis. In this way, the myths connect us to tradition by offering a language which the people already understand.

More than that, there is bound to be a convergence of symbols around the self-same experiences. (This is the contention of a Joseph Campbell who can find parallel stories in multifarious and far-flung cultures, from which he infers a commonality of experience. Similar stories, similar experiences). If you and I have an equivalent experience, it is likely that our descriptions will in some respect resemble each other. Myths are early attempts to explain something that we still need to understand, and it is possible that we can still learn something from these time-tested narratives.

Plato for example was not exactly replacing one thought system (Homeric gods) with another and consciously overthrowing an entire tradition. He was differentiating something that had previously been compact. This is why he had to take something that already existed in the culture and reveal these differentiations as an advance on our understanding. Two thousand years later many of antiquity's differentiations have not been improved since; if anything, they have been corrupted in the West, often grossly oversimplifying a complex reality. The myths offer us a compactness that in many cases we have otherwise lost.

Archetypal psychologists will argue that the myths survived because they reflect or enact dynamics in the soul. There will be a kind of validity to a story that captures what happens in each of us. We can "relate" to the tale, and that is why it survives. These archaic images are the archetypes that shape human thought. Thus, whatever it is that we hope to understand will originate in a common reservoir of images derived from the polytheistic worldview of the ancients. "To study human nature at its most basic level," wrote James Hillman, "one must turn to culture (mythology, religion, art, architecture, epic, drama, ritual) where these patterns are portrayed" (Hillman, 2004, p. 14). He continued, "The primary rhetoric of archetypal psychology is myth" (2004, p. 31). And the fundamental component of mythology for purposes of understanding the human soul are its images (Hillman, 2004, p. 26). When these timeless images are encountered, they frequently arrive as personifications bearing a message (Hillman, 2004, p. 25).² That is how we often understand them. Thus, we give them a name. And so we find ourselves encountering Hermes and Hestia.

² Hillman explicitly distinguishes a polytheistic account of the soul from a polytheistic religion (2004, pp. 45-49). It was not his purpose to demonstrate whether the cosmos is actually populated by divine beings bearing the likeness of Zeus, Apollo, and Athena.

One final observation about the relevance of Hermes in particular to our investigations into leadership. It is from the name “Hermes” that scholars adopted the term “hermeneutics” to mean interpretation – originally, the interpretation of sacred texts. They wanted to formalize their efforts to interpret texts that were notoriously difficult to understand. These texts were often partial and cryptic, recorded in an alien language, during a remote era, as part of a foreign cultus, such that interpretation was required to make sense of them. The goal was to adopt standards for conducting these interpretations. Out of the evolution of these standards a name for this effort emerged based on the Greek god Hermes, by way of *herméneia* for the English word “explanation” (Kerényi, 1986, p. 88).

In like manner, leadership studies has been one long, sustained effort to interpret something that is not always directly accessible to observation, a looking past what is apparent to something behind it, into the interior of social actors – their fears and desires, their hopes and dreams. And to do this, of course, we have to interpret the scholarship of many writers – the scientists, philosophers, and historians who have tried to make sense of leadership, but also the dreamers and artists. Interpretation has been the name of this collaboration. You and I and leadership scholars (as observers) and leaders and followers (as participants) all engage in processes of interpretation en route to making choices about what to do in the world. It seems useful to say this openly and make it plain. Thus, we might say that Hermes represents the activity of particular interest to us.

Hermes and Hestia, Together

One could argue that – to one degree or another – each of us embodies the gods. We pass through phases or episodes in which they possess us: anger for Aries, love for Aphrodite.

Hermes is a kind of leader, attracting attention from those in liminal spaces, uncertain where to turn, and pointing the way toward fulfillment. He even accompanies us, supplying hints and intimations as we go on the path we are meant to follow. He brings the boon of direction. His illumination draws our attention in the darkness and lights our footsteps.

Hestia awaits us, keeping the home fires burning, tending the point of convergence, where we all are meant to gather and abide together. She is the steady attraction, a fixed point we must use to orient ourselves, lest our lives become unfocused. If Hermes lapses occasionally into exasperating, manic abstraction, whirling about on winged sandals, getting carried away by rumor and speculation, she is the most concrete thing there is ... a touch, a warmth, a place to eat and rest. And so they work together, animating our choices about when to follow and whom to follow – the lively, gesticulating, charismatic Hermes, enlivening the imagination to venture forth, toward the feminine embrace of fulfillment at the place where we somehow know that we belong.

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