

Re-awakening the Green Man by Janet Hartley Kane

We need to reinvent our myths from time to time. The stories we tell ourselves determine who we become, who we are, what we believe. ~ Sam Keen

The degradation of our environment is accelerating beyond the point of our being able to repair it. The problems are many and complex—from the destruction of our forests, to the dying off of our fish. Our impure air and water is causing worldwide increases in chronic diseases including severe challenges to our immune systems. Most threatening of all, climate change may raise temperatures and cause extreme weather conditions for thousands of years. Scientists and experts such as Al Gore can show us charts of what is happening, but the facts and figures don't reach into the depth of our hearts and motivate us to change. Joanna Macy, author and deep ecologist says, "We need to love the world in order to save it." Using our intellect in this area is not enough; we need to feel an emotional connection to the planet. Advertisers know that the best way to stir us is through images and stories, often culled from myths that deeply affect our psyche.

Mythologist Sam Keen says, "The organizing myth of any culture functions in ways that may be creative or destructive, healthful or pathological. By providing a world picture and a set of stories that explain why things are as they are, it creates consensus, sanctifies the social order and gives the individual an authorized map of the path of life." Another mythologist, Phil Couseneau, says, "Myth creates the plotline that organizes the diverse experiences of a persona or a community into a single story. Myths come from the same place that dreams and art come from. They bubble up from the depths of the soul. They can't be forced or constructed..." If there are new ecologically hopeful myths bubbling up from the collective unconscious—to perhaps replace those that promote greed and consumerism—we need to honor them and encourage them in every way we can.

One of these ecological myths is the story of the Green Man. He has been part of our Western heritage for centuries. Depth psychologist Carl Jung says that archetypes are embedded in our collective unconscious and these archetypes are shared by all. That is why we find very early images of the Green Man in Iraq and all over Europe. His face, which has leaves sprouting from his lips, eyes, nose and ears, can be seen on buildings and signs throughout Europe that date back to the Middle Ages. He is a combination of man and nature; he shows us we can never be separate from the natural world, that we are part of the Earth. He signifies irrepressible life and represents the human longing for the natural world. He is an image from the depths of prehistory and his origins are much older than our Christian era. Green Man is still honored today in England and Europe in May Day festivals where he is evoked to bring in a bountiful growing season.

His image is usually thought of as an amusing even sinister survival of the old pagan religions. Remote origins of the Green Man go back to Neolithic times in the religions of old Europe and then appear in Roman art in the 1st century. In classical Greece the Green Man was represented by Dionysus or Bacchus in Roman mythology. Dionysus taught the art of agriculture and represented abandonment to the power of nature. He was intoxicated by the grape vine and was called the God of Wine. A typical belief about Dionysus is that if you don't celebrate with him you are denying your own wildness and can become a victim of uncontrolled chaos.

Many indigenous peoples saw the Green Man as a spirit of the woods. He appears in art, stories and folk plays from the Middle Ages and they continue on to present time. The Green Man was the central figure in May Day celebrations, often called the King of May. There is a record of a May Day festival on the Isle of Man in 1020. Throughout Europe May Day revels are still vigorously celebrated with the Green Man playing a central role in all of them. The games during many of these festivals represent the struggle between the king of winter and the king of summer. May 1st is seen as the time to honor the Green Man to ensure the success of the crops and bring forth the fruits and vegetables. The May Pole featured in these festivities represents the connection between heaven and Earth and the children winding the ribbons around the pole depict the endless pattern of creativity that connects them to the god and goddess.

So, how and why does evoking the particular image of the Green Man give us hope for our future? In 1992, in his book, *The Voice of the Earth*, Theodore Roszak coined the term "Ecopsychology," which is the study of our emotional bond with the Earth. Roszak wrote that there is a synergistic relation between planetary and personal well being, that the needs of the one are relevant to the other. Mental health cannot be understood simply in the narrow context of our self or our social

relations. It has to include the relationship of humans to other species and the ecosystem. Our relationship with the Earth has a long and deep evolutionary history. Humans are dependent on healthy Nature not only for our physical sustenance but for mental health as well. We can go so far as to say that we are not separate from nature.

Jung offered his theory of compensation—that an archetype will reappear in a new form to redress imbalances in society at a particular time when it is needed. According to this theory, the Green Man is rising up into our present awareness in order to counterbalance a lack in our attitude to Nature. Science is predicting that in this century the torrid zones of the Earth will be reduced to desert and close to a quarter of the Earth's human population will be reduced to a state of destitution as a consequence of the destruction of the Amazonian, African and Indonesian rainforests. It is no wonder the Green Man is returning at a time of such danger to his domains. He is reminding us of the union that ought to be maintained between humanity and Nature. He is a symbol of hope, but he is also challenging us with difficult tasks, such as how to live in fruitful interchange with the environment.

As we destroy the ecosystem something in us dies as well. We then feel a loss of connection to Nature; but celebrating the archetype of the Green Man can speak to us today, remind us of what we have lost, and help us to become conscious and recover our bond with the natural world. Because we have meddled with Nature, we need to perform rituals again and have our ceremonies to honor the Green Man.

The Green Man shows his face today at Fairy, Green Man and May Day festivals around the world. There we celebrate the natural world, the fecundity of all life, and humanity's connection to the Earth. We can personally celebrate the Green Man all year round by planting community gardens, planting bulbs in our home in the winter, maintaining a window box or building a shrine to the Green Man in our yard. You only need a few pieces of wood, leaves and twine to make a stick figure to bring the Green Man into your life.

The Green Man is now crying out for help to heal our planet so that mankind can continue its partnership with Nature. By honoring the natural energy of the Green Man we will be able to begin to reintegrate ourselves into our natural environment. When Thich Nhat Hanh, a noted Buddhist teacher, was asked what we could do to save our world, he replied, "We must hear within ourselves the sound of the Earth crying."

John Matthews, author of *The Green Man*, sums it up quite well, "The Green Man's archetypal presence reminds us of other possibilities. By honoring the natural energy he personifies, we may yet find a way to reintegrate ourselves into our natural environment. If we succeed we will certainly find the Green Man waiting for us, holding out the hand of fellowship, as we envision the possibility of a new earthly paradise, or at least of rediscovering the lost greenness of our own souls...."

Resources:

Green Man: The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth, by William Anderson, 1990.
A Quest for the Green Man, by John Matthews.

The Green Man, by William Anderson.

Once and Future Myths: The Power of Ancient Stories in Modern Times, by Phil Cousineau, 2001.

Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, Our World, by Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, 1998.

World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal, by Joanna Macy, 2007.

Man and His Symbols, by C.G. Jung, 1968.

Chesapeake Education, Arts and Research Society: www.cheers.org

A list of Green Man Sites: <http://bogbrothers.org/>

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