

CHAPTER 3

Timespirits

At about 7:30 P.M. on August 3, 1990, my wife, Amy, and I were completing a conference on addictions. We had encouraged our group of about two hundred participants to engage in a group process, by which we meant that the group should notice and process whatever was in the field. After many different individuals had spoken about what they sensed in the field, a teenager in the group who had apparently fallen asleep suddenly awoke with a muffled scream. It startled us all. Instead of neglecting this shocking disturbance, there was a consensus that this must be part of the field in which we were living, and so a small group decided to give greater form to the young woman's cry.

Within minutes, we had moved all the chairs out of the way, and two groups of people spontaneously formed. There were those who tried to give more form and support to the teenager's scream. This group yelled, screamed, and created havoc and upset. Simultaneously, the other group was incensed and outraged by the noise and insensitivity of the noisy group.

As the two groups became polarized, the situation escalated. The noisy group became louder and louder as the quiet group become more and more inhibiting. Then the two groups became aggressive and belligerent toward each other. At the height of the escalation, just as it looked unsolvable, I recommended that the group members feel free to hurt one another. At that moment, the people quieted down. Participants were silent for a moment, reflecting on how close they had just

come to being violent. Some stood up spontaneously and began to express their individual feelings about what had happened. It is difficult to convey the drama of that particular evening or the way in which it resolved itself. It was, as many group processes are, a powerful occurrence and a moving resolution.

The reason I am telling the story, however, is because that very evening, on the other side of the world, Iraq invaded Kuwait, tilting the world toward world war. Could there have been some noncausal connection between the astounding conflict in our group and the world scene? Later in the book I will discuss such noncausal connections between group processes and world events.

Here, I must ask an unanswerable question: what creates tensions and conflict in the field? One view is that fields are generated by people's differences and polarizations. Just as the lines of force seem to be generated around the poles of a magnet, many aspects of our earth's field seem to be created around human differences, conflicts, and peak experiences.

A second view perceives the field as the prime cause of events on earth. The field influences relationship issues, earthquakes, and thunderstorms. What comes first: our conflicts or the field in which we live? There are times when we sense the field generating the issues, as in the conference mentioned earlier, and then there are other times when the issues seem to generate the field.

In many parts of the world, human problems are understood to be a consequence of force fields and spirits and therefore require the work of shamans to be healed. In many parts of the modern world, problems are believed to be generated by people. If we perceive the field as being the primary force behind all things, we develop shamanism. When we feel our personal moods create fields, we develop psychological explanations.

Thus, shamanism and psychology are complementary ways of dealing with life. Both explanations are necessary; one without the other is one-sided. Worldwork attempts to put the two together by accepting the nature of individual experience as potentially necessary and useful for the individual while avoiding the questions as to where this experience comes from and what causes it.

In fact, most forms of process work operate without the person knowing the origin of the events in question. We may ask questions about cause and origin, but for the most part the answers do not do much to alleviate the problem. Therefore, my conclusion is that the best we can do is to learn how to deal with events as they occur.

To work with a field, we will need a neutral vocabulary to describe events. *Tao* is a good word but rather vague and general. *Spirit* would be better, but its connotations are different for everyone. *Yin and Yang energies* are one way to describe polarizations in a field, but these terms are culturally biased. We could speak simply of *polarizations* and *group roles* to describe the structure of fields, but these descriptions are static and do not sufficiently emphasize the changes through which each side goes. If we use terms that imply stasis and immobility, then stasis and immobility will occur when we try to facilitate global processes.

We need new terms for opposing energies, polarizations, and roles. We need a term that implies that polarizations are not entirely a product of given individuals and groups and that roles are not static but rather change, escalate, diminish, and even disappear with time. For lack of a better term, I am going to refer to the aggressive and the peace-loving polarities in the above-mentioned conference as *timespirits*.

Fields seem to be troubled by relationships between timespirits. Any polarity or tension between roles and poles can be seen as tension between timespirits. Even the names mother and father are names for timespirits that are specific to a certain time and place and that change with time. Group fields are often polarized into conflicts between competing leaders, between insiders and outsiders, between followers and critics, and between women and men. Educational fields are polarized into teachers and learners, while political fields are polarized into liberals, moderates, and conservatives. In businesses, too, we inevitably have bosses and workers, insiders and outsiders, innovators and the establishment.

Timespirits are often experienced as mythical beings. Just look at how the media describe national fields and figures. Heroes are often given superhuman attributes, while the "bad guys" are linked with villains, monsters, and evil. There are fools and sages, starving people, and a great mother figure. Every field has a villain and a hero fighting for liberation.

At the center of social life lie a multitude of turbulent, conflicting fields that are structured by tensions between minority and majority groups, between the rich and the homeless, black and white, police and drug dealers, and countless more. Severe tensions exist between majority and minority timespirits in groups all over the world. We are constantly reading about struggles between races, ethnic groups, the sexes, religious groups, and classes.

The minority is a timespirit experienced by blacks in many places, by gypsies in Europe, and by Jews, among others. Wherever we look,

we find a majority that rejects a given minority. All over the world, regardless of the country, any majority group will say the same things about the minority groups. Typically, majority groups or those in power believe that the minorities or those without power are

- different, strange, and dangerous
- stigmatized, morally inferior, or at least morally alien
- not deserving of social rights
- incapable and worthy of only the lowest social jobs
- unclean, evil, corrupting, or destructive to the world
- unconscious and dumb
- paranoid and belligerent
- intellectually inferior

Projections and Processes

The above beliefs about any given minority group, regardless of its race, religion, or sex, are universal. When we are inside these polarizations, we feel that these are human problems, created by people. But the minority-majority conflict is a conflict organized by a field; it is a timespirit dividing people from one another.

A common approach to the beliefs about minorities is that one group projects negative attributes onto another; projections are the negative parts of oneself. One should recognize that these are indeed projections and should finally withdraw them. People with this approach believe that withdrawing projections will improve relations between the groups. Withdrawing projections is obviously very important, and if one person or side does this, problems can be rapidly resolved.

But often negative projections are recreated or return after they have apparently been resolved. Certain conflicts seem to recur as if they were created not by people but by timespirits. Thus, withdrawing projections is only one part of worldwork; we must also process field tensions as if the field itself were trying to express itself. Worldwork approaches conflict in a group as an attempt by the timespirits to confront, conflict with, and know one another. In this case, individual human beings may feel as if they are channeling or being used by the conflicting field spirits.

Roles and Timespirits

The global field has neither an inside nor an outside; thus the momentary roles we feel compelled to occupy in a local field are simultaneously connected to global events. The atmosphere of our world or spirit of the times influences our bodies, tugs at our relationships, and polarizes, separates, and unites us with friends and family members.

The roles that we play in a group field are 'Zeitgeist,' spirits of the times, or global timespirits, as I call them. Timespirits are actually differentiated parts of the overall global field; they are roles found throughout the world: communists and capitalists, workers and managers, poor countries and rich countries, heroes and villains, and so on.

Elsewhere¹ I have used the term *role* to refer to the different parts of a given field. The term *timespirit* is an update of the role concept; it describes and emphasizes the temporal and transitory nature of roles in a personal or group field better than does the term *role*. *Timespirit* is meant to remind us of the transformation potential of the world around us.

Timespirits are like figures in our dreams. They are like whirlpools or vortices in an otherwise invisible field; they attract you, suck you into their swirl of energies. When you identify with a timespirit in a given field, you actually experience the emotions of that spirit; your consciousness is altered, so to speak. You get angry or become inflated. You feel heroic or victimized. The timespirit's energies make you moody and possessed, crazy and joyous, depressed and suicidal.

Transforming Timespirits

These descriptions, however, are not static or permanent states or oppositions. If one processes these roles by consciously identifying them, playing them, or even temporarily becoming them, they change. Timespirits transform.

A person or role that seems at first to be absolute evil may reveal more depth and compassion than we would have otherwise thought if that person or role is processed. Likewise, a puritanical and moral person could also transform rapidly into the essence of an evil or tyrannical figure.

Even though we describe timespirits as static, immutable constants, in practice they transform, change, and can surprise us with

their capacity to yield, develop, and evolve. The villainy of an individual or group can soften and become benevolent; the good can become rigid or even tyrannical. The weakling can turn into the hero, and the nasty critic may transform into the wise teacher.

We all fear timespirits because of their capacity to possess us in both collective and personal settings. Everyone is aware of the sudden and potentially devastating effects of mass hysteria. Suddenly, we are sucked into roles and become irrational and unconscious. The less we know about ourselves and about the field's timespirits, the more easily we fall into altered states of rage and depression, ecstasy and paranoia. Because of their influence upon us and because we think they are permanent entities incapable of change, we fear these states.

We also fear timespirits because we identify the people filling the roles as timespirits. Groups and individuals, however, are not identical with timespirits; individuals have the potential to have many different feelings and timespirits within themselves as well as the capacity to become conscious of those feelings and timespirits and to use them profitably.

For example, haughtiness and arrogance is a timespirit that not only nonblack people can occupy in a field of racial tension; blacks, too, can temporarily occupy that normally "white" role in the field. Likewise, any group, black or nonblack, may suddenly find itself being the rejected or oppressed minority timespirit. We are different than the roles we occupy in a field. We are too complex, too multifaceted to be in any one role, even if a timespirit possesses us temporarily. I am sometimes a Brahmin, sometimes an untouchable, sometimes black, sometimes white. Sometimes I feel like a Jew or a Christian, and sometimes I am a nonbeliever or a fundamentalist.

There is something familiar but also unconscious in the way we identify people with static, absolute roles. We divide ourselves rigidly: you are the leader; I am the follower. You are white; I am black. You are European; I am American. You are Zulu; I am Bantu. You live on this side of the street; I live on the other side. You are part of the higher caste; I am part of the lower. We easily forget that it is the timespirits themselves that press us into roles.

When we process our experiences, they change. As we consciously experience the feeling of haughtiness or rejection, of anger or hurt, of sadness or need, the timespirit we occupy begins to transform. As timespirits transform, it may also happen that the antagonist becomes indistinguishable from its opponent. Where we had two parts in opposition, we suddenly have unity!

It is the tendency of people timespirits to change that creates community. For example, in the conference described at the beginning of this chapter, only when the aggressive and loud people expressed their wildness, and only when the quiet group was allowed to resist and become belligerent toward the noisy group, could the aggressive and conservative timespirits transform. The timespirits transformed and eventually dissolved, leaving only individual people, speaking from the heart, in the room.

I think of my own travels. After living for twenty years in Switzerland and then returning to the United States, having traveled around the globe, I wonder who I am. Am I European or American? Am I Japanese or African? Any one identity feels too rigid for me. I can no longer identify with only one timespirit in the field. I sometimes feel embarrassed and misunderstood when people ask me where I live, where I grew up, or when and where I was born. One day I feel like a global citizen, the next day like an American, and the next day like a peasant farmer from Switzerland.

Fields must exist, because every place I go, I find myself in the same place. Every town has a "Ned" who works in the hardware store, or a "Charlie" the realtor who winks and waves as I walk by. There are always a "Monica," an easygoing, wise, and thoughtful woman, and a "Herr Stoffel," the village leader. Though every place is different, unique, and unlike any place else, there is also a hologramlike similarity. Timespirits are spaceless.

Spacespirits

Though I speak about timespirits for the sake of simplicity and generality, in specific localities a timespirit cannot be thought of as being independent of the place. A timespirit may also imply characteristics of a given locality. Thus in given areas we must also consider *spacespirits*.

For example, there is a Los Angeles spacespirit, a feeling of the place, a combination of the weather, the wide boulevards and feeling of wealth, poverty, the smog, the mountains, the presence of Hollywood, and the beach and beautiful people. This spacespirit is much different from that of Bombay, with its crowded, narrow streets, beggars lying on the sidewalk, busy marketplaces, and mosques.

In earlier times, people paid more attention to spacespirits, but today we expect our architects and city planners to create the atmosphere of a

place. Nevertheless, we are all sensitive to spacespirits, and, like indigenous people who identify certain areas, forests, and mountains as having more or less power, we are attracted to or repulsed by places and intuitively feel those "places of power" as areas that can either support us or make us ill. Don Juan, the Yaqui shaman who instructed Carlos Castaneda, speaks at length about these places of power.

Don Juan also stressed the transpersonal nature of allies. Allies are beings that take the "man of knowledge" beyond himself into other worlds. The woman or man of knowledge had to wrestle these spirits to the ground before the spirits could whirl them to death. The successful warrior who did so had then "tamed" these allies. Timespirits and spacespirits are potential allies, capable of helping us to transform the world.

Working with potential allies or spirits in this shamanistic way was only one part of Don Juan's contribution to worldwork. Whether he was dealing with warriors or with allies, Don Juan showed that part of appreciating life on earth meant using it as a hunting ground for "personal power," for discovering our own total capacities as individuals by working with ghosts and people, shadow energies and group situations, parapsychology and physics.

Individual work in the world needs public, group work to support it. The groupwork that we are all capable of doing is to realize that world problems such as racism, unbridled aggression, and insensitivity to others and to the earth are timespirits that flow beyond the cities and countries we hear about in the news. Timespirits are everywhere, inside and outside us, waiting to be dealt with.

Field Exercise

1. Think about a group meeting in which you have taken part.
2. Remember the atmosphere of that meeting. Imagine that the different parts or positions taken at that meeting were figures or timespirits. For instance, there could have been rebels and conservatives or leaders and followers.
3. Were there other timespirits present that were difficult to identify? Were there timespirits that were only implied or felt? For instance, were people afraid to speak up? If so, was it because of an unspoken critic or judgmental figure in the air?

4. Now that you can identify some of the timespirits that structure the field, how would you choose to make this field clear to others?

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Mindell, *The Year I*.