ANIMAL GUIDES IN LIFE, MYTH AND DREAMS
BY NEIL RUSSACK

A Reflection by Hannah-Valeria Grishko
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Neil Russack, a Jungian Analyst from the San Francisco Jung Institute offers us his reflections on the symbolism of animals that permeate not only his analytic work with patients, but also his private life. His personal relationship with animals described at the beginning of his book engages us from the start and allows the reader to develop a more personal relationship with the material. It is as though the author offers an embodied and related approach to animals in his life and in psychic life of his patients.

The sheer abundance of examples of different animal images and dreams allows us to experience many facets of animal healing.

From the beginning, the author delineates the difference between an animal guardian spirit that has been used in hunting-gathering cultures and an animal guide. The former would come individually to a person and stay with him or her for life’s duration, whereas the latter would “guide the person through a transitional phase of their life” (Russack, 1997, p.49).
This is particularly relevant for therapists when clients come to therapy at the point of transition in their lives or because they are not able to pass through a psychological threshold point. One of many examples that stood out for me was the case of a thirteen-year-old girl who, upon caring for an injured bird, dreams of a baby and mother dolphin. In the dream, the girl helps the baby dolphin, and the mother dolphin invites her to take a ride on her back signifying a psychological shift for the girl into womanhood.

Neil Russack’s book reminded me of James Hillman’s work in *Dream Animals and Dream Presences*, and it is the embodied way in which Russack relates to animal symbolism that echoed for me Hillman’s work. As Russack says himself,

This is not a “how to” book: It is a book to stir imagination. Animals link us to the mythic realm. They are messengers of the gods, and I hope that this book itself will become a kind of messenger... attuning us to older and deeper ways of life. (p.10)
Neil Russack’s grounding in Jungian analysis becomes particularly evident when he invites his readers to consider animal symbolism through the lens of Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. We understand each animal in their respective archetypal setting suggested by the author. At first, we enter the journey through the gates of the snake onto the realms of water, earth and fire through the embodied spirit of the animals. The initiatory act of going into the unconscious is conveyed so poignantly that it truly enlivens us through being in touch with a deeper archetypal layer of ourselves.

Animal healing teaches us to trust our innate instincts and to act in a powerfully more embodied way in the world. It does not mean to act out all our impulses in an instantaneous or destructive fashion, but instead it helps us listen to our emotions and reactions in a less premeditated way. It can be experienced as almost knowing in one’s bones or cells what one has to do. In essence, we become more fully who we are or who we are meant to be. The author’s own experience of a white egret wrapped around his heart which freed him from his physical pain and led to the writing of his book, speaks to this embodied transformation.

Jung’s work on instinctual response supports the themes of this book. In his *Vision Seminars*, Jung talks about what it means “to bring people back to the animal; not to what we know as the animal, not that they should identify with it as we understand it, but to the animal within...” (Russack, 1997, p.42).
Russack develops this further by suggesting that the healing animal images need to become absorbed and experienced, and only then can they be integrated. I am again reminded of Hillman’s work in Animal Presences where he impels his readers “not reduce the dream to the symbol but reduce ourselves, our own vision, to that of the animal – a reduction that may be an extension, an amplification, of our vision so as to see the animal with an animal eye” (pp.31-32).

Many compelling examples speak to the wounded instincts and situations where healing these fractured aspects of ourselves makes us whole again. Sometimes an animal image communicates a way of being that has not been expressed due to trauma, thus carrying potential healing in itself. One of these interesting examples introduces a woman whose dream of a man turning into a snake speaks to her own instincts that have been damaged as part of being raised in a strict Christian religious household. Further childhood trauma disconnected her from her instincts even more. The snake in the dream awakens her to the ability to trust herself and her instinctual reactions regarding what to do and how to live her life (p.58).

Neil Russack’s work has stirred my imagination and helped me to find an attuned reflection for my own animal experiences and images. This has been both inspiring and healing personally and professionally, and yet it remains, as the author suggests, “a living mystery” (p.210).

REFERENCES
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HANNAH-VALERIA GRISHKO, MSW, LCSW, is a Teaching Member of the British and Irish Society for Sandplay Therapy (BISS) and the International Society for Sandplay Therapy (ISST). Ms. Grishko recently finished her term as a Chair of BISS. She is a member of The British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (MBACP) and a member of the Association for Family Therapy (AFT) UK. Her publications include “Turtle: Primordial Symbol of Creation, Strength, Containment & Transformation in Sandplay Therapy with Children” (Journal of Sandplay Therapy, 2012) and “Use of Wet and Dry Sand in Sandplay Therapy” (Journal of Sandplay Therapy, 2014). She presented her work at the BISS National Conference in 2012, STA National Conference in Seattle in 2014 and at the STA National Conference in Chicago in 2016. Her sandplay work has taken her internationally to Russia, Romania and Israel. In addition to clinical sandplay practice, Hannah-Valeria Grishko delivers training on child development, trauma and attachment as well as childhood grief, separation and loss. Her practice includes working with children, adults, families and couples for over fifteen years in public and private settings in New York City and London. CORRESPONDENCE: valeriagrishko@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: This reflection reviews a book by Neil Russack that focuses on the symbolism of animals in daily life, dreams and mythology from an embodied point of view. An exploration of what healing the instincts means psychologically is included. Neil Russack’s Jungian analytic framework serves as a basis for the archetypal lense through which he explores animal imagery and symbolism.
About the artist:

TERRI AMIG attended the Corcoran School of Art and Design, Washington, DC; California Institute of Art, Valencia, California with further studies at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. She lives and works from her home/studio along the coast of Southern New Jersey, USA. Please check the website work upcoming shows and information. WWW.TERRIAMIG.COM