



We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy & the World's Getting Worse

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This furious, trenchant, and audacious series of interrelated dialogues and letters takes a searing look at not only the legacy of psychotherapy, but also practically every aspect of contemporary living--from sexuality to politics, media, the environment, and life in the city. James Hillman--controversial renegade Jungian psychologist, the man Robert Bly has called "the most lively and original psychologist we've had in America since William James"--joins with Michael Ventura--cutting-edge columnist for the L.A. Weekly--to shatter many of our current beliefs about our lives, the psyche, and society. Unrestrained, freewheeling, and brilliant, these two intellectual wild men take chances, break rules, and run red lights to strike at the very core of our shibboleths and perceptions.

We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy & the World's Getting Worse Details

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Richard Reese says

The Industrial Revolution blew the lid off Pandora's Box, releasing a poisonous whirlwind of evils into the world. Millions of rural people were herded into vast, filthy, disease-ridden cities to live among hordes of strangers, perform miserable work, and die young. It was pure hell, and many people snapped. Insane asylums began popping up like mushrooms, and the psychotherapy industry was born.

In Vienna, Freud kept busy treating hysterical Austrians, and Jung worked with "schizy" inmates at a Zürich asylum. They launched an insurgency against European Puritanism, a mindset that drove many out of their minds — desire was bad, and punctual, robotic conformity to a system of pleasure-free maximum productivity was the compulsory objective.

So, the first wave of psychotherapy was radical and rebellious, but a second wave that emerged in the '50s has been regressive. The new mode purported that newborns were pure, innocent, blank slates. Once born, the beautiful, helpless "inner child" was vulnerable to abuse from others that could knock it off balance, sometimes permanently.

In the therapy room, attention was focused on the patient's past — a hunt for abuse that may have happened decades ago. Mental illness was usually the result of a screwed up childhood, and it was believed to reside within the patient. The endless bombardment of dark influences from the surrounding insane society was off the radar. The goal of mainstream therapy was helping wounded patients adapt to living in an insane society. Mainstream therapists now practice everywhere in America.

James Hillman (1926-2011) was a student of Jung, and once served as the director of the C. G. Jung Institute. Over the years, he became a vocal critic of modern psychotherapy. In his opinion, newborns were not blank slates, and they were not born whole and perfect — they were unique acorns with a calling and a destiny, tuned into the voices of their ancestors.

He thought that mainstream therapy was turning the educated middle class into docile plebes, trained to "cope (and not protest), to adapt (and not rebel) to... make it work for you (rather than refuse the unacceptable)." He strongly believed that the therapy room should become a cell of revolution. Patients needed to become involved in the insane world, and transform it into a healthier place for all life. Aim at the core of the problem, not the side effects.

Michael Ventura (born 1945) was a popular journalist for the trendy L.A. Weekly. He had abundant experience as a consumer of therapy. Mental illness was a significant theme in his family history. Most of the people he knew were either in therapy, practicing therapists, or both. At the same time, he saw that most marriages and relationships around him were dysfunctional to varying degrees. How could this be, at the zenith of human progress?

In 1990, he interviewed Hillman, and the article generated abundant buzz. This inspired them to do a book: *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy — And the World's Getting Worse*. It's a scrapbook of interviews, conversations, and written correspondence, an informal jam session of passionate ideas. Their two minds soar and play, and the result is a stimulating duet. The book was published prior to the Prozac Revolution.

According to Jung, “individuation” was the ideal destination — the lifelong process of becoming more and more who you are. (He also said: “The most terrifying thing is to know yourself.”) Individuation involved throwing overboard the stuff that was not who you are. This shifted us from a realm of comfortable habits to unfamiliar territory, where growth was more likely to happen. When we strayed onto a path where we didn’t belong, our inner life force sent us clear warning messages, “symptoms” (anxiety, depression, etc.). Hillman said, “Only the unconscious can save us: in your pathology is your salvation.”

It’s wacky to help people adjust to living in an insane society, to stifle their healthy resistance, and encourage their submission. Hillman denounced “therapeutic Puritanism,” with its psychic numbing and sensual numbing. America had been anaesthetized by the Puritan mindset. “Just look at our land — this continent’s astonishing beauty — and then look at what we immigrants, Bibles in hand, priests and preachers in tow, have done to it.”

The authors linked the rise of mental illness to the rise of individualism and its shadows, alienation and oppression. For them, the psyche did not live inside the individual, the individual dwelled within the vast timeless collective psyche, like a fish in the ocean. In the good old days, life was tribal and communal. Spirituality embraced all sacred beings, animate and inanimate. Both feet were firmly planted in a stable sense of time and place. Life was rich with meaning, power, and beauty. Ventura suspected that “the quality of wholeness is not located in the individual but in a community that includes the environment.”

Christianism blindsided the ancient balance with its new concept of individual salvation. Suddenly, the creator of the entire universe was paying around-the-clock attention to ME — watching everything I did, continuously reading my mind, and remembering all of my errors.

Following Columbus, the disintegration of ancient balance went into warp drive. Europeans, their slaves, and the people they conquered were uprooted and scattered across the planet. The social glue of ancient cultures dissolved. “Nothing needed to be permanent anymore.”

In the last hundred years, life has gone totally crazy. Our sense of time and place has vaporized. Ventura called it “the avalanche.” We lived in an era of “simultaneous, massive changes on every level of life everywhere, that have built up unstoppable momentum as they speed us toward God knows where.” Obviously, we’re heading for disaster. “You can’t negotiate with an avalanche. Nothing, nothing, nothing is going to stop the shipwreck of this civilization.”

Understand that the world is not ending, just this pathological civilization. We should not regret its passing, but honor its death with song. The good news here is that “I” am not sick, my society is. The good news is that the sick society is busy dying, setting the stage for rebirth and renewal. Hillman: “Any major change requires a breakdown.” The next century or two may be rough, but it won’t last forever. “The only solution can come when the world is reanimated, when we recognize how alive everything is, and how desirable.”

What should we do? In a nutshell, two things are essential. (1) We cannot move toward healing without the power of imagination. Imagination allows us to break out of ruts, overcome barriers, and see farther, with greater clarity. It strengthens our ability to envision a healthier future. (2) Individualism is a toxic ball and chain, and we need to leave it behind, in the rubble of the past. We must remember community living and rejoin the family of life.

Ventura said it like this: “You don’t #@ around. You don’t waste your life trying to find a secure place in the avalanche, ‘cause there ain’t no such animal. You do the work of the soul.” He told his son, “If you wanted to volunteer for fascinating, dangerous, necessary work, this would be a great job to volunteer for —

trying to be a wide-awake human during a Dark Age and keeping alive what you think is beautiful and important.”

Martin Hassman says

Inspirující kniha. Za 4 a p?l hv?zdy. Zdaleka jsem s ní nemohl souhlasit. ?asto ani bez znalosti po?ádného kulturního a odborného kontextu nelze odhadnout co p?esn? tím ?ím auto?i myslí. Ale to není t?eba. Nemám pot?ebu dešifrovat p?esný význam toho ?i onoho. Sta?í mi se vydat za otázkami, které p?i jejím ?tení vyvstávají. Myslím, že tuhle knihu budu ještě hodn? dlouho zpracovávat. A to se o mnoha knihách ?íct nedá. Proto je inspirující. Hodn? inspirující.

David says

When I first saw this book, the title struck my attention immediately. I decided I had to read it on principle without knowing anything else about it. And it did not disappoint! Such refreshing honesty with penetrating accuracy. Leave it to a Jungian psychologist to write a book like this – this book is a great example of Jungian psychology in action from a couple of highly creative minds who are quite adept at tapping into our collective unconscious.

Does Hillman go off the deep end at times? Yes. Do I agree with every premise the authors write about? Certainly not. Do they have errors in their logic? Oh yeah. Are there parts where they lost me? Uh-huh. AND... Do they offer penetrating insight into the process of psychotherapy? Absolutely. Is this book a goldmine of ideas? Most definitely. And that's the real point of this book; not to solve problems, but to generate ideas.

Some of my absolute favorite topics: the acorn, respecting ideas for themselves, scholarship as fiction, incest within the psyche, and we don't know anything.

Austin says

A good read if you like idea books that will turn some common beliefs on their heads. I don't agree with all of the content or find it useful, but it was a good read.

Mihai Luca says

If you're not at peace with the world today, you should read this one.

Gordclements says

I find James Hillman to be most insightful and fearless in presenting truth as he sees it. It's the truth of an Outsider, who sees the dualistic dysfunction in our modern day institutions and values. It can be somewhat depressing to attend to his insight but if one can manage to do that it can lead to a liberating experience in opening towards self knowing. He is very clear about what has gone wrong in society and where it is leading the collective and the individuals.

Heather Smith says

We've Had A Hundred Years of Psychotherapy And the World's Getting Worse is a tonic for the hundreds of pop-psyche books pouring out of publishing houses every year. The book consists mainly of letters between the authors, Michael Ventura and James Hillman. Ventura is a columnist for the L.A. Weekly and a novelist; Hillman is a scholar, writer, and psychologist who has written numerous books, including *Re-Visioning Psychology and Dreams* and *the Underworld*.

The book's first and last sections consist of conversations between Hillman and Ventura on subjects ranging from philosophy to psychoanalysis, aesthetics to acting, politics, existentialism, child abuse, inner child theory, romantic love, and much more.

Hillman contends psychotherapy has caused a decline in the political sense of Americans by making intelligent people too passive and introspective. The sensitive, intelligent people of the middle classes, he says, have been in therapy in the U.S. for thirty or forty years, "and during that time there's been a tremendous political decline in this country." It is questionable whether this decline can be solely ascribed to the influence of psychotherapy; however, Hillman's critique of psychotherapy rings true.

Psychotherapy, according to Hillman, by locating soul (Greek: psyche) inside of oneself, has contributed to a devaluation of architecture, aesthetics, art, urban planning--indeed, to the devaluation of the entire phenomenal world. The result of this is the soul-stifling ugliness we find all around us in urban America: misplaced freeways, ugly skyscrapers, tacky-tacky suburban tracts, and rampant urban sprawl.

A central tenet of many therapists and people who might loosely be categorized as among the Human Potential or New Age movements has been that if enough people raise their consciousness--through therapy, meditation, or some other consciousness-raising method--we'll have a better society, better schools, better buildings, and better people. Hillman claims this is false.

Our inner knowledge has gotten more subtle while our ability to deal with issues in the world has deteriorated. "Personal growth doesn't automatically lead to political results," he says. "Look at Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Psychoanalysis was banned for decades, and look at the political changes that have come up and startled everybody. Not the result of therapy, their revolutions. (7)"

Hillman also targets the Recovery movement. Quoting a Boston Globe article claiming that each week 200 types of 12-step recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Overeater's Anonymous draw 15 million Americans to 500,000 meetings across the nation, Hillman asks:

Meanwhile, where are the small political meetings, the ward heelers of yesteryear? Where are the Irish, the

Italian, the Polish groups--the little ethnic and neighborhood groups--who met about city power (yes, graft and nepotism too), but who came together to push politics? There was a common cause as well as self-advancement and protection (support). (137)"

Hillman is not saying there isn't a need for some of these recovery groups--or, for that matter, for psychotherapists. He does say, however, that "there is plenty for a recovery group to give their love to besides one another; there is the world. (138)" While these recovery groups foster togetherness, they do not constitute community, according to Hillman.

It isn't community. I'm there, everybody is there, in order to support me. "I have a terrible time with my smoking. And you do, too. And each of us is there to deal with my smoking problem.

...Now, a possibility of community does arise. The loyalty to that group is a very strong thing...People don't miss their groups...There is deep affection. But the focus of this "community" is still not on any communal activity. (208-9)"

Only a few generations ago, the word "recovery" carried a communal connotation, quite in contrast to the individualistic spirit it carries today.

During Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, recovery meant dealing with one-third of a nation, which he said were ill fed, ill clothed, and ill housed. He invented the NRA, the National Recovery Act. With a little spin and a little shove, all the 500,000 recovery meetings going on each week all across the U.S.A. could turn from individualism to the body politic, recovering some of the political concern for the plight of the nation that necessitated recovery groups in the first place. As I see it, we cannot recover alone or even in support groups. We need communal recovery, recovery of communal feeling, and each group provides the nucleus of that feeling. (138)"

Hillman claims that another negative effect of psychotherapy is its finding the source of present psychological symptoms in childhood, in faulty parenting, rather than seeing the symptom as the Soul's cry for meaning, here and now. Partly, this preoccupation with childhood comes from psychotherapy's assumption that we are born as blank slates, and hence innocent, and in the course of our upbringing, we lose our original innocence. But according to Hillman and Ventura, we are not born as blank slates; we are born with a destiny to fulfill, and we enter this world with a momentum of our own. We have an agenda from the start, albeit an unconscious one.

The child is to the adult as the acorn is to the oak tree. This notion of our being born innocent is part of what's behind the fascination both psychotherapy and the Recovery movement have with child abuse and the "inner child." Caring for one's "inner child" is all the rage now in America. And the obsession with child abuse may represent the shadow side of our collective abandonment of children to poverty, second-rate schools, illiteracy, unemployment and drug addiction.

This is a radical book. It questions many cherished beliefs of what Bernie Zilbergeld, in *The Shrinking of America*, called "the therapeutic sensibility." Yet while Hillman decries the mediocrity and tepid "adjustment" that so often seem to be the results of psychotherapy, his call is not for the elimination of psychotherapy but for raising it to a new, higher level. He sees psychotherapy more as a religious and artistic venture than a quasi-medical one; by adopting the medical model, as a science, psychotherapy gained popularity. And in Freud's day, psychotherapy even had a kind of "revolutionary idealism," challenging the repression of Victorian puritanism; but gradually, "[it] became more passive, boring, repetitive, even trivial. (157)"

This notion of psychotherapy as revolutionary and idealistic is debatable; by today's standards, Freud was certainly no idealist about human possibilities. But in contrast to the repressive Victorian attitudes of his time, his recognition of unconscious motivation and the importance of sexuality was revolutionary and idealistic. Yet ultimately, psychotherapy came up against the limits of both the medical model and Freud's own pessimistic philosophy.

Hillman wants to "reimagine therapy as a practice deriving from a poetic basis of mind. (156)" To do that, however, requires a total abandonment of the medical model, and a recognition of not only the cognitive and emotional but also the political roots of pathology.

If therapy imagines its task to be that of helping people cope (and not protest), to adapt (and not rebel), to normalize their oddity, and to accept themselves "and work within your situation; make it work for you" (rather than refuse the unacceptable), then therapy is collaborating with what the state wants: docile plebes. Coping simply equals compliance. Community mental health, with its pamphlets giving advice on every "dysfunction" from thumb sucking to cock sucking, actually serves to keep the people pacified and satisfied with their white bread. (156)"

We've Had A Hundred Years of Therapy is a provocative, dangerous, and high-spirited book. It joins a growing chorus of challenges to the psychotherapeutic orthodoxy which has grown up in the last couple generations. It should be read and studied by all sensitive, thoughtful Americans, especially those who are or have been in therapy.

Jeanine Marie Swenson says

I would also give this book 4.5 stars if I could. A funny collaborative project between a seasoned therapist and a seasoned client (not with each other, by the way), this critique challenges the field to keep growing and learning and to resist complacency and structure. They come up with some deep questions and some even deeper personal answers. Loved this one!

Alan Conrad says

This is not just a strong critique of psychotherapy/psychology - it's an assault on all our unjustified beliefs and prejudices. Ventura isn't just a sounding board for Hillman's usual challenging ideas - he is a self-made psychologist in his own right. If you want to think seriously about why we and the social world we live in are the way they are, this book is essential reading

Jordon says

I wish that therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, or any helpers in training would read this book. Anyone involved in any institution, whether its marriage, academia, church, business, psychology, government, whatever, should question the basic myths of that institution and try to evolve them or live them more consciously. You can't really do that until you ask the hard questions though. Getting new ideas in your mind can help you ask the hard questions and this book is about ideas, not conclusions.

Joli Hamilton says

This is a book to be read with a grain of salt (and probably a shot of tequila with lime for that matter) but it should be read. I'm sorry to have put it off so long, the title had put me off, it was dismissive sounding when really, the book is irreverent not dismissive at all. Playing with the very idea of ideas, Hillman and Ventura wander their way through a series of conversations and letters that provoke the imagination. The book made me itchy to be in my life, to stop trying to escape the trouble of it all and embrace the mess in the face of the inevitable.

Allisun says

I read this while I was in the middle of getting my doctorate in clinical psychology. It was during a time that I was feeling irreverent and frustrated and I delighted in all the subversive ideas about psychotherapy. James Hillman is brilliant and brave. I recently re-read it and found it to be somewhat cynical and not completely informed, but still a stimulating read!

Julene says

Great dialogue, some parts more interesting than others. Long list of ways to evaluate an idea: is it fertile, fecund? does it make you think? is it surprising, shocking? does it stop you from habits & bring a spark of reflection? is it delightful to think about? does it seem deep? important? needing to be told? does it wear out quickly? what does the idea want from you? why did it decide to light in your mind? This way of thinking about what we think gives pause.

Scott says

A good read and only slightly dated for being 25 years old. I didn't really care for the exchange-style format, though that is surmountable. I value Hillman's call to turn the therapy room into a cell of the revolution, that all is not well with the world and that our "disorders" may stem not from childhood but from the very abrasive and alienating society and culture we live in. A lot of poignant ideas covering a range of topics. Worth reading.

Carl Hovey says

This is an excellent introduction to the thought of James Hillman. The book is composed of three dialogs and one series of letters between Hillman and his friend, Michael Ventura. I won't say I agree with everything Hillman says, but his ideas are creative, sometimes shocking, and most of the time flat-out brilliant. If you're at all interested in James Hillman or Archetypal Psychology, this is a great place to start.

