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A heretical vision of the Holy Brother Klaus (1417-1487)

What is a vision?

When asked what a vision is, there are three fundamental answers: believers take visions to be divine revelations; rationalists understand them as ideas that do not come from heaven, but from our clever heads, and depth psychologists consider them to be products of the unconscious that are internally perceived by the ego.

My presentation is based on the response of depth psychology, which has explored the phenomenon of visions for a century, both in life and in literature, among still-living visionaries as among those from bygone times. It no longer conceives of visions as insights into a hereafter beyond man and the world, but as pictorial representations of inner realities. It explains the concept of a supernatural sky as the projection outwards of a psychological reality, and thus transforms the old "beyond" into an inner "beyond consciousness". Withdrawal of the projection brings the otherworldly beings back into the soul, where they have always functioned as archetypes.

Therefore, for depth psychology visions are natural phenomena. Because they are impressive, often even disturbing, they were thought to be something supernatural. They are unforgettable and modify consciousness permanently. Visionaries often have the impression of God speaking to them. Visions are *numinous* (Latin *numen*: divine being). They are uncanny, *fascinosum et tremendum*: exhilarating but also shocking.

Now I will analyse a vision of Niklaus von Flüe, a hermit from the *Innerschweiz* (central Switzerland). It was a pearl that washed ashore from the creative sea of the unconscious.

The text

Until the "break", Niklaus was a respected, wealthy, happily married hill farmer. Toward the end of his "first" life (around 1465) he had the following vision:

"A man interrupted sleep for the sake of God's, and his own, suffering. And he thanked God for his suffering and his torment. God gave him the grace to find amusement and delight in it. Then he lay down to rest. When his reason was bound in irons - he thought he was not in his sleep yet - or so he thought ...

... that one of them came to the doorway, stood in the middle of the house and called him in a firm, clear voice, as he was known then, and said to him, 'Come and see your father and look what he's doing!'

It seemed to him as if he came quickly to a bow's target (it was only an arrow shot away). He came into a beautiful tent, a vast hall. In it he saw people in white clothes. The one who had called him was with him, stood by his side, and spoke for him as an advocate. Although he spoke, he did not see his form, and he was not surprised. He said, 'Here is the one who has carried and borne your son and has come to his help in his anxiety and in his need. Thank him for being, thank him and be thankful to him for being!'

Then a handsome, imposing man came striding through the palace, with a glistening colour in his face and in a white robe like a priest in his alb (white vestment). He laid his two arms on his shoulders, pressed himself to him, and thanked him with all the fervent love of his heart, that he had been so well-disposed to his son and had come to his aid in his distress.

This man condemned himself and was very frightened because of this, and declared himself unworthy, saying, 'I do not know that I have ever served your son.'
He left him, and he no longer saw him.

Then a beautiful, imposing woman came striding through the palace, also wearing such a white robe. And he saw that the freshly laundered white dress suited her well. She put her two arms on his two shoulders, and pressed him deeply to her heart with overflowing love, because he had so faithfully served her son in his distress.

The man was very frightened and said, 'I do not know that I have ever served your son. I just came here to see what you are doing.' Then she parted from him, and he did not see her again.

He looked around him. He saw the son sitting beside him in an armchair and saw that he too was wearing such a robe. It was sprinkled with red, as if it had been spattered with a frond. The son bowed to him and thanked him deeply that he had come to his aid so well.

He looked down at himself and saw that he too was wearing a white robe, sprinkled with red like the son's. He was very surprised, for he did not know that he had put it on.

He quickly found himself at the very spot where he had fallen, so he thought he had not slept" (translation: Gröbli 1990, 239; after Durer 1917-21, 31).

External circumstances

First, the text describes the external circumstances before the vision:

"A man interrupted sleep for the sake of God's, and his own, suffering. And he thanked God for his suffering and his torment. God gave him the grace to find amusement and delight in it. Then he lay down to rest."

"A man ..." This refers to Niklaus von Flüe, who at midnight for *Vigil* - the prayer of the Night Office - arose to immerse himself in an illustrated devotional book about the last hours of Christ's life. As he was scarcely able to read, he prayed with the help of the pictures. He celebrated the Vigil at the same time as the monks, but alone in a place known only to himself and his wife. There "he thanked God for his suffering and his torment" (here "God" means Jesus Christ, the Son of God).

The ritual was supposed to relieve a depression which weighed upon Niklaus. Its cause was an insoluble dilemma:

On the one hand, he was a man "of this world", a respected hill farmer with a beautiful farm holding, a good wife and ten well-raised children, who held official positions. He had been a councillor and a judge, a military commander and a major. Even the highest office in Obwalden, that of the Cantonal president, had been offered to him. He later said that he was "caught up in many businesses and worldly offices".

On the other hand, he was drawn ever more strongly towards solitude, to a life of silence. He had two souls in his chest, a worldly and a unworldly. The tension between his extraverted and introverted interests threatened to tear him apart. He had achieved the aims of his outward life; but the older he became - he was now approaching fifty - the more energetically the other side, his inner self, the soul, manifested. He was at risk of burnout.

In his distress, he sought the advice of *Heiny am Grund*, a priest in Kriens who he was friends with. Heiny advised him to meditate on the suffering of Christ at the prayer times of the monastery. When in the monastery one celebrated the seven daily prayers - *Lauds*, *Terce*, *Sext*, *None*, *Vespers*, *Compline* and *Vigil* - he should interrupt his work to pray.

This advice helped; the depression abated. Now the hermit could live with it and it was integrated into his life. *Heiny am Grund* had advised what psychotherapists still advise today: "Don't suppress what's bothering you; accept it, and try to integrate it into your life!" The fact that the advice helped is confirmed in the text: "God gave him the grace to find

amusement and delight in it." Contemplation of the suffering of Christ relativized his own suffering; whose cross brought his own cross into a new light. Meditation upon death and resurrection opened his eyes to his own "Stirb und Werde!" (die and become!). By immersing himself in the archetypical fate of the Son of God, Niklaus found the connection to the root of his own soul. This enlivened him. He called his newly gained joie de vivre "delight". The meditation was not a sad, but a good, thing! After the Vigil, Niklaus slept relieved - only once not:

Incident of the vision

"When his reason was bound in irons - he thought he was not in his sleep yet (or so he thought) - then one of them came to the doorway, stood in the middle of the house and called him in a firm, clear voice..."

Before he slept, he saw inner pictures. His attention was directed inward, as in Mary's myth when she was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. The censor, which had blocked the stream of images from the Self to the ego during the day so that Niklaus could function in the world, was now out of service. Then he saw that he had a visitation from the other side. But because he was only dozing and still not fully asleep, what he saw is called a vision. He looked down into his psyche, which revealed itself to him in pictures.

The invisible

He saw how „one of them“ came to the door, called him by name with "a firm, clear voice", and asked him to come along. It carried him away like a biblical prophet. The heavenly messenger said, "Come and see your father and look what he's doing!" He went with him, and:

"It seemed to him as if he came quickly to a bow's target (it was only an arrow shot away). He came into a beautiful tent, a vast hall. In it he saw people in white clothes. The one who had called him was with him, stood by his side, and spoke for him as an advocate. Although he spoke, he did not see his form, and he was not surprised."

Heaven was just an arrow shot away. Its proximity was the result of intense prayers. The messenger stood by Niklaus like an advocate in court. Niklaus heard him talking, but did not see him.

"He said, 'Here is the one who has carried and borne your son and has come to his help in his anxiety and in his need. Thank him for being, thank him and be grateful to him for being!'"

The invisible suggested to Niklaus in heaven: 'Here is the one who has carried and borne your son and has come to his help in his anxiety and in his need. Thank him for being, thank him and be thankful to him for being!' Three times the word "thank" - what a speech! God the Father, the Almighty and All-Knowing, was informed and instructed by the invisible: "Here he is; be thankful to him!" Who was the invisible, who could talk to God the Father like that? What was making the rule here? Was this the right thing?

From the point of view of depth psychology, nothing can be done about the behaviour of the invisible, for it symbolizes the Self, and this is above the father archetype in the psychical hierarchy. That was why it was reasonable that he told God the Father who was there, and asked him to thank Niklaus, because he was the boss.

But from the point of view of the church, things were not right at all. For them the dogma was decisive. God always remained the same: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian dogma is for the Church the "embodiment of the faith of all Christians" up to the present day (according to § 232 of the Catechism of 1993).

Klaus's conscience was influenced by the collective belief, and therefore he had to reject the change in heaven. His superego rejected the new conception of heaven, which was showed to him in the vision: the rule here was neither patriarchal nor Trinitarian. God the Mother joined God the Father, and Niklaus came to the side of the Son. From the Holy Trinity, a *quaternity* had emerged, which was led by the invisible, the fifth (the new quintessence). In addition, God the Father and God the Mother stood on the same level, and Niklaus was exalted to heaven; the feminine and the ego were revalued. That was heresy!

This new constellation of the psyche began the slow march to modernity, to the dismay of the Church, which still does not allow women priests and continues to belittle the ego; for without the priest and the Church, the individual is lost. The new constellation had begun in the High Middle Ages, expanded in the Renaissance, and had now even reached the hill farmer Niklaus von Flüe. *Outwardly* this process led to the establishment of democracy, women's equality and the right to self-determination the individual, and *inwardly* it led to the strengthening of the ego and of the feminine side of the psyche. This development was catastrophic for the Church, for which it was an existential threat. In its struggle for survival, the Church invented the Inquisition to fend off this innovation.

The vision was therefore not to be trumpeted far and wide; Niklaus had to cautiously recount it in the third person: "A man ...", because it was life-threatening. The treatment of the Almighty by the invisible, the abolition of the Trinity by a quaternity, the revaluation of the woman and the individual were heretical.

So much for the form of the invisible. No sooner had he finished his speech, than God the Father appeared, the once omnipotent and all-knowing father archetype.

God the Father

"Then a handsome, imposing man came striding through the palace, with a glistening colour in his face and in a white robe like a priest in his alb. He laid his two arms on his shoulders, pressed him to him, and thanked him with all the fervent love of his heart, that he had been so well-disposed to his son and had come to his aid in his distress.

This man condemned himself and was very frightened because of this, and declared himself unworthy, saying, 'I do not know that I have ever served your son.'
He left him, and he no longer saw him."

At the beginning of the vision, Niklaus had seen ... "that one came in to the door ... and said to him, 'Come and see your father and look what he's doing!'"

Now he saw what he did: He was "a handsome, imposing man", with an enlightened countenance, dressed "in a white robe like a priest in his alb." He reminded Niklaus of priests wearing the alb. Now the radiant epitome thereof stood opposite him, the archetype of priestly wisdom. What would God the Father do now? Since an advocate stood beside him, Niklaus thought there was now to be a court ruling. But it turned out quite differently: the father "laid his two arms on his shoulders, pressed himself to him, and thanked him with all the fervent love of his heart, that he had been so well-disposed to his son and had come to his aid in his distress".

Instead of condemning him, he took him with him to heaven! This image shows the intimate connection of Niklaus' ego with the depths of his soul. This legitimized his role as soul guide. However, he was not consecrated by the Church, but by his inner being, the father archetype. He was now an independent teacher of natural wisdom, not an official of the Church. But he was not a *self-made guru* who elevated himself to the priesthood. It

was not his ego that appointed him, but his Self which, according to Jung, is not the subjective, but the objective psyche.

In other words, Niklaus was authorized *from the inside* for his office. This gave him that genuine authority which was to characterize him later.

But Niklaus could not accept the consecration. He was too much caught up in the collective, under the thumb of the superego, to do so. He did not dare to transform the creative impulse of the vision into life, but responded as follows to Father's gratitude and embrace:

"This man condemned himself and was very frightened because of this, and declared himself unworthy."

He could not rejoice in the gratitude of heaven. What he was experiencing confused him. On the one hand, the numinous experience was delightful; on the other, it terrified him: "He was very frightened, and declared himself unworthy." He reacted over-conscientiously because his faith was identical with the faith of the Church. In the collective faith of his time, the voice of one's inner nature had no place. He did not want to be a heretic; to follow one's own religious path was taboo.

The revolutionary breakthrough of the Self in the vision was therefore followed by the counterrevolutionary "no" of the superego, which mocked Niklaus's lack of humility: "God the Father is supposed to have embraced you? Such nonsense! You only imagined that in your pride! Who do you think you are?! Carry on like that, and you'll go to hell!"

Now Niklaus "condemned himself" and was "very frightened". Hoping for mercy, he corrected his *faux pas* with the kowtow: "He declared himself unworthy, saying, 'I do not know that I have ever served your son.'"

The scene with God the Father concludes abruptly: "Then he left him."

Was the vision for nothing? God the Father thought otherwise; as an otherworldly being, he knew that the encounter with Niklaus would continue in his psyche ...

After his departure, God the Mother appeared. Would they have more success?

God the Mother

"Then a beautiful, imposing woman came striding through the palace, also wearing such a white robe. And he saw that the freshly laundered white dress suited her well. She put her two arms on his two shoulders, and pressed him deeply to her heart with overflowing love, because he had so faithfully served her son in his distress. The man was very frightened and said, 'I do not know that I have ever served your son. I just came here to see what you are doing.' Then she parted from him, and he did not see her again."

In the "beautiful, imposing woman" the mother archetype appeared in her spiritual form as *Sophia* (Neumann 1956/1985, 305 ff.). However, Niklaus understood the phenomenon concretely: he believed that he saw Mary, who was honoured by the church with four great festivals:

On the 8th of December, her supernatural conception was celebrated, on the 25th of March the conception of the Saviour by the Holy Spirit, nine months later, on the 25th of December, his birth, and on the 15th of August was the feast of the "Assumption of the Virgin Mary".

Years later Niklaus saw Mary again in the "Ranft" gorge, in the crown of an apple tree. This was how the Queen of Heaven had appeared to the ancient Egyptians, but as *Isis*.

Because Niklaus "had so faithfully served her son" he became a second son to Mary. The meditation had linked Niklaus's ego to the mother archetype, as the image shows: "She

put her two arms on his two shoulders, and pressed him deeply to her heart with overflowing love." Her warm heart, which Niklaus felt, was the breasts of Sophia, the *Alma Mater*, whose milk nourishes all who thirst for wisdom. Whoever loves Sophia is a philosopher: one who is looking for not only the intellectual training that our colleges provide, but also real education that embraces the whole human being and is also the development of heart and personality. Such wisdom could now be proclaimed by Niklaus. The consecration to this office took place not through the Church, but through Mary herself.

But Niklaus also rejected the second grace of heaven: "The man was very frightened and said, 'I do not know that I have ever served your son.'", adding, "I just came here to see what you are doing."

The second attempt of the unconscious to persuade Niklaus to welcome the new constellation of his psyche still did not yet succeed. The pious hill farmer remained loyal to his church. Nothing is as difficult to change as one's believe and image of God.

This does not mean, of course, that the two numinous encounters had left no traces in Niklaus's psyche! But the scene ended, as it did with God the Father: "Then she parted from him, and he did not see her again."

Two of the three arrows in the quiver of heaven had already been shattered, without any visible success. But there was still a third ready ...
Would it hit the bull's-eye? As the saying goes: "All good things come in threes."

The Son

"He looked around him. He saw the son sitting beside him in an armchair and saw that he too was wearing such a robe. It was sprinkled with red, as if it had been spattered with a frond. The son bowed to him and thanked him deeply that he had come to his aid so well.
He looked down at himself and saw that he too was wearing a white robe, sprinkled with red like the son's. He was very surprised, for he did not know that he had put it on."

When Niklaus looked aside, he saw the third heavenly figure, the Son. This man was dressed like the other inhabitants of heaven. His robe, however, was sprinkled with red, "as if it had been spattered with a frond". The stains were reminiscent of splashes of blessed holy water, the healing power of which stemmed from the sacrifice that the Son had made through offering himself up to the cross.

The Son "bowed to him and thanked him deeply that he had come to his aid so well." The bow elevated Niklaus. This image again shows Niklaus's profound connection to the root of his soul. The father and mother archetypes had already revealed this to him, but Niklaus, still under the spell of the superego, had rejected the gift. The spell was broken when Niklaus saw his own robe:

"He looked down at himself and saw that he too was wearing a white robe, sprinkled with red like the son's. He was very surprised, for he did not know that he had put it on."

Now his protestations against the appointment of "the Son of heaven" fell silent. Niklaus was "very surprised", but was no longer defending himself. The superego was silent, and the unconscious emerged as the winner. The depression was overcome.

The good outcome inspired not only Niklaus, but also heaven; not only consciousness, but also the unconscious, which requires good cooperation with the ego. Just as consciousness longs for security in its unconscious source, so the unconscious longs for

consciousness. Both poles need the addition of their opposite. The instincts need awareness so that the human being can adapt optimally to life, and the ego needs contact with the root of the soul, so that the life has meaning and depth. In archaic language, man needs the gods, and the gods need man.

Niklaus and the Son wore the same robes. What does this statement mean?

In the eyes of the church that was a monstrous, damnable reduction of the Son and simultaneously a sacrilegious deification of Niklaus - both blasphemous heresies, behind which stood Niklaus's vanity and the devil.

But seen through the eyes of depth psychology, the image of the same robes shows that the sacrifice of the two was basically the same: both rooted their ego in the depths of the soul. Turning inward and renouncing their worldly careers was the price they paid. In both cases, ego-centrism (egoistic self-rule) was sacrificed in favour of cooperation, dialogue with the Self, with inner and outer nature.

The ego-self-axis that was built would become a blessing for many.

Because Niklaus intuitively sensed this, he ceased to deny his elevation to the "Son of heaven". Now he accepted the title. The numinosity of the vision had finally convinced him.

Mystics called what he experienced the *unio mystica*, which *Johannes Tauler* of Strassburg (1300-1361) had described a century earlier as follows:

"God speaks to loving people, 'Dearly beloved, I thank you and rejoice over you, that you have thanked me for my suffering, and have helped me to bear the heavy burden of my cross by what you have suffered. Behold, thou shalt have thine own.' ...
God gives Himself abundantly to the loving soul ... He embraces it"(von Franz 1980, p. 105 f.).

Elsewhere: "The *unio mystica* is a foretaste of the eternal joy of heaven, the wedding, the feeling of the presence of God, whereby our soul is poured and moulded by God, through which we are to become what God is by nature: god-coloured, divine, godly"(Dinzelbacher 2012, p. 224).

Now Niklaus understood mystical texts from within. What they described had more weight for him than the doctrine of the Church; the living God was for him now more than the God of the religious institution. The ego-self-axis had replaced the superego that was caught up in the collective. The collective was replaced by the individual Self; the collective religion developed into independent spirituality. This is the goal of religious evolution.

The sacrifice that Niklaus made, which brought him blessing, was his „break". This was not easy for him, for he loved his wife and children, his cattle, and his reputation among the people. On the other hand, hermits were respected, so he could hope that many would come to seek advice from him. Thus, his sacrifice could become a blessing to many.

He was not mistaken. The break quickly made him famous. Soon he was the revered "Brother Klaus" who did not eat. Thanks to his authority, he brought the agenda to complete the "Treaty of Stans", which prevented a civil war.

Later, as a hermit in the Ranft, he immersed himself daily in his mantra:

"My Lord and my God, take all of me, which holds me back from you.
My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me to you.
My Lord and my God, take me and give me completely to you."

In the Ranft, he regularly meditated on his „book", the image of a wagon wheel with six spokes, which alternately turned inwards and outwards. In this he recognized the

movement from the divine innermost, the hub, into the world, to the rim of the wheel, and from there back to the centre, around which everything turned.

God flowed through everything, and everything flowed back into Him. Everything was one. Niklaus had found the "one being", for whom he had longed so earnestly. His "carnal" life was finished; now he would lead a life "in the Spirit".

With this, the final phase of the man's process of individuation began. We are celebrating his 600th birthday this year. C.G. Jung and his school teach how the process of individuation is today. The path of salvation is still the same: it is about the connection of heaven and earth, of ego and Self, in other words, of the spiritual whole.

Whether all the jubilee celebrations for Brother Klaus convey what happened more than half a millennium ago in this nature-connected, spiritually gifted hill farmer is questionable. What he still has to say today is simply: "Turn inward!" My wife and I will give a meditation course at the Hotel Paxmontana in Flüeli-Ranft this year with the title: "Turning inward - with Brother Klaus and me." A contemporary "Treaty of Stans" would oblige us to try seriously to renounce the superficial lifestyle and give life more depth.

We do not have to act as radically as Niklaus and "break" from everything. What remains exemplary about him, however, is that he took his soul seriously and adapted his life accordingly. The Bible contains the thought-provoking sentence: "What good is it if we gain the whole world, but lose our soul" (Mark 8: 36)!? We live in a soulless time. Turning inward like Niklaus, could be a blessing for many.

Thank you for your attention.

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