

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS MOORE

Author of care of the Soul and patron of Re•Vision

The day after Thomas Moore ran a workshop/seminar for staff and those who trained at ReVision in London, in March 2011, he met with Sarah Van Gogh, one of the tutors on the ReVision counselling diploma course, for this interview.

S VG: The theme of the talk you're going to give tonight is around the virgin goddess Artemis, and her qualities, and I'd like to ask you about the idea of a deep need for privacy, and whether you think that might get missed, sometimes, in therapy.

T M: Well, there are many different levels or contexts for the spirit of Artemis. I have given talks on Artemis and Environmentalism, for instance. So we could see Artemis in the outer world (which is never completely outer), or on a different level, which I think you're talking about, which is to do with the spirit of integrity, being *inviolate*. So there is something about a human being that doesn't want to be violated, or penetrated. And I think that in therapy, sometimes, there can be the idea that we should all be able to say or do anything; that therapists can expect their clients to say everything, open themselves completely. And I would say that goes against the spirit of Artemis. We all have an Artemis element, which is to do with that which doesn't want to be public, doesn't want to be seen. And this spirit of Artemis is also to do with meditation and contemplation, and that deep sense of soul that is so hidden, you don't even know it yourself.

S VG: I guess there's always a tension between needing to have some aspect of yourself hidden, and needing to be really seen. Winnicott describes little children playing Hide And Seek. He says that because it's so painful to hide and never be discovered, but also painful to be found before they're ready, most little kids will play it by first hiding, and then leaping out to say "Boo!" before anyone discovers their hiding place. They want to be in charge of when the hiding ends! That makes me curious about how you experience the absence of being able to be hidden when you're on a visit like this to London, to talk and run workshops and so on; I guess you have to be out 'on display' quite a lot.

T M: Well, I'm a very, very private person. There's nothing better for me than sitting at home, writing. As a matter of fact, I was just sitting by myself in the hotel room this morning, and I was thinking how much I miss writing. I've been away from home for over a week now. That's the most difficult thing about being away for me, because I enjoy writing so much. And the act of writing is very private, very personal; ultimately it does connect me to the world, but it's a very private process. I think the practice of therapy is also private, even though there are two people involved, it's still contemplative and private, I think the spirit of Artemis can be present in therapy.

S VG: And somehow also the spirit of Eros?

T M: I once heard someone give a lecture on Artemis, and she said that Artemis is not involved with Eros in anyway. I thought that was completely wrong, and so we argued it, you know, publicly. I feel the stories about Artemis are all full of Eros.

S VG: Bathing by moonlight in the woods, in a secret grove, after a day's hunting – that's pretty erotic!

T M: And there's the story of Daphne, who's an Artemis-figure. Apollo is totally crazy for her! He can't keep himself from pursuing her, and all the great images of that story are to do with flight, being pursued. That's very erotic. I think there is definitely the erotic around Artemis. For instance, I take a real pleasure in protecting the integrity of the clients I work with. I'm happy, I enjoy it when they don't say everything – it pleases me. I'm not waiting for them to completely unveil themselves.

S VG: So would you say more about how you experience the wish or hope that will be around, when you work in public, for you to “undress” a little, or do a bit of “undressing” of someone else?

T M: Well, I can do both! And there's one idea I regard as key in all this: we are dealing with a **polytheistic** psychology - a psychology of many gods and goddesses. So that means not everything is Artemis. Artemis is an important spirit, *as part of a whole picture*. So I think it is perfectly possible to respect privacy and, at the same time, encourage an openness. So I asked someone at the workshop yesterday, in a way that I hope was not too invasive, to reveal a bit more of themselves. I might say to someone something like, “I appreciate what you're saying, and I don't think that would account for the level of emotion you're showing; I think there's something else going on.” And then, if that person doesn't want to say anything more on that, that's fine. If it's too personal, I wouldn't expect them to. But I do expect, when I'm working with a group of therapists, that they will be far in advance, in these terms, of an average group of people. I don't hesitate to ask them to use self examination and self reflection. I mean, I would certainly protect their need to be private, *and* I would expect them to be able to reveal a fair amount. A therapist needs to be able to do that, and I will be tough with a group of therapists, in expecting them to do that.

S VG: And I imagine such toughness might be part of what the people in a workshop with you are longing for? I guess we're back to the tension Winnicott was describing – 'I want to be known and seen; just not *too* known and seen.'

T M: I think that's right.

S VG: That makes me think of the time and space given on the ReVision courses to individual reflection and then writing about those reflections, and how important it is that *no one else ever sees* those notes, those internal journals. How potent that makes them. And how that goes against the general trend in our society; generally there is less and less opportunity to spend quiet, reflective time alone, and there's an ever-increasing expectation that we should be communicating with others all the time, faster and faster.

T M: Well, we have a very extraverted society now. We are not encouraged to find times for retreat, reflection, to go back into oneself. People are expected to be outgoing and engaged with others and the world. It's almost as if you have to break the rules now to really be private.

S VG: The science writer Simon Singh is interesting about this as a relatively recent state of affairs – in his book on codes and codebreaking he talks about how for thousands of years, until just a hundred years ago, it was so simple to be alone and private: you just left places where there were dwellings, checked no one was hiding in a nearby bush and you could be sure of your privacy! Now, it is no longer a simple business. We have mobiles and computers and cctv and a web of connection that's much harder to get out of. What do you think happens to us, as a society, when we have so much opportunity to be constantly outwardly connected to others?

T M: Everyone needs an opportunity to reflect on their own experience. If not, you are simply always doing, and there's no possibility for learning. I've been talking a great deal recently to people in the medical professions for my book (“Care of the Soul in Medicine”), and over the years I've been teaching psychiatrists, and all these people are those who really need the opportunity to reflect on what they are doing, and they have no opportunity, in their work, to do so. They're always being called on to do something. And when I suggest that this is what they need, their immediate reaction is – they can't, because they're too busy. So sometimes we can't even *imagine* reflection as being important enough to be put into a schedule.

S VG: There's a great letter from the poet Keats to a friend where he describes a morning of “delicious, diligent indolence.” I love that expression. He tells his friend he has been lying on a sofa, reading poetry and listening to a thrush in his garden, and how much he has got from apparently doing nothing.

T M: Oscar Wilde would be another writer who would be in the same vein.

S VG: It seems that even in therapy we have to really fight for the space to be like that; in many counselling trainings in the UK now, there is a pressure to make them shorter, more vocational, more goal-orientated. The space to dream and reflect is seen increasingly as an expendable luxury.

T M: I was in Ireland just before I came to London. When I was in the airport in Dublin, I went to the food hall, to get some breakfast, and there was a woman doing the same, next to me, and there was *no music playing*. It was quite quiet, and she turned to me, and said, “Isn't this wonderful, just to have some quiet while you're having breakfast!” We were both enjoying it so much. About ten minutes later the music came on, but there had been this time of peace and quiet. That's quite rare now in a public place. Even in somewhere like a hospital, where there should be places of peace.

Instead there are TV's on, and frequent announcements. I read an article by a nurse recently who pointed out that even the nurse notebooks they all have make a 'snap' noise when they shut, that you can hear all over the hospital. So when you're treated in a hospital, it's not easy to find peace. I make the case for hospitals to have quiet places, as a kind of Artemis grove – a little room or alcove. But in hospitals that's seen as a waste of space; they have so many things and equipment that they need space for, they see an empty, quiet space as only a waste, not an opportunity.

S VG: Back with Artemis again, I was thinking of how important dogs are in all her stories, and of how there's often something of the qualities of Artemis around animals. When you take a dog for a walk, you are both alone and not alone, which is a great experience. You can have it in therapy too: you're somehow alone while you're with another.....

T M: I have a dog at home. For years he has sat under my desk while I write, and I walk him twice a day. And one of the things I love about my dog is he communicates so well and never says a word. I'd be disappointed if he started talking.....He makes his wishes known, basically through his eyes or his posture; or he'll take me somewhere, knowing that if he takes me there, I'll know what his desire is. So I really understand that Artemis's dogs are appropriate companions for her. But I have this other thought on that. I'm going to show some pictures this evening, one is of a Greek vase with illustrations on the side; you can find it at the museum of Boston. It shows Artemis and a couple of her companions, and one of them has a dog coming right out of his or her head. You see it emerging from the top of the head. It's such a striking image. The first time I saw it I was so intrigued by it . And then I found out later that the companions had names, and this one figure had a name that meant 'madness.' It was showing a kind of '*dog-madness*.' Of course, Actaeon sees Artemis naked and she turns his hunting hounds on him; they go mad and tear him to pieces. So there's a dangerous kind of Dionysian energy around the dogs.

S VG: Are you talking about a sort of 'pack mentality'?

T M: Yes.

S VG: That makes me think of the consequences, metaphorically, for our culture, of what we unleash on ourselves when we are like Actaeon, always wishing to see, intrude, look at the virgin's nakedness. Maybe that kind of urge ultimately tears us apart?

T M: Well, often in our intimate relationships we have fewer opportunities to take things slowly, have breaks in between times of intimacy, times of solitude, when we can reflect and wonder about the relationship. We don't tend to be able to move slowly in and out of relationship with each other anymore. And when a relationship is based on a kind of speed, it often doesn't work very well.

S VG: I suppose it might, if you're lucky.

T M: Yes, if you're lucky. Well, we probably all need luck for any kind of relationship to work!

S VG: But we might need more than a fair share of it, if it's one based on a quickly-achieved intimacy.

I have another question for you, related to the Artemis need for privacy and seclusion. I hope it doesn't seem like an overly intrusive question! I guess you can just not answer, if it does....Given that you're quite a private person, how do you feel about the fact that there's quite a lot of information about you, including images of you, out in the public domain?

T M: That's fine to answer because actually it doesn't bother me. Let me go back in time to when I was in my teens and twenties, to explain. I lived in a religious community then, a Catholic order. Especially for the last 5 or 6 years that I was in the order, I found it a wonderful way of life for me. I had a small room that was mine and nobody was allowed in that room without my permission. Nobody. I could absolutely count on the fact that no one would cross the threshold without my invitation, and I loved that. But that room was in a place where everyone had their rooms too. It was in the context of community. And I had the wonderful opportunity to be private, which I really needed, and also be part of a community. And the community was a given. I didn't have to work at it. There were so many extraverts there, I didn't have to do anything, myself, I just had to follow the extraverts to have access to a more extraverted way of life. So it's a similar thing for me now, with what you're asking about. I'm still very private, and I spend most of my time alone, with my dog, writing, and with my family. We have a pretty quiet household. So having my image and so forth out in public, and publicising my books, and doing workshops, to me, it's like being in the religious order again – this all gives me a life that I don't have to work at. I'm pleased my writing allows me to have this other way of life, one that's more 'in the world.' Otherwise I would be more cut off. So I like it. Most of the time.

S VG: Would you say some more about what you get, in terms of the balance between solitude and connectedness, when you come over, as ReVision's patron, to do workshops, or give talks?

T M: There are only a very few places that I know, where the people approach therapy in a way that makes sense to me, and ReVision is one of them, so I'm always pleased to come and do things with ReVision. I feel I always learn a great deal. And I appreciate collaborating with Chris Robertson (one of the co founders of ReVision), and I enjoy his thinking and leadership. I trust what ReVision is doing. There are a couple of places in Ireland, and in the United States where I feel similarly 'at home' , but it's rare. So I enjoy coming. However.....I find that my thinking about it beforehand is always more idealised than the actual experience, because there is always a kind of failure in this work. I always have to disappoint. And that can leave me feeling, “Hmmm, I'm not sure I want to do that again!” But I think it's important to really take on some roles that come to us. Especially leadership roles. And I think therapists could be more up for that – more up for making connections to the wider world. Because they spend so much time learning a great deal about what goes on in life, in their training and in their work. And that's exactly the perspective that the world needs. But it's not happening enough. I think therapists could be a more productive force, and take more of a leadership role in the world. So, I feel the same about myself: if others are interested in having me around to do things with them, to teach or facilitate, I feel like it's my job to enter that role, and do it, without any false modesty; just really *take it on!* And most good teachers that I've known, especially in the spiritual traditions, are able to do this. Like gurus. They just really take on the role of teacher. I mean, there could be a lot of self doubt and worry and all that. But you don't have to show that, you just take on the role. I never went looking for such a role, I didn't ask for it, and I don't manufacture it. I don't try to create a following or anything like that, but it happened, it's happening. So I take it theologically. It's like a grace that I have to respond to. It's not my job to

judge it, or dismiss it, and say, "Oh, I shouldn't be doing this!" If it happens, then, *good!* And I will enter that role.

S VG: When you're able to teach and there are those hungry for what you can teach, it must be a great match. A bit like what Marion Milner, the analyst, describes in her book "On Not Being Able To Paint" - she talks about that bliss when a mother is ready to feed and able to offer a full breast, and her baby is hungry and wants to have her milk. A match made in heaven!

T M: Yes, and there's a shadow aspect to that too, that teachers have to come grips with. When people come with expectations, and they turn out to be happy to be with you, that's fine. And some people come with expectations, and they end up disappointed. So as a teacher you have to know you are going to disappoint people. I gave a talk in Toronto to a large audience, and it was a pretty formal setting, so I had a suit and tie on. At the end of my talk a man came up to me. He said he'd read my books and was very interested in hearing me talk, but was totally disappointed because I wasn't a wild, hairy-looking person, who looked as if I was really embodying the shadowy side of soul, and who was really living this wildness. Instead, here I was, a conventionally dressed person, who had just given quite a formal talk, and had not gone wild. He said he would never again come to hear me talk!

S VG: Did you feel much temptation to say, "Huh! Envious attack!"?

T M: Well, I still remember it, but it didn't really get to me, because that's just not who I am. His idea of me had nothing to do with what I'm really like, so I didn't feel threatened by it. But I thought it was so interesting to see how strong the fantasy was that he had about me. And I could appreciate that, because that's the way it is – we all have fantasies about writers; particularly writers because all we usually get of them is their words. But I'm saying on some level, you have to disappoint people and that can be hard....

S VG: I guess we're back to the beauty of a polytheistic approach – in the pantheon there's Artemis who can only ever be Artemis-like, and there's Apollo, who can only be Apollonic. They are all just purely themselves, and couldn't be any other way. And there's room for them all.

T M: You know, I learned a lot from James Hillman about this. He and I used to talk a lot about this, how we never wanted to hide what kind of people we were from our clients or students. He would often have gatherings at his house for colleagues and students, and he would always just be himself. And he's not that easy to get along with sometimes, when he's just being himself! And I really got that notion a long time ago – that I didn't want to create a special persona for an audience. I mean, you have to, to some extent, just because of the context of adapting to a particular format. But basically, I don't want to get into all that. I know some speakers and teachers who give talks and so forth, and they take a lot of trouble creating the right atmosphere, and they turn up early to get the chairs arranged how they want. I have no interest in doing that. That's not who I am, and I don't really care about that stuff. Whatever the setting is, I just go into it and do my thing, and I'm not trying to create a mood or a perception of me. I think that's a piece of what we're talking about.

S VG: I see our time together is about up. Thank you for making space in your busy UK schedule to do this interview. One last question: if you had had some free time this morning, instead of talking with me, what might you have done?

T M: I could have gone to the British Museum to look at some of the objects that John Dee used (the Elizabethan necromancer). They have his obsidian glass that he used for prophesying. It's very beautiful.

S VG: Well, thank you for forgoing that pleasure and talking with me instead.

T M: Thank you.