

HEALTH

James Hillman, Therapist in Men's Movement, Dies at 85

By BENEDICT CAREY OCT. 27, 2011

James Hillman, a charismatic therapist and best-selling author whose theories about the psyche helped revive interest in the ideas of Carl Jung, animating the so-called men's movement in the 1990s and stirring the pop-cultural air, died on Thursday at his home in Thompson, Conn. He was 85.

The cause was complications of bone cancer, his wife, Margot McLean-Hillman, said.

Part scholar, part mystic and part performance artist in his popular lectures, Mr. Hillman began making waves from the day he became the director of studies at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich in 1959.

Mr. Hillman followed his mentor's lead in taking aim at the assumptions behind standard psychotherapies, including Freudian analysis, arguing that the best clues for understanding the human mind lay in myth and imagination, not in standard psychological or medical concepts.

His 1964 book, "Suicide and the Soul," challenged therapists to view thoughts of death not as symptoms to be cured but more as philosophical longings to be explored and understood. A later book, "Re-Visioning Psychology," argued that psychology's narrow focus on pathology served only to amplify feelings of anxiety and depression.

Feelings like those, he said, are rooted not in how one was treated as a child or in some chemical imbalance but in culture, in social interactions, in human nature and its churning imagination. For Mr. Hillman, a person's demons really were demons, and the best course was to accept and understand them. To try to banish them, he said, was only to ask for more trouble.

He might advise a parent trying to manage, say, a mentally troubled son to begin by “stop trying to change him.”

By the time he returned to the United States in 1970s, Mr. Hillman had adapted Jungian ideas into a model he called archetypal psychology, rooted in the aesthetic imagination. It was irresistible for many artists, poets, and musicians. The actress Helen Hunt, the composer and performer Meredith Monk, the actor Mark Rylance and John Densmore, the drummer for the Doors, were among his adherents, drawn in part by his force of personality, at once playful and commanding, generous and cunning.

“For all his Saturnine and Martial defense of psyche in our scientifically defined cosmos,” Mr. Rylance wrote in a statement, “he is the most jovial person to sit with.”

In the late 1980s, Mr. Hillman and two friends, the poet Robert Bly and the writer and storyteller Michael J. Meade, began leading conferences exploring male archetypes in myths, fairy tales and poems.

The gatherings struck a chord, particularly with middle-aged men — Mr. Bly’s book “Iron John” became a best-seller — and by the early 1990s there were thousands of such men’s workshops and retreats across the country, many complete with drumming, sweat lodges and shout-outs to the ancient ancestors.

“I don’t know what to say about James,” Mr. Bly said in an e-mail. “You could say, ‘James threw enormous parties for the spirits.’ ”

In 1997, at age 70, Mr. Hillman became a best-selling author himself when “The Soul’s Code” reached the New York Times list. He appeared on “Oprah.”

“He was in the tradition — or maybe the nontradition — of Alan Watts: a psychologist, thinker and lay philosopher who took concepts from a variety of sources and melded them into his own, particular idiosyncratic take,” said Wade E. Pickren, chairman of psychology at Pace University in New York and editor of the journal *History of Psychology*.

“I think psychology is prone to and also needs people like Hillman who think outside the box,” Professor Pickren said. “Sometimes he’s following his own idiosyncrasies, but sometimes his observations make us all pause and reconsider.”

James Hillman, the third of four children of Julian Hillman, a hotelier, and his wife, Madeleine, was born on April 12, 1926, in a room at one of his father’s properties, the Breakers Hotel in Atlantic City. His mother ran an accessory shop.

After high school, James attended the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown

University for two years before joining the Navy's Hospital Corps in 1944. He studied English literature in Paris at the Sorbonne and graduated with honors from Trinity College in Dublin with a degree in mental and moral science.

But it was when he moved to Zurich and enrolled at the C. G. Jung Institute, in 1953, that his imagination took flight. After 10 years as the director of studies there, he zigzagged between Europe and the United States, writing, giving lectures, editing a Jungian journal and, in 1978, landing at the University of Dallas as graduate dean. There he helped found the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.

He wrote more than 20 books and was a sought-after speaker, often drawing a full house, delivering the Terry lectures at Yale and others at Harvard and Princeton, and appearing regularly in Switzerland, Italy and India, as well as at annual symposiums at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, Calif., which houses his papers.

Once, early in his career, an editor rejected one of his manuscripts, saying it would "set psychology back 300 years," according to Dick Russell, who is writing a two-volume biography, "The Life and Ideas of James Hillman," due out next year. "He just loved hearing that," Mr. Russell said, "because that's exactly what he wanted to do."

Mr. Hillman was married three times. Besides his wife, Ms. McLean-Hillman, an artist, he is survived by four children from his first marriage: Julia Hillman of Woodstock, Conn.; Carola Hillman of St. Gallen, Switzerland; Susanne Hillman of Zurich; and Laurence Hillman of St. Louis; as well as two sisters, Sue Becker and Sybil Pike, and a brother, Joel.

"Some people in desperation have turned to witchcraft, magic and occultism, to drugs and madness, anything to rekindle imagination and find a world ensouled," Mr. Hillman wrote in 1976. "But these reactions are not enough. What is needed is a revisioning, a fundamental shift of perspective out of that soulless predicament we call modern consciousness."

A version of this article appears in print on October 28, 2011, on page B18 of the New York edition with the headline: James Hillman, 85, Therapist in Men's Movement, Dies.