

Totems, Authenticity, and Bob Dylan

by [Carl Nelson](#) (March 2025)



Sunset, Monument Valley (Bob Dylan, 2022)

The instincts are a far better protection than all the intellectual wisdom in the world. –C. G. Jung

In my earlier years, 1970-1980s, I was quite captivated by Jungian psychology, and a notion forwarded was that of the totem animal.

According to Jung, the animal is sublime and, in fact, represents the "divine" side of the human psyche. He believed that animals live much more in contact with a "secret" order in nature itself and—far more than human beings—live in close contact with "absolute knowledge" of the unconscious. —Google

At that time this was a popular notion, and most Jungians had opinions about what their own totem animals, and those that were the totem animals of others. Pop psychology writers were able to make hay with the faddishly accepted theories, populating the newly released offerings with titles such as: the famous *"Women Who Run With The Wolves / Contacting the Power of Wild Women"* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, journals such as the *Hedgehog Review*, and the plethora of sports teams who take on specific animals from the Cougars to the Ducks to represent their spirit. Contemporary books such as *Animal Totems and Spirit Guides*, *Totem Tales*, *Personal Totem Pole*, and *Wolf Girl* (Books 1-7) continue the fun.

One of the ways to determine your totem animal is to name the animals which most fascinate you. Pigs and hogs rather fascinate me, which unfortunately delivers a rather poor spiritual reading. I guess I'll just have to live with it as I nevertheless enjoy watching pigs and hogs, and especially sows with their piglets cavorting about between their heavy hooves in the muck. I like the way they all jam their heads into the feeding trough at dinnertime with all of the grunting and squealing. It's the innocence and happenstance cruelties of life all in one setting. I like toads, too. So I'm probably unsalvageable.

For a while, the preceding provided a fun intellectual playfield that didn't require a ceiling-busting IQ in which to

participate. But I'd never experienced totems in the flesh, so to speak. When I did, I didn't connect the phenomenon with totem animals—or animals of any sort for that matter. It was simply something *I had noticed about authenticity, that it had the property of dispensing invulnerability.* This was a fascinating discovery—which revealed its presence to me first on the sales floor, in the boiler room. I noticed that many of the top sellers had personalities which would seem to put people off, and behaviors which would have seemed to void or destroy relationships. (Which, actually, was true of their marriages—or ex-marriages, or non-marriages.)

I witnessed top sales persons yelling, in conversation with prospects, into their phones, swearing, stomping, hanging up, even tossing the phone and cradle. Contradicting the prospect was something done all the time, and it seemed to move seamlessly with bullying. How did they get away with this? The thing was that I'd always viewed a successful relationship as people exchanging pleasantries. But actually a relationship was about anything involving two parties. It could be two fighters in the ring (“reach out and touch someone”) or a boss with their subordinate, or a “f*ck you!” contest. It didn't have to be nice. I would listen from my cubicle in awe. Moving forward in life by screaming at others—what a life plan. I didn't think this was supposed to work. But wow! It really blows away the chaff. Nothing in the sales materials mentioned this. It wasn't in the role-play demonstrations. But some people melded it within a winning formula.

It didn't generally work. It only worked much of the time for certain people.

Certain people could get away with all sorts of behaviors and people didn't get sore. At times, they were almost amused, like when you might tap at the side of a snake's cage till they struck. It seemed to have something to do with authenticity. *When your behavior seemed authentic, the latitude for what was allowed seemed to expand.* It's as if you

were a horse and went about knocking things all about inside of an owner's house. They might yell and try to chase you out, but they wouldn't blame you. You would still be a good horse, but just in the wrong place. If a person's nature squared with their behavior, a great latitude of tolerance was granted. And this latitude of behavior seemed to be what was meant when Jungians talked of a totem animal.

Once I realized this, I could see evidence of it everywhere. Working as a teamster in the warehouse for example, I was irritated that smokers could take a break and stand on the dockside chatting. But if I, a non-smoker, were to do the same, I'd be told to "get back to work." It seemed unfair that they would get a break for a bad habit. But I was misunderstanding. They were given the break because they were smokers, whereas I was not. It was done with the same understanding that one might allow a cat to stalk unimpeded through a flower bed, while the cow is kept out. Or an owl (who lives on mice) is left alone while the chicken hawk is not. Or the hound is left to sleep on the porch while the draft horse must work. Or a bear is discouraged around cattle herds but a wandering deer is not. Again, in the warehouse, we had a former deep water sailor, who would re-create his drinking binges ever so often, be gone for days and then return. It was all business as usual. But if I stayed out sick, I got immediate grief.

It is really remarkable who people will automatically take orders from, or endure loud denunciations from—and others who they will not—over the same topics and problems. I gave up trying to tell people what to do long ago because I didn't like to—and because they would ignore me anyway. When directing actors, some direction is required. The only way I found which worked for me was to immediately pick a scene from the script to work on. The actors would follow my direction at first out of tradition and habit. Then once I could show them how my advice had made their performance perk up, they began

to show real interest as I became the lantern with which to find success. But I hated these workarounds for what never came naturally.

In this respect, most of my life evolved as a workaround for what did not come naturally. Humans are much like dogs in that they cling to a hierarchy—and if you aren't leading, you're sniffing someone's ass (as humor has it). And the point of this paragraph is to say that it is important to determine what your totem animal might be, as this will define your territory and circle of influence and power. A predator will naturally be very far ranging, while a forager, like a small rodent's life will be much more concentrated in a spot. To be in harmony with your nature is to become the most efficient and hopefully successful (given some luck) person you can be. It may also keep you safe.

For example, I almost never request anything nor give an order. I might give a direction, if asked. I manage things for myself, as I rank quite low in the totem hierarchy. Though I'm sometimes offered a little leeway when I act like a pig, and can manage to maintain the boundaries of the muck I like so as to live as I wish. There are no development covenants where I live. Autos are parked in yards, or getting fixed on the street or in driveways. Very little here to be snobbish about or Jones' to keep up with—but quite safe. (So it's "a better class of losers", as the country song intones.) I can write here and publish from my little office and no one cares. No one reads. It's free slumming, in some respects, which can retail well. I live within an immense latitude, by keeping to my sty... even as a married pig. (My wife's totem animal is an otter, which might explain why she is always after me to bathe.)

All of which brings me to discussing the phenomenon of Bob Dylan, which was actually the impetus for writing this. After

watching the current film biopic, *A Complete Unknown*, about Dylan (who I wasn't that taken with), I finally broke down and purchased the biography by Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway / The Life of Bob Dylan*.

When I was a hopeful playwright taking a class, the instructor used a phrase regarding some possible theatrical material we were discussing. His advice was that, "we have to get this thing up into the air." Isn't that what all of Art does? It takes the everyday and the mundane, and inflating them like balloons begins tapping and tossing them all over, while the accidental breezes also play a role.

The problem with the film, to my mind, is that it took the air out of Dylan's mystique. A rather tawdry life gets respect through the magic of talent. In reality, the film was, in its mediocrity, about a bunch of underfed scrabbling twenty-somethings who fed upon the genius of Dylan's artistic creations like tapeworms. The actors played characters fairly close to the personages they were to resemble. (You could certainly see who they were aiming for.) The story had a serious rearrangement and fabrication of event done for artistic reasons, though the result of this being done (the mystique) was missing. The biographical book released much of the air likewise (but isn't that a necessity of a biography?). As far as I could see, few of the skimpy theater audience were either transfixed by the performances or enthralled by the tale. They simply nodded in tribute to the genius of Dylan, while the critics genuflected. You didn't like the guy much. But that's the reality, isn't it?

This is so different than the reaction to the emerging phenomenon of Dylan himself. People mobbed him outside of performances and on the street. They snuck under the backseat cover of his car. They went through his garbage. They were on his roof! He mumbled obscure and cryptic comments. He missed appointments. He was late. His observations were often sardonic or rude. He was promiscuous and self-involved. He

stole. He lied. He smoked. He fabricated. He was a rascal who reveled in it all until it nearly ate him alive.

My take is that Dylan is a human being who lived as an amanuensis to his totem 'animal' who was the Old Testament God.

Playing Boswell to this totem, Dylan often remarked that he felt that he himself was not the author of his work but merely the conduit. How could a person think this up, he asked at one time, referring to a passage of his inscrutable song lyrics. And it was the interlarding of the two (Boswell & God) which he both took personal advantage of and which bedeviled him.

The character out of history who Dylan most resembles to my mind would be the Old Testament King David. Both were rascals in many of their actions, and yet God did not abandon either, seemingly, as they fulfilled their duties as conduits. You don't abandon a faucet when it acts like a faucet . The surety of both was that as David was 100% committed to God, as was Dylan 100% committed to his music, and not much else.

Dylan knew what he wanted and he apparently expected his vision to automatically flow through others. (Those who didn't perform as wanted were immediately replaced—often without explanation.)

Dylan just wanted to come in and start playing and he wanted everybody, as if by magic, to fall in right behind him and [play] a tune they never heard before," says mutual friend Nick Gravenities. —Down the Highway (Pg.179)

Bob rarely spoke to Johnston [album producer]. The only clue he offered when he was about to sing was that his foot would start tapping apparently in time with a metronome in his head. Johnston ran tape continuously so as not to miss anything. "I truly believe that in a couple of hundred

years they'll find out he was a prophet," he says, adding without irony: "I think he's the only prophet we've had since Jesus. –Down the Highway (Pg.184)

The basis of Art is probably the religious experience. People are attracted to the either the idea, or the presence, or even the fabrication of God, like moths to a flame. And when the experience is at a level above all else, it can be incredibly compelling. Like hearing the voice of God through a burning bush, or Jesus in person, people (notably fishermen) tend to drop what they are doing.

As Bob Dylan, the conduit, he was offered incredible audience and personal latitude. In the movie and book we get the itinerant, ragamuffin Boswell (*films*), but in the music we are the contemporary witness to an Old Testament God in this, the contemporary world. It is the authenticity of this artistic experience, in my view, which accounts for the incredible charisma, and privilege allotted the Dylan persona. In truth, God chooses unexpected conduits for His manifestations.

I'll end with another similar impression by the fellow folk musician, Leonard Cohen, after his attendance at a Bob Dylan concert.

... As Sharon Robinson said, Bob Dylan has a secret code with his audience. If someone came from the moon and watched it they might wonder what was going on. In this particular case he had his back to one half of the audience and was playing the organ, beautifully I might say, and just running through the songs. Some were hard to recognize. But nobody cared. That's not what they were there for and not what I was there for. Something else was going on, which was a celebration of some kind of genius that is so apparent and so clear and has touched people so

deeply that all they need is some kind of symbolic unfolding of the event. It doesn't have to be the songs. All it has to be is: remember that song and what it did to you. It's a very strange event.

[Table of Contents](#)

Carl Nelson's latest book of poetry titled, *Strays, Misfits, Renegades, and Maverick Poems (with additional Verses on Monetizations)*, has just been published. To have a look at this and more of his work please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)