

# **Jungian Psychology, Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Direction**

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"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." John 10:10.

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## INTRODUCTION

As I have continued in the Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme, I have become aware of the large extent to which Jungian psychology informs my approach to spiritual growth and my experience and practice of spiritual direction. For me, applying Jungian psychology has been life-giving, and it has become the lens through which I look at spiritual growth.

I was encouraged recently by reading the paper which Joy Ryan-Bloore presented to the gathering of spiritual directors at the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors' Training Event in Christchurch in August 2013. She writes,

*"We cannot grow spiritually without psychological development: and psychological development is incomplete unless it leads to an encounter with the spiritual, with God, as an inner Divine presence. Only that encounter gives meaning and purpose to our human existence. The bridge which unites them is the psycho-spiritual interface found in the vessel of the human psyche." (p.9)*

In her search for the "bridge", she discovered the writings of Carl Jung. *"When I read Jung, it was as if a light was turned on."* (Ryan-Bloore, 2013, p.10). She studied to become a Jungian analyst, and writes, *"In my journey on the edge, looking for the interface between the bruised reed and the smouldering wick, between psychotherapy and spiritual direction, I found Jungian Psychology, one of the most significant discoveries of my life."* (Ryan-Bloore, 2013, p.10). She sees Isaiah 42:3's 'bruised reed' as being the damaged essential self and the 'smouldering wick' as being the dimly burning flame of the spiritual life.

Jung's theories around individuation and wholeness inform us in important ways about psychological and spiritual growth.

Jung's discoveries about the unconscious, both personal and collective, have shed enormous light on our understanding of the way in which God works within individuals. Our understanding of dreams, as taught in the Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme, is largely informed by Jung's research on dreams; our desire for our directees to 'go deeper' is because we believe that God is found deeper, i.e. at the unconscious level,<sup>1</sup> and we want God to become more conscious to the directee; our belief that symbols, metaphor, art and poetry can be important in spiritual direction stem from a sense that these things help make the unconscious (where God is) conscious.

In this paper I will provide a brief introduction to Jung, and then focus on three areas where Jungian psychology helps us to understand spiritual growth and practice spiritual direction: the process of individuation, the significance and interpretation of dreams, and taking a symbolic approach to Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that God is found only at the unconscious level.

## INTRODUCTION TO JUNG

Carl Gustav Jung was born in Switzerland in 1875 and died in 1961. He became a psychiatrist, and then branched into psychoanalysis, and extensively researched the unconscious. He developed theories about the collective unconscious, its relation to consciousness, and what he termed the 'individuation process'. Jung's theories about the human psyche were empirically based and his theories grew out of what he observed in thousands of patients (both unwell and well people) and in himself, over many years. Jung's psychology is neither a religion nor a philosophy - it is a scientific system of psychic experience, which puts structure and understanding around observed phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamental to Jung's analytic psychology is the view that the psyche is an entity of its own right. *"For Jung, the psyche is no less real than the body. Though it cannot be touched, it can be directly and fully experienced and observed. It is a world of its own, governed by laws, structured, and endowed with its own means of expression."* (Jacobi, 1973, p.1).

For Jung the 'psyche' is the totality of all psychic processes, both conscious and unconscious.

The unconscious has two elements to it - the personal and the collective. The personal unconscious is specific to the individual and contains forgotten, suppressed, repressed and subliminally perceived elements (Jacobi, 1973, p.10), and *"the collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution born anew in the brain structure of every individual."* (Jacobi, 1973, p.35).

Jung's clinical research showed that the unconscious is archetypal in nature; that is, that it has a structure common to all human beings, and that it cannot be understood exclusively in terms of any individual life history. The unconscious is not only the basement of our minds into which we place the discarded material of our own lives; it is also the ocean out of which our conscious lives have sprung, and over which the ship of the soul sails its course through life. (Sanford, 1987, p.11).

Archetypes within the collective unconscious are patterns of instinctual behaviour that are common to all people. They are *"built-in patterns of human becoming, relating, behaving, or just plain being."* (Brewi & Brennan, 1988, p.13). Archetypes and the collective unconscious are revealed to us symbolically and in metaphor - they cannot be fully described or understood by rational consciousness.

Jung recognised the spiritual and religious need that is innate in the psyche. In this aspect he is different from his contemporaries, Freud and Adler. For Jung *"the spiritual appears in the psyche also as an instinct, indeed as a real passion..."* (Jacobi, 1973, p.61).

Jung's method of psychoanalysis is prospective. Jung treats material raised in analysis *"synthetically, building towards the future from the present situation by attempting to create relations between conscious and unconscious, i.e., between pairs of psychic opposites, in*

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<sup>2</sup>See Jolande Jacobi's "The Psychology of C G Jung". In particular, see Jung's forward to Jacobi's book (p. ix), Jacobi's introduction to her book (p. 1-3) and her biographical sketch of C G Jung (p. 153 -157).

*order to provide the personality with a foundation on which a lasting psychic balance can be built." (Jacobi, 1973, p.67).*

He saw his psychotherapy as being a way of healing and a way of salvation - good for the psychically unwell, but also *"it knows the way and has the means to lead the individual to his "salvation", to the knowledge and fulfilment of his own personality, which have always been the aim of spiritual striving."* (Jacobi, 1973, p.60).<sup>3</sup>

## INDIVIDUATION

Jung's concept of individuation is the development of the psyche<sup>4</sup> toward wholeness. It is a two stage process, involving the first and second halves of life.

Jung saw the work of the first part of a person's life as being the development of the ego<sup>5</sup> - establishing how one is in the world, developing the external life. Developing the ego necessitates strengthening some parts of oneself while neglecting other parts. If one develops one's extroversion, one cannot at the same time be developing one's introversion because they are each other's opposite. The same applies to the opposite functions of thinking and feeling, and of intuition and sensation. So a first-half-of-life-person with a healthy ego will have hidden in his/her unconscious some very undeveloped parts. There are other parts of oneself that become hidden away as part of successful ego development. The parts that society or one's family deems to be not valuable or negative become hidden in the unconscious. Painful memories or embarrassing episodes are also hidden in the unconscious.

For Jung, the task of the second half of life is to integrate the hidden and undeveloped parts with the known developed parts. 'The self<sup>6</sup> which emerges through the dialogue of consciousness and the unconscious is a healed and enlivened individual. The energy of the psyche has an in-built propensity for wholeness, the fullness of life available to the personality. The psyche, formerly at odds with itself, now engages in healing communication.' (Welch, 1990, p 60).

The parable of The Great Banquet in Luke 14, can be seen as a picture of the process of befriending the undeveloped parts (the shadow) within oneself.

Jesus tells the story of a man who prepared a banquet but the friends whom he invited were too busy to come, so the man ordered his servant to go out into the streets and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. Looking at this parable in an intrapersonal way,

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<sup>3</sup> The word 'salvation' in this context has a specific meaning which differs from its meaning in many Christian theological contexts.

<sup>4</sup> In Jungian thought, the 'psyche' refers to the totality of the personality. (Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims*, p. 66)

<sup>5</sup> In Jungian thought, the 'ego' is the centre of consciousness. (Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims*, p. 66)

<sup>6</sup> In Jungian thought, the 'self' is the archetype of wholeness in the psyche. It represents the fullness of life available to the individual. (Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrims*, p.74; Welch, *When GODS Die*, p. 79)

Jesus invites the successful busy happy healthy parts of ourselves to come to share in his banquet. These parts are so happy and successful that they don't value the invitation to come and feast with Jesus. So Jesus then invites the weak and damaged and shameful parts of ourselves to come. These parts are only too glad to be there and they feast with delight at Jesus' table.

The weak and the needy and the embarrassing parts of us are welcome at Jesus' table. Jesus embraces our shadows.

I have found taking an imaginative approach to this parable and consciously inviting my shadow parts to be at table with Jesus has been extraordinarily life-giving. It has enabled me to befriend the awkward and difficult parts of myself. It's been a way of putting Jung's psychology into practice.

In Luke 4, Jesus says,

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

This can be taken to mean the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed who are within a person's psyche - the parts who have not been given any resources to develop, the parts who have been incarcerated within because of shame or guilt, the parts who have not been allowed to see the light so are blind, and the parts who are oppressed because of their social unacceptability.

Jesus comes to announce the year of the Lord's favour. He says, "All you shadow parts, your time has come!"

There is a classic folk story, various versions of which are told all around the world, which communicates this same deep psycho-spiritual truth about becoming a whole person. It is the story of the enchanted frog.

*A haughty princess loses a treasure in a pond. A talking frog comes along and offers to retrieve the treasure for her and give it back to her if she will kiss him. She agrees to this bargain, and the frog retrieves the treasure. The princess tries to negotiate rewards other than a kiss as a way of getting back the treasure, but the frog insists on a kiss. She kisses him, and he turns into a handsome prince. He tells her that he had been put under a spell that could only be broken by being kissed by a princess. They marry and live happily ever after.*

The deep truth of this story is that the lost treasure of internal wholeness and harmony can only be found if one embraces and befriends the despised and lowly parts of oneself. *"In order to be healthy and whole, each person must recognise the superior, hidden worth of the most lowly and despised elements of both psyche and society."* (Taylor, 1998, p. 28).

As a spiritual director it is important to be developing one's own psychic wholeness, and to have some understanding of where the directee is in the process of individuation. Is he in the first or second half of life, psychologically speaking? Is she still in the process of establishing her ego, managing how to function in the external world? Is he being called to, or is he already deeply engrossed in, the process of discovering and befriending the undeveloped parts, and integrating his shadow into his conscious personality?

Societal health is related to the extent to which individuals know themselves at a deep level. The more unconscious one is, the more one projects on to others those parts of oneself one does not recognise in oneself. The more one gets to know one's deep inner self, the less one projects one's unknown parts onto others. Self-realisation raises up within a person the *"tolerance and kindness which are only possible in those who have explored and consciously experienced their own darkest depths."* (Jacobi, 1973, p.151).

## **DREAMS**

Jung worked with thousands of people on their dreams, and studied his own dreams in depth. He disagreed with Freud in his interpretation of dreams fundamentally because Freud had a materialistic worldview, and did not take the spiritual into account. Freud's view of dreams was reductive - he saw them as pointing the way to what has already happened.

Jung's research into dreams led him to interpret dreams prospectively - dreams are the unconscious bringing to consciousness what is. They describe what is going on and can provide a warning, but they also provide a way forward from the present situation.

Jung saw the *"dream as the psychic phenomenon which offers the easiest access to the contents of the unconscious"* (Jacobi, 1973, p.70), and as the way that the unconscious performs its regulative activity. Dreams express the counterpart of the conscious attitude. Dreams perform a compensatory function - *"balancing and comparing different data or points of view so as to produce an adjustment or a rectification. This innate compensatory function of the psyche works toward individuation, i.e. the development of the psyche toward 'wholeness' "* (Jacobi, 1973, p 70,71).

Dreams come unbidden to us. They come from the unconscious and we have no conscious control over them. *"One does not dream, one is dreamt. We "suffer" the dream, we are its objects."* (Jung, 1938, cited in Jacobi, 1973, p. 73).

Dream material comes from the conscious, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious, and dreams speak in symbols and metaphor. Because they come largely from the unconscious, they always tell us something we don't already consciously know.

Dreams can have personal meaning and/or a collective meaning.

In interpreting a dream personally, one takes every part of the dream as representing part of oneself. One can ask, "What part of me is like this person/that person/this object/this animal? What meanings do these dream elements have for me? Why this dream now? What is happening in my life now that relates to this dream? In what area am I experiencing emotions like the emotions in this dream? What is this dream asking me to do? What does this dream want me to know?" One can then work imaginatively with the dream, e.g. giving it a different ending, or dialoguing with the dream characters.

There are archetypal symbols in dreams which can shed light on the dream's meaning.

A baby or young child can symbolise new life and growth, water can symbolise the unconscious, swimming can mean becoming adept at navigating safely through the waters of the unconscious, a frog can represent the potential for transformation, etc.

Dreams are an important way that God who is within speaks to us, and unpacking dreams can be very fruitful in a spiritual direction session. The spiritual director can help the directee to discover the insights and invitations that the dream offers the directee.

## **INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE SYMBOLICALLY**

In the same way that dreams and myths and folk stories can be interpreted symbolically, so too can scriptural stories be interpreted symbolically. Joy Ryan-Bloore (2013) writes,

*"Large numbers of scriptural images are archetypal and as such have the power to evoke a psychic process in the soul. If we submit our personal circumstances to their scrutiny we may be astonished at the guidance and inspiration they bring to our lives. The early Church Fathers' symbolic interpretation of the gospels in particular, anticipated and parallel Jung's insight that these 'inspired' words come from the deepest level of the human psyche - what he discovered and called the collective unconscious. This is why the Church has rightly taught that they are 'inspired'..... The Word does 'read us' and reveals itself at ever deepening levels if we are open and submit to what we find." (p 18,19)*

An example is looking at the story of the Good Samaritan intrapersonally. One can have within oneself a robbed, beaten-up and left-for-dead person, a group of robbers, a priest, a Levite, a despised but helpful and loving Samaritan, an innkeeper, and even a donkey. This parable can speak to the universal (archetypal) experience of grief where one can feel beaten up, robbed and left-for-dead. One may need to find a Samaritan within oneself who will tend one's needs with compassion and practical care, and one may need to be wary of the indifference and heartlessness of the religious ones within.

Sanford (1987, p.145-147) tells the story of a successful, intellectual, proud and judgemental man whose feeling-orientated wife left him eventually. In the deep personal crisis that ensued for this man, he was like the man on his way to Jericho. The thieves that attacked and robbed him were his rigid attitudes. The priest and Levite were the parts of himself that were

interested in respectability and looking good, and did not want to get involved in the messiness of his crisis. The Samaritan was the parts of himself he had previously despised - the feeling, compassionate and tender parts. Despite their lowly status in his psyche, they came to his rescue and were able to comfort him and bring him to a place of healing.

In another example of the symbolic interpretation of scripture, Taylor (1998, p.147-150) writes about the story of Joseph and Mary's flight from Egypt with the young Jesus because of Herod's plan to kill all the newborn baby boys. In order to rid the world of one particular baby, Jesus, by whom Herod feels threatened, he kills all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Herod is the 'archetypal oppressive, imperial, insecure, power-crazed ego in its threatened, pre-emptive, defensive posture'. Taylor gives three examples from history where the same "Kill them all, and let God sort it out" attitude led to the deaths of many innocent people. The modern term is collateral damage.

One can consider, "Is there a Herod within me who wants to kill the divine child of creative growth and possibility, and in doing so kills off all possibilities of anything new? Where am I resistant to change and growth, and what parts of myself have I shut down because of that fear?"

Reading the scriptures symbolically can bring insight and healing, and lead to wholeness. One can work creatively with the stories, and imaginatively interact with the different characters. The beaten up man can dialogue with the priest within or the robbers within; the Mary within can dialogue with the Herod within and ask him why he is so threatened by new life; the Mary and Joseph within can take the actions they need to take in order to preserve the baby Christ within and ensure that he grows to maturity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our knowledge of Jung's discoveries about the collective unconscious and of archetypes helps us to look with a new perspective on Biblical stories, especially gospel stories and parables, and enables us to appreciate the parallels and deep truths in myths and stories throughout all cultures and ages.

Jung's view of the second half of life as being a time for integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality helps us to understand second half of life issues and faith development issues.

Jung's view that the task of the whole of life is to come to the knowledge and fulfilment of one's true personality, and his insights into the unconscious, archetypes, and dreams have much to teach us about psychological and spiritual growth. His insights help us to see that psychological and spiritual growth are deeply intertwined, and cannot be separated. For this reason I would suggest that some knowledge of Jungian psychology is essential for spiritual directors to ensure that they are well balanced in the spiritual direction that they offer.

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