

What is Depth Psychology?

I stand in the gap between the depth traditions and the American focus on results. In one ear, I hear the sighs of the wind, the rhythm of the earth and stars as they spin in the cosmos, the chanting of our ancestors, the keening of dead souls and a wounded earth who yearn for wholeness and healing. In the other, I hear strident claims of capitalism; conflicting cries on a war over oil; endless iterations of consumerism, instant gratification, and Return on Investment. My ears are ringing. Where I stand, I'm ankle deep in mud. The opposites on either side of me appear overwhelmingly in conflict with each other. But I am in the "third position", midway between the two opposing forces. There is something about holding both opposites in my awareness that makes my vantage point a position of power, allows transcendence. Because of this, my soul is at peace somewhere deep inside me. There is a song being sung that has nothing to do with me--- and everything to do with me. There is much to be done—and yet everything is as it should be.

"The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life," writes Carl Jung who is widely known as the father of depth psychology. "Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon futilities and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance....In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted" (Jung, 1989, p. 325).

Depth psychology, narrowed down to its essential, asks simply: what is the nature of our dance with the Jung's "infinite"--and what does it mean to us? The infinite referred to here has many names including "God", the "universe", the "field", or "Spirit". Jung

called it the *collective unconscious* and also the *Self*. Intimacy with the infinite is not something we can take for granted in today's world. Taking on the call to engage with the infinite, to create that connection, is to take on power that not only changes the individual, but creates a ripple that will affect everything around him. Like dropping a pebble into a pond whose surface is covered with leaves, it is impossible to move just one leaf: they will all shift as the ripple goes out—touching the fabric of space and time and all events, objects, and individuals found in the proximity.

Our ancestors knew a relationship with Jung's infinite that we as modern westerners rarely consider outside of philosophical ruminations. The concept of animism—that everything is alive and has a spirit, that everything is imbued with intelligence, that intelligence manifests itself in patterns, blueprints, or energies that we live out our lives according to—is a core piece of depth psychology. As modern human beings, we aren't necessarily any less spiritual than our forebears: it is just that our definition of spirit has changed, leading us to seek relationship with money, career, social status, or security via emphasis on perfectionism, addictions, greed, or fame. Our ancestors lived a life much nearer to nature in a close connection with the infinite. It wasn't until recent centuries that mankind developed “lenses” like telescopes and microscopes that would allow us to get a bird's-eye view of the natural world. The irony is, we can view the moon and stars via a telescope—but our indigenous forefathers likely didn't need any such scientific devices as they lived daily in an intimate existence with the natural world that did not require them to “study it through a lens” that would bring it closer (Romanyshn, 2004, p. 97).

Depth psychology, among other things then, is a study of how “whatever is out there that is bigger than us”—communicates with us—and we with it. And, how, then, in

knowing how to interact does the interaction affect us? The premise is simple. There are a lot of things we don't know that, if we knew them, would help us live our lives in a healthier, happier, and more holistic way. Seeing the infinite intelligence of the collective universe would help us reconnect with a new reality—one that transcends the challenges of our daily lives and those we have created on a global level. It would provide meaning to our lives so they are not “wasted with futility” as Jung suggested.

What if you found a magic lamp with a genie who could tell you everything you ever needed to know in the universe to make your life meaningful and whole—and in so doing, could affect the lives of those around you, the environment, the community you live in, and society as a whole? What if that information were available to us all the time, at any given moment, if only we could interpret the language in which the information was available? What if there were a simple system to learn that language and apply it right away through observation, awareness and application of application of specific methods? Depth psychology is a vehicle by which we can know and understand ourselves and the world around us and initiate change through the very act of focusing on it.

Inherently, the first barrier to establishing intimacy with the infinite lies with what is known as the ego – that is, the personality or conscious self. The ego has a corresponding piece known as the personal unconscious. The ego is made up of things we know about ourselves and identify with (giving us an “identity”), and also of things we don't consciously know about ourselves which come from a vast field of our personal past experiences and of information that has been suppressed, repressed, or has just not had reason to surface in the first place. Because we tend to define ourselves as individuals—separate from some greater whole—we are each rather attached to our ego

consciousness—the things we think we know to be true about ourselves and our world. Some of these details and beliefs bring us joy and some pain, but inherently, we as individuals prefer to hang onto this way of perceiving ourselves feeling it gives us a sense of place or hierarchy in the world.

We are human beings with psyches within a culture that promotes this type of object-oriented thinking--i.e. I have value because my car is _____ (fill in the blank: bigger, faster, nicer, more expensive, used, gets good gas mileage, a hybrid, I don't have a car). We learn to separate ourselves from others based on perceived uniqueness that is driven by both our conscious choices and values as well as our hidden or unconscious drives that we act on or believe in whether we know about them or not. But somewhere out there, after all of our posturing, pursuing, and patting ourselves on the back for whatever reason seems true to us at the time, lies Jung's infinite in wait. And it's bigger than our egos.

Beyond the personal unconscious which corresponds to the ego self, there is also a field far more vast: a reservoir of all that ever was, is, and will be. This field affiliates with the collective cultures contains a mass of myth, stories, histories, archetypes, patterns and energies—some known to us and some not. In other words, it is Jung's so-called infinite.

Jung called the process of finding ourselves, of reconnecting with the infinite, of re-establishing contact with the bigger picture, *individuation*, a process of inquiry and opening which results in liberation, freedom, wholeness, and joy. Through the individuation process, something unfolds from within and transformation results in finding or reuniting with the *Self* with a capital "S". What lies beyond our immediate

concept of our ego-selves and the world around us is revealed and suddenly, living lives of “quiet desperation” based solely on societal, cultural, and personal beliefs, values, and restrictions becomes limiting, undesirable, or even unbearable.

The concept that there is an infinite universe, an unknown order or intelligence that we can tap into to know joy and freedom, to transcend our constructs, limitations, hang-ups and habits is compelling. All we have to do is look beyond the constructs of the ego which we are so conditioned to believe is the only reality we can experience and then to become aware of the patterns, symbols, and energies that reside in the collective unconscious and translate that language into something we can use to understand and transform ourselves, our culture, and our planet. G.I Gurdjieff, a twentieth century mystic and teacher who was strongly influenced by Sufi and Gnostic ideas said that “objective consciousness which is brought about by sustained, systematic effort at self-observation and self-remembering, is a state that compares to ordinary consciousness as the latter compares to dreaming sleep” (in Metzner, 1998, p. 23). Regarding living life within the perceived confines of our beliefs and object-relations—that is, a forgetting of our connection to nature and a greater reality, it has been said we “sleep while we are living and awake when we die” and “our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting” (Metzner, 1998, p. 22). Depth psychology is a vehicle that provides a way to wake up and step onto the path of transformation, of reconnecting and remembering ourselves in a greater context, of communing with ourselves, others, and the infinite that lies beyond.

Pursuing consciousness, paying attention to what’s missing from our daily existence, looking for signals and communications from the infinite can ultimately lead us toward a map for wholeness. Being whole includes retrieving parts of our Self that

many of us fail to even know we are missing. Wholeness requires a connection between the body, mind, creativity, spirituality, culture, and human ecology in order for the continuum of nature and the infinite to flow through us and carry on about its ineffable business. And, because we have a psychological share in everything that surrounds us, we can be sane and whole only to the degree that we care for our environment and tend responsibly to the world in which we live. Therefore, we must engage with the infinite proactively, heroically, tragically, and/or just for the sake of survival. If we do not, we are lost, as surely as Jung declares, “if we do not embody that [essential], life is wasted” (Jung, 1989, p. 325).

Information from the collective unconscious reveals itself in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons: crisis, spiritual emergency, close encounters, relationships, or sometimes for no apparent reason at all. And, since the collective unconscious speaks its own non-verbal language, we must learn, through conscious awareness and observation, to translate it into meaning that allows transformation. Mankind created spoken and written language over the course of millennia as we became more and more evolved, but, as that happened, we lost intimacy with the world of symbols, energies, patterns, and images that best communicate the unknowable. We lost our inherent connection with nature over eons of civilization and progress. Along with the connection, we lost consciousness. The infinite still speaks to us in symbols, dreams, art, coincidences and synchronicities, nature, and in myth, but we have forgotten the ability to interpret the forms and meanings. Depth psychology is the way back to remembering and understanding.

Communication with the infinite may not always be in a concrete or static form. It can also show itself in archetypes, patterns or energies that may coincide powerfully with our lives. According to William James, an American philosopher-psychologist of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, consciousness was vital for the biological evolution of the species. And, waking consciousness was simply one state out of many, significant for survival of the biological organism in the external world, but should not preclude other realms of human experience at different levels which exist simultaneously alongside waking consciousness. For example, just as objects can be experienced, so too can the relations between them. The energy or entity of the relationship itself then becomes an independent dynamic vehicle that is transformed and transformational (Taylor, paras. 5 & 8).

A contemporary thinker and British biologist, Rupert Sheldrake, posits the theory of morphogenetic fields, organizing energies or patterns which shape forms as we know them in the world around us. These fields resonate from fields of past experiences, but are capable of evolving or changing dynamically (Sheldrake, para. 4). Thus, a society, culture, event, or simply our own personal way of being in the world could be driven by an unseen pattern contained in Jung's infinite. Understanding of the bigger picture allows us to break free of our limitations by observing, holding, or otherwise amplifying the patterns to allow them to evolve.

So, ultimately, what does depth psychology mean for us? How can we, as modern men and women living in a culture of violence, greed, hierarchies, power struggles, and immediate gratification, re-establish connection with the infinite? How can we navigate the gap between the two worlds and find the courage to take a stand? How can we slow

ourselves long enough, be with the discomfort strongly enough, find the resources to be creative enough to drop the pebble that ripples the pond and shifts the leaves on the surface?

In the end, depth psychology endeavors to develop relationship with the infinite and uncover the unconscious through recognition, analysis, awareness and internalization of our own depth or divinity as individuals. Whether it is true that modern society has gone off track and needs to be righted through growing consciousness or whether you buy into the theory that everything is unfolding in this moment exactly as it's meant to be, either way, once we as individuals begin to focus on the infinite, the unknown, or the unconscious, things are bound to change. We shall reserve the right of the final word here for Jung himself: "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being. It may even be assumed that just as the unconscious affects us, so the increase in our consciousness affects the unconscious" (Jung, 1989, p. 326).

References

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