

The Therapeutic Trialogue: Depth Psychotherapy as a Shared Soul Journey

Depth psychotherapy engages the whole person, including the depths of the unconscious, in the shared journey toward fullness of being and self-realization which the great soul-centred psychiatrist C. G. Jung called 'individuation'.

In depth therapy, the therapist renounces the role of a detached expert dispensing textbook theories, pills or advice and instead acts as a midwife in helping to draw forth healing and meaning from within the patient. Ideally, the patient provides the raw material of therapy in the form of dreams, symbols, creative writing, visions, or artwork . Throughout this shared journey, therapist and patient work together to arrive at a solution which satisfies the needs of the whole person, both psychospiritual and physical, conscious and unconscious.

In contrast, by adopting an authoritarian stance, would-be therapists immune themselves to the benefits of shared learning and mutual transformation, which may involve a needed reciprocal wounding and healing. As well, in the realm of the psyche, what we haven't experienced, we don't understand. In other words, the therapist *is* the therapy, such that s/he had better be the real deal. In order to avoid spoiling the work and inflicting possible harm, it is vital, then, for the therapist to have done enough inner work to ensure that s/he avoids negatively projecting unconscious, unresolved personal 'shadow' problems onto the patient.

Genuine depth therapists do not seek to control, disempower, or fix, but instead nurture the living work as catalysts, soul gardeners and midwives - in equal dialogue with the patient. Jung, for instance, speaks of 'soul loss' as a lowering in the level of conscious activity, characterized by depression, loss of energy, or powerlessness. A psychotherapeutic cure would result from exploring the unconscious through 'active imagination' - a conscious dialogue with an inner symbolic image - or through dreams, in order to discover where the energy is now being channelled. By creatively interacting with these soul dramas, the energy may be reclaimed so that life can flow again with renewed drive and enthusiasm.

Throughout the journey, neither therapist nor patient, in other words, plays an exclusively active or passive role. Ideally, the patient learns in time to navigate the unconscious, while the therapist acts as a guide. Here it is axiomatic that one can never lead another where one has not been oneself. To attempt to do so amounts to the blind leading the blind, such that both are likely to fall into a ditch.

The therapist ideally provides a safe, sacred space, or 'temenos' inside of which the whole transformation drama can unfold; as well, the therapist is a kind of containing vessel and alchemist, who warms the process through attentive care, empathy and compassion. Too much heat - for example, by trying to hurry the process, or stir up emotions - and the whole 'soul soup' may explode; too little and nothing happens!

Importantly, Jung discusses the sharing of a third soul between therapist and patient, a soul that acts as a guide, whom Jung, taking his cue from the alchemists, names 'Mercurius', a semi-abstract personification of the World Soul - of divinity hidden in matter - or what Jung called the 'collective unconscious'. Being tricksterishly helpful and destructive, Mercurius is apt to cause havoc as well as healing, chaos as well as order, danger as well as help, symbolic death as well as rebirth. Yet out of this subversion of rigid attitudes, defensive ploys, limiting fears, or one-sided beliefs emerges a new process of integration. Mercurius, the I and not-I of thou, the soul-matrix of both as one, is the presiding deity of this unfolding drama, or 'trialogue' (a term I coined). Typically, the therapist sets out, not knowing where the journey will lead but following the guidance of Mercurius, who personifies an ancient wisdom and knows the patient and therapist better than they know themselves.

This soul journey toward wholeness never ends, but along the way we may resolve conflict, expand our consciousness, outgrow limitations, discover new skills, transcend our woundedness, gain a sense of meaning and unique purpose, and work through crises toward the experience of a more calmly centred self who can be true to the law of its own being and serve the world with the care it needs. For individuation is a twin-directional spiral: while consciousness spirals inward toward the divine core of the personality, its sphere of concerns at the same time spirals outward to embrace the world.

Psyche as 'soul', mythically symbolized by the butterfly, is, however, always prone to wandering, depth, pathology, fragmentation and elusiveness. It has its own unfathomable agenda and the best we can do is to honour, reflect, embody and nurture its breathable mystery. As Jung confessed toward the end of his rich life, "I never think I am the one who must see to it that cherries grow on stalks. I stand and behold, admiring what nature can do."

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