

## Waking Up to the Unconscious

One morning a woman got into her car as usual and drove several miles to her office. Along the way her imagination began to produce a great adventure. She saw herself in olden times, a simple woman living in the midst of wars and crusades. She became a heroine, saved her people by strength and sacrifice, encountered a strong and noble prince who loved her.

With her conscious mind thus totally occupied, she drove along several streets, stopped at traffic lights, signaled properly at each turn, and arrived safely at her office parking lot. Coming to her senses, she realized that she couldn't remember any of the drive to the office. She recalled not a single intersection or turn. Her startled mind asked: "How could I drive this far without being aware of it? Where was my mind? Who was driving while I was dreaming?" But things like that had happened before, so she dropped the subject and went on into the office.

At her desk she began to plan her day's work, but she was interrupted by a colleague who came storming into her office, threw down a memorandum she had circulated, and went into a rage over some minor point he disagreed with. She was astonished. His anger was so disproportionate to the size of the issue! What had come over him?

He, in turn, hearing his own raised voice, realized he was making a mountain out of a molehill. Embarrassed, he mumbled an apology and backed out. In his own office he asked himself:

"What came over me? Where did that come from? I don't usually get rattled over little things. I just wasn't *myself*!" He sensed that there was a boiling anger within him that had nothing to do with his friend's memorandum but had suddenly come to the surface over this petty matter. Where the anger came from, he didn't know.

If these two people had time to think about it, they might realize that they had already felt the presence of the unconscious in their lives that morning. In dozens of ways in the ebb and flow of

ordinary daily life, we experience the unconscious as it acts in us and through us.

Sometimes it works alongside the conscious mind and takes over the controls of the automobile while the conscious mind is focused on something else. We have all had the experience of driving a few blocks on "automatic pilot" as the woman in our example did. The conscious mind is somewhere else, briefly, and the unconscious mind simply takes over whatever we are doing. It stops us at the red lights, starts us at the green lights, and keeps us within the law until the conscious mind comes back to the here-and-now. This isn't the safest way to drive, but the unconscious does provide us with an excellent, and crucial, built-in back-up system that we all take for granted.

Sometimes the unconscious generates a fantasy so full of vivid, symbolic images that it captures the conscious mind totally and holds our attention for a long time. The fantasy of adventure, danger, heroic sacrifice, and love that enthralled the woman on her way to work is a primary example of the way the unconscious invades our conscious minds and attempts to express itself—through the *imagination*, using the symbolic language of feeling-charged images.

Another way we experience the unconscious is through a sudden surge of emotion, the inexplicable joy or the irrational anger that suddenly invades the conscious mind and takes it over. The floods of feeling make no sense to the conscious mind, because the conscious mind did not produce them. The man in our example could not explain to himself the intensity of his reaction. He asked, "Where did that come from?" He felt that his anger came from somewhere *outside* him. He felt that he was "not himself" for a few moments. But in fact this surge of unmanageable emotion did come from a part of him, a place deep within that he couldn't see with his conscious mind. It is because of this invisibility that this place within is called the "unconscious."

The idea of the unconscious derives from a simple observation in daily human life: There is material contained in our minds that we are not aware of most of the time. We sometimes become aware of a memory, a pleasant association, an ideal, a belief that wells up unexpectedly from an unknown place. We sense that we have carried these elements somewhere inside us for a long

time—but where? In an unknown part of the total psyche that lies outside the boundaries of the conscious mind.

The unconscious is a marvelous universe of unseen energies, forces, forms of intelligence—even distinct *personalities*—that live within us. It is a much larger realm than most of us realize, one that has a complete life of its own running parallel to the ordinary life we live day to day. The unconscious is the secret source of much of our thought, feeling, and behavior. It influences us in ways that are all the more powerful because unsuspected.

Most of us have an intuitive feeling about what is meant when we hear the term the *unconscious*. We correlate this idea with myriads of experiences, small and large, that are interwoven with the fabric of our daily lives. We all have had the experience of doing something unconsciously when our minds were “someplace else,” then being surprised at what we had done. We remember getting worked up during a conversation and blurring out some strong opinion we didn’t know consciously that we held.

Sometimes we are startled: “Where did that come from? I didn’t know I felt so strongly about that.” As we become more sensitive to the surges of energy from the unconscious we learn instead to ask, “What *part of me* believes that? Why does this subject set off such an intense reaction in that unseen part of myself?”

We can learn to look at the issue more closely. What “comes over me” is a sudden invasion of energy from the unconscious. If I think I wasn’t being “myself,” it is because I don’t realize that “myself” also includes my unconscious. These hidden parts of ourselves have strong feelings and want to express them. Yet, unless we learn to do *inner work*, these parts of ourselves are hidden from our conscious view.

Sometimes these hidden personalities are embarrassing or violent, and we are humiliated when they show themselves. At other times we wake up to strengths and fine qualities within ourselves that we never knew were there. We draw on hidden resources and do things we normally could not have done, say something more clear and intelligent than we’ve ever been able to say before, express wisdom we did not know we had, show a generosity or understanding of which we never knew we were capable. In each case there is a startled reaction: “I am a different person than I thought I was. I have qualities—both positive and negative—that

I didn’t know were part of my definition.” These qualities lived in the unconscious, where they were “out of sight, out of mind.”

We are all much more than the “I” of whom we are aware. Our conscious minds can focus on only a limited sector of our total being at any given time. Despite our efforts at self-knowledge, only a small portion of the huge energy system of the unconscious can be incorporated into the conscious mind or function at the conscious level. Therefore we have to learn how to go to the unconscious and become receptive to its messages: It is the only way to find the unknown parts of ourselves.

#### APPROACHING THE UNCONSCIOUS—VOLUNTARILY OR INVOLUNTARILY

The unconscious manifests itself through a language of symbols. It is not only in our involuntary or compulsive behavior that we can see the unconscious. It has two natural pathways for bridging the gap and speaking to the conscious mind: One is by *dreams*; the other is through the *imagination*. Both of these are highly refined channels of communication that the psyche has developed so that the unconscious and conscious levels may speak to one another and work together.

The unconscious has developed a special language to use in dreams and imagination: It is the language of symbolism. As we will see, inner work is primarily the art of learning this symbolic language of the unconscious. Therefore we will devote most of our time to working with dreams, imagination, and the uses of symbolism.

Many communicative efforts by the unconscious are lost on us. The unconscious bubbles to the surface in dreams, but few people have the information necessary to take their dreams seriously and understand their language. The activity of the unconscious is also evident in the running of the imagination: the bursts of fantasy that float like bubbles across the landscape of the conscious mind, barely noticed by us; the veritable floods of fantasy that seize many people regularly and run like rivers along the edges of their minds. We think we are “thinking” or we think we are “planning,” but more often we are in a daydream, lost for a few minutes in that stream of fantasy before we pull ourselves back to the

physical situation, the work at hand, the persons with whom we are speaking.

To get a true sense of who we are, become more complete and integrated human beings, we must go to the unconscious and set up communication with it. Much of ourselves and many determinants of our character are contained in the unconscious. It is only by approaching it that we have a chance to become conscious, complete, whole human beings. Jung has shown that by approaching the unconscious and learning its symbolic language, we live richer and fuller lives. We begin to live in partnership with the unconscious rather than at its mercy or in constant warfare with it.

Most people, however, do not approach the unconscious voluntarily. They only become aware of the unconscious when they get into trouble with it. We modern people are so out of touch with the inner world that we encounter it mostly through psychological distress. For example, a woman who thinks she has everything under control may find herself horribly depressed, able neither to shake it off nor to understand what is happening to her. Or a man may find that he has terrible conflicts between the life he lives outwardly and the unconscious ideals he holds deep inside himself where he never looks. He feels torn or anxiety-ridden, but can't say why.

When we experience inexplicable conflicts that we can't resolve; when we become aware of urges in ourselves that seem irrational, primitive, or destructive; when a neurosis afflicts us because our conscious attitudes are at odds with our instinctual selves—then we begin to realize that the unconscious is playing a role in our lives and we need to face it.

Historically, it was through this kind of pathology that Jung and Freud rediscovered the existence of the unconscious—through the psychological suffering of patients in whom the relationship between the conscious and unconscious levels had broken down.

### JUNG'S MODEL OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Jung discovered that the unconscious is not merely an appendage of the conscious mind, a place where forgotten memories or unpleasant feelings are repressed. He posited a model of the un-

conscious so momentous that the Western world has still not fully caught up with its implications. He showed that the unconscious is the creative source of all that evolves into the conscious mind and into the total personality of each individual. It is out of the raw material of the unconscious that our conscious minds develop, mature, and expand to include all the qualities that we carry potentially within us. It is from this treasure trove that we are enriched with strengths and qualities we never knew we possessed.

Jung showed us that the conscious and the unconscious minds both have critical roles to play in the equilibrium of the total self. When they are out of correct balance with one another, neurosis or other disturbances result.

### THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Jung's studies and work led him to conclude that the unconscious is the real source of all our human consciousness. It is the source of our human capacity for orderly thought, reasoning, human awareness, and feeling. The unconscious is the Original Mind of humankind, the primal matrix out of which our species has evolved a conscious mind and then developed it over the millennia to the extent and the refinement that it has today. Every capacity, every feature of our functioning consciousness, was first contained in the unconscious and then found its way from there up to the conscious level.

Jung developed a magnificent vision of this human capacity for consciousness, of its role and meaning. He saw a creative force at work in nature—a cosmos laboring through timeless aeons to give birth to this rare quality that we call consciousness. Through the human race, the huge unconscious psyche of Nature has slowly made a part of itself conscious. Jung believed that God and all of creation labored through time to bring conscious awareness into the universe, and that it is the role of human beings to carry that evolution forward.

Human consciousness develops out of the primal matter of the unconscious. Its growth is nourished by a continuing stream of contents from the unconscious that rises gradually to the level of consciousness, seeking to form a more complete, conscious person. The incorporation of unconscious materials must continue

until, finally, the conscious mind reflects the wholeness of the total self.

Jung believed that every mortal has an individual role to play in this evolution. For just as our collective human capacity for consciousness evolved out of the unconscious psyche, so it does in each individual. Each of us must, in an individual lifetime, recapitulate the evolution of the human race, and each of us must be an individual container in which the evolution of consciousness is carried forward.

Each of us is a microcosm in which the universal process actualizes itself. Therefore we are all caught up in the movement of the contents of the unconscious toward the level of the conscious mind. Each of us is involved in the counter-movement of the ego-mind back toward the unconscious, reconnecting with its root in the parent matrix that gave it its birth.

Within the unconscious of each person is the primal pattern, the "blueprint," if you will, according to which the conscious mind and the total functional personality are formed—from birth through all the slow years of psychological growth toward genuine inner maturity. This pattern, this invisible latticework of energy, contains all the traits, all the strengths, the faults, the basic structure and parts that will make up a total psychological being.

In most of us, only a small portion of this storehouse of raw energy has been assimilated into the conscious personality. Only a small part of the original blueprint has been actualized at the conscious level.

The inner, unconscious model of the individual is like the plan for a cathedral: At first, as the plan is translated into physical reality, only the general contours can be seen. After a time, a small part of the actual structure is finished enough to give an intimation of what the final work of art will be. As years pass the edifice rises, stone by stone, until finally the last blocks are in place and the finishing touches are complete. Only then is the magnificent vision of the architect revealed.

In the same way, the true depth and grandeur of an individual human being is never totally manifested until the main elements of the personality are moved from the level of potential in the unconscious and actualized at the level of conscious functioning.

Each of us is building a life, building an edifice. Within each

*purpose*

person the plan and the basic structure are established in a deep place in the unconscious. But we need to consult the unconscious and cooperate with it in order to realize the full potential that is built into us. And we have to face the challenges and painful changes that the process of inner growth always brings.

### THE EGO IN THE MIDST OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

The unconscious is an enormous field of energy, much larger than the conscious mind. Jung compared the ego—the conscious mind—to a cork bobbing in the enormous ocean of the unconscious. He also compared the conscious mind to the tip of an iceberg that rises above the surface of the water. Ninety-five percent of an iceberg is hidden beneath the dark, icy waters. The unconscious, like most of the iceberg, is out of sight. But it is enormously powerful—and as dangerous as a submerged iceberg if not respected. More people have sunk after collisions with the unconscious than *Titanics* after collisions with icebergs.

*Ego*, in Latin, simply means "I." Freud and Jung referred to the conscious mind as the *ego* because this is the part of the psyche that calls itself "I," that is "self-conscious"—aware of itself as a being, as a field of energy that is independent and distinct from others. When we say "I" we are referring to only that small sector of ourselves of which we are aware. We assume that "I" contains only *this* personality, *these* traits, *these* values and viewpoints that are up on the surface within the ego's range of vision, accessible to consciousness. This is my limited, highly inaccurate version of who "I" am.

The ego-mind is not aware that the total "I" is much larger, more extensive than the ego, that the part of the psyche that is hidden in the unconscious is much greater than the conscious mind and much more powerful. *Powerful*

Our egos tend to think of the unconscious as being outside ourselves, even though its contents are actually deep inside us. This is why we hear people say things like "I just wasn't myself when I did that." When we find ourselves doing something unexpected, something that doesn't fit in with our conscious conception of ourselves, we speak of it as though someone else were acting rather than ourselves. The conscious mind is startled, because it pre-

tends that the unconscious isn't there. Since the total psyche is much larger, and more complex than the ego-mind can grasp, these unexpected things always feel as though they come from outside us rather than from within us.

In dreams and myths the conscious mind is often symbolized by an island. Like an island people in an island world, the ego sets up a little world of its own—a system of order and a set of assumptions about reality. Our egos are not aware that outside the limits of their little islands, outside the narrow perimeters of their vision, there is a whole universe of realities and truths contained in the vast sea of the unconscious that our egos can't perceive.

Deep in this unseen ocean of energy huge forces are at work. Mythical kingdoms, symbolized by the legends of Atlantis, exist there in the depths and carry on lives parallel to the daily life of our conscious minds. Centers of alternative consciousness, alternative values, attitudes, and ideas exist there like other islands in the great sea. They wait to be discovered and acknowledged by the searching conscious mind.

The purpose of learning to work with the unconscious is not just to resolve our conflicts or deal with our neuroses. We find here a deep source of renewal, growth, strength, and wisdom. We connect with the source of our evolving character; we cooperate with the process whereby we bring the total self together; we earn to tap that rich lode of energy and intelligence that waits within.

## THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE INNER LIFE

The inner life that Jung described is the secret life we all lead, by day and night, in constant companionship with our unseen, unconscious, inner selves. When human life is in balance, the conscious mind and the unconscious live in relationship. There is a constant flow of energy and information between the two levels as they meet in the dimension of dream, vision, ritual, and imagination.

The disaster that has overtaken the modern world is the complete splitting off of the conscious mind from its roots in the unconscious. All the forms of interaction with the unconscious that nourished our ancestors—dream, vision, ritual, and religious ex-

perience—are largely lost to us, dismissed by the modern mind as primitive or superstitious. Thus, in our pride and hubris, our faith in our unassailable reason, we cut ourselves off from our origins in the unconscious and from the deepest parts of ourselves.

In modern Western society we have reached a point at which we try to get by without acknowledging the inner life at all. We act as though there were no unconscious, no realm of the soul, as though we could live full lives by fixating ourselves completely on the external, material world. We try to deal with all the issues of life by external means—making more money, getting more power, starting a love affair, or “accomplishing something” in the material world. But we discover to our surprise that the inner world is a reality that we ultimately have to face.

Jung observed that most of the neurosis, the feeling of fragmentation, the vacuum of meaning, in modern lives, results from this isolation of the ego-mind from the unconscious. As conscious beings we all go about with a vague sense that we have lost a part of ourselves, that something that once belonged to us is missing.

Our isolation from the unconscious is synonymous with our isolation from our souls, from the life of the spirit. It results in the loss of our religious life, for it is in the unconscious that we find our individual conception of God and experience our deities. The religious function—this inborn demand for meaning and inner experience—is cut off with the rest of the inner life. And it can only force its way back into our lives through neurosis, inner conflicts, and psychological symptoms that demand our attention.

Several years ago I was invited to speak at a Roman Catholic seminary. At the last minute some mischievous urge took hold of me and I entitled my lecture “Your Neurosis as a Low-grade Religious Experience.” The lecture apparently shook the congregation profoundly. I had a greater deluge of questions, impassioned conversations, and raised voices than I had ever had. The subject touched a raw nerve, you see. People were startled to hear that if we don't go to the spirit, the spirit comes to us as neurosis. This is the immediate, practical connection between psychology and religion in our time.

Every person must live the inner life in one form or another. Consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or involuntarily, the inner world will claim us and exact its dues. If we go to that realm

Purpose of work with unconscious

consciously, it is by our *inner work*: our prayers, meditations, dream work, ceremonies, and Active Imagination. If we try to ignore the inner world, as most of us do, the unconscious will find its way into our lives through pathology: our psychosomatic symptoms, compulsions, depressions, and neuroses.

### THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUATION

*Individuation* is the term Jung used to refer to the lifelong process of becoming the complete human beings we were born to be. Individuation is our waking up to our total selves, allowing our conscious personalities to develop until they include all the basic elements that are inherent in each of us at the preconscious level. This is the "actualizing of the blueprint" of which we spoke earlier.

Why should this be called "individuation"? Because this process of actualizing oneself and becoming more complete also reveals one's special, individual structure. It shows how the universal human traits and possibilities are combined in each individual in a way that is unlike anyone else.

Jung emphasized the uniqueness of each person's psychological structure. Thus, the name he gave this process was not an accident; it reflected his conviction that the more one faces the unconscious and makes a synthesis between its contents and what is in the conscious mind, the more one derives a sense of one's unique individuality.

At the same time, individuation does not mean becoming isolated from the human race. Once we feel more secure as individuals, more complete within ourselves, it is natural also to seek the myriad ways in which we resemble our fellow human beings—the values, interests, and essentially human qualities that bind us together in the human tribe. If we look closely, we see that our individuality consists in the special way that we combine the universal psychological patterns and energy systems that all human beings have in common. Jung called these patterns the *archetypes*.

Since the archetypes are universal, they are all present in the unconscious of each person. But they combine in infinite variations to create individual human psyches. We may compare all this to the physical human body. In some ways our bodies are like

those of all other human beings. We all have arms, legs, hearts, livers, and skin in one form or another. They are universal characteristics of the human species. Yet, if I compare my fingerprints or strands of my hair with those of other people, I find that no two human bodies are exactly alike.

In the same way the universal psychological energies and capacities in the human race are combined differently in each of us. Each person has a distinct psychological structure. It is only by living that inherent structure that one discovers what it means to be an individual.

If we work at individuation, we begin to see the difference between the ideas and values that come out of our own selves and the social opinions that we absorb from the world around us. We can cease to be mere appendages of a society or a clique of people: We learn that we have our own values, our own ways of life, that proceed naturally out of our inborn natures.

A great sense of security develops from this process of individuation. One begins to understand that it isn't necessary to struggle to be like someone else, for by being one's own self one stands on the surest ground. We realize that to know ourselves completely and to develop all the strengths that are built into us is a lifetime task. We don't need to make an imitation of someone else's life. There is no further need for pretensions, for what is already ours is riches enough, and far more than we ever expected.