

**The Creative Self: The self re-created**

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*“All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.”*

-T.E. Lawrence

Artists are people for whom the world of symbols and images are readily accessible. They swim in the waters of the unconscious, returning with treasures to present in the form of paintings, songs, and spoken images. But not everyone thinks of themselves as an artist or is comfortable contemplating immersion in the ocean of the unconscious. How do ordinary people, those who are afraid of drowning in these waters, utilize the power of the unconscious to become individuated and live lives of deeper and more authentic meaning? In this paper I will show that creativity is central to individuation. By using creativity to connect to our meaning in life, we find a pathway to individuation, to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our purpose. I will propose that many activities we take for granted are themselves deeply creative and can be conduits for expressing and revealing our true selves.

Our lives are hybrids of dreams and waking images in which our modern, rational brains try to create meaning. But deeper, in our ancestral core, is a symbolic language that derives meaning from the world itself, without passing through the filters of the conscious mind. Creativity, intuition, and emotion spring from this well (Jung, 1966, p. 104). In his 1984 paper, *Chomsky on Creativity*, D’Agostino highlights Chomsky’s assessment that the very fact of a person’s use of language in an expressive fashion is an advanced form of creativity (p. 85). How we dress, the way we use our hands to

demonstrate, or even the route we take home from work, are all creative responses to external stimuli. The decisive factor linking creativity and individuation then, is openness to new experiences.

After graduating from high school, I chose not to pursue higher education. I was done with school, grades, and imposed academic structure. Instead I pursued art. I pursued travel. I followed the signs of my intuition. Largely they led me to wonderful experiences, many of which I count as integral to aiding my ultimate goal of becoming a working artist. The most profound of these occurred as I convalesced after a bout of acute appendicitis. I was bedridden and decided to watch Tom Stoppard's self-directed screenplay of *Rosencranz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1989) as my evening's distraction. I was very familiar with the play, having been a part of an earlier production, and I knew the story of *Hamlet* thoroughly as well. But this time, during the first scene, as the unlucky pair encounter the Players on the open road, I was riveted. Physical theater performers erupted out of a horse-drawn caravan, and Richard Dryfus' exclamation: "*Halt: An audience!*" left me spellbound. *This* is what I wanted to do. Though I had suffered through a five hour surgery three weeks and fifteen pounds ago, I was renewed with a sense of purpose and vigor. All these experiences were crucibles that led me to this moment where my future was laid out before my eyes. I knew what I had to do. It led to college, and a vibrant career as an internationally touring theater artist. If I hadn't been available to the experience, it might have passed unnoticed. But I *was* available, open to chance and to a defining moment in my life.

Depth psychology is concerned largely with aiding the process of individuation. C. G. Jung pioneered this approach to help patients grapple with latent forces of the

unconscious to integrate and assimilate symbolic markers. As Jung put it, individuation was “coming to selfhood” or “self-realization” (Jung, 1953, p. 173).

The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aim, but as an artist he is “man” in a higher sense—he is “collective man,” a vehicle and moulder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind. (Jung, 1966, p. 101)

If we exchange the label of *artist* from Jung’s description and replace it with *individual*, we can begin to understand what role a pure symbolic image might have on one’s life. As an individual examines their impulses, thoughts, and dreams, they have the opportunity to become aware of the presence of their own symbolic archetypes. It is these archetypes that provide the deepest insights into the process of individuation and potentially the fertile numinous that lies beyond.

The ego, the self-conscious consciousness, is aware of itself, its thoughts and intentions. This is our boat on the ocean, so to speak. We paddle but are truly at the mercy of what is below. Beneath this are the waters of the unconscious; it is the world of images and symbols pertaining to the hidden psyche. This is the realm of the archetypes.

The shadow archetype is generally encountered first. This represents aspects of the ego hidden from consciousness. While it can be summarized as the culmination of that which the individual is fearful of showing to others, there is a more meaningful aspect as pertains to creativity in particular. Since the shadow contains much of what we repress in our personal lives, we also capture aspects of the collective unconscious in this repressive action as well. This can be a major source of inspiration for creative work

and symbolism, as the knowledge of the unconscious is the only means of defending ourselves against its power. (Jung, 1957, p. 5)

Among the other archetypes Jung proposed are the two countersexual aspects of the feminine and masculine: the *Anima* and *Animus* respectively. The word *anima* comes from latin, used to convey the metaphysical breath or spirit and is characterized as emotive, chaotic, and typically Dionysian. The animus, conversely, is more Appolonian. It reflects the linear, logical, rational elements associated with the mind, the *symbolically* masculine. These archetypes are often encountered in dreams or symbolism in active imagination, and can also bring us closer to inspiring images which reverberate in our psyche.

In the framework of Jung's microcosmic/macrocosmic conception of the human psyche, to work with the materials of personality, which means to work within the human being, leads immediately beyond the person. This is so because, at its depth, the psyche of the individual contains reflections of the larger universe. These reflections are images symbolically representing aspects of the macrocosm. (Progoff, 1973, p.78)

In some cases, an individual's encounter with their unconscious can produce neurosis. These are generally people who have, as Jung puts it, "remained too long on a primitive level" (Jung, 1953, p. 184). And while people generally sense their own striving for wholeness and the self-realization to which Jung refers, in the majority it is distant and often obscured by superficial intentions.

Since it is highly probable that we are still a long way from the summit of absolute consciousness, presumably everyone is capable of wider consciousness,

and we may assume accordingly that the unconscious processes are constantly supplying us with contents which, if consciously recognized, would extend the range of consciousness. Looked at in this way, the unconscious appears as a field of experience of unlimited extent. If it were merely reactive to the conscious mind, we might aptly call it a psychic mirror-world. In that case, the real source of all contents and activities would lie in the conscious mind, and there would be absolutely nothing in the unconscious except the distorted reflections of conscious contents. The creative process would be shut up in the conscious mind, and anything new would be nothing but conscious invention or cleverness. The empirical facts give the lie to this. Every creative man knows that spontaneity is the very essence of creative thought. Because the unconscious is not just a reactive mirror-reflection, but an independent, productive activity, its realm of experience is a self-contained world, having its own reality, of which we can only say that it affects us as we affect it—precisely what we say about our experience of the outer world. And just as material objects are the constituent elements of this world, so psychic factors constitute the objects of that other world. (Jung, 1953, p. 184)

Here Jung draws the parallel of creative thought and the assimilation of the unconscious in the ongoing work of individuation. He also notes that willingness to be affected is central to this process; *we get out of it only what we put into it*. This willingness, this openness to new and unfamiliar experiences, is key.

Creativity is felt, rather than thought: experienced intuitively, rather than logically. We *see* the painting, we *hear* the music, we *touch* the sculpture, we *feel* the

performance, but when we try to incorporate the creative experience we encounter the obstacle of our intellect when trying to make sense of the stimulus. This disconnect prevents many from accessing or returning to aesthetic experiences in our culture; the enterprise can create a sensation of isolation or otherness since it communicates via a lexicon of intuition and emotions, not reason (Noë, 2015, p. 137).

What is creativity but being open to a novel approach to anything? We are said to be creative if we've managed to solve a puzzle in a new way, or manufacture a new object, be it representational or abstract. It is this *newness* that defines our action as creative, rather than simply acting in the mundane realm of everyday life. According to psychologist Rollo May (1975) creativity is, "...the process of bringing something new into being. Creativity requires passion and commitment. It brings to our awareness what was previously hidden and points to new life. The experience is one of heightened consciousness: ecstasy" (p. 49).

But he also highlights one of the primary features of creative effort: the *encounter* (May, 1974, p. 45). The encounter may be with a particularly engaging conversation which leads to insight, or a painter encountering a landscape they wish to paint. The idea is *encountered*, which implies a confrontation, of sorts. In any confrontation, if we are to move forward, we must gather courage. As May puts it, courage is "the capacity to move ahead in spite of despair" (1975, P. 12). He continues,

...if you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself. Also you will have betrayed our community in failing to make your contribution to the whole. (1975, p. 13)

In my own recognition of my future path, I had to first create a framework within which the image could materialize. Even if the ultimate realization was not identical to the

image, it fit into the frame in a way that made it easy to identify. As if a rough sketch of a constellation was held up to the night sky: the sketch and the stars eventually line up.

Initially I indicated the path to individuation for the skeptic, a more detached individual, would require a fundamental shift in perspective. This is akin to May's notion of encounter for which we must gather courage in order to proceed. While those with a heightened sensitivity to the metaphysical may enjoy a distinct advantage in engaging the voices of the unconscious, those who tend toward the side of conscientiousness and disagreeableness will likely listen for voices of reason to guide them in their quest for self-realization. After describing a personal breakthrough in an early study, May describes the experience of receiving, unbidden, a completely new perspective which utterly transformed his work. He explains this process:

The unconscious seems to take delight [...] in breaking through—and breaking up— exactly what we cling to most rigidly in our conscious thinking. What occurs in this breakthrough is not simply growth; it is much more dynamic. It is not a mere expansion of awareness; it is rather a kind of battle. A dynamic struggle goes on within a person between what he or she consciously thinks on the one hand and, on the other, some insight, some perspective that is struggling to be born. The insight is then born with anxiety, guilt, and the joy and gratification that is inseparable from the actualizing of a new idea or vision. (May, 1975, p. 59)

These uninvited guests of the subliminal mind can bring not only new perspectives but new frameworks for our own existence. They might come as physical symptoms or observed coincidences, (Jung's famed *synchronicities*,) or simply as flashes of insight that move our train of thought onto new tracks.

These flashes of insight, or the “*Ah-ha moment*” is afforded by confrontation with a new, incontrovertible reality: *the aesthetic arrest*. “There is an accord between you and the object and that is why you say, “*Aha!*” (Campbell, 2007, p. 187). Though this arrest need not necessarily be afforded by an object, *per se*, it could just as easily be triggered by events or environments. Viktor Frankl’s *Logotherapy* emphasises suffering as a source of aesthetic arrest. We are caught in the experience of the difficult and are rendered immobile without a reframing of our attention; our attitude by the lever by which we are freed or further snared (Frankl, 1975, p. 179). The creative is not always an encounter with the beautiful, joyous rapture romantically portrayed in cinema. It is frequently a slap in the face.

Openness is a reliable indicator of creativity. The psychiatrist Jordan Peterson notes the appeal of Jung’s symbolic approaches to individuals high in trait openness (Peterson, 2017). His assertion is that this method naturally favors those with a creative mindset. In fact, Jung himself was exceptionally high in trait openness (Peterson, 2015). When one allows themselves to be guided, the archetype of the anima can provide a numinous perspective on avoiding obstacles, navigating experiences, or simply living a more meaningful life. But for the more closed and skeptical personality, one must look to more subtle experiences for inspiration and guidance. As Picasso famously pointed out, every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction. One must be willing to relinquish a grip on belief to encounter a new reality.

In his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl describes his experiences during the Holocaust. His path to survival relied on transcending his physical condition and engaging a spiritual transcendence. He had to daily, hourly, moment by moment, relinquish his attachments to his own suffering in order to transcend it. He quotes

Spinoza's *Ethics*– “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it” (Frankl, 1959, p. 117). Rather than a will to power, Frankl discovered a will to meaning. He wrote,

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him. (Frankl, 1959, p. 127)

The process of individuation requires a similar effort. The search for meaning in one's life is in itself a creative process. The ability to see multiple possibilities and perspectives simultaneously, for instance, is a creative trait.

We have to be careful to make a distinction here between the skeptic and the zealot. For the zealot, the organization or religion to which they belong is enough. Their introspection is rerouted by faith. This can happen outside of the church as well, (for example the Post-Modernist movement whose reliance on relativism constitutes a religious-like context for adherents.) But for any self-reflective individual, even within the framework of organized belief, “...the security of living in a meaningful universe created and overseen by a loving personal God has gone [...] without a healthy relationship to the instinctual power of life our attempts to attain to humility and modesty have produced only a shallow mediocrity” (Le Grice, 2013, p. 54). It is here in this ontological vacuum that we can begin to incorporate the mythological and the symbolic via creativity to assist the individuation process.

The first function of a mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe as it is: the second being to

render an interpretive total image of the same, as known to contemporary consciousness. (Campbell, 1968)

As we grow we gather symbols around us that help us define our identities, like a hermit crab growing out of, and finding new habitable shells. It is important to remember the individuation process is not governed by the conscious ego, but by the delicate communication with the dimensions of our unconscious: the shadow, the archetypes, and their interplay in associated imagery.

Jung's theories about creative impulses imply that rather than mere aspects of the psyche, the symbolism derives from a deeper place common to the species (Jung, 1966, p. 100). If we take the supposition that artists are not special kinds of people, but rather people are themselves special kinds of artists, we may progress through a kind of logical syllogism regarding this metaphor; every dreamer's mind goes to the same place, though only a few bring back what they find there. As Jung himself has said, "In everyone some kind of artist is hiding" (1977, p. 38). Rollo May also points to Jung's frequent emphasis on the polarity between unconscious experience and consciousness. He characterized the role of the unconscious like a kind of lubricating agent, keeping consciousness from drying up in the sunlight of "arid rationality" (May, 1975, p. 59). Jung stressed the process of individuation required the integration of both collective and personal elements, both of which stem from the imaginal (1953, p. 179).

In Conclusion, we can point to components of creativity that afford us deeper access to the individuation process: openness, attention, and meaning. They are all necessary in some measure to build an integrated ego strong enough to withstand the encounter with the unconscious. This encounter can transform suffering into purpose.

To utilize the archetypes of the unconscious, we must summon a willingness to entertain the notion that there are larger forces at work vying for our attention, or they will destroy us. To cultivate this openness requires a vulnerability—an acceptance of our shadow: the archetype receives power only if it is suppressed and ignored. Likewise, the embrace of our animus/anima duality assists the individual's readiness to proceed by providing a contrasexual perspective.

Where we place our attention similarly prepares us for the continuation of this work. It is in this phase we might gain a deeper insight into our personality and natural proclivities. We begin to embrace our true nature and guide our own story, our own myth. In this attentiveness lies our strength.

Finally, with our sense of self engaged and working with, not against, oneself, we begin to grasp our meaning. Through the transformation of suffering we discover that our encounter with the creative has driven our understanding of ourselves. While this may change, a sense of the Self can become clearer as all our aspects merge and rise. As meaning becomes clearer, so does action. In our everyday lives, this action, supported by the engaged and individuated ego, takes on a new significance. Our character becomes singular and in attunement with our intention and meaning. We are able to absorb and withstand the challenges of our lives, buoyed by the expansive sense of ourselves. The everyday brings its own symbolism, rich with numinous content ready to be examined and incorporated into a larger framework.

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