

On the Importance of Numinous Experience in the Alchemy of Individuation

By Murray Stein

In a letter to P.W. Martin (20 August 1945), the founder of the International Study Center of Applied Psychology in Oxted, England, C.G. Jung confirmed the centrality of numinous experience in his life and work: “It always seemed to me as if the real milestones were certain symbolic events characterized by a strong emotional tone. You are quite right, the main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neuroses but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact is that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology. Even the very disease takes on a numinous character” (Jung 1973, 1: 377). If one holds the classical Jungian view that the only genuine cure for neurosis is to grow out of it through pursuing individuation, then treatment based on this model would seem necessarily to include “the approach to the numinous,” as Jung states so firmly in this letter. The individuation process, as proposed by Jung and his followers, typically includes experiences of a numinous nature.

The question is: How are such momentous experiences related to and used within the context of analysis and the individuation journey, and how do they contribute to the overall process of individuation? On the answer to this complex question rests the difference between psychological individuation and the development of spirituality. While the psychological hero(ine) of the individuation journey is by no means identical to the spiritual hero(ine) of the journey to God (however this term may be defined), it is not always easy to tell where their paths diverge, precisely because Jung placed such

central importance on numinous experience for individuation. And yet they do diverge, and decisively.

On Healing and Numinous Experience

We can begin by investigating how attaining to numinous experiences releases a person from the curse of pathology, as Jung claims in his letter to P.W. Martin. Generally speaking, an “approach to the numinous” is considered a religious undertaking, a pilgrimage. The “attainment to the numinous experiences” that Jung speaks of refers to religious experiences of a quasi-mystical nature. By itself, this attainment might well persuade a person that life is meaningful. Numinous experience creates a convincing link to the transcendent, and this may well lead to the feeling that character flaws like addictions or behavioral disorders are trivial by comparison with the grand visions imparted in the mystical state. The pathological symptom can be interpreted as an incitement to go on the spiritual quest, or even as a paradoxical doorway into transcendence, and this can donate meaning to the malady itself. Perhaps some degree of pathology is needed, in fact, in order for a person to feel strongly enough motivated to set out on a spiritual quest to begin with. In this case, attainment to numinous experiences would bring about a change in the feeling that pathology is a curse, even if it did not result in curing the pathology itself, although it might lead to this as well.

For modern and psychologically astute people, however, such a spiritual development might not signify more than a temporary Band Aid and by no means a definitive solution to the problems created by neurosis. For such people, who tend to be the ones who seek out analysis rather than spiritual guidance or religious pilgrimages, spiritual awareness by

itself is not enough. So how would an approach to the numinous and the attainment of numinous experiences contribute to the more far-reaching psychological project of individuation? This becomes a much more complicated matter than the purely religious realize.

To begin with fundamentals, one cannot conceive that Jung (or the Jungians following him) would possibly entertain the notion that achieving freedom from the curse of pathology for oneself or for the people one works with in analysis can be separated from living a full life, that is from engaging to the fullest extent possible in the process of individuation. Going on spiritual quests or having numinous experiences may be part of the route to individuation but by themselves are not enough to establish, let alone to complete, an individuation process, although they may create a profound change in attitude and personality as in the case of Paul on the road to Damascus (cited by Jung in Psychology and Religion). Generally speaking, however, a numinous experience is a “hint,” as Jung defines it in several passages. It is a hint that larger, non-egoic powers exist in the psyche, which need to be considered and ultimately made conscious. High on the agenda of the individuation opus is making the psyche conscious, and this far-ranging enterprise can be described minimally as multifaceted because of the complexity resident within the Self. Treating pathology is not a partial undertaking in Jungian psychotherapy. Specific symptoms cannot be isolated from more general questions of consciousness and wholeness, that is from individuation issues of a profound and far-reaching nature.

To get more deeply into this discussion, we should recall the basic two-phase movement of the individuation process, analysis and synthesis. The development of consciousness and the realization of the complete personality’s identity, i.e.,

individuation, requires initially that a person break the unconscious identity with the persona on the one side and with the anima/animus on the other (see Stein 2005a). The attachments and identifications with these structures and their contents must be loosened through conscious reflection and analysis. After that, a process of inner dialogue (“active imagination”) can take place through which the gap is opened wider between ego consciousness and these other psychic structures. This defines the analytic movement in the individuation process. Through it, consciousness comes to resemble less a static set of objects and patterns, like a painting, and more something like a mirror through which objects can float freely into and out of view but do not remain permanently in residence. This movement of analysis includes dissolving the attachments to religious objects, traditional practices, and childish theologies. It is one of the primary achievements of individuation to arrive at this type of fluidity in consciousness and to gain a measure of freedom from identities that were created early in childhood and adolescence and then became cemented in place through ongoing attachments, loves, loyalties, and the need to belong and to be one of the group, a member of the collective. If this project resembles a spiritual quest, it is one by way of a via negativa (the way of negation), such as Zen Buddhism espouses. If one thinks about the psyche structurally, as above, one understands readily enough that identification with the persona and the anima/animus blocks individuation by cluttering the personality’s ego with foreign objects, i.e., introjects and other unconsciously acquired and maintained contents. Consciousness must be freed from this contamination if a person is to gain individuality and true uniqueness.

Experientially, it is the affectively charged “voices” or “images” embedded in these psychic structures, which back them up and make authoritative demands, that cause the

problem. In these are represented the figures with whom one is identified or to whom one is bound emotionally by affective ties - parents, mentors, lovers, community leaders, enemies, “ghosts,” etc. The reality of psychological life requires that in analysis we confront voices and images that communicate feeling and emotion; we do not confront inner structures as such. To speak structurally introduces a level of abstraction that is theoretically necessary but not in and of itself clinically useful or descriptively accurate. It is in considering the voices and images as they are experienced concretely within the psyche, which influence and at times even take possession of consciousness, that we come upon the mythic dimension, which is only a small step away from the experience of a numen.¹ In the analytic movement of individuation, the ego’s unconscious identification with such figures, including archetypal ones, becomes subject to analysis (dissolving, taking apart). One must become free of their power and influence. Detachment and separation, not union, are the central themes of this movement.

To put this discussion into an historical perspective, Jung’s interest in mythical figures of the unconscious psyche began around 1909 and found its first major published statement in the two-part work, Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido of 1912 (first translated into English in 1916a as Psychology of the Unconscious). Taking off from a text written by Miss Frank Miller, “Some instances of subconscious creative imagination” and published with an introduction by the Swiss psychologist Theodor Flournoy,² Jung unearthed the mythical background concealed in this American woman’s

¹ From **nūmen** -inis, n. (nuo), a nodding with the head, a nod. As an expression of will, command, consent. Of a deity, the divine will, divine command. Hence, the might of a deity, majesty, divinity. Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary.

² “Quelques Faits d’imagination créatrice subconsciente,” Archives de psychologie (Geneva), V (1906) : 36-51.

fantasies. For him, this investigation exposed a deeper layer of the psyche than the purely personal. There are voices and images active in the unconscious that occupy a space located at a non-personal level. At first Jung termed these “primordial images;” later he named them “the archetypes of the collective unconscious.” A careful investigation of consciousness, especially through the analysis of daydreams, waking fantasies, and dreams, uncovers archetypal images at work that have a controlling influence over waking thought and feeling. As Jung poked into these hidden recesses, he discovered the influential power of the primordial images over consciousness, and for him their determinative authority for psychological life became irrefutable. Stuck behind and within the personal inner voices and images, Jung discovered “the gods.” These impersonal forces and energies of massive dimension and of both primitive and sophisticated quality are not only disturbers of consciousness, however; they are also the carriers of culture, of spiritual values passed down through generations, and of patterns of instinct and imagination that can be found in all cultures and at all times of human history. Ultimately, their images embody and represent humankind’s experience of the divine on the one hand, and of the instincts (such as sexuality, hunger, creativity, etc.) on the other.

This profound realization of the psyche’s archetypal foundations led Jung to the view that pathological symptoms also contain (and often conceal) an archetypal element. Human psychopathologies are not only individual and personal acquisitions. They appear cross culturally and universally, and their appearance and statistical manifestation are relatively unaffected by social and cultural circumstances. They are typical outcomes of human interaction with environments of many types, and they disguise or represent basic

human needs, including spiritual ones. A person must address these needs directly and take them on board if life is to achieve balance and wholeness. Individuation depends on making this move toward consciousness and integration.

Numinosity enters this discussion in relation to the role that archetypal influences play in pathological states of mind. As Jung writes in a letter, dated 30 January 1961, to William Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous: “His [i.e., Roland’s, Jung’s patient] craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God” (Jung 1973, 2: 624). In Bill W’s case, as Wilson is referred to in the literature of AA, the approach to the numinous and the attainment to numinous experiences changed him when he was able to free himself from the notion that opening himself to the numinous would oblige him to go back to the familiar religion of his childhood and to its prescribed teaching and dogmatic structures. Since he could not do this, his path to the integration of the numinous was blocked. For Bill W., his religious tradition had become, as it has for modern people generally, Procrustean. The key came in the spontaneous advice from an alcoholic friend who had found a way to spirituality: “Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?” (Alcoholics Anonymous: 12) Giving the ego choice and responsibility, rather than insisting on submission to dogma, was the answer to his religious conflict. Becoming freed to find his way to the numinous as an individual - this is the essential point for modern people - changed Bill W. in such a fundamental way that the illness corrupting the physical and psychological body could be overcome. From this forceful realization that the numinous element in spirituality can heal, an individual was freed from his addiction to alcohol and a worldwide self-help organization was born.

Once the true underlying craving for spirit was effectively addressed and integrated into daily life, the desire for alcoholic ecstasy could be held in check.

Are not all addictions, one wonders after having seen such a wide variety of them in clinical practice, a search for something so elusive as to be considered somehow “of the spirit”?

Rudolf Otto, Creator of “the Idea of the Numinous”

Because Jung weighted numinous experience with such great significance for individuation, it is instructive to know something about this terminology and where it came from. The German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) developed the use of the terms numinosum, numinous, numinosity in his famous work, Das Heilige (translated into English, somewhat unfortunately, as The Idea of the Holy), in order to describe “the Holy” in such a way as to keep it distinct from other theological and philosophical or ethical renditions, such “the good” or “goodness.” He writes: “For this purpose I adopt a word coined from the Latin numen. Omen has given us ‘ominous’, and there is no reason why from numen we should not similarly form a word ‘numinous’” (Otto 1917: 6-7). Otto set out to describe the human experience of “the Holy,” not the theological concept of holiness. His work introduced a strong psychological and emotional component into the study of religions, in contrast to other comparative and historical approaches and above all to the theological enterprise, which often treats almost exclusively only received doctrines and offers a rational (in the sense of an organized and systematic) explication of traditional teachings and texts (i.e., “revelation”).

For a Protestant like Otto, of course, “faith” was generally taken to be the central fact of religious life, not numinous experience. This can often take the form of intellectual and therefore quasi-rational assent to doctrinal propositions. Otto, on the contrary, wanted to speak about the nature of religious experience and to demonstrate the fundamental importance of the irrational in religion, hence his book’s subtitle: “Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen“ (“On the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational”). While obviously not desiring to abandon the rational elements of theology (see *ibid*: 1-4), he creatively set forth the non-rational quality of religious experience and especially its strong emotional overtones. For Otto, the human encounter with “the Holy,” as image, ritual, or sound, could only be accurately described with strong words like mysterium tremendum et fascinans (an awe-full and fascinating mystery), a phrase that he explicates meticulously and profoundly in his exposition of numinous experience. To enter into the presence of “the Holy” was for him to be shaken to the foundations by the power and awesome magnitude of the Other who is confronted in this experience. To describe this, he uses words like “shudder,” “stupor,” “astonishment,” and “blank wonder.” As a student of the world’s mysticisms, he also related this to the “void” of Buddhist mystics (Otto 1917: 30). This universal religious moment is primarily an experience of feeling, whereas theology is above all an exercise of thinking and reflection.

It is not altogether clear how Otto arrived at his position, whether through the influence of early teachers and ministers, or of philosophers like Kant and Fries whom he studied deeply, or from Christian theologians like Schleiermacher who also emphasized the crucial importance of feeling in religious life and teaching, or by taking into account

his own experiences of the Holy (see Alles 1996: 62-63). Perhaps his psychological typology also played a big role. His preference for feeling over thinking set him apart from his theological fellows. Whatever the reasons, he was gripped and fascinated by the power of numinous experience. In some of his letters written back home during his travels Otto describes two impressive incidents that some scholars have regarded as decisive for his deep appreciation of the numinous. These offer a vivid account of what he means by “numinous experience.” The first occurred on a visit to Mogador in 1911, some six years before the publication of Das Heilige. His account is dated simply “On the Sabbath”:

It is Sabbath, and already in the dark, incredibly filthy vestibule we hear the “blessings” of the prayers and the scripture readings, those half-sung, half-spoken nasal chants that the synagogue bequeathed to both the church and the mosque. The sound is quite pleasant, and it is soon possible to distinguish certain, regular modulations and cadences, which follow one another like leitmotifs. At first the ear tries to separate and understand the words in vain, and soon one wants to quit trying. Then suddenly the tangle of voices resolves itself and ... a solemn fear overcomes one’s limbs. It begins in unison, clear and unmistakable:

Qādôš qādôš qādôš ’ēlōhîm ādonāy sebāôt

Māle’û haššāmayim wehāares kebôdô!³

I have heard the Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus of the cardinals in Saint Peters, the Swiat, swiat, swiat in the cathedral in the Kremlin, and the Hagios, hagios, hagios

³ “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory” – a liturgical adaptation of Isaiah 6.3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

of the patriarch in Jerusalem. In whatever language these words are spoken, the most sublime words that human lips have ever uttered, they always seize on in the deepest ground of the soul, arousing and stirring with a mighty shudder the mystery of the other-worldly that sleeps therein. That happens here more than anywhere else, here in this deserted place, where they resound in the language in which Isaiah first heard them and on the lips of this people whose heritage they initially were. (Alles 1996: 80-81)

Here we find the religious shudder and the strong emotional response that Otto will later analyze in Das Heilige. This memorable experience must at the minimum have contributed importantly to the experiential ground for writing about the numinous with personal conviction. For the authorship of his remarkable book, the gift of intellectual creativity and courage had to play a major role.

The second such impressive numinous experience occurred some eleven years after Das Heilige appeared in print and added further confirmation to what Otto had been writing about for the past decade and more. This he recounted in a letter dated 4 January 1928 and postmarked Bombay:

From our balcony we can see the wonderful Bombay Harbor. Right nearby sits the proud “Gateway of India”, and left of that we see the mountainous island of Elephanta. We went there three days ago. Visitors climb halfway up the mountain on magnificent stone steps, until on the right side a broad door opens in the volcanic rock. It leads into one of the biggest cave-temples of ancient India. Heavy pillars, carved from the rock, bear the roof. Slowly, one’s eyes become

accustomed to the dim light; then they can make out marvelous representations from Indian mythology carved on the walls. Eventually one's eyes find their way to the massive, main niche. Here towers an image of the deity that I can only compare with certain works of Japanese sculpture and the great images of Christ in old Byzantine churches: a three-headed form, depicted from the chest up, growing out of the rock, three times the size of a human being. To get the full effect, one must sit down. The middle head looks straight ahead, silent and powerful; the other two heads are shown in profile. The stillness and the majesty of the image is complete. It portrays Śiva as the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer of the world, and at the same time as the savior and bestower of blessings. Nowhere have I seen the mystery of the transcendent expressed with more grandeur or fullness than in these three heads... To see this place would truly be worth a trip to India in itself, and from the spirit of the religion that lived here one can learn more in an hour of viewing than from all the books ever written.

(Alles 1996: 94-95)

These deeply moving experiences of religious objects not his own (the one Jewish and the other Hindu) contributed to Otto's conviction that all religions are founded upon such strong impressions of "the Holy." The spiritual ground beneath the temples and the cathedrals of all religions, supporting their rites and rituals and their Sacred Scriptures, is made of numinous experiences, and is therefore psychological. For Otto, this forms the universal, foundational bedrock of all world religions: "From the very beginning religion is experience of the *Mysterium*, of what breaks forth from the depths of our life of feeling... as the feeling of the supersensual" (Alles 1996: 52, n. 44). Otto's grounding of

religion in the experience of the *Mysterium* was fully compatible with Jung's view: "The idea of God originated with the experience of the *numinosum*. It was a psychical experience, with moments when man felt overcome. Rudolf Otto has designated this moment in his *Psychology of Religion* as the *numinosum*, which is derived from the Latin numen, meaning hint, or sign" (Jung 1988: 1038).

As a student of world religions, Otto could see the universality of humankind's experience of the numinosum and of numinous objects. Since time immemorial, humans have noted the "feeling of the supersensual" that Otto refers to in his definition. This is the experiential basis of religions, high and low, near and far. All are on an equal footing in this respect. In this sense, Otto was an apologist for religion as such, not specifically for his own tradition, Christianity (see Alles 2001). Appreciating the value of religious experience universally freed him from the narrow confines of his orthodox Lutheranism, and as a result he entered energetically and enthusiastically into dialogue with members of other religious communities, founded a "Religious League of Humanity," and proposed a parliament of world religions to be "made up of official representatives of the various religions" (Alles 1996: 147). For his liberal attitude he paid a high price at home in his German university at Marburg, where he received harsh and even abusive criticism and ridicule from the neo-orthodox Christian students and a variety of other theologians⁴, notably from his arch rival Rudolf Bultmann (see Alles 1996: 4).

While Otto considered all religions to share a common basis in the experience of the numinosum, he did retain the view that the Christian tradition offers the highest form of

⁴ Alles (1996:4) cites Paul Tillich's recollections: "During the three semesters of my teaching [in Marburg 1924-1925] I met the first radical effects of the neo-orthodox theology on theological students: cultural problems were excluded from theological thought; theologians like Schleiermacher, Harnack, Troeltsch, Otto, were contemptuously rejected; social and political ideas were banned from theological discussions."

spirituality attained to date by humankind. This was not an unusual position for an identified Christian theologian to take in his time, although today it seems quite provincial and is certainly no longer “politically correct” in liberal religious circles. Nevertheless it is instructive to see how Otto argued in favor of this view, as in the following passage from The Idea of the Holy that also, curiously enough, anticipates by some thirty-five years some features of Jung’s interpretation of the Bible in Answer to Job:

For what makes Christ in a special sense the summary and climax of the course of antecedent religious evolution is pre-eminently this – that in His life, suffering, and death is repeated in classic and absolute form that most mystical of all the problems of the Old Covenant, the problem of the guiltless suffering of the righteous, which re-echoes again and again so mysteriously from Jeremiah and deutero-Isaiah on through Job and the Psalms. The 38th chapter of Job is a prophecy of Golgotha. And on Golgotha the solution of the problem, already adumbrated in Job, is repeated and surpassed. It lay, as we say, entirely in the non-rational aspect of deity, and yet was none the less a solution. In Job the suffering of the righteous found its significance as the classic and crucial case of the revelation, more immediately actual and in more palpable proximity than any other, of the transcendent mysteriousness and ‘beyondness’ of God. The cross of Christ, that monogram of the eternal mystery, is its completion. Here rational are enfolded with non-rational elements, the revealed commingled with the unrevealed, the most exalted love with the most awe-inspiring ‘wrath’ of the numen, and therefore, in applying to the Cross of Christ the category ‘holy’,

Christian religious feeling has given birth to a religious intuition profounder and more vital than any to be found in the whole history of religion.

(Otto 1917: 172-3)

Here we see how Otto used his idea of the numinous and the irrational to explicate the symbolic heart of Christianity.

Jung and Otto

Jung did not share in this type of ranking of religious symbols or consider the Christian one to be the “highest,” although he did find in the cross a profound symbol for the central burden of individuation, i.e., holding and suffering the tension of the opposites. Jung’s concern with healing and with the psychological process of individuation was entirely other than Otto’s primary focus, which was exclusively centered on the religious aspects of life and on worship of the Holy. Otto was only minimally involved in psychological healing and treatment, and the notion of psychological individuation did not play a part in his thinking. His primary interest lay in describing and analyzing the encounter with the numinous. Jung, on the other hand, personally engaged the “God within” in a wholly psychological manner, and while he related to the imago Dei with the same passion and feeling for its mystery and awesome emotional power as did Otto, he related to it psychologically and not worshipfully, and with the caution befitting the psychotherapist. The passion for the spiritual, like all passions, can easily tip over into pathos and extreme alienation of other parts of the Self, as we see so well today among religious fundamentalists and fanatics. The goal of individuation, unlike that of the religious quest, is not union with the divine or salvation

but rather integration and wholeness, the forging of the opposites inherent in the Self into an image of unity and integrating this into consciousness.

It is regrettable, however, that Jung did not have personal contact with Otto to carry on this type of discussion. From the early 1930's onward, Jung made extensive use of Otto's terminology to refer to a variety of psychological phenomena, mostly those having to do with manifestations of the archetypal images of the collective unconscious. The potential for fruitful dialogue would have been great, partly because the two men shared a common cultural and philosophical background (unlike the insurmountable differences in this respect between Jung and Fr. Victor White, the Dominican expert on Thomist theology, with whom he did have extensive discussions between 1945 and 1955 – see Stein 2005c, also Lammers), partly because they both had a deep and abiding interest in world religions and mystical traditions (see Otto's Mysticism East and West and Jung's Psychology and Religion: West and East), and above all because they both attended to experience rather than to doctrine or “faith” as the primary object of inquiry. Their paths nearly crossed in Ascona, Switzerland around the founding of the Eranos Tagungen in 1932-3, which were dedicated to the dialogue between East and West and featured world-class scholars from around the world. Unfortunately, Otto was too ill by that time to participate in the first meetings of this circle of intellectuals, but the name Eranos was the result of his suggestion to the founder, Olga Froebe-Kapteyn (see Hakl: 92-9). Jung attended and lectured at Eranos regularly throughout the 1930's and 40's. Otto and Jung also shared a close acquaintance with the Sinologist Richard Wilhelm, whom Otto visited in China and with whom Jung collaborated extensively (see Stein 2005b), and with the Indologist Wilhelm Hauer, with whom both men broke off relations, in Otto's case on

account of Hauer's negative views on Christianity (see Alles 2002) and in Jung's because of Hauer's extreme pro-German and Aryan political views (see Shamdasani: xlii).

With his book, Das Heilige, and the use of the term "numinous" to describe the nature of religious experience, Otto introduced a major psychological dimension into the scientific study of religion, even though this may not have been his primary motive (see Alles 2001). Jung, on the other hand, picked up on Otto's terminology to highlight what he already knew to be the important religious dimension of the psyche and of aspects of psychotherapeutic and developmental processes. There is much overlapping of views in their published writings with respect to the nature of numinous experience, even though their fundamental points of reference are quite different. Otto would certainly have objected to Jung's broad use of the term numinous to cover a wide range of psychological experience, while he himself limited it exclusively to the religious.

Jung, for his part, borrowed and transformed Otto's terminology for his own purposes. By the time he began to use the word numinous in the 1930's, Das Heilige, published in 1917, was already a classic and Jung was well advanced in his psychological theorizing. Jung effortlessly equated numinous experience with the manifestation of unconscious contents, the personal complexes as well as impersonal archetypal images. Here is Jung speaking in a lecture delivered in Zurich at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) on 5 May 1934 and repeated shortly thereafter at Bad Nauheim, Germany, at the Seventh Congress for Psychotherapy:

It will no doubt be remembered what a storm of indignation was unleashed on all sides when Freud's works became generally known. This violent reaction of public complexes drove Freud into an isolation which has brought the charge of

dogmatism upon him and his school. All psychological theoreticians in this field run the same risk, for they are playing with something that directly affects all that is uncontrolled in man – the numinosum, to use an apt expression of Rudolf Otto's. Where the realm of complexes begins the freedom of the ego comes to an end, for complexes are psychic agencies whose deepest nature is still unfathomed. Every time the researcher succeeds in advancing a little further towards the psychic tremendum, then, as before, reactions are let loose in the public...

(Jung 1934: par. 216.)

We see from this passage that for Jung “the numinosum” and “the psychic tremendum” - terms drawn straight out of Otto's work - translated into contents of the unconscious without further specification as to their nature or quality. For Otto, the theologian, these terms were reserved for religious experiences whose ultimate object would be considered metaphysical (i.e., the Divine), a transcendent reality mediated to people through religious symbols such as icons, statues, rituals, or sounds that related to acts of worship. For Jung, the psychologist, on the other hand, the object of a numinous experience was a content of the unconscious psyche that needed to be made conscious.

Jung nevertheless shared with Otto the “religious musicality” (Max Weber's term) to resonate to the numinous in the presence of religious symbols and ideas. Otto wrote that this sensibility couldn't be taught, it must be evoked (Otto 1917: 7). As with the appreciation and creation of art, some people have a genius for it while others have less, little, or no talent in this area (ibid: 177). Jung had this gift to an extraordinary degree. His accounts of firsthand numinous experiences appear in several of his writings – Memories, Dreams, Reflections, “Septem Sermones ad Mortuos,” and above all in the

famous Red Book (soon to be published). These writings demonstrate that Jung's receptivity to numinous experience was profound and extensive. For this reason, he has been recognized by many as a true Homo religiōsus. It should be noted that Jung's accounts include purely "inner experiences," such as dreams and visions, as well as the more extroverted type that Otto describes in the letters quoted above.

Numinous Experiences and Individuation: Hints and Signals for Integration

For Jung personally these numinous experiences were of critical importance, as he states in the letter to P.W. Martin cited above. In the late work, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, he is referring to them when he writes: "The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life – in them everything essential was decided" (Jung 1963: 199). This is a reference to the "Red Book" period, 1913-28, when he made his closest approach to the numinous. And then he makes the telling comment: "It was the prima materia for a lifetime's work" (ibid). In other words, the attainment to numinous experiences, while significant in itself, was not of final import; rather, it provided the essential ingredients for further stages of the individuation opus. These experiences were something to work on. They offered the material out of which he could wrest his psychological theory and forge his final identity: "Out of it [i.e., the concluding numinous dream in a long series, the famous Liverpool dream] emerged a first inkling of my personal myth," and "That [i.e., the whole series of numinous images and experiences] was the primal stuff ... and my works are a more or less successful endeavor to incorporate this incandescent matter into the contemporary picture of the world" (ibid). This, in brief, is a thumbnail sketch of the psychological opus of

individuation. It is an operation of sublimation, which raises the spiritual to the level of the psychological and renders numinous experience practical and useful. They become integrated into psychological functioning and assimilated into the contemporary world.

The psychological explanation for numinous experiences like those Otto reports lies in the phenomenon of projection, whereby unconscious contents are “found” in the physical objects, rituals, or sounds that elicit them. In religious experience, the psychologist claims, the ego is experiencing a content of the unconscious in projection. The stronger the experience, the more archetypal is the content. Such experiences link consciousness to the unconscious and offer “hints” that may be deciphered as communications. These hints can lead to a deeper perspective on life from the viewpoint of the collective unconscious and are essential for the psychological process of individuation if they can be brought forward and made conscious. This transformation from one state (the spiritual) to another (the psychological) falls under the name of a process called sublimation. To cite von Franz: “[Sublimation] comes from alchemy. Freud took it out of alchemy, out of chemistry. For example, when you boil water, it becomes steam. Steam is sublimated water. It is another aggregate state. Chemically, steam is not different from water. But qualitatively it manifests itself in another way. It has a higher potential. In steam, the water molecules are more alive; they whirl more about and therefore give the impression of steam instead of water” (von Franz: 167). Sublimated, the archetypal images become woven into the fabric of a person’s conscious identity. They become integrated. Thus, as sublimated spirit and transcendence, they offer healing. They release a person from the limitations of the purely immediate and time-bound framework of the ego and thereby contribute essentially to the formation of what Jung termed “the

transcendent function” (1916b), a psychological structure of identity made up of personal and archetypal elements (see Stein 2005a).

“It is altogether amazing how little most people reflect on numinous objects and attempt to come to terms with them,” Jung exclaims in his famous theological outburst, Answer to Job, “and how laborious such an undertaking is once we have embarked upon it. The numinosity of the object makes it difficult to handle intellectually, since our affectivity is always involved” (Jung 1954: par. 735). Sublimation and integration of this type is a difficult task but absolutely essential to the opus of individuation.

One must take care in discussions like this one to observe Jung’s often repeated definition of “the unconscious” as: “the unknown.” Otherwise a radical type of reductionism becomes inevitable. To say: “Religion is based on ‘nothing but’ projected unconscious contents (i.e., the numinous experiences of the Mysterium)” could be taken to reduce the study of theology and religion to a sub-department of psychology where the business would be to demonstrate how personal conflicts, etc. generate religious defenses and pseudo solutions to life’s problems. Some schools of psychology would doubtless applaud this demotion of the religious to the psychological. Not so with Jung and Analytical Psychology, however. In this approach, the psychological embraces (i.e., takes up, integrates) the religious in such a way that its spiritual value is not damaged or reduced. It is sublimated. In fact, the spiritual becomes confirmed and amplified through the psychological. Psyche is not seen as limited to brain chemistry, early childhood, or learning potentials. It is rather an ultimate term with an infinite horizon, which does not in principle exclude the metaphysical grounding of unconscious contents. Unconscious contents are all those factors of the world that lie beyond the ego’s awareness and control,

either because they have been repressed (as the result of conflict between incompatible images or ideas) or because they have not yet become fully conscious (everything else that has not yet been psychized, or sublimated, and integrated). To say that the object symbolized by religious experience is a content of the unconscious does not rule out its possible metaphysical standing. It only states a limit on human knowledge. This is therefore a statement of epistemological caution on the scientist's part, but not a claim that religious symbols and numinous objects have no further ontological basis. The metaphysical cannot be established or disconfirmed by scientific methods. It must remain hypothetical.

The "hints" Jung speaks of repeatedly in reference to numinous experiences may be taken as similar to what the sociologist and student of modernity, Peter Berger, has in mind with his phrase, "signal of transcendence": "To speak of a signal of transcendence is neither to deny nor to idealize the often harsh empirical facts that make up our lives in the world. It is rather to try for a glimpse of the grace that is to be found 'in, with, and under' the empirical reality of our lives" (Berger: 212). Berger speaks from the perspective of faith, however, while Jung holds to the neutral, observational position of the psychologist.

Shadows of the Numen

In several passages in The Idea of the Holy, Otto acknowledges the dark side of the numinosum, which is the source of the "shudder" and "dread" found in accounts of religious experience worldwide (see for instance Otto 1917: 15-19). Jung, as a psychiatrist, was understandably highly sensitive to the destructive power of the

unconscious and also aware of the negative potential fallout from numinous experience at many levels. Archetypes can profoundly disturb consciousness (see Jung's essay on Brother Klaus (1933) for an example of near psychotic proportions), as important as the experience of them may be for linking the ego to the transpersonal reality of the Self.

In Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Jung comments on the distorting effect that numinous ideas and images can have on cognition. In one remarkable passage, where he is offering an account of his encounter with Freud during the early years of his career as an analyst, he writes: "Wherever the psyche is set violently oscillating by a numinous experience, there is a danger that the thread by which one hangs may be torn. Should that happen, one man tumbles into an absolute affirmation, another into an equally absolute negation... The pendulum of the mind oscillates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong. The numinosum is dangerous because it lures men to extremes, so that a modest truth is regarded as the truth and a minor mistake is equated with fatal error..." (Jung 1963: 151). Jung observed that Freud was in the grip of a numinous power, sexuality: "My conversation with Freud had shown me that he feared that the numinous light of his sexual insights might be extinguished by a 'black tide of mud.' Thus a mythological situation had arisen: the struggle between light and darkness. That explains its numinosity, and why Freud immediately fell back on his dogma as a religious means of defense" (ibid). Jung concludes that the numinosity of sexuality had distorted Freud's normally incisive thinking capacities. Numinous contents of the unconscious pull thinking magnetically into an orbit where it becomes merely ingenious rationalization, as brilliant as it may be. This is what one commonly finds in people who are absolutely convinced of a religious teaching. Filled with faith and belief, their thinking is clouded by

an archetypal image of massive but largely unconscious proportions, which lends its related privileged ideas a sort of triumphant, dogmatic certainty. One step further and one finds the martyr, whose identification with the archetypal image is so extreme that life itself loses priority. Needless to say, this is the exact contrary of the individuation project, which is to make the numinous content as conscious as possible, to sublimate and integrate it, and to bring it into relation with other quite different aspects of the Self, thereby relativizing it.

Jung applied this same critique to national politics in his 1936 paper on Wotan, where he offers a psychological analysis of the distorting power of numinous images in the churned up political and social processes tearing apart the cultural fabric of Germany and central Europe at that time. In this instance, he observed, the numinosity of the newly constellated old Germanic god, Wotan, had mesmerized an entire nation and was driving Germany to an (at that time) unknown and irrationally determined goal. Archetypal possession in a collective invests certain ideas and policies with defensive certainty and denies the legitimacy and standing of doubt. Contrary thoughts and images are savagely repressed. This was the case with German collective psychology at the time. There was no space for reflection, for questioning, for serious debate, never mind contrary views. Conviction based on archetypal backing seemingly cuts off circulation to the neo-cortex and fires the emotions. The old reptilian and limbic brains take over and rule.⁵

When the curtain came down on the final scene of “The Third Reich” and the theater in which it played lay in ruins, there remained little appetite for myth and symbol in the land. (The same was true for Japan, where the cultural myth of the divine Emperor was

⁵ Jung’s archetypal analysis of Germany in the 1930’s does not valorize or in any way justify the social and political situation, as some have claimed. To say “a god (e.g., Wotan) is behind it” does not make it good or noble. It only says that it is unconsciously driven and controlled: Consciousness is not in charge here!

shattered by the military defeat and occupation.) There had been too much of the numinous afoot in the collective psyche, and it had contributed to the devastation. Numinosity was cancelled as a cultural option, and irony and rationality took charge of the culture. While defensive, this also represented a return to sanity. The result, however, has been a resolutely militant “modernity” that harshly rejects the need for meaning, which requires some sort of transcendent reference and relation to the numinous. In this seared cultural context, it became almost impossible to look upon the mythic without grave suspicion and bitter memory. Understandably enough, once badly burned, twice shy.

This wariness about the grand enthusiasms generated by religion, ideology, or mythopoetic hermeneutics has introduced as well an uneasy suspicion of Jung’s psychology and classical Jungian perspectives on dream interpretation and the hermeneutical methods of amplification and active imagination. These enter too deeply for comfort into the taboo territory of myth and symbol. What is lost thereby is the realization that the numinous experience offers a “hint”: that human life has a link to transcendence and that the individual is a “soul” with potential to come into relation with the spiritual in a wholly natural way that does not tip over into madness. In contemporary German art, this has begun to come to the fore again in the boldly symbolic paintings of Anselm Kiefer and in the later films of Wim Wenders, where hints and signals of transcendence shine through the fabric of everyday life.

The Individuation Hero(ine)

The psychological journey of individuation traverses the realm of the numinosum,

where the hero(ine) listens intently to the “hints” offered in such experiences, but then its path leads out of it again. This journey does not find its final resting place in “the Holy” or its sanctuary. It is not, therefore, tantamount to a mystic journey, which prizes the experience of union with God or the vision of the Mysterium tremendum as the apex. Individuation does not culminate in an act of worship. Nor is it identical with the resolute via negativa of Zen. It has elements of both – experiencing the numinous and cleansing the mirror of consciousness – but it includes these as two movements within a greater opus. For the spiritual hero(ine), all else is a falling away from this high point. For the individuation hero(ine), on the other hand, the numinous experiences are “prima materia” for the opus of individuation, which goes on indefinitely. To remain or “get stuck” in the land of the numen, whether defined as full or empty, would amount to becoming assimilated to the unconscious (Jung 1935: pars. 221 ff.), which means a pathological state of grandiose inflation, loss of ego boundaries and integrity, and possibly even entrapment in a paranoid psychotic defense. Such “states of possession” are generally destructive for individuals and to groups.

For the psychological process of individuation, however, the attainments to the numinous experiences, if sublimated and integrated by consciousness, are major milestones and often constitute sharp turning points on the journey. Most importantly, they go into the creation of the “transcendent function.” The individuation task is to make them conscious and to bring them into relation with other aspects of the Self, and thereby to attain approximate wholeness.

To conclude, we can say that the psychological hero(ine) works to shed the personal identifications and complexes without succumbing to the seductive lure of archetypal

ones. A personality can be suffused with experiences and knowledge of the numinous, but not be possessed by it or rely on it for defensive purposes. The psychological hero(ine) may achieve a measure of freedom from the complexes and the gods and also a hint of transcendent identity. Yet there remains a healthy measure of respect for all the powers, for it would be absurd to believe that one can be delivered from them altogether.

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