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Active Imagination in Psychotherapy



Judson Davis

School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Woosong University, Daejeon, Republic of Korea

Introduction

The life and work of Carl Jung exemplify one of modern humanity's most ardent examples of pioneering exploration in the fields of psychology and spiritual development (Bair 2003). The legacy of this remarkable man remains immense and includes not only innumerable insights into the psychic life of *Homo sapiens* but also many highly effective methods for the healing and transformation of mental afflictions and other disorders. Among such methods exists the therapeutic technique known as *active imagination*, which acts as a dynamic connecting link between the conscious ego and the unconscious, thus providing a channel through which greater psychological cohesion and wholeness can be achieved (Jung 1960).

Throughout his long existence, Jung (1963) experienced a vast array of psychic phenomena, both in his personal life and in the life of his patients. Over time he began to identify universal themes and images that arose in abundance through the human psyche, especially in dreams and in various forms visionary experience. Jung

referred to such images and motifs as *archetypes*, and it was through these highly charged symbolic forms that he would later develop his conception of the *collective unconscious* as the boundless repository of humanity's cultural, ancestral, and mythic heritage. Archetypes play a crucial role in the therapeutic process, serving as both symbolic guides through which to navigate psychic discord as well as powerful mythic forms that signify the psyche in a state of psychological wholeness.

Psychotherapeutic Applications

In line with the above theories, Jung (1963) developed the process of *amplification*, a method by which the deeper meaning of archetypal images, symbols, and dream-figures is expanded through their association with mythological, cultural, and religious motifs and metaphors – a process that has particular application within a psychotherapeutic and developmental context.

Jung (1977) stressed that these psychologically potent mythic forms are not creations of the conscious ego, but rather arise from the depths of the unconscious. For this reason, the phenomena of dreams is of primary importance in depth psychology “because dreams are the most common and most normal expression of the unconscious psyche . . . they provide the bulk of the material for its investigation” (p. 73). Jung (1963) suggested that the purpose of such dreams is “to effect a reversal of the relationship between ego-consciousness

and the unconscious, and to represent the unconscious as the generator of the empirical personality” (p. 324). He chose to experiment with various techniques designed to help manifest the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious, and he viewed creative expression in particular as one of the primary means of facilitating this process. Jung also discovered that drawing, sand play, and other imaginal exercises involving archetypal imagery could be very effective in bringing clarity to vague feelings, images, and other manifestations of inner content. This proves especially useful in that “the whole procedure is a kind of clarification of the effect, whereby the effect and its content are brought nearer to consciousness, becoming at the same time more impressive and more understandable” (1960, p. 82). The ego’s direct engagement with mythic imagery thus represents one of the most essential features of this alchemical healing process, as it signals “a movement out of the suspension between opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation . . . a quality of conjoined opposites” (p. 90). This intriguing phenomenon is well represented through the following dream (which arose in the present author’s own experience) and the process of psychic amplification through active imagination that followed:

I am standing in a room and am engaged in a conversation that reveals with great certainty that at a later date I will be involved in the dissemination of Jung’s theories to a wider audience. This realization is accompanied by a strong sense of personal pride at the prospect of professional accomplishment and recognition in the outer world. Then I suddenly pass through a curtain and find myself on a football field preparing to kick a field goal that will signify my success in this endeavor; but when I kick the ball, it hits the base of the goal post, and falls short. Then I wake up. (Davis 2015, pp. 38–39)

Having been left with the undeniable sense that this dream had special significance, and having been confused by the seemingly contradictory messages it provided, I was intent upon discovering its deeper meaning. To accomplish this beguiling task, I engaged in the practice of active imagination, which was created by Jung (1960) as an imaginal exercise in which one reenters the dream in a conscious state by focusing intensely

upon a primary image and then allowing the ensuing *inner drama* to unfold of its own accord and toward its own completion. In this case, the goal post was clearly the most prominent symbol in my dream, and so, with this image firmly in mind, I proceeded to close my eyes, concentrate my focus, and then experienced the following:

In a short time I found myself again on the football field, this time playing quarterback. Each time I tried to pass the ball, I was quickly tackled. Finally, I decided to keep the ball and attempt to cross the goal line by my own volition, and was then able to maneuver my way through the defense, ultimately being brought down as I successfully crossed the goal line. As the football I was carrying touched the ground, it suddenly turned into an enlarged, glowing blue diamond, and this was accompanied by a wordless telepathic communication that can only be described as a sacred revelation, one that arose from a deeper part of myself that I rarely have direct access to, and yet somehow instinctively know to be my *true self*. And what this communication revealed to me was that the *goal* in life is not about achieving success or status in the outer world, but rather, the true meaning of this life is to reconnect, to return *home*, to the very source of one’s being. (Davis 2015, p. 39)

This profound and utterly illuminating experience could not have been anticipated nor constructed by one’s conscious ego, as it had unfolded from an unfathomable place within that transcends the waking self. Further, its strikingly numinous nature served to confirm Jung’s (1964) theory of universal archetypes, as the diamond exists as one of the primary representations of the *Self* (i.e., the totality of psychic life) and has manifested as a sacred symbol of spiritual radiance, purity, and indestructibility in an array of diverse cultural traditions throughout world history. It also proved to be a compelling testament to how the unconscious acts in a regulatory capacity (Jung 1960), compensating for the misguided direction of the ego through the spontaneous manifestation of mythic symbols, a process that combines aspects of one’s contemporary personal existence (i.e., the goal post) with archetypal imagery from the collective unconscious (i.e., the blue diamond), resulting in a sense of deep personal meaning and psychic wholeness (Davis 2015).

This potent interplay between these two fundamental aspects of the human psyche was described by Jung as “the beginning of the transcendent function, i.e., the beginning of the collaboration of conscious and unconscious data” (1960, p. 82). He strongly emphasized this psychic relationship as being central to the healing process (and to the broader process of *individuation*, or spiritual development) and stressed that “the suitably trained analyst mediates the transcendent function for the patient, i.e., helps him to bring conscious and unconscious together and so arrive at a new attitude” (p. 74). This process is two-fold in that it has the effect of helping the client out of a state of contracted focus (e.g., ego restricted or depressive states) and subsequently moves him into closer contact with the sphere of the total personality. Engagement with this deeper sphere of being is facilitated through the psychic magnification and assimilation of key symbols and archetypal forms that arise from the unconscious, and it is through such creative methods as active imagination that the amplification process can be brought to its most preeminent and revelatory potential.

Conclusion

Active imagination represents a method by which archetypal imagery arising from the unconscious can be applied in a therapeutic context to bring clarity and meaning to one’s life and inner processes (Jung 1960). By assisting individuals in their engagement with these vital psychic aspects, the therapist helps to facilitate a transformative process by which the images can speak their own intrinsic truth through the client, a process that “helps the patient interact with the image being expressed in order to see more metaphorically his or her daily struggles, fears, and preoccupations” (Watkins 2003, p. 198). Further, it is within this framework that a therapist can best offer guidance in an “individuation process whereby people could find their own direction

and live according to their own sense of purpose” (Singer 1972/1994, p. 135). This approach presents each human being with the possibility of genuine insight and healing because “the analytical process is a means of systematically drawing upon the resources of the unconscious and progressively integrating these contents into consciousness” (p. 15). The process of active imagination provides a dynamic means by which these restorative and expanded states of consciousness can be fostered, thus providing the practitioner with a decisive channel through which to merge with the deeper aspects of one’s being.

See Also

- ▶ [Active Imagination](#)
- ▶ [Amplification](#)
- ▶ [Individuation](#)
- ▶ [Jungian Self](#)

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