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To live a psychological life is to live imaginally.

Wisdom of the Psyche: Depth Psychology after Neuroscience

By Ginette Paris, PhD

Preface

1) Only once are we born and once do we die. Psychologically, however, we die **a thousand** deaths and are reborn at **least that many times**. Moments of great suffering usually signal that the old self needs to die and because it is painful, we are tempted to look for quick solutions, buying into the common illusion that every psychological "problem" calls for a positive "solution." Yet, this **well-intentioned** approach increases the suffering because it ignores one of the great paradoxes of psychological wisdom: the activation of the death principle has more power than anything else in the psyche. The destructive impulse can be crucial if we are to get rid of what oppresses us. In other words, as far as our inner life is concerned, one could say that where there is death, there is hope! As the old self dies, one can take up the task of birthing a new self. But first, there has **to be a letting go** of all positive ego ideals.

2) Much has been written in psychology about interpersonal conflicts and how to resolve them. Many authors of popular psychology books and most therapy centers offer advice on how to save the marriage, improve communications, enhance self-esteem, and achieve love and success. I am investigating the opposite: the element in the psyche that wants to destroy relationships, to leave, to die, to go down and stay low for as long as it takes for the old identity to die. This turning inward and downward comes from an unconscious sense that if the exhausted old "me" does not die, my body will carry the death wish in a literal and terminal fashion.

3) What the psyche refuses to acknowledge, the body always manifests. Whenever the body says "no more," it is sending a message that should get our attention; it may be inviting us to a voyage of descent. Even when intolerably painful, such a voyage can be an adventure all the same because it has the potential to reveal the natural wisdom of the psyche. Normally, what excites us about adventure is the aspect of surprise and great pain, be it physical or psychological. Dangerous voyages, internal or external, seem to open to us a treasure chest of endless surprises: the unconscious.

4) The word "unconscious" may sound too technical, too Freudian. It can be replaced by the term used at the time of the Renaissance: "imagination." In our moments of depression and anxiety, the imagination is paralyzed, cold, and empty. Contrary to advice offered in most self-help books of popular psychology, the way out of such painful states does not start with an upward, positive, willful effort of the ego. It begins with an opening of the imagination, often producing dark, twisted, frightening images, symbolizing what needs to die.

5) I am a frequent traveler and have visited many countries. However, of all the trips I've taken in my life, the one that was the most fascinating was my descent to the dark recesses of my psyche, that place where we reside as if in a nightmare, a place that the ancient Greeks called the Underworld and that we call the unconscious. Watching the process of my own self-destruction was captivating, like watching a cobra poised to strike. When the unconscious opens, it disturbs every routine and life takes on a surprising quality. Madam Death insists that surrender be absolute. I came to live in California 14 years ago, moving from the cold climate of the Atlantic coast. From my first day on the Pacific coast, I failed to notice how so much light and energy can be inflating. I gradually lost sight of what, in life, belongs to death – a sense of limitations, of exhaustion of old forms, of tiredness in walking the same path, of my minuscule significance in the universe. Santa Barbara's climate is close to perfection; the orientation of the bay creates a microclimate as pleasant as that of Provence, without the suffocating heat of a Provencal summer.

6) The city has a feminine charm: small, chic, gentle, lovely, safe. More gardens than parking lots. Here is the ocean and here are the mountains; here is nature and here is culture. Living with this kind of beauty, I failed to notice that the darkness, silence and slowness of cold winter days used to provide a rhythm that was essential to me. I began working non-stop, tugging at life to yield what I had decided to extract from it, shamefully abusing the

animal generosity of the unconscious, a good horse that will keep going until exhausted.

7) I failed to understand a sequence of dreams that suggested: You think you want a way out of the labyrinth? Wrong! Look for the entrance. A series of psychological disasters and a nearly fatal accident popped my shiny California bubble. Tumbling, literally, into an empty pool and sustaining a cerebral hemorrhage was just the right dose of death for equilibrium to return.

8) Psychology classifies fears according to their depths. Between the surface (for the sake of simplicity let's say "ego consciousness") and the abyss (or the "unconscious"), there is an abundance of fears, big or little fish that can be caught in the net of psychoanalysis. Prudence advises a slow descent with the guidance of an analyst, but if one is in a hurry, a tragedy may accelerate the process. At the bottom rests a single fear: death. Ah! Here you are, Madam, my Death. Pleased to meet you. During the days following my brain injury, my encounter with death taught me more about the psyche than had many years of analysis. For a psychologist, this revelation is troubling, as it suggests that there is a very direct route to the core of one's being. Analysis is a fascinating zigzag path to consciousness, but there is also an expressway: a face-to-face encounter with one's death. Unpleasant, risky, painful, but expedient. You don't choose this itinerary. It happens to you as an encounter with something like the Greek goddess Fate.

9) All fears are fundamentally the fear of death, but they vary in flavor. In the intensive care unit, I was first aware of my fear of losing the ability to walk, a primitive, animal fear. The next hour brought up the sentimental fear that I might die without telling my children, their father and all my friends, how much I love them. It was a fear of dying in exile, without saying my farewells to loved ones, a possibility that, in the Middle Ages, was dreaded as much as the fact of dying. By the next day, experiencing how a damaged brain drastically diminishes mental capacities, I was haunted by the eventuality of the loss of my identity as teacher, therapist, and writer, a fear with the distinctive taste of ego. From there I realized that death also means the loss of an innumerable number of life's little delights - June cherries from the farmers' market, picnics on the beach, reading a good novel, cooking with somebody, for somebody, laughing and arguing with friends, swimming, dancing the tango.

The sum of all those mini-epiphanies, I realized, is immeasurable. Up to then, when faced with a difficult situation, I would shift into the heroic mode: don't tremble, thrust ahead. All-wheel drive, up the hill! Not this time. Mister Courage refused to appear on cue, leaving the stage instead to Madam Death. She stepped forward to remind me of my vulnerability, my brokenness. All I could do was quiver. It was a great lesson. Many times in my life it would have been much wiser for me to surrender, tremble and suffer rather than posture heroically. I entered the darkest period of my life and became as tormented as my most tormented patients. Suffering renewed my sense of the compelling relevance of depth psychology. I was in such darkness that there was no denying that the psyche has incredible depth, and I was falling into its abyss.

Paradoxically, as my commitment to my professional calling was renewed, I lost faith in almost all psychological theories. Thirty years of study turned to dust! Those brilliant theories, read, annotated, regurgitated in courses and articles - all now appeared useless. Depth psychology had been the great intellectual passion of my life. Now it felt like my hard drive had been erased, my intellect emptied of all its files. With no more confidence in psychological theories, it felt a bit contradictory to feel, more than at any other period of my life, the need for psychological insight. I began investigating what exactly had changed for me, theoretically as well as personally. I revisited everything I thought I knew about psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, about matters of the heart, about growing up and being an adult, about human nature, and human love.

This is why this book speaks with two voices. One is that of the therapist writing a critique of my field, observing the evolution of my trade from a theoretical point of view. After 30 years of teaching and practicing psychology from various approaches, I am taking a personal inventory: which ideas still feel useful and which feel dead? Given the takeover from neuroscience and pharmacology what is the future of depth psychology? What is coming in the next psychologies?

The other voice is not so detached. It is the much less assured voice of an ordinary person telling an ordinary

experience of inferiority, brokenness, failure and pain. It comes from a need to test all the theories against my own experience of suffering – a very different posture than the lofty position of professor and therapist. It is a phenomenological stance and as such it excludes the clinical interpretive terminology, moving away from the medical model, away from psychodynamics, and towards literature.

Chapter 1 is an application of this phenomenological-literary-imaginal approach to my own account of a plunge in the dark river Styx. It is in writing in this imaginal -rather than clinical - style that I first felt the liberation that comes from abandoning the usual jargon of the bible of the profession: the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It was so liberating that I began questioning myself: what if, all through my career, I had written my patients' case histories with the same literary attention that I am now giving my own experience? What if I had given their cases the same kind of mythopoetic license?

What about dropping the clinical taxonomy when writing case history, keeping only the story and dropping the case? Throughout the book, the vignettes show the result of my rewriting of some of my patient's insights (with their permission). To sustain life, the psyche requires pleasure, joy, and a fascination with the world. This seems impossible in the face of acute pain. Yet, I believe the paradox can be sustained, if one is ready to go through the suffering bearing the curiosity and respect of a pilgrim traveling in the Underworld. I believe the next evolution of psychology will be concerned less with pathology -leaving it to neuroscience -and will become more like a philosophical training, capable of preparing the person for the voyage in the country of pain and joy -depth psychology as the art of not wasting the joy of life.

The necessity of a descent into the Underworld is a core idea of depth psychology, one that I wish to explore anew in this book.

We all have a psychology because we all have an imagination. Inner imagery needs periodic updating because the virtual realities going on in the psyche need to change all the time. When the old script offers no more surprises, no more room to move, one needs a new identity. This is not something a trauma-focused clinical approach can do because the exploration of our psyche's depth definitely belongs to the humanities and the arts.

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