

From the numinous to the sacred

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Abstract: Jung took the idea of the ‘numinous’ from Rudolf Otto’s book *Das Heilige* (E.T. *The Idea of the Holy*) and made it central to his understanding of religion. However, as Lucy Huskinson has recently pointed out, this involves a misreading of Otto’s work in which we have to look *beyond* the numinous (which is the non-rational factor in religion) towards the ‘holy’ which, like a symbol, holds the rational and non-rational aspects of religious experience together in a personally transformative way. This understanding of the spiritual and psychological journey is supported by case material in which a numinous experience, arising in the context of intensive analytical psychotherapy, proved to be but the first step in a process which led, through a period of mourning, towards the development of the patient’s capacity to symbolize. In the light of this, the author suggests that the sacred is to be found in the capacity for a certain quality of symbolic relatedness—to self and other—which may or may not be attended by numinous experience.

Key words: archetypal, archetype, dream, holy, Jung, numinous, Otto, religion, sacred, sea monster, spirituality, vision

Introduction

This paper falls roughly into two parts. In the first part, I examine a numinous experience that occurred in the course of therapy. Within the Jungian tradition there is a tendency to speak about such experiences with reverence; and understandably: if we take a Jungian view of the unconscious, conceived as something more extensive than the repressed unconscious of Freud, then every communication coming to the ego from the unconscious is, almost by definition, a transcendent experience. But is the ‘numinous’ the same thing as the ‘sacred’? I will be looking for an answer to this question.

In the second part of the paper, I try to stand back and think more broadly about some of the psychological and spiritual issues arising from the material presented. Freud and Jung both realized that ultimate issues—ontological, existential questions—are hugely relevant to the business of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy does not happen within an insulated cocoon. In Freud’s mind, it mattered whether God exists, or not, because psychological health has to be thought about within a wider picture of reality (Freud 1927). These

questions mattered intensely to Jung too (Jung 1954). His philosophical and psychological approach differed greatly from Freud's, but they were both *depth* psychologists, dedicated to elucidating unconscious processes. Jung's relationships with Wolfgang Pauli (Pauli-Jung 2001; Gieser 2005) and Father Victor White (Jung-White 2007; Lammers 1994; White 1952 & 1960) were not dilettanti exercises, aside from his medical work. They were central to his enterprise, which was to understand the workings of the psyche within the widest possible frame of reference.

In the discussion of my clinical material, I will argue that although archetypal material is generally attended by numinous experience, we should not automatically identify numinous experience with the 'sacred'. Rather, we must look for the personal meaning enshrined within the archetypal material. In my patient's case, a numinous experience triggered a process of mourning which led, in turn, to the gradual restoration of his capacity to symbolize; and the capacity to symbolize is, for me, the pre-requisite for mature spiritual functioning. What, though, is the 'sacred'? My contention will be that the sacred is to be found in the capacity for a certain quality of symbolic relatedness—to self and other—which may or may not be attended by numinous experience, hence my title, *From the Numinous to the Sacred*.

Given the problems of semantics, it may help if I begin by outlining my understanding of the 'numinous', the 'sacred' or the 'holy' (which I use interchangeably), and 'archetypal', as I use them in this paper.

Psychological and theological perspectives

Jung's understanding of the 'numinous' was lastingly influenced by his (mis)reading of Rudolf Otto's great book, *Das Heilige*, published in English under the title, *The Idea of the Holy, An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (Otto 1923). In the introduction to his Terry Lectures, for example, Jung writes,

Religion, as the Latin word denotes, is a careful and scrupulous observation of what Rudolf Otto aptly called the *numinosum*, that is, a dynamic agency or effect not caused by an arbitrary act of will. On the contrary, it seizes and controls the human subject, who is always rather its victim than its creator.

(Jung 1937, para. 6)

In a recent paper, Lucy Huskinson comments that,

Jung's allusions to the numinous are many, and most often concern the emotional, affective experience of the unconscious (with particular reference to the archetypes, complexes, and psychopathology). He thus describes the numinous as 'inexpressible, mysterious, terrifying'; 'holy dread'; 'overwhelming – an admission that goes against not only our pride, but against our deep-rooted fear that consciousness may perhaps lose its ascendancy'; as having 'thrilling power' and 'deeply stirring emotional effect'; 'spiritual and magical'; 'healing or destructive – never indifferent'; capable

of 'fateful transformations . . . conversions, illuminations, emotional shocks, blows of fate' . . .

(Huskinson 2006, p. 202; references to Jung quotations given in her text)¹

As Huskinson explains, Otto originally introduced the term 'numinous' to counter the Christian tendency to reduce holiness to morality. According to Otto, holiness is much more than a moral code, containing 'a clear overplus of meaning', which the rational faculty cannot decipher, for the 'deeper essence [of religion] is not, indeed cannot be, comprehended . . . [It] requires comprehension of a quite different kind'. Otto's name for this unique 'category of value' is the 'numinous' (Huskinson 2006, p. 201).

According to Huskinson, though, Jung's enthusiastic adoption of Otto's 'numinous' was based on a misunderstanding. As she writes,

Jung's use of Otto's term (and, consequently, the use of it by commentators of Jung) is inaccurate. Jung is too quick to incorporate Otto's term into his own theory the 'numinous' is not, strictly speaking, applicable to aspects of Jung's psychological theory, with particular emphasis being placed on the individuation process. Rather, it is to Otto's term 'the holy' that Jung, and we, should turn . . . the difference in meaning of a 'numinous' experience and one that is 'holy' is critical to the development and healing of the personality that is at the heart of Jungian theory . . . , *a numinous experience cannot induce progressive change or enrichment of the ego, for, although an encounter with the numinous is overwhelming, it is without purpose; only in an experience of the holy can the ego be reborn into Selfhood.*

(my italics; Huskinson 2006, p. 202f; cp. p. 210, n. 4)

Huskinson's paper deserves to be read in full. Although my terminology differs somewhat from hers, I hope my clinical material and subsequent discussion will go some way towards amplifying her thesis that, although numinous experiences may be awesome and provide access to archetypal material—'archetypal' in the sense that the imagery involved is collective, rather than personal, and attended by overwhelming emotions of the numinous kind described by Jung, above—such experiences will be of little spiritual or psychological value unless they help to trigger a symbolic process which enables us to transcend the overwhelming and destructive energies of the numen.

As far as my use of 'archetypal' is concerned, I think my case material illustrates Jean Knox's work, especially when she writes,

In analysis, the activation of image schemas, or archetypes . . . may provide the first step towards the gradual emergence of the capacity to symbolize. The creation of narrative competence, the ability to connect past and present experiences together into a meaningful story is the next stage in this process. At the highest levels of

¹ It is not my purpose in this paper to comment on Jung's personal psychology which I have addressed elsewhere (MacKenna 2000), but it would be interesting to reflect on Jung's comments about numinous experience in the light of Marcus West's recent paper, 'The narrow use of the term ego in analytical psychology the 'not-I' is also who I am' (West 2008).

psychic complexity, the mature achievement of reflective function is also emergent and forms the basis for the creation of new patterns of meaning and relationship in analysis.

(Knox 2004, p. 16)

This would be a good description of the developmental path followed by my patient.

From the numinous . . .

My patient was 39 years old, a rather schizoid married man with two young children. Although apparently successful in his work, his presenting problem was a general feeling of aimlessness and meaninglessness, which was not assuaged either by his job or by his family life. He was referred to me by his GP who was concerned he might be verging on depression, but the patient was averse to medication. Instead, because he had once been intrigued by a book about Jung, he preferred to work with me. At the time I will describe we had been meeting for nearly two years, three times a week.

The work had been quite difficult. My patient's rather schizoid and narcissistic personality meant that life, colour, and vitality all happened, for him, 'out there': as if he was watching real people doing real things, but through a plate glass window. He was also dissatisfied with me. I was a Jungian analyst, but I wasn't coming up with the goods: no great archetypal experiences. Part of the problem, from my point of view, was that, although he tried hard to engage with the process, everything happened in his head—insulating me and his internal world as effectively and painfully from him, as the external world seemed to be removed through the plate glass window.

His dreams did not help us much either tending, when he remembered them, to be inconsequential and fragmentary. But then, one day, he reported a dream picture of four fountains arranged in a square (it was characteristic that his description—a 'dream picture'—sounded like a photograph, rather than a first hand view of the fountains themselves). Emotionally, he could not make much of it, though the image engaged him. Typically, when he drew the fountains, instead of sketching them in a naturalistic way, he produced a ground plan of them, done on graph paper; and then spent the session speculating that because there were four of them, they must be a symbol of wholeness. In the absence of personal associations, this felt sterile and academic, but he was resistant to engaging with the image in any other way.

Happily, though, the dream would not go away, and I found myself gently trying to shift him from intellectual speculations about wholeness towards a more sensuous engagement with the fountains. How big were they? Could he walk up to them? If the wind blew, would he get wet? Were they noisy? Anything I could think of to engage his imagination.

Interspersed with other topics, this went on for four sessions, when he suddenly sat up and said, 'I know where these fountains are, they are in the park

where I used to play as a child'. This staggered me—as far as I could remember it was his first spontaneous association. But then—I could have screamed—he veered off, trying to recall the etymology of the rather unusual name of the park (it was reminiscent of a breed of mythical beasts) and asking where he could find what Jung had written about these creatures, and if there were any in the Bible.

Despite his intellectualizing tendencies though, making the link with the park brought about a shift. Spontaneously now, he began to recall that as a child he had tricycled there. It had been a place of adventures: special trees and secret hollows he had had to visit every time he went. Who had gone with him? I wondered. He was vague, perhaps his mother or an *au pair*. It sounded as if the park itself had been his world, where people were irrelevant; and maybe rather an obsessional world too. Apparently, all the special places *had* to be visited every time he went.

Perhaps something of that obsessional quality crept into our meetings because, session after session, we found ourselves returning to the park. So much so that I feared we were becoming entangled in a Peter Pan-ish Never Land, insulated alike from the sterility of his present day world and the discomforts of our relationship.

His holidays then interrupted our work for three weeks, which meant that I was even more unprepared than I might otherwise have been for the marked change in him, when he returned. Sweeping past me, he ignored the couch and sat facing me on the chair he had not used for months. My first impression was that he had grown. He seemed very upright and self-possessed, and there was a strange look in his eye. I felt afraid. It was as if he was possessed by something enormous, and when he began to speak his words and manner were uncharacteristically solemn and grandiose.

He told me that he had had an extraordinary experience while I had been away—I felt shafted by this: he was the one who had been away but, apparently, to him, it was I who had been away; as if whatever had happened had nothing to do with me. However, he went sweeping on to say that, if we were to continue working together, he would need to explain it to me, though he might not talk about it much. He was not sure if he had been asleep or awake but, either in his dream or in an intense waking vision, he had suddenly been back by those fountains, on his tricycle, enjoying a great sense of power as he roared round them following his usual complicated pattern. (My own fantasy about these manic rides around the fountains—at this stage, unshared with my patient—was that he was somehow trying to 'bind' them all together; and I had wondered to myself if the fountains might represent aspects of himself or, maybe, the four members of his family).

For some reason though, in his dream or vision he had unaccountably veered off his regular path, and found himself going round the side of a pavilion that backed onto the neighbouring road. Here he found some railings fencing off a narrow area of dark green water that disappeared into a dank brick cave.

Dismounting, he stared at it; and then something very strange had happened: he was seized by the conviction that either he was going to be sucked into the water, or a sea monster was going to rear its head up out of the water and devour him. He did not know how long he clung to the railings; but then he had somehow managed to break free and cycle hell for leather, shuddering with fear as he imagined the sea monster's long neck uncoiling after him. He told me he was sure this had really happened to him as a child but, until the dream or vision, he had had no memory of it. He had not shared it with a soul.

Given the break, his changed manner, and the way he had so abruptly put me in my place, I found this numinous experience difficult to receive (my fearful countertransference was enough to assure me that it was a numinous experience, of the kind described by Jung and Huskinson, above). And the session became stickier when I realized that he was not sharing the memory so that we could talk about it, but so that a veil could be drawn over it. Despairingly—and I felt despair—I realized he was telling me that he had now had his longed for archetypal experience, and that I was therefore, probably, redundant. Indeed, he missed the next two sessions, which was unlike him.

The next few weeks were intensely difficult and I became increasingly concerned about his state of mind, which swung between grandiosity and emptiness, though, more often than not, I was the one who seemed to feel most empty. Gradually though, he talked more about the experience, but reverting to his intellectual pattern: ransacking books to gather information about sea monsters and water spirits, determined to work out the meaning of the vision in his head. Then, as his ability to sustain his elevated state of mind began to crumble, I came under enormous pressure to reassure him of the importance of his vision. It had been real, hadn't it?

My response was to say that it had, indeed, been real, but that we were now in an agonizing place where he seemed to feel that the bottom would drop out of his world if he could not sustain his original sense of wonder that such a revelation should have come to him. He agreed with this, and there was a long silence in which I felt my internal emptiness turn first to sadness, and then intense depression. Not long afterwards, he told me that he had been to see his doctor who had prescribed anti-depressants.

The next sessions were acutely painful: black, intense despair. It was as if the light had gone out of his world. He reminded me of some rather manic religious believers I have known, who implode psychologically when they cannot keep their faith intact.

A great gain, though, perhaps as the anti-depressants kicked in, was that we began to be able to think about his vision in more measured terms. How old had he been, I wondered, when he had this experience? He thought not more than five. Doing the sum in my head I realized that this would have been a few months after his younger sister was born, when his mother was suffering from post-natal depression. As I made this connection it was as if I inwardly became that little four year old, gripping the railings, feeling both suicidally depressed

and ragingly angry. So depressed that I could easily have drowned myself in the water as a way of hurting my depressed mother and absent father; so hungry and angry, that I could have been the sea monster, crunching up the bones of anyone I chose.

It took us a long time—several more years—of working our way through his loss and rage and grief, before he could own that premonition for himself. By the time he had done this, his vision had lost its numinous aura because he had finally been able to mourn the emotional loss of his mother, brought about by the birth of his sister and compounded by his mother's consequent depression.

What we were never able to establish was his mother's emotional state after he had been born. Was her depression, when he was four, a new experience or did it terribly compound an earlier experience of depression, following his own birth? There was also the question in my mind—especially in the early stages—of whether I was the sea monster. The vision came during a time of separation, at a stage in our work when he was unconsciously much more dependent on me than he cared to be—witness his contemptuous comment about *my* being away. I imagine the effect of our separation was to align me with his emotionally absent mother, and so expose him to intensified neediness and rage. Rightly or wrongly, though, I did not interpret this to him. The vision felt so much larger than life, that I feared transference interpretation would just open up a chasm of incomprehension between us.

Discussion of case material

What are we to make of this material? My patient was one of several I could have chosen whose common feature was that they had been stirred up by reading Jung and turned to me in the hope that I could orchestrate for them a Jungian adventure. In all of them, a rather grandiose attitude compensated for feelings of emptiness and inferiority. I have encountered a similar psychology in some religious believers—I identify them easily because I feel so worldly and unspiritual in their company. With both groups, language about the sacred or archetypal experience seems to conjure up a mirage, which sends them scurrying off in a transpersonal direction where, at worst, either they get stuck and become progressively more rigid and dictatorial, or they implode, sometimes catastrophically into a depressive or psychotic breakdown, or even, on occasion, suicide. Tragically, this reaction may not be enacted by them but by their partner or a member of their family.

But what of my patient's vision of the sea monster? In that it gave rise to the kinds of feeling described by Jung (above) it was undoubtedly a numinous experience—Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1958)—but Huskinson's reading of Otto cautions us against automatically identifying the numinous with the 'sacred' or the 'holy'. We find the same caution in the Christian mystical tradition—for example, in the writings of St John of the Cross (John of the Cross 1991)—where there is a repeated

warning that mystical experiences, far from being signs of advanced spirituality are, often, signs of immaturity. We only hear voices or see visions because our psyche is too frail to contain them. If such experiences come, we need to be thoughtful about them; but the fact that they are numinous, says St John, does not mean that they are automatically to be taken for the voice of God.

Thinking about this in more psychological terms, I am fairly certain that the suicidal depression and murderous rage my patient had experienced as a child, but managed to repress, could only have resurfaced in archetypal form. His rigid defences ensured that there was no other way in which the compensatory power of the Self could break through the schizoid barrier into his conscious life. Yet, although the imagery was archetypal, its content was personal; and I would not have helped my patient if I had fallen under the spell of its numinous, archetypal aura, and colluded with his desire to enshrine it in a way that precluded thought. Had I done this, I imagine, I would have stoked his already grandiose state of mind, while intensifying his inner isolation and despair.

St John of the Cross was a shrewd spiritual guide. Where I think psychotherapeutic understanding improves on his approach, is in recognizing the importance of understanding and working through the contents of these experiences so that they can enrich our conscious attitude to life.

Which brings me to the next part of this paper.

... to the sacred

If numinously charged archetypal material turns out to mask repressed personal experience, does this undermine the possibility of genuinely transpersonal experience occurring in the therapeutic setting? Jung seems to have feared so. The struggle between the archetypal and the personal perspectives is almost the last note in his battle with Victor White over *Answer to Job* (Jung 1958). In his penultimate letter, Jung writes to White,

If Job is to be considered as a neurotic and interpreted from the personalistic point of view, then he will end there, where psychoanalysis ends, viz. in disillusionment and resignation, where its creator most emphatically has ended too.

(Jung-White 2007, p. 285)

To which White replied, sixteen days before his death,

Clearly one cannot know what an analysand can take until one meets him and works things out with him. But certainly according to the original story Job is thrown into no such abyss of despair as you talk about, but he learns to hear the voice of God *in* and *through* all those terrifying untamed natural things.

(Jung-White 2007, p. 290f)

Can we say that my patient, like Job, heard the voice of God when he remembered his childhood meeting with one of those 'terrifying untamed natural things'? Not if by 'hearing the voice of God' we mean that he had an overtly religious experience, leading to conversion and a change of life; but

then, is God religious in this way? Although I do not identify God with the physical processes of life in the almost concrete way Jung sometimes does—for example, in his second letter to Victor White, he writes ‘My personal view . . . is that Man’s vital energy or libido is the divine pneuma alright . . . (Jung-White 2007, p. 7)—yet I can easily detect the ‘hand of God’ in my patient’s numinous experience because it brought about the conditions in which he could begin to mourn, and thus enable healing to begin. Equally, I would be happy to describe the vision as created by the pressure of the Self towards wholeness. Perhaps the vision demonstrates the impossibility of making neat divisions between the personal and the archetypal levels of the psyche: the form of the vision *had* to be archetypal because no everyday image could sufficiently have expressed the intensity of his repressed despair and rage. In Matte-Blanco’s terms, it came from the deeper strata of our Bi-logical structure, where emotion verges on the infinite (Matte-Blanco 1988, pp. 39ff).

In her book *Mourning, Spirituality and Psychic Change*, Susan Kavalier-Adler remarks on the heightened spiritual awareness—expressed, for example, by the appearance of archetypal motifs in dreams—that sometimes accompanies transitional stages in therapy, when internal splits are being bridged and the patient is beginning to experience his repressed pain, rather than ‘sealing off the wounds and trying to transcend them’ (Kavalier-Adler 2003, p. 276). This painful reconnection is the prerequisite for mourning to begin; and she draws on Kohut to explain the grandiose—we would say archetypal—imagery associated with such experiences. Kohut speaks of a ‘true self-kernel’ which ‘first emerges into consciousness in a grand form because it is coming from the infant level of experience’ (Kavalier-Adler 2003, p. 224). Similarly, Jung wrote,

I have found that, as a rule, when ‘archetypal’ contents spontaneously appear in dreams, etc., numinous and healing effects emanate from them. They are *primordial psychic experiences* which very often give patients access again to blocked religious truths. I have also had this experience myself.

(Jung 1976, p. 56f)

But Kavalier-Adler then goes on to note that,

The spiritual beliefs associated with these transitional phases endure in . . . later psychic evolution, but they become less prominent in (the) mourning process later on, as (the patient) then relates directly to his psychodynamic conflicts in terms of his interpersonal relationships.

(Kavalier-Adler 2003, p. 276)

In other words, as the mourning process goes ahead the patient’s imagery gradually settles down, becoming less archetypally numinous and more humanized; and this happens in step with his growing capacity for inter- and intra-personal relationships. In Kohut’s terms, this emotional progress is a sign that the ‘grandiose self’—the ‘core and potentially healthy part of the self’—has reconnected ‘with the central and conscious self in order to bring the whole self to life’ (Kavalier-Adler 2003, p. 224). In more Jungian terms, we might say communication between ego and Self has been restored.

So, numinous archetypal, or ‘heightened spiritual’, imagery tends to appear at significant moments of internal re-connection which generate high emotional intensity. And when such imagery appears, it brings with it its characteristic aura of numinosity. But if archetypal imagery fades as more ordinary forms of object relating are re-established, does this mean that these ordinary forms are less spiritual, less connected to the sacred, just because they appear to be less archetypally driven and are not attended by numinous vibrations? I do not think so. What may need to change, though, is our own thinking about the sacred, and how we ‘tune in’ to it.

This shift in thinking can be difficult to make. If we have experienced an archetypal ‘high’—attended by feelings of numinosity and, maybe, also accompanied by synchronistic events—we may need quite a bit of convincing that the low key, almost intuitive interconnectedness which accompanies healthy object relating has got anything to do with the sacred. We find a similar problem in the religious world. If we have had a big experience at a charismatic meeting, with speaking in tongues and genuine words of knowledge, and maybe even seen people being healed, we may be intensely resistant to the idea that the sacred can be equally present in the quiet decorum of a Quaker meeting, or a time of silent meditation.

In the Bible, Elijah is the archetypal adrenaline junkie: calling down fire from heaven and carving up the prophets of Baal, but sinking into depression when the spotlight leaves him. He has to make a long journey into the wilderness, to a holy mountain, where he experiences wind and earthquake and fire—tempestuous natural forces which mirror the turbulence of his inner world—but the LORD isn’t in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire; and then, eventually, he hears the ‘sound of sheer silence’ (1 Kings 19.12, NRSV) and begins to learn that God is present all the time—the God whose name means, ‘I will be there as I will be there’ (Exodus 3.14, Buber & Rosenzweig’s translation: Vermes 1994, pp. 79–100).

Psychologically speaking, I think this shift from archetypal eruption to more coherent forms of object relating, both internal and external, is closely connected to the development of our capacity for symbol formation, which, in turn, is bound up with our ability to mourn. This is in line with what Jean Knox has written about the development of ‘narrative competence, the ability to connect past and present experiences together into a meaningful story’, following the activation of archetypal image schemas which may provide the first step towards the capacity to symbolize (Knox 2004, p. 16). My patient’s problem, the reason why his unconscious could only erupt in archetypal form, was that his symbolic capability was insufficiently developed. As it began to develop, though, he started to relate to his dreams in an exploratory way, rather than expecting to find some concrete meaning for them in books. And as his symbolic capacity grew, so he became better able to endure the pain of connecting his past and present experiences into a coherent narrative. For me, the capacity to symbolize, with its intimate

connection to mourning, is the necessary psychological underpinning for mature forms of spirituality—for relating to an other who is both known and unknown.

Significantly, in the psychoanalytic world, Freud, Segal and Bion all connect the development of our symbolic ability to the experience of object loss, and Winnicott locates our earliest symbol formation in the transitional space opened between mother and child by the mother's diminishing adaptation to the child's needs (Wright 1991, p. xii). But the capacity to symbolize can only evolve if our early experiences of separation are not too traumatic. If mother's face re-appears quickly enough, so that the child is only slightly anxious and not driven to black paroxysms of despair, trust is strengthened, and the child's ability to hold a picture of her face in mind during moments of separation, is slightly increased—we can think of the endless games of 'peepo', of losing and finding, that small children love to play. Conversely, André Green has charted what happens when an infant—like my patient—is subjected to too much catastrophic separation, or to the presence of the 'dead mother'. He then finds himself in a psychic void of blank mourning in which no symbol can arise. In this case,

The quest for lost meaning drives the child into a compulsion to imagine, a frantic compulsive form of play, or a compulsion to think, leading to over-catheted intellectual capacity.

(Green 2003, p. 152)

Green might be describing my patient with his solitary, obsessional, and occasionally manic play in the park, and his endless adult intellectual musing.

Our capacity to symbolize develops as we become able to tolerate absence, without resorting to the primitive defences described by Green. Maria Schleger has written about St Augustine's view of evil in relation to psychoanalytic thinking about the death instinct in a way that is relevant to my theme,

The heart of the problem is how we engage with the negative . . . I (have) argued that good and evil are inevitably found together, that the life and death instincts are always to some extent fused. This means that precisely the same experience can be 'a source not only of dread but also . . . of vitality and meaning in life' (Alford, C. Fred 1997, *What Evil Means to Us*. London: Cornell University Press, p. 9). It is not the negative in itself which is bad, but the form of our connection to it. As Augustine realized, we bring evil about through a wrong relationship with something we perceive as absent. When we collapse the boundary between presence and absence evil is made concrete and the 'no-thing' comes into being.

(Schleger 2005, p. 37)

'It is not the negative in itself which is bad, but the form of our connection to it'. If our early experience has been supportive enough, we can inhabit the void, the 'nowhere place', in a mindful way that allows symbols to emerge in their own way and in their own time. We can cope with the uncertainty of not knowing. We can be alone. But where the capacity to symbolize—to stay in the darkness of unknowing—is lacking, terrible things can happen. In

her paper, Schlegel instances the way Macbeth is destabilized by the witches' teasing salutation, when they hail him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and one 'that shall be king hereafter' (Act 1, Scene 3, ll 50–52). Macbeth was only Thane of Glamis; but once the idea of becoming Thane of Cawdor, even king, is sown in his mind, instead of being able to live with unknowing and wait to see if these things will come to him, he is compulsively driven to enact the thought; and, in the process, brings himself and many others to destruction. A similar pattern appears in Strauss' opera *Salomé*, where *Salomé*, infatuated with John the Baptist and infuriated by his rejection of her advances, engineers his execution. In the bizarre final scene she makes love to his severed head, as if any form of possession is more bearable than to remain with unfulfilled desire (Schlegel 2005, p. 38).

Keats gave classical expression to the qualities we need if we are to inhabit the negative, the void, in a way that will be creative and spiritually fruitful, and not cause us to act out in compulsive ways,

Several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, *when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.

(Letter to his brothers, 21.12.1817)

Ann Ulanov calls this space 'the gap' and says, 'A gap always remains between ego and Self, for they speak different languages',

The gap between them can be a place of madness where the ego falls in and loses its foothold on reality... (but)... If we really become aware of and accept the gap between ego and Self it transforms itself into a space of conversation between the worlds.²

(Ulanov 1997, p. 299)

The therapeutic process confronts us with this gap. What a strange business it is: to lie on a couch or sit in a chair, in the presence of a complete stranger, and talk freely about whatever comes into our head. If we could do that, we would not need therapy! The space, the gap, the void, the negative, is always the same and yet, every day, it feels different: everything from terrifying, freezing, panic-inducing emptiness to the warmest and most intimate of play spaces. As Schlegel says, 'It is not the negative in itself which is bad, but the form of our connection to it'.

In neurotic or traumatized states of mind we fear the intrusion of unthought thoughts or unfelt feelings. They threaten our fragile equilibrium. But as we advance on the psycho-spiritual journey, and particularly as we learn to mourn,

² I owe this quotation to Vivian De Souza Ciriaco.

to let go yet to keep our imagination open in a way that allows thoughts, pictures and symbols to form, we become more attuned to that which comes to us from beyond—either the ‘beyond within’ or the ‘beyond without’, if it is meaningful to speak in spatial terms. This is the state of mind needed for therapeutic work, for creativity, and for prayer.

What, then, is the ‘sacred’? This brings me back to my thoughts about Freud and Jung, and my appreciation of their courage in putting their convictions on the line. Ultimately, they knew that mental health must, somehow, be related to reality. But what is reality?

My argument, so far, supports Susan Kavalier-Adler’s experience that numinous experiences tend to occur either at critical moments in therapy, when vital re-connections are being forged in our internal worlds (Kavalier-Adler 2003)—or, though I have not described this, at moments when our whole system is supercharged with emotion; for example, when we fall in love; or following a bereavement, or in time of critical illness or distress. At these times, we seem to be opened up to the deepest levels of the psyche, and our emotions and perceptions become archetypally coloured, or determined. And, whenever the archetypes are abroad, we feel their numinous aura.

At the same time, though, I have been arguing that the experience of numinosity ought not, in itself, to be our chief criterion for diagnosing the presence of the sacred. Rudolf Otto points us beyond the numinous to the holy. My case material supports this view. Had my patient been less defended, in a schizoid way, and better able to mourn and process his internal distress, his inner desperation would never have reached the point where it only could erupt in archetypal form.

For me, the hallmark of the sacred—and this is also the goal of the therapeutic journey—lies not so much in the experience of heightened numinosity, though this may sometimes be present, but in the capacity for a certain quality of symbolic relatedness to self and other, which can accept the otherness of the other and so is able to live with separation, absence, loss. The struggle, whether this be in private prayer and meditation, in worship, in the consulting room, or in the social or political arenas, is to find a way of being with ourselves and with others that is transparent enough to allow this capacity for relatedness to emerge. If I say that God is good, I am thinking of these moments of connection. Many therapists are not comfortable with religious language, but I am struck by the number of times that colleagues have been moved to use, or to accept, the expression ‘holy ground’ for these experiences. Ultimately, I believe, the nature of this ground is love, not emotional or romantic love, but rather a deep sense of acceptance and affirmation in which all find their proper place.

In his book *God the Unknown*, Victor White addresses the question of the ultimate unknowability of God, and asks,

But what is the use of it all? What is the point of seeking to know the unknown and unknowable? Just this, St Thomas replies, that in our search for knowledge about God

we find the truth about ourselves, our purpose and destiny, and on this our whole weal depends.

(White 1956, p. 24f)

For me, these moments of connection in which something is glimpsed and at least perhaps partly understood, are epiphanies in which God, or the 'sacred', is fleetingly known. Such moments may, or may not, be attended by numinous emotion.

Conclusion

This paper was originally written for a conference on *The Self and the Sacred*, arranged by the Jungian Section of the British Association of Psychotherapists to celebrate the publication of the correspondence between Jung and Father Victor White O.P. (Jung-White 2007; Weldon 2007). In it, I have explored a numinous experience that arose in the course of intensive analytical psychotherapy. Jung, misreading Otto, generally subsumes such experiences to his understanding of religion as 'a careful and scrupulous observation of what Rudolf Otto aptly called the *numinosum*' (Jung 1937, para. 6). By contrast, my clinical experience supports Lucy Huskinson's re-reading of Otto: while the numinous may mark the overwhelming, non-rational quality of religious experience, we need to make space for the symbolic and the 'sacred', or the 'holy', if we are to understand the way in which reason and non-reason can be held together in a way that is psychologically and spiritually transformative for the individual.

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Jung emprunte l'idée du numineux à l'ouvrage de Rudolf Otto *Das Heilige* et la plaça au centre de sa propre compréhension de la religion. Cependant, ainsi que l'a récemment souligné Lucy Huskinson, ceci suppose une méconnaissance du travail d'Otto, selon lequel il s'agit de regarder *au-delà* du numineux (qui est le facteur non rationnel de la religion) et de *viser* le 'sacré' qui, comme un symbole, fait tenir ensemble les aspects rationnel et non rationnel de l'expérience religieuse, en un mouvement de transformation personnelle. Une telle compréhension du voyage spirituel et psychologique est étayée par un cas clinique; une expérience numineuse apparue au cours d'une psychothérapie analytique intensive s'avéra n'être que le premier pas d'un processus qui conduisit le patient, à travers une période de deuil, au développement de sa capacité symbolique. A partir de cet éclairage, l'auteur suggère que le sacré est à rechercher dans l'existence d'une certaine qualité d'aptitude relationnelle symbolique, à soi-même et aux autres, que celle-ci s'accompagne ou pas d'une expérience numineuse.

Jung entnahm die Idee des 'Numinosen' dem Buch Rudolf Ottos, *Das Heilige* und machte sie zum Zentralpunkt seines Religionsverständnisses. Wie Lucie Huskinson kürzlich gezeigt hat, beinhaltet dies jedoch ein Fehlverständnis des Werkes Ottos, wo wir *hinter* das Numinose (welches der nichtrationale Faktor in der Religion ist) auf das 'Heilige'

schauen müssen, welches, wie ein Symbol, die rationalen und nichtrationalen Aspekte der religiösen Erfahrung zusammenhält und auf je persönliche Weise umsetzt. Dieses Verständnis der spirituellen und psychologischen Reise wird durch Fallmaterial gestützt, in welchem eine numinose Erfahrung, die im Kontext einer intensiven analytischen Psychotherapie auftauchte, sich als erster Schritt erwies in einem Prozeß, der durch eine Phase der Trauer hindurch zur Entwicklung von Symbolisierungsfähigkeit beim Patienten führte. Auf diesem Hintergrund vermutet der Autor, daß das Heilige in der Fähigkeit zu einer bestimmten Qualität der symbolischen Beziehung – zum Selbst oder zu anderen, gesucht werden muß, wobei numinose Erfahrungen begleitend auftreten können, aber nicht müssen.

Jung prese l'idea del 'numinoso' dal libro di Rudolf Otto 'L'idea del Sacro' e ne fece il centro della sua comprensione della religione. Tuttavia, come ci ha fatto notare recentemente Lucy Huskinson, ciò implica una scorretta lettura del lavoro di Otto nel quale si deve guardare al di là del luminoso (che è un elemento irrazionale della religione) verso il 'sacro' che, in quanto simbolo, tiene insieme sia gli aspetti irrazionali che quelli razionali dell'esperienza religiosa in un modo individualmente trasformativo. Tale modo di intendere il viaggio spirituale e psicologico viene sostenuto da materiali clinici nei quali una esperienza numinosa, che emerge nel contesto di una intensa psicoterapia analitica, si rivelò essere solo un primo passo in un processo che portò, attraverso un periodo di lutto, allo sviluppo della capacità del paziente di simbolizzare. Alla luce di ciò, l'autore pensa che il sacro debba essere cercato nella capacità di avere una certa qualità del relazionarsi simbolicamente, a se stesso o agli altri, che può essere o può non essere accompagnata dall'esperienza del numinoso.

Jung tomó la idea de la 'numinoso' de Rudolf Otto en el libro *Das Heilige* (ET *La Idea de lo Sagrado*) y lo hizo fundamental para su comprensión de la religión. Sin embargo, como Lucy Huskinson recientemente ha señalado, se trata de una interpretación errónea de la labor de Otto en la que tenemos que mirar más allá de lo numinoso (que es el factor no-racional en la religión) en función de lo 'sagrado' el cual, similar a un símbolo, comprende aspectos racionales y no racionales de la experiencia religiosa integrados en una forma de transformación personal. Esta comprensión del viaje espiritual y psicológico es apoyado por el material de casos en donde una experiencia numinosa, surgiendo en el contexto de la psicoterapia analítica intensa, resultó ser sólo el primer paso en un proceso que condujo, a través de un período de duelo, hacia el desarrollo de la capacidad del paciente para simbolizar. A la luz de esto, el autor sugiere que lo sagrado se puede encontrar en la capacidad para entablar una cierta calidad de relación simbólica-consigo mismo y con el otro-ella puede o no ser tocada por la experiencia numinosa.

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