



Reflections on the Fear of Consciousness

by Bud Harris, Ph.D.

Abstract Watcher © Rolffimages, Dreamstime.com

“May God deny you peace and give you glory” seems like a strange kind of blessing from the Spanish theologian Miguel de Unamuno. But it is a blessing, expressing a kind of spiritual and psychological depth that we rarely find in our sentimentalized religious services. In his sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis compares us to ignorant children who would rather continue making mud pies in a slum because we cannot imagine taking a holiday by the sea. But our failure to take the symbolic journey from the slum to the seaside is actually caused by fear. This fear is the fear of consciousness and how consciousness can threaten our identities, self-worth, relationships, and our membership in the tribes of family, friends, work, church, and others that support and affirm our identities.

Once I became aware of this fear, I realized that it emanated from the swampland of my origins, creeping through my psyche whenever I faced a transformation in my life. During the years when I didn’t know where the fog of fear came from, I tried to counter it by clinging on to the feeling that I’m O.K., to say to myself, “I’m O.K.” Well, I was O.K. when the reality I needed to face was O.K. But, I’m not O.K. when my life isn’t working well, when I am agitated, anxious, neurotic, addicted to sweets, alcohol, work, depressed, overweight, screwing up my relationships, or whatever.

In these times I need to be able to say on a heart-stirring level, “I am not O.K.” Then this statement becomes the beginning of my seeing the truth of my reality, and it is necessary for an old self to begin to die so a new one can be born. Admitting I’m not O.K. doesn’t mean that I hate myself, for hating myself would be a vicious defense against change and would keep me trapped in a self-absorbing conflict. To say I’m not O.K. in the way I’m saying it is, in reality, an act of

radical self-love, of radical self-acceptance and compassion that lets me begin to drop into an unknown future. This drop is an act of radical, and perhaps desperate, faith that something will rise up and catch me.

For years I’ve seen people go into analysis and then leave it, even after long periods of work, having never been able to die through their major complexes and be reborn. Some of them simply go on their way. Some who are interested in Jung, some who have worked in analysis, seem content to stay lost in their intellect, in insight, rationality, distanced, and in control. A few who are stuck in the conflict like it is a tar baby, may even become analysts or teach, lead groups, and other things that keep them connected to a conflict they are unable to grow through. Unfortunately, when teachers are stuck or underdeveloped, they lead others deeper into shallowness because they are stubbornly resisting confronting their inner terror. They may be even more stubbornly trying to actualize a personality that, while it may be talented and intelligent, is still wounded, not O.K. They cannot face giving up their old selves that need to be consciously accepted, warts and all, in order for transformation to begin. An old self cannot begin the death process in transformation until we are strong enough and humble enough to accept it. No wonder Jung says that a step forward for the Self is a defeat for the ego.

One dilemma that keeps us stuck is that we are steeped in a culture that believes the way out of pain or problems is a greater success, a greater mastery of oneself and one’s fate, accompanied by greater public validation. This point of view is false, misleading and destructive. It is the heroic complex of the modern age, an approach to life that even Jung discovered he had to sacrifice within himself.

This old heroic complex gave birth to the fiction of self-actualization, a romance of ego gratification. Self-actualization reflects our culture’s one-sided perspective of idealized growth. Joseph Campbell remarked that it was for people who don’t have anything better to do. Poverty, illness, pain, safety, and so-on has never deterred people moved by a

Bud Harris, Ph.D., is a Zurich-trained Jungian analyst in Asheville, NC. He is a member of the C.G. Jung Society of Atlanta and the Georgia Association of Jungian Analysts. His website is www.budharris.com and his email is info@budharris.com.

higher purpose, a call or a myth supporting their lives.

Self-actualization uses what is meant to serve our growth as a defense mechanism. Through it our ego attempts to colonize our unconscious as the European countries colonized Africa rather than to seek transformation through it. Instead, individuation asks us to become grounded in our instincts and to journey into the darkness of our emotions, complexes, and the life that arouses them. It is both a challenge and a plea to explore what we fear, to face inner rage, loneliness, and areas of life we have neglected or refused to live that show up in our dreams, depression, anxiety, illnesses, and in other symptoms crying out for our attention. This is the real quest for the pearl of great price, the secret of a fully lived in and engaged in life. Unamuno's glory.

So it is not a failure to say, "I'm not O.K." It is not a failure to face our self and our shadow, which means our major complexes, and to undertake the arduous journey of working through them until they enlarge our personalities by being transformed. In the process we are transformed together and the old me is dead.

Why in the world would anyone choose to stay in the slum of an old life instead of undertaking the journey to the seaside? Well, to begin with, in my case I had what looked like a good life. It took my depression and my wife's illness to break out of this container. It wasn't easy to stop thinking I have achieved a good life and I should learn how to be happy in it. Of course, I had also been strongly Calvinized in my upbringing. That meant that I learned early on that I was to blame for all my problems. They were the results of my bad choices, bad habits, and weak self-discipline. Plus, there was the suspicion that my dark thoughts were bad, sinful, my strong emotions were untrustworthy, and my desires unworthy. In short, my inner life was amoral, if not wicked, and could only be redeemed by a stream of good works or on the secular level, achieving a good life based on a stream of successful achievements. Of course, this was rubbish and I was smarter than that. But yet, somewhere deep inside, these injunctions still echoed. My fear of taking the journey from slum to seaside began with fears about my own worthiness.

Part of my Calvinization included an unconscious fear that if I went deep enough into the inner journey, I would find some things that truly were reprehensible. Or, that I would discover I didn't really have the right stuff for the kind of life I desired. One of our greatest fears is of being unmasked, being humiliated, deprived of respect and dignity, and to be cast out of the tribe into a loneliness that cannot be penetrated by love. Tribes range from families to social groups. We may already be on the outside edge or in rebellion against it, but archetypally, being rejected and cast out seems like it will be a hell of loneliness.

Our fear of waking up, of becoming more conscious as our consciousness evolves while we are initiated into one new self after another, is, at its heart, a fear of loneliness. What if we outgrow those around us, or if they resent our growth? What if our growth causes us to question what we value and how we define ourselves? We have our fears of the changes, conflicts and chaos that give birth to new creation. Plus, the risks are real. There is also the fear of our demons,

desires, our caged Mr. Hyde, our denied murdering Shiva, or of our overpowering sexuality. The first fear I had to overcome was to step through the door of an analyst's office and into the process. It helped me to know that individuation calls us to become new versions of ourselves by growing through and beyond our current challenges.

I soon discovered that the kind of analysis that generates individuation cannot be short. Even if we begin with relatively strong egos, we have to work for years to strengthen them more, to loosen the ties of the fears I've mentioned, and to build the strength of character that is needed to have our egos crucified in this process and still emerge stronger and paradoxically smaller and in service to the Self. We need this strength to endure the turning points in our growth and to continue seeking self-knowledge through the ongoing confrontations with our shadows, wounds, and complexes in a way that holds the promise of new life.

Remember, though, that it is reflection and self-examination of a life being engaged in that fuels our development of consciousness. Consciousness engenders transformation, which always means the death of the old life or self for the birth of the new. It always includes a period of gestation in between where there are no guarantees of the outcome. Individuation is a risky approach to life that must become a way of life. No wonder we are afraid. But, the archetypal pattern of reaching new life assures us of hope.

My trust in this pattern has taught me that as life evolves, opens up, it doesn't become easier – it becomes fulfilled. It isn't nice. It is real. Conflicts and tensions arise, but they are accepted. Feelings become real. Feelings become honest. Life becomes art. The inner sources of creation, the muse, the anima, the spirit, the animus, and the Self bring a creative influence that spawns tension to create new forms. But strangely, as life opens up, its brush strokes become broader and they paint with the passion of emotions that have been refined like crude oil into the fuel that moves life. Success and failure become the wrong paradigm. Life is no longer an achievement, it is a grace and, at its best, we become co-creators with the Self, the Divine within us. At other times, well, I always have the responsibility to be devoted to my inner voice, but I am not in charge.

It is the tension and suffering we experience in our transformational conflicts that generate creativity. The realization that growing in creativity, love and potential rests on the archetype of transformation as its vehicle, and the death of the old self begins with loss, injury, conflict, betrayal, disillusionment, and disaster, and the acceptance of this reality brings the "peace that passeth all understanding."

The results of this kind of work are not immediate and spectacular. Nor can they be idealized as easily as self-actualization. The results show up as we reflect on our lives and, over time, we realize our life has slowly become miraculous. Do we dare to live this way? Do we dare to live a life whose arc will follow a pattern determined by the Self, not by our culture, our egos, or our fear?