Exploring the Unconscious by Going Within:

A Book Review of *Inner Work* by Robert A. Johnson

Nathaniel S. Prentice, MSW, LCSW, CAS-PC


ISBN: 0062504312

Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/dp/0062504312/ref=rdr_ext_tmb (yes, they do have a Kindle version)

This is a review of a book on Jungian Dream Analysis and Jung's Active Imagination Technique by Robert A. Johnson, a Jungian Analyst. Both techniques are tools that can be used in healing the psyche. This book is a very readable treatise on these two approaches to the unconscious with an eye towards healing as well as exploration. While it makes Jung's techniques approachable, it also has weaknesses in the area of symbolic interpretation, which is another source of understanding of unconscious material. I believe that it has material that is applicable to those who are healers and also those of us who are interested in their spiritual life and/or their own inner world, as the techniques can certainly be used in a spiritual and psychological manner.

In this book, Johnson discusses what the nature of the unconscious is, how to interact with it through dreams and active imagination work (and both), and how to take what is learned in that and translate it into the everyday world.

The unconscious is a marvelous universe of unseen energies, forces, forms of intelligence--even distinct *personalities* [sic]--that live within us. It is a much larger realm than most of us realize,
one that has a complete life of its own running parallel to the ordinary life we live day to day.

The unconscious is the secret source of much of our thought, feeling, and behavior. It influences us in ways that are all the more powerful because unsuspected [sic].

... We are all much more than the "I" of whom we are aware. Our conscious minds can focus on only a limited sector of our total being at any time. … Therefore we have to learn how to go to the unconscious and become receptive to its messages. It is the only way to find the unknown parts of ourselves. (pp. 3-4).

Thus he starts off his book with a challenge for us to explore the deeper side of ourselves inside. He explains that the unconscious is a realm that does not use our everyday language of words, but that it uses the language of symbols, which are richer, but less apprehensible.

He then lays out in the first part how to work with dreams and understanding them. He encourages the use of a dream journal (written or recorded) and engaging in the regular practice of looking at them as they happen on a daily basis for deeper meaning that is being conveyed from the unconscious and that is applicable to our lives. He describes a four-step approach for dealing with them, listed below:

- Gathering free associations that pop out from exploring dream content. After writing down dream image content, one notes feelings and words that freely come while thinking of the dream image content and jots them down. A dream about an argument with a loved one raises feelings of distrust, sadness, anger and thoughts of the object of the conflict (e.g. “I am arguing over a blue knicknack. A knicknack is a personal item that is small, but has sentimental value. It is blue, therefore it reminds me of feeling sad”).
○ **Connecting dream images to inner dynamics.** Here, a basic knowledge of archetypes (patterns of personality inside, e.g. hero, trickster, lover) is helpful, but not necessary. One can simply relate how the dream content and the aroused associations speak about what is happening in the various conflicts of our inner world (this is present when one says, “one part of me in the dream wants to kill the person who took the knicknack, one part wants to just strangle, and one wants to just let him go”, for example).

○ **Interpreting by looking at the data, the associations, the dynamics and the dream’s meaning as a whole.** An example of this could be looking at the dream as a whole and interpreting that it is a dream about expressing anger towards that person in general and discerning the right way to do so.

○ **Bringing that “right way to do so” into the world through some kind of ritual or tangible action.** By actually doing something based on the dream, the unconscious is told that the content and drama brought up in the dream is being addressed. An example of this could be talking to the person with whom one is angry who has been indicated in the dream.

He then talks about the practice of Active Imagination. Active Imagination is a process developed by C. G. Jung, and is mentioned in his autobiographical book, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (Jung, 1961) and demonstrated through the journal of his own active imagination work in *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009). It is a meditation process whereby one actively engages the imagination on its own terms and sees it as an expression of the unconscious. The difference in active imagination is that the journeyer actually spends the majority of his/her time interacting with one’s imagination and building relationships with the figures within it. It is more private, therefore.

The steps provided by Johnson to do active imagination are as follows:
○ *Invite the unconscious.*

○ *Dialogue and experience the interaction between self (ego) and unconscious.*

○ *Add the ethical element of values.*

○ *Make it concrete with a physical ritual.*

At this point, I’d like to illustrate this by telling the story of one of my experiences with this process.

One day, I was taking my daughters to the hairdresser in order that all of us could have a haircut. My daughters were each taking turns, and I was waiting for them. While I was waiting, I started thinking about something that has been troubling me of late, and I noticed a creeping sense of strong anxiety coming into my awareness. This anxiety got stronger, and became uncomfortable. Instead of fighting it off (which would probably make it worse), I saw an opportunity to practice Active Imagination.

Curious, I sat down and just took a deep breath, then I mentally told my body that it was going to be OK, and that I was willing to listen to it. I asked it to present its concern in whatever way it needed to, whether it be an image, a thought, a memory, or a body sensation. I paused for a couple of minutes, and then saw a flash of a Buddhist monk in lotus position, sitting in just his robes on the top of a snow-covered mountain, which was part of a range of snow-capped mountains. In my mind’s eye, I was standing in front of him, and watching him sit there.

“Greetings, sir.” I said.

No response. He continued meditating with his eyes closed.

“Sir, I know that you are coming to me as an expression of my underlying concerns. I was wondering if you had a message for me?” I asked.
No response. His eyes were still shut.

At this point, I was intrigued that I had this image pop in my mind, even though it wasn’t doing anything. So, I noticed he was meditating. I thought I could benefit from meditating, too, so in my imagination, I spent time meditating.

After a couple of minutes, I noticed myself calming down. After I noticed this, I heard an internal voice saying, “I needed you to do that.”

I opened my internal eyes to see him still sitting there and looking at me calmly. I responded, “Yes, I forgot that I can do that. Thanks. Do you have any other messages for me, sir, and thank you for your time.”

“Read Psalm 46.”

Psalm 46? I’ve read the Bible front to back, but that Psalm didn’t exactly jog my memory. So, I thanked him, left, and then thought about the monk’s request. Seeing as it couldn’t harm myself or someone else, I acted on the new insight by looking it up in the Bible. Here is what I found:


46 God is our refuge and strength,

A very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change

And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea;

3 Though its waters roar and foam,

Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride. Selah.

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.

5 God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.

6 The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;
He raised His voice, the earth melted.

7 The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.

8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.

9 He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariots with fire.

10 “Cease striving and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

11 The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.

I realized that it was telling me that I had forgotten that God is in charge. As it suggests in verse 10, I had to cease striving and know that He is God. I felt like I had a weight lifted, and that I had a direction again. Sharing this story with you is also part of how I respect the insight I learned.

In this exercise I followed Johnson’s steps. I invited the unconscious when I told myself not to fight it but to listen to it. I had a dialogue with it that led to a new insight that I needed to meditate. I considered the ethics of following its instructions to read Psalm 46 by seeing that there was no harm to
myself or others, and I did a concrete action by reading it. I also acted on it by telling you the story so you can see what you can do as well.

This is a wonderful book, but I found it lacking in a couple of ways. First, on a personal basis I generally don’t remember my dreams. I’ve tried keeping a dream journal, only to find that I do forget the content moments after becoming semi-vertical in the morning. I’ve had more luck with active imagination. Secondly, he breezes over the topic of symbolism, which was very important to Jung in understanding the content of dreams and active imagination within the context of the collective unconscious, which is a vast repository of common symbols held across cultures that influence our ways of looking at the world. However, he does make the valid point that symbols are most importantly understood if they have personal meaning to the person doing the work, and the importance of this is not lost on the reader.

Even with its shortcomings, it is a great introduction. I would highly recommend that this book be considered one of the first books suggested for someone who struggles with uncomfortable feelings in general, as it provides a way to change one’s relationship with the feelings through Active Imagination.

References

