

“Inner Work”
March 4, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call to Worship

This day is a new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together,
giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
Our truth partial,
And our love imperfect,
We believe that new light is ever waiting
To break into our hearts and minds,
To enlighten our common path,
That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Trippers and askers surround me, people I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,

CONGREGATION: MINISTER: The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,

MINISTER: My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues, the real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,

CONGREGATION: The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money,

MINISTER: Or depressions or exaltations, battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events:

CONGREGATION: These come to me days and nights and go from me again, but they are not the Me myself.

MINISTER: Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am, stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary, looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,

CONGREGATION: Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next, both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

MINISTER: Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders, I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait.

CONGREGATION: I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, and you must not be abased to the other.

(Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," chants 4, 5; Leaves of Grass)

Reading

My reading this morning is from the opening few paragraphs of Robert A. Johnson's book, Inner Work, the book upon which my morning's sermon is based. These paragraphs are from the introduction titled, "Waking Up to the Unconscious."

"One morning a woman got into her car as usual and drove several miles to her office. Along the way her imagination began to produce a great adventure. She saw herself in olden times, a simple woman living in the midst of wars and crusades. She became a heroine, saved her people by strength and sacrifice, encountered a strong and noble prince who loved her.

"With her conscious mind thus totally occupied, she drove along several streets, stopped at traffic lights, signaled properly at each turn, and arrived safely at her office parking lot. Coming to her senses, she realized that she couldn't remember any of the drive to the office. She recalled not a single intersection or turn. Her startled mind asked: 'How could I drive this far without being aware of it?' But things like that had happened before, so she dropped the subject and went on into her office.

"At her desk she began to plan her day's work, but she was interrupted by a colleague who came storming into her office, threw down a memorandum she had circulated, and went into a rage over some minor point he disagreed with. She was astonished. His anger was so disproportionate to the size of the issue! What had come over him?

"He, in turn, hearing his own raised voice, realized he was making a mountain out of a molehill. Embarrassed, he mumbled an apology and backed out. In his own office he asked himself: 'What came over me? Where did that come from? I don't usually get rattled over little things. I just wasn't *myself*.' He sensed that there was a boiling

anger within him that had nothing to do with his friend's memorandum but had suddenly come to the surface over this petty matter. Where the anger came from, he didn't know.

"If these two people had time to think about it, they might realize that they had already felt the presence of the unconscious in their lives that morning. In dozens of ways in the ebb and flow of ordinary daily life, we experience the unconscious as it acts in us and through us....

"The idea of the unconscious derives from a simple observation in daily human life: There is material contained in our minds that we are not aware of most of the time. We sometimes become aware of a memory, a pleasant association, an ideal, a belief that wells up unexpectedly from an unknown place. We sense that we have carried these elements somewhere inside us for a long time – but where? In an unknown part of the total psyche that lies outside the boundaries of the conscious mind.

"The unconscious is a marvelous universe of unseen energies, forces, forms of intelligence – even distinct *personalities* – 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....

"These hidden parts of ourselves have strong feelings and want to express them. Yet, unless we learn to do *inner work*, these parts of ourselves are hidden from our conscious view.

"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 given time. Despite our efforts at self-knowledge, only a small portion of the huge energy system of the unconscious can be incorporated into the conscious mind or function at the conscious level. 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."

(Robert A. Johnson, Inner Work, pp. 1-4)

"INNER WORK"

Introduction

In nature about us at this time of the year, plants and trees are inwardly preparing for the burst of springtime. Already a number have burst forth with in color. With most plants and trees, however, the high inner activity has not yet manifested in exterior form.

So, too, in the Christian religious tradition this Lenten season of the year – Lent relating to springtime – is an intense, final period of inward turning and inward preparation before the high, outward activity of the coming spring and summer.

My guide in this inwardly-turned direction this year is Robert A. Johnson, an author and friend, who, more any person I know, has lived a life close to the inner world. As I said last week, he is more at home in the softer, liquid world of dream and vision images than in the harder, concrete world of material things – more sure-footed traversing the interior landscape of the soul than the exterior landscape of the material world.

Each week in this sermon series I intend to discuss ideas from one of his many books. The book I'm drawing from this week, as indicated in my reading, is: Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth.

The influence of Carl Jung

Robert Johnson has been strongly influenced by the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, initially a friend and colleague of Freud, who later headed in his own direction.

As a young man, Johnson began his post-high school studies at Stanford University, but quickly discovered that such university life was unsuitable for his interests and aptitudes. He found himself, instead, spending a couple of years with the well-known East Indian teacher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, staying with Krishnamurti at his center in the Ojai Valley, 100 miles north of Los Angeles.

Then, still in his early twenties, he took a freighter to Europe and, after a series of adventures, began studying at the Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, an Institute that Jung himself wanted little or nothing to do with. Nevertheless, Johnson did have the opportunity to meet with Jung. It was related to a disputed dream that made its way to the renowned psychiatrist. It happened like this:

Johnson presented what he felt was an important dream to his analyst, but she refused to deal with it, telling him that it was an old man's dream, inappropriate for a person so young. As you can imagine, Robert didn't find this response particularly satisfying – after all, clearly, he had the dream – so he quit analysis with her and began working with Emma Jung, Carl Jung's wife.

After a time of meeting with Emma Jung, Robert showed her his dream in written form, which she in turn brought to Carl, her husband, by this time a “wise old man” of 73 years with a lifetime of delving deep into the interior spaces, working with dream images, art, the world's myths, as well as with top scientists of the world.

Dr. Jung, having read the dream, summoned Robert to meet with him. Then, without inquiring at all into his personal history, Jung laid out for Robert the type of life called for by this dream.

What he said would be necessary for him was largely a solitary life, a life lived close to the contents of the interior world. Said Jung to Johnson: “Even if you never amount to anything in the outer world, your life will still be a worthwhile life if you attend to the realities of your inner world.”

This kind of solitary life was not going to be a comfortable life; it would not be connected to family life, to groups or organizations. And it was a life that Robert at times tried to sidestep, but one that he has, indeed, found necessary for his particular being.

Seven Jungian assumptions related to “inner work”

Robert Johnson’s basic approach for work with the interior life is based on the investigations and ideas of Carl Jung. And let me spend some time now summarizing a number of the operating assumptions of this approach because it is the foundation of Johnson’s work. In other words, I will summarize some of the basic principles or hypotheses that both Jung and Johnson are using in their psychological work.

(1) First, as illustrated in the passage I read from in the introduction of his book, Inner Work, there is a lot more going on with us than we are consciously aware of or than we have control over. There’s a whole energy system that underlies the waking awareness that we have.

This underlying system is typically named “the unconscious,” a name that, to my mind, is perhaps a bit unfortunate and misleading because “unconscious” tends to imply unintelligent, directionless, or without value.

But “the unconscious,” for both Jung and Johnson is neither unintelligent, directionless, or without value; it simply refers to the parts of the psyche that are not in the purview of conscious awareness. In other words, it is “unconscious” from the point of view of ego consciousness.

For example, while I am speaking to you now a whole system is supporting my conscious activity and my efforts to try to say something coherent. As I am speaking, my heart is pumping blood through various tubes in my body. Yet other tubes are returning that blood to my heart after it has brought its nutrients to the appropriate areas. Still other organs of my body are digesting the food I ate earlier this morning.

“I,” my conscious self, hasn’t requested any of this, nor have “I” taken much note of it, or expressed gratitude for it; and yet it is happening – all free of charge.

Further, my tongue and lips are forming words that are much more than my conscious effort. I don’t have to consciously consider how to make the sounds that you hear. I simply have to ... well ... what? ... to conceive an idea and voila! words come forth to express that idea. I’m not even exactly certain what words will emerge, even though I’ve taken some effort to prepare them. But like you, to some extent, I am watching to see what words will come forth.

Sometimes words emerge that I wish hadn't. And where did they come from? On the other hand, where do any words come from? Did consciousness invent words? Or do words call forth consciousness?

Further, just the physical forming of words is much more than my conscious intention. If I had to form my words by consciously concentrating on tongue and lip movements, I would be in even deeper trouble while speaking than I already am.

So: to call this energy system that underlies and supports our conscious awareness "the unconscious" is not to imply that it is unintelligent, directionless, or without value. It might be preferable to speak of the "unconscious" as the "creative source" of our being, for it is from this deeper energy matrix that the conscious mind emerges.

(2) And this, then, is a second assumption in Jungian psychology, namely, that the conscious mind evolves from the larger, deeper matrix of our being. Our ego mind, our ego consciousness emerges from an underlying matrix that is non-rational, pre-rational, pre-self-conscious.

I watched this emerge in my own children, watched as at about age two they began to develop an ego, that is to say, a sense of personal identity, a *self*-identity, a *self*-awareness. They began to say the "I" word – "I want," "I need," "I will," "I am."

It's not coincidence, I think, that we refer to the second year of human life as the "terrible two's" – the high water mark of human arrogance. My mother tells me that her favorite time of life with her children was up to age two.

My point here is that our consciousness of being an individual – that of our whole species as well – develops out of a creative but non-conscious matrix.

(3) And, beyond this, assumption three, is that our individual beings and our species are connected with the whole evolutionary past of the universe. We are part of and emerge out of an even larger, wilder, creative matrix – billions of years of history. As Johnson says:

"The unconscious is the Original Mind of humankind, the primal matrix out of which our species has evolved a conscious mind and then developed it over the millennia to the extent and the refinement that it has today. Every capacity, every feature of our functioning consciousness, was first contained in the unconscious and then found its way from there up to the conscious level. (Inner Work, p. 6)

Or as Whitman, the poet, puts it:

"Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,...

(from "Song of Myself," chant 44, Leaves of Grass)

(4) Thus, assumption four is that our ego mind, our conscious mind, this late-comer on the planet, should be in a servant role to the larger reality from which it has emerged.

It should be in a servant role, first of all, to the larger individual psyche from which it has emerged, for the individual conscious human mind, to use an analogy of Carl Jung, is the tenth of the iceberg that shows above water. Below the conscious aspect of our psyche is the hidden and unseen 9/10ths of the psyche. (Inner Work, p. 8)

And, beyond this, the conscious mind should be in a servant role to the cosmos as a whole, not just to its own individual being.

(5) And, assumption five, what is that servant role? To be an organ of awareness. The function of the conscious mind, the ego, is to become aware – to bring awareness, first of all, to the individual being. Consciousness is not first of all for directing things, but becoming aware. With such awareness, new and different paths of action might become apparent, but primarily the ego is for awareness, not decision-making.

Johnson, late in his life, has come to the conclusion that there is only one right action in any given moment. In other words, if one is adequately aware, the path will be clear, and the only question is whether a person will take it. I understand this to mean that if you are truly aware, the direction will be clear. The question is: Will you obey or disobey?

And then, additionally, the conscious mind, this miraculous and marvelous evolutionary development, is nature's way of beholding itself. Writes Johnson of Jung's approach:

"Jung developed a magnificent vision of this human capacity for consciousness, of its role and meaning. He saw a creative force at work in nature – a cosmos laboring through timeless aeons to give birth to this rare quality that we call consciousness. Through the human race, the huge unconscious psyche of Nature has slowly made a part of itself conscious. Jung believed that God and all of creation labored through time to bring conscious awareness into the universe, and that it is the role of human beings to carry that evolution forward." (Inner Work, p. 6)

(6) Thus, assumption six for Jung and Johnson, is that there is an urge in us toward greater awareness. Our being seeks further development, seeks, like all things, to become more fully what they are and could be. The urge in us toward fuller consciousness, fuller self-awareness, is part of this inner urge towards development and wholeness.

And, as I have been saying, for Jung and Johnson this urge is more than individual; the urge has cosmic dimensions in that being has an urge to know itself consciously. Thus, we are agents of this urge.

(7) And then a seventh and final assumption is that, as is probably obvious now, Jung and Johnson's basic approach to the interior life and the unconscious aspects of the psyche is to regard it – the “unconscious” – in a positive way.

The “unconscious” part of the psyche is not an appendage of the conscious mind (Inner Work, p. 5), nor the dumping ground for unwanted or repressed contents of our conscious life, but is rather the creative source of our conscious life.

And, importantly, this creative, underlying, psychic ground tries in the best way it can to communicate with our conscious mind. It has no desire to deceive us.

However, its communication is often lost on us because its primary means of communication is in the form of images, which we have largely lost the art of understanding, having rambled off our own way.

So these are some of the assumptions behind Inner Work.

The object of inner work

And what is this inner work? It consists primarily in trying to cooperate with this creative source that underlies our consciousness.

“Inner work,” as Johnson says, “is the effort by which we gain awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us and move toward integration of the total self.” (Inner Work, p. 13)

This means taking the time to learn the language of the deeper psyche, the language that comes to us in dream images, in visions, in feelings, in moods, in urges, even in addictions and compulsions – maybe especially in addictions and compulsions. Our job is to pay attention and to be willing to listen and to learn.

So often we, in our conscious selves, think and act as though we are the masters – “I am the master of my fate:/ I am the captain of my soul.” – words that make me shudder.

Techniques for inner work

There are many ways to attend to the unconscious. As Johnson says, “... any form of meditation that opens our minds to the messages of the unconscious can be called “inner work.” (Inner Work, p. 13)

In his book, Johnson describes two methods or techniques for keeping the communication going: dreams and active imagination. Let me briefly touch on these two methods:

“Dreams,” Johnson says, “are the native language of the unconscious.” (Inner Work, p. 20) We may not easily understand them, but, as I said, there is no intention in dreams to deceive us. Rather, they are trying to communicate to us. And they do so by reminding us of what we are missing in our conscious life.

For example, if you have a recurring nightmare, an image or images that jolt you wide awake out of your sleep, this is your deeper, hidden being attempting in the best way it can to bring something to you waking, conscious self that it is important for your conscious self to know if it is to achieve a higher functioning.

One of Jung’s main ideas was that dreams served a “compensatory” role. They compensate for our conscious attitude. In other words, they aren’t just showing our conscious mind what it is already conscious of; rather, our dreams are attempting to bring to the conscious mind images that have not yet been integrated.

This is part of what makes understanding dream images difficult, namely, that it is material we haven’t yet worked through or become fully aware of. So if a dream seems too simple for you, the Jungian idea is that it probably is.

And the way to work with this material is not so much to try to interpret it, so that we think, “Oh, now I’ve got it,” but rather to take the dream as you would a work of art.

A work of art is not so much understood as it is related to. You wander around it, occasionally something strikes you, you get an insight into your life, an “aha,” but the image never really exhausts itself.

Resistance to the interior input

Typically, we, in our conscious selves, resist the input from the interior self. First of all, we like to think we’re in charge and can structure and direct our own lives, thank you very much.

Secondly, the input from the interior self, as I am saying, isn’t presented in our preferred form – not in clear, concise, verbal language – “If it has something to say, why doesn’t it just say it?”

Thirdly, we’re busy and have many important things to do, and have only so much energy. This is a distraction from our lives; this takes too much effort and energy. Life is difficult enough without having to spent time trying to attend to and placate an interior, invisible self.

I know for myself, I tend to pay attention to my dreams only when forced to – when I’m emotional trouble, when I’m depressed, or at my wits end – a kind of last resort.

Dreams as “intra-psychic”

Another thing about dreams in Jungian perspective is that they are subjective in nature. The images are about aspects of interior energy, not usually about exterior relationships. They typically start from and relate to exterior events, but they have to do with our interior household and what is going on inside.

When I dream of Mickey Mantle, for example, this is not about my relationship with Mickey Mantle – since I never met the man. But as my childhood athletic hero, this dream image of Mickey Mantle is about my own interior athletic image. So I watch to see what Mickey Mantle is doing in my dreams, and I learn a little about that part of myself.

Johnson's four-step process to working with dreams

I don't have time to go into Johnson's approach to dreams in any depth, but let me summarize it by saying that it consists of 4 steps:

- 1) Making associations with the dream images.
- 2) Connecting the images with what is going on in your life at this time – what's emotionally going on?
- 3) Attempting to discern the central message of the dream for you.
- 4) Doing some ritual to make the dream concrete

So, to take an example from his book: a short little, insignificant-appearing dream of Johnson's. Here's the whole dream:

“I am stealing a newspaper from a vending machine. I suddenly wake up [in the dream] to what I am doing, and I feel guilty.” (Inner Work, p. 74)

So, very quickly, how do you work with this?

Step one: Associate with the dream images. What does a newspaper, the central image in the dream, represent? To Johnson – a newspaper represents collective values, collective platitudes, opinions, gossip, scandals raked up to serve as news, propaganda.

Step two: What is happening in my life? In this case, Johnson was just starting his profession as a psychologist, unsure of himself, trying to fit in, repeating the opinions of others as though they were his own viewpoint – in other words, “stealing a newspaper from a vending machine.”

Step three: What is the dream telling me? “I was not paying the price for having my own ideas and wouldn't dare think for myself because I so desperately wanted to fit in.” (Inner Work, p. 75)

Step four: Do a ritual to make the dream concrete. Actually, this little dream woke him up so that he took his profession in a whole different way.

Active Imagination

The other technique for doing inner work that Johnson discusses in the book is a technique that Carl Jung developed called “Active Imagination.” Jung, according to Johnson, actually valued active imagination more than dream work because it involves a dialogue between your conscious self and other interior aspects of your being.

To illustrate: You’ve probably all heard of examples of a therapist working with a client saying, “Okay, here’s this empty chair. Now imagine your father, your mother, your friend, your adversary sitting there. What do you have to say? And, what do you imagine in the person’s response.”

Active imagination is something like that, except you enter into conversation with different parts of your self, ask questions of your interior self, and see what responses emerge.

I have done this only rarely, again typically when I’m in difficulty, because these inner figures may demand a change in your life, even when you argue with them. I believe it’s probably better not to engage such material unless you are prepared to make some kind of adjustment or change in your life. This is not stuff to fool with or play with.

Conclusion

So: I’ve given you just a taste of these techniques. If you’re interested in further exploration, I would certainly recommend his book, Inner Work. I have often recommended this book as the best introduction I know to working with dreams and your imagination on an individual basis.

Next week I’ll look at some of the themes in another of Robert Johnson’s books, the one titled, Owning Your Own Shadow.

Benediction

May the love that gives to life its beauty,
the reverence that gives to life its sacredness,
and the purposes that give to life its deep significance
be strong within each of us
and lead us into ever deepening relationships with all of life.

(from George G. Brooks)

Extinguishing of Chalice

And now we extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,

Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 4, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)