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Narcissism, Aging, Anima Mundi—Paradox and Necessity

Ancient Chinese Taoism and traditional Chinese culture view longevity as an accomplishment, a symbol of pride including qualities of endurance, perseverance, flexibility and harmony. Taoism recognizes a relationship to the living spirit in nature, the divine within all creation. This is evident in a quote from the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu:

To know harmony is to endure. □

To endure is to be enlightened. (Verse 55)

“We are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from it” (Jung, CW 9i, par. 267). This quote applies to the challenges of the changes, joys, loss, grief and mourning and regrets that aging brings. Currently, in order to explore the expansion of life people of older ages are entering psychological depth work. This can signify the return of the

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repressed, the no longer avoidable material, personal and collective, conscious and unconscious and the urge for creative expression.

The word old from the Indo-European/Latin roots means to grow, to get well, to feed, nourish, increase. With aging, the world widens even as it narrows. The language of the Anima Mundi representing the entire soul of the world includes the qualities of aesthetics, depth, inner life and outer activity and is comprised of infinite meanings, metaphors and narratives. The anima mundi was described by James Hillman as “that soul-spark, the seminal image, which offers itself through each thing in its visible form... the animated possibilities presented by each event... bespeaking its interior image--in short, its availability to imagination, its presence as a psychic reality” (Hillman, 1982, p. 71).

In contrast, the narcissistic tendency is towards self-absorption, narrowness and individual subjectivity. Narcissism, occluding growth, becomes more rigid with age, an impenetrable container walled by the false self. The images, dreams and depth psychological work with older adults reveal the life conflicts, stagnation and depression that indicate the residual presence of narcissism. Jungian psychology contends this problematic and narrow path, like any defensive position or complex, can

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lead to the anima mundi, to connection to the whole of creation and the heart of the world. Peeling through the psychological layers reveals the instinctual and natural self in the following quote from the Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tsu:
to never leave whatever you are is to abide,
and to die without getting lost-
that is to live on and on.

Narcissism

The narcissism described here is aligned with the puer/puella archetype and the Western youth culture. It encompasses dependence on surface and façade, the fast, yet to be developed, the future, an absence in the present and disconnected from the physical. This attitude is challenged in later age by the realization of time, what remain undone, mourning and the need for acceptance. It signals estrangement from the unconscious and a necessity for cognition of the shadow elements that the narcissist avoids.

The narcissistic response to aging is often based on denial and attempts to defend youth oriented self-images. The narcissist ages without compassion or grace and much sorrow. He stares in disbelief and rage at what he considers cruel mirrors, and he is maladapted to life's trials and

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tribulations. Andre Green, French psychoanalyst describes this as an example of what he called death narcissism or the void, emptiness, self-contempt, destructive withdrawal, and permanent self-depreciation with a predominant masochistic quality. He called another attitude life narcissism, a way of living—sometimes parasitically, sometimes self-sufficiently—with an impoverished ego that is limited to illusory relationships that support the self, but without any involvement with living objects. (Green, 2002, p. 644) Neither brings one into connection with self, soul or world.

Later age brings the necessity of patience, to move methodically, to listen to the world quietly, to engage with reverie, to contemplate the silence and the self. All these are qualities that the narcissistic attitude, like that of the psychological constellation of puer/puella, cannot bear. Age impatiently faces us with the need to enclose the circle, to make connection of spirit and soul, inner and outer through addressing the narcissist wounds.

“Love the world as your self; then you can care for all things,”

Tao Te Ching, Lao Tsu, (Verse 13)

James Hillman takes the idea that what actually individuates is not us, but our passions, talents and places of wounding. Our complexes need to shake off their infantile associations and find maturity, reality and

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the physical connection with psyche. Then the personality becomes a rich, multidimensional canvas. (Slater, 2012, p. 30) This process disintegrates the fixed thought patterns around aging not through the mind or intellect but with the instinct evolving from interior necessity.

Since life does not tolerate standstill, a damming up of energy results. Jung refers to this occurring through the transcendent function arising from the paradoxes holding the tension of the opposites increased from the regression of libido caused by the blockage. (CW 8, 1960, par. 145) Part of the necessity is to bridge the paradox between what was and what will be. The transcendent function becomes basic both to the regulation of the psyche and the emergence of new attitudes.

As if personality

The 'as if' personality, according to Hester Solomon, signals an internalized experience of emptiness, a lifeless void, difficult to survive due to its blankness. (Solomon, 1998, p. 199) Few perceive the cover-up has become a survival suit. The realization of this might take well into the aging process as the previous adaptations collapse. Jung was known for purporting that especially in the second half of life we are faced with the challenge and responsibility to acquire a religious, ie, spiritual attitude.

However, the personality described here has an unlinked up quality, cold and although off-putting, is based on vulnerability. They feel fraudulent, a forgery, reacting from pseudo affectivity and living a sham existence. The fear is that if anyone got close their truths would be seen. A woman describes that no matter how many accomplishments and honors pile up, she feels insufficient and wonders about her value and impact, especially as she ages.

James Hillman (1989, p. 25) described the puer as unable to find belonging, place, or the right niche, feeling precarious, lacking internal solidity, all exacerbated with age. The puella/puer is apparent in collective attitudes that venerate adolescent qualities and activities denying death and aging. The range of an archetype holds meaning through the tension of ambivalence with its spectrum of opposites. However, for the puella/puer type this turns into a tragedy of changelessness, frozen in one-sidedness. “An underlying sensitivity exists but not the internal psychology, because that takes time” (Hillman, 1989, p. 25-26).

The puer/puella is caught in a “childish state of constant dissatisfaction with themselves and the whole of reality” (von Franz, 2000, p. 87). The pressure to live bolstered by the persona adaptation avoids the feared

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underlying emptiness and the narcissistic wounds. For this woman, it came with the discovery that her husband was having an affair for several years. She had been so occupied with her career she avoided any needs for care and attention—neither giving nor receiving them. The competency pose was protecting a terrified and precarious self. There lingered an absence of passion. She described feeling unreal. Other truths remained hidden like her aloneness, lack, restlessness, depersonalization and inability to inhabit the present. Now in her late 60's she was scared and wanted to stay married but did not even know how to image what that would look like.

The *puella/puer* needs love and attention yet engages in deception to self and deflection with others by putting on a performance (Solomon, 2004, p. 639). The arrested development ends up rejecting the instinctual, a disconnection from the physical, earth and time. As Jung said, “The fear of life is a real panic...It is the deadly fear of the instinctive, the unconscious, the inner that is cut off from life by continual shrinking back from reality” (CW 5, 1956, par. 457). She feigns confidence and composure that can seem to others as exhibitionistic and grandiose, self-centered and ambitious. The true self was preserved, walled off so it was not shattered by the anticipated lack of empathy from the world. With age, this also collapses. The wounds this woman

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expressed arose from early abandonments, emotional absence and lack of love and nurturing.

The Illusions

The process of stripping off the veils of illusion is painful. It takes patience to unmask them from the accrued amount of vulnerability and years of repression. She enters therapeutic work because; “there is something (she) cannot forget, something she cannot stop telling (herself), often by (her) actions, about (her) life. And these dismaying repetitions create the illusion of time having stopped” (Phillips, 1994, p.15). This description portrays the distraction, the psychosomatic reactions drawing attention, the emotional arrest. The tragedy internally imposed against her may be so subtle that the distressing ramifications become underestimated for years. In this way, she sidesteps the dark aspects of the self that are threatening to a fragile sense of identity. (Schwartz-Salant, 1982, p. 68)

The necessity of age means she can no longer continue in the same vein. Without access to her foundations the changes required of aging become oppressive. Controlling behaviors and fear drives her. The predictable repetitive manage experiences of shame, embarrassment and smallness. Life has been registered ‘as if’ to this observer of life. “She started out in the world with

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averted face...and all the while the world and life pass by her like a dream—an annoying source of illusions, disappointments, and irritations” (Jung, CW 9i, par. 185).

The emotional distance forms a vacuum, feeling unlovable brings alienation from the physical, escalating into various forms of self-attacks and ways to numb out. The falsity leaves her searching for the ideal rather than the real. Eventually the superficial brilliance is exhausted. This narcissism has to do not with self-love but self-hate. (Schwartz-Salant, 1982, p. 24) And, it has all become even harsher with age.

The Body

The somatic aspect of psyche is apparent with aging—body changes, weight gain or loss, illness. (Solomon, 2004, p. 649) A woman in her early seventies admits to not really knowing how to care and dreamt, “A woman is going to commit suicide in a trash bin because she needs to be right for once. The importance of being right equals her very life.” The dream figure, the trash and the trash bin all symbolize the shadow.

Until this dream she did not take seriously the extent of her denied self-interest and the disturbed and disconnected relationship to her body. The dream shows the complex that denies the body instincts and basic experiences of life.

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Missing a nourishing connection to the physical makes her lacking, feeling a shock she realized her aging body was indeed hers. With few positive role models of elder women, preoccupations with aging and weight perpetuated an unexamined self-absorption that was distancing and threatened her fragile composure.

Jung recognized the shadow as part of the individuation process and involved coming to terms with the body. (1975, p. 338) One cannot individuate, that is, cannot become the person he or she is truly meant to be, without relating to the unconscious. There is only death or stagnation in holding the opposite aspects of the personality separate rather than dealing with them. The transcendent function is the primary means reconciliation is accomplished. Conscious and unconscious opposites can be bridged by the emergence of symbols from the fantasy-producing activity of the psyche expressed in dreams, images, and metaphors. It is in the activation of the transcendent function that maturity lays. (Humbert, 1988, p. 125)

Holding the tension of opposites—like the puella/puer (youth) and crone/senex (older person)—becomes more necessary as the opposites seek a flow together. The poles of tradition, stasis, structure and authority of the crone/senex combine with qualities of immediacy, wandering, creation and idealism of the puella/puer. The older consolidates, grounds and disciplines while

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the younger flashes with insight and thrives on fantasy and inventiveness, the unusual or edgy. These diverging, conflicting tendencies are interdependent, forming two faces of one flexible configuration. In fact, later life can be a period of profound creativity and vibrancy, to revision, a chance to review and integrate, coming to terms with reality, loss, limits and the body.

“The east teaches us another, broader, more profound, and higher understanding—understanding through life.” (Jung, CW 13, par. 2)

To be Old

Puella/puer types are often perceived as successful, performers, achievers although their inner life remains hidden and split, even tumultuous and depressed. For example a woman was run by something she did not understand, describing it as dark, sad. She journaled about herself as follows: “Oh, look at this, pressing at her face, wondering if she can be opened...Picture this woman plucking at herself like cardboard.” The puella/puer in any complex gives it its drive not only from the oral hunger and omnipotence fantasies but that the world can never satisfy the demands of the spirit or match its beauty. (Hillman, 1989, p. 26)

As life unfolds, so does confrontation with the shadow, erupting through melancholy, mourning and loss. Mourning what cannot be might

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feel like the darkest time, ridden with disillusionment and signaling a necessity to reorder the psychological elements. This woman comes to therapy questioning the meaning of her life. Although an accomplished professional, she feels cut off at the knees and proceeds to recount an actual experience of falling and skinning her knees. Taken by surprise, she recounts feelings of being unprepared, needs to read more and take courses. But once completed, she does not use the information nor feel competent. Fearing loss, she keeps her special possessions hidden in case something happens and she will be robbed of what is precious. To avoid the void and suffering she has arrested the processes of life. (von Franz, 2000, p. 151)

Instead of turning in to the emotional soul-life, the puella/puer turns outward. The personal and cultural pressures worshipping the unrealistic and inhuman ideals contributing to the lack of mature societal models catch her. She chases rituals around cosmetics, body re-shaping, and other compulsive thoughts and behaviors. But, she does not really partake—be it food, love, emotion or anything to do with feeling. She tends not to feel at the center of her life, developmentally stuck between the mirror and the mask. Because the present is imperfect, the present sense of being has

relevance only as preparation for the next moment when life will begin.

To be perfect maligns the fear of being exposed, exploited, mistreated and not loved. Behind this lies the empty self, impotent, frustrated in a world that seems as hateful and vengeful as the parts she cannot acknowledge of her self. She feels flawed and the changes that happen with aging are saddening, frightening, even overwhelming. An unrealistic self-reflection leaves the person without a joyful or pleasurable physical relationship. The body was and is even more now a locus of anxiety. In denial and without desire, libido is devitalized and scattered. Eaten from within cuts off her spirit from its roots as she engages in an unending war of interior upheaval that distances from the self. Hidden, the self cannot come to light, be seen or accepted.

Ananke was the primordial goddess of necessity, compulsion and inevitability. She was an incorporeal, serpentine being whose outstretched arms encompassed the breadth of the cosmos, symbolizing the generative. The necessity permits no resistance. Likewise, there is little escape in later life from loss, loneliness, separations and illness. The limitations bring one face to face, a confrontation of the grandiose self with the transitory nature

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of life. With age, the inner dilemmas heighten in intensity. There is a longing for transformation and escape from constriction and engulfment, requiring the casting off of the outgrown selves. Aging requires the ego gives up the shallow narcissism, turn inward and engage in the psychic process of mourning. (Solomon, 1998, p. 29) Aging requires gaining a sense of peace and real connection to self and authenticity.

Isolated and Empty with Age

Henry, age 71, enters Jungian therapy after thirty years of previous therapeutic work he described to survive life, but to never connect, only remain safe. His presenting issue was the need for relationship. He has never been close to anyone or anything. Not even the desert when hiking. No one ever approached him, or he anyone. Others were like robots as was he. He reacted to life with an archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound that became the object of his attachment. (Kristeva, 1992, p. 268) Habit substituted for nature and instinct, no spirit nor soul in harmony with anything. The notion of the alienation, or splitting off of the self comes about as the result of the repression of feelings. Now retired, a dread encroaches.

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Henry's soul died early and he has to recover it. He has lived in solitary confinement of the self... There is fear of opening to another at the risk of psychological annihilation. (Solomon, 1998, p. 228) Depressed, he despairs and is unsettled. Nothing sacred and life early banished as in the following dream:

I am in a room that is empty. I open the door to another room I did not know was there. It is grey, filled with grey things and people. It is a pretty grey, but grey. The first room was my father's store and the second is mine and although grey there are some things in it. Henry goes on to talk about the empty, the fear of falling apart, on the verge of emotional collapse. He was surprised not by the grey but that it was pretty. Now he is sad and tears frequently as emotional response emerges.

Dreams bring clues about the psyche's recuperative powers. Henry dreamed he had a tray of small cakes and is handing them out to others at a party. One has a bite out of it and one damaged but he turns each around so no one sees. He thought the cakes were like his mother and associated them to the madeleine Marcel Proust so thoroughly described. However, all he got from his mother were rules, damaged goods to hide, not eat himself. The needs for warmth and love were early unmet, slammed shut. The lack sent

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him into a life of isolation and separateness he wants to repair.

How old is the habit of denial? We keep secrets from ourselves that all along we know.... For perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung.

Susan Griffin, *Chorus of Stones*, p. 48

“In the last analysis every life is a realization of a whole, that is, of a self... every carrier is charged with an individual destiny and destination, and the realization of these alone makes sense of life.” (Jung, *CW 12*, par. 330)

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