

Stories, and Stories....

by James Hollis

If we are asked for our “story,” chances are we will respond with the outer facts of our biography: where we were born, our family members, what we have done for a living, and perhaps our current social roles. Yet, none of us seriously thinks of this outer history as who we really are. So, who, then, are we, for that matter?

All of us are living stories, many stories, some of them compatible with each other, and some antagonistic. What story do we live in any given social setting? What story has most compelling power over our lives? Is such a story even conscious? In the idea of *individuation*, Jung observed that generically we are all living a common story, the story of nature seeking to embody itself more fully through the life and choices of the individual. Each of our stories, by definition, must be a variant of this general pattern. How life has clung to this spinning planet, prevailed over disease and hostile conditions, is truly marvelous—surely a testimony to the power of that story.

But, as a Jungian analyst, I also see how our common, transcendent story is interfered with, repeatedly, and how we are so often driven off course. Recalling the distinction between fate and destiny is useful. *Moirai*, or fate, is constituted from the givens we receive: a particular genetic heritage, a specific family of origin, a cultural *Zeitgeist* into which we are thrust. All of them play a powerful role in our lives, and none of them is within our external power to alter. *Destiny*, *proerismos*, is the plan, the possibility, that which we are invited to become. When the hand of fate is especially heavy, it can deter, even destroy this entelechy which seeks to unfold through us. We see this interruption frequently: whenever life is cut short, in the so-called personality disorders, where the wound dominates and dictates choices, or wherever ego strength and consciousness are lacking.

The one thing none of us can answer is: of what are we unconscious, yet what is unconscious makes choices for us, and creates patterns even as we presume ourselves conscious. One way to look at analysis, and the *raison d’être* of the Atlanta Jung Society, is as an invitation to examine our histories, our recalcitrant patterns, the corrective testimony

of dreams and symptoms, in order to discern what stories we are really living out. Or better, to reclaim what wants to live through us!

Let me provide some examples. One woman repeatedly overworked herself to exhaustion, for her family, her employer, her friends. In her mind, her conscious story, she simply felt it good to be responsible, good to be productive. Yet, her “story” was compulsive. She had no control over it, and always would rationalize her exhaustion. Even though she was highly accomplished and respected by others, since childhood she had been in service to the negative presence of her Mother. Though long dead, her parent was not unlike Walt Whitman’s “dark mother always gliding near with soft feet.” Her jealousy of her daughter’s emergent gifts were expressed through denigrating remarks. Having internalized this powerful judgmental voice, this woman felt that she was never good enough, never could believe in her inherent worth, and always had to do more and more for others, prove herself over and over. Through the years the psyche revolted, first in the form of physical exhaustion, then undiagnosed depression, then in illness which forced her to shut down. Only then, in asking the meaning of her illness, did she begin to question the story she had been inadvertently living. She was in service to that archaic voice of negativity all those years; someone else’s limitation constricted her individuation story and subordinated it to a lesser narrative.

Or, the child of addicted parents grew up perceiving that his well-being apparently depended on taking care of those impaired around him. He became a nurse, and then a social worker, and was remanded for therapy after his outbursts of anger upset the clinic in which he worked. He would not have thought he was living the story of an angry, abused person, although that is how others experienced him. His life was governed by the story of an unseen child who, denied permission to express his need for attention, grew more and more repressed. Later, this intense emotion, long buried, leaked out from his professional persona and spilled over onto patients and colleagues. If asked for his story, he would have supplied a version of his resume, but he would never have guessed that the putative story he was living was derived from that parental household long ago and far away.

Both of these persons faced the formidable task of over-

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throwing the enormous power of these surrogate stories. Repeated for so many years, these stories exercise virtual autonomy in the life of the person and can only create replicative patterns. We do not think when we rise in the morning that we will repeat such self-defeating patterns, yet we do, the more so as their formation was early, their powers archaic and compelling, and the labor required to oppose them demanding. One reason why these historic clusters are so hard to uproot, even after becoming conscious, is because often they were generated at a time when we were most dependent, most vulnerable, most permeable, least capable of alternative possibilities, that is, when we were children. Moreover, their repetition at such an early, disempowered time makes them all the more institutionalized within our psychic economies. Thus, we all have a tendency to suffer from “the fallacy of overgeneralization,” the original powerfully charged experience creating the norm, the template, the pattern producing replications of personal history.

Jung called complexes “splinter personalities.” When consciousness is usurped by one of these invasions, we live out a partial identity, with attendant somatic changes, energy flow, and, often regrettably, predictable outcomes. One could also say that these core complexes are also fragmentary mythologies, force fields in which we swim, and which carry us toward the same old, same old. Learning what our story really is means discerning over time the core complexes, the core ideas to which our psyche is in service, whether we know it or not. Many of these stories will be regressive, self-protective, and rooted in the powerlessness of childhood. But they will dominate, even create our story if we let them remain unconscious.

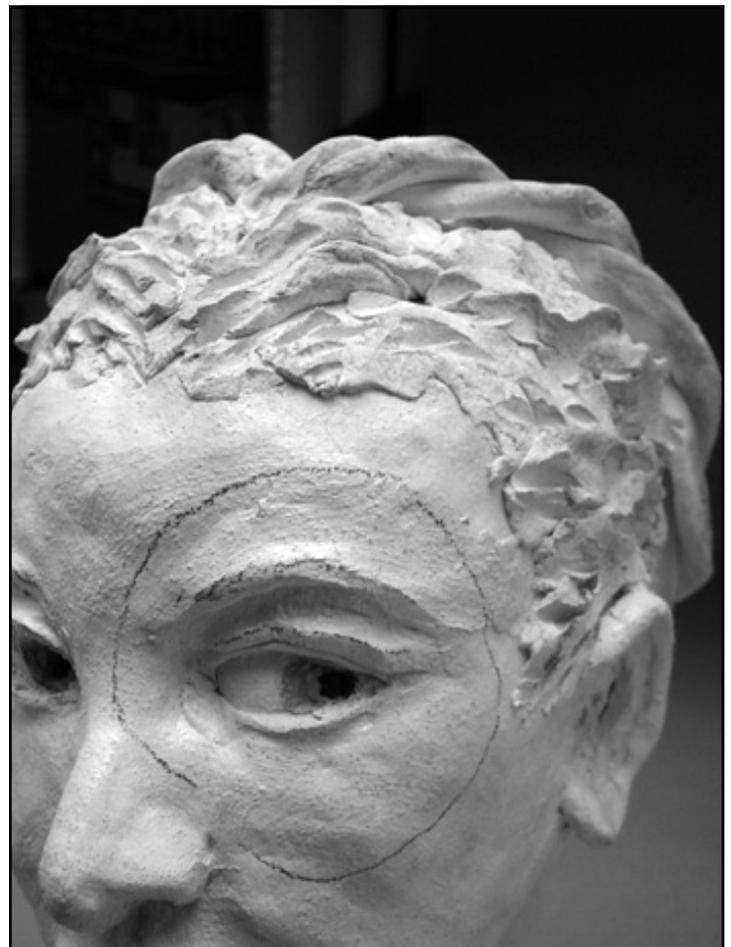
Martha Grant, the President of the San Antonio Jung society, wrote this humorous account of her encounter with the complexes, those splinter personalities she calls “The Committee.”

THE COMMITTEE

The rude one is only one of many
 who populate my inner committee,
 an unruly group of stubborn complexes
 who try to run my life.
 My vigilant effort to tame these insubordinates
 is ongoing, endless.
 I’ve wheedled and flattered
 and when that didn’t work
 actually reasoned with the most recalcitrant members
 but it only makes them more determined.
 Besides, they have my number.
 They’ve sat too often with my therapist,
 wringing their collective hand in commiseration,
 clucking sympathetically,
 when all along they were gathering ammunition.
 Now they are doling out assignments—
 I can hear the papers shuffling—
 and what’s more,
 calling in recruits from the streets.

This is from a lady who knows, who has been and continues to fight the good fight for conscious life, opposed always by the insurgent power of history.

Only a rigorous examination of our historic patterns, with the effort to see the core ideas they are expressing, faithful attendance upon our dreams, the constructive testimony of those around us, and continuing self-scrutiny, can bring these stories to the surface. If we do not like what we find, then we have the possibility of changing the story. Without this kind of rigorous, sustained self-examination, chances are we are living someone else’s story, not ours. The old Zen *koan*, “What was the face you had before the world was made,” suggests that each of us has an original story, the one we are supposed to be living. Clearly this issue has been with humankind from the beginning of human reflection. Jungian psychology, and the work of the Atlanta Jung Society, can help provide the support, the tools, and the challenge of separating, differentiating these narrative threads which govern our lives. We live many stories, but some of those stories are living us. Which story is ours, really? Which one calls us to that high task for which we were brought to this place ■



Dale Ferguson, detail of *Seeing Other Side*