

Father Hunger: Jung's Dreams of His Father

by Susan Olson

In his book *Under Saturn's Shadow: The Wounding and Healing of Men* (1994), Jungian analyst and author James Hollis defines eight "great secrets" that "bedevil the male soul." The seventh of these is "father hunger," a man's "deep longing for his father and for his tribal fathers." The eighth has to do with healing this hunger, which requires men to "activate within what they did not receive from without." These words, written to address "the collective experience of men," might well have been written about Jung's relationship with his father, a Swiss reform pastor. Jung's "father hunger" began in childhood and was not filled until he found within himself the spiritual wisdom that his father could not provide. The spiritual food came in the form of dreams that occurred after Paul Jung's death, in which he finally became his son's spiritual teacher, mentor, and guide.

C. G. Jung had the misfortune (or perhaps the good fortune) to be born to parents who were often at odds about religious matters. His father espoused a traditional form of Christianity that did not satisfy the spiritual curiosity of his intuitive, imaginative son. Jung's mother, with her dark "No. 2 personality," came from a family that regarded "paranormal" experiences such as séances and communication with the dead as a natural part of life. Jung was keenly aware of the conflict between his parents and tried as a young man to reconcile it within himself. He looked to his father to help him interpret his own profound spiritual experiences, especially his dreams, but Paul Jung could provide only trite, conventional responses. In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961), Jung describes his many frustrating attempts to engage his father in conversation about theological issues. At last he realized that his father "suffered from religious doubts" himself and could offer "nothing but the same old lifeless theological answers" to his questions. (*MDR*, p. 112) When Paul Jung died in 1896, his 21-year-old son was left without a strong father to guide him into psychological and spiritual maturity. The spiritual wisdom that Jung did not receive from his father would have to come from within.

The first hint of inspiration came six weeks after Paul Jung's death, when he came to his son in a dream and told him that he had recovered from his final illness and was on his way home. Two days later the dream came again, leaving Jung feeling ashamed for thinking that his father was dead. "What does it mean," he asked himself, "that my father

returns in dreams and that he seems so real?" (*MDR*, p. 117) Although his outer father had died, the image of a healthy father was already being activated from within and was coming "home" to live in his inner world.

In 1907 Jung met Sigmund Freud, who became his surrogate father for the next five years. Jung must have told Freud the dream of his father, for it appears in a paper, "Formulations Regarding Two Principles in Mental Functioning," given by Freud in 1911. As we might expect, Freud interpreted the dream as a wish-fulfillment with an Oedipal twist. Assuming that Jung had wanted his father to die and then blamed himself for harboring such thoughts, Freud viewed the dream as a compensation for Jung's repressed Oedipal guilt. But this is not how Jung understood his dream. To him it was "an unforgettable experience" that "forced [him] for the first time to think about life after death." (*MDR*, p. 117) Already his dream father was becoming an inner guide and inviting him to explore a spiritual question that fascinated him for the rest of his life.

Twenty-six years later, at the age of 47, Jung was married with five children, well established in his career, and past the break with Freud that had created a crisis in his life from 1912-1918. Then, late in 1922, Paul Jung made another dream appearance. In this dream Jung wants to show his father around his house, introduce his wife and children, and tell him about the book he has just written on psychological types. But before he can do so, his father says that he wants to consult him on the subject of marital psychology. At this point Jung awoke, feeling perplexed and asking himself why his father should be interested in that particular topic. It was not until his mother's sudden death four months later that he wondered if the dream might have been a warning or a premonition. Perhaps, he thought, his father knew that his wife was about to join him in the afterlife and was worried that their marriage, which had been "full of trials and difficulties and tests of patience," was about to resume. (*MDR*, p. 347) Jung was not able to answer his father's questions in the dream, but in 1925 he wrote "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship," in which he began to explore the psychological underpinnings of marriage. Once again a dream "activated from within what he did not receive from without" in the figure of a father who respected his son's profession, sought his advice, and inspired him to explore a new area of study.

By the early 1940's, Jung was in his mid-sixties and at the height of his career as an analyst, writer, and teacher. Now his father appeared again in two important dreams and invited him to venture into uncharted psychological waters. In the first dream, Jung is exploring a large wing of his house that he has never seen before. He finds a laboratory with shelves full of bottles containing "every imaginable sort of fish" and realizes that it is his father's workroom. (*MDR*, p. 240f.) Next door is his mother's room, in which she has set up beds for "ghostly

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married couples” to sleep. In his comments on the dream, Jung interpreted the fish as a Christ symbol and the beds as a “somewhat farcical” symbol of the *coniunctio*, the sacred marriage of the masculine and feminine principles. Although his parents were not seen in the dream, he felt their presence strongly and understood the dream to mean that “something had remained unfinished and was still with my parents; that is to say, it was still latent in the unconscious and hence reserved for the future.” Again Jung’s father (and in this case his mother) appeared “from within” as guiding figures who led him to his work on Christian symbolism in *Aion* (1951) and his study of alchemy and the sacred marriage in *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1955).

In the next dream, Jung’s father is living in a large house in the country and working as the custodian of the tombs of several famous people. To his son’s great surprise, he is now a distinguished Biblical scholar. In his study he opens a large Bible bound in shiny fishskin and begins a learned exegesis of an Old Testament passage. Then he leads Jung up a narrow staircase to a mandala-shaped room and points to another flight of stairs and a small door leading to the chamber of “the highest presence.” (*MDR*, p. 245f.) As his father kneels and touches his forehead to the ground in a gesture of reverence, Jung imitates him but confesses that he “could not bring my forehead quite down to the floor—there was perhaps a millimeter to spare.” At the end of the dream he realizes that the room at the top of the stairs is the chamber of Uriah, whom King David had betrayed to the enemy in order to marry his wife Bathsheba.

Jung interpreted this dream as another indication of “the things that awaited me, hidden in the unconscious.” The fishskin, the Biblical passage, and the Old Testament figures indicated the work yet to be done on the Christ symbol, the Book of

Job, and the *coniunctio*. Now that his dream father had become a scholar in his own right, he could finally address his son’s theological questions. But when they bowed before the highest presence, the father touched his forehead all the way to the ground while the son did not. This meant to Jung that he needed to preserve a measure of “mental reservation” for his work, but I wonder if the dream might also have been hinting that his father’s spiritual development had now surpassed his own. In any case, his dream father had finally become the spiritual guide that he was not able to be in his lifetime. Perhaps his own father hunger—his unsatisfied longing for a genuine relationship with God the Father—made it impossible for him to understand his son’s unorthodox religious experience. But what he did not provide in life he provided in death, by taking the form of a vivid dream figure and becoming Carl Jung’s psychopomp, or guide of souls. For all we know, satisfying his son’s father hunger may have also have done much to satisfy his own.

In my analytic practice and my own experience, I am aware every day of the ways in which the deep connection between parent and child shapes our consciousness and determines our outlook on life. Our parents become “inner objects” whose influence (for better and for worse) remains powerful long after we have left the nest, and our relationship with our children (with whom we try, and often fail, to be better parents) continues to evolve long after they have flown. Jung’s dreams of his father offer the hope that even after death it is possible for unsettled conflicts to be resolved and open wounds to heal. In the realm of dreams, which Jung honored all his life and taught us to honor, the images of the dead appear and offer us the gift of a lively and ongoing connection with them. If we accept this gift, our own deep hunger for what we did not and cannot receive from without can be filled by what is given to us from within †