

How Do You Feel About This?

by Van Waddy



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I've always been fascinated with Robert Johnson's musings on the wounded feeling function of Western man. Like Parsifal, we in the West so often lose the thread of what really matters, what deserves our valuing, what choices and passions we choose that would bring us into the presence of our deepest selves. We too often settle for the shallow promises of advertising, of wealth, of whatever brings quick comfort, forsaking that which would truly fuel and feed the deeper passions of our "higher angels."

Lately, I've been reading James Hillman's writings on the feeling function in the book he coauthored with Marie-Louise von Franz in 1971, *Jung's Typology*. Hillman defines the feeling function as "that instrument with which we sort out the genuine and the spurious," or, citing Jung, that process which imparts to the content of a feeling, thought or psychic phenomenon, a definite value in the sense of acceptance or rejection ("like" or "dislike"), a type of judging that leans on some subjective criterion rather than making an intellectual connection.

Hillman distinguishes here between feelings as *contents* (hopes, longings, angers) and feeling as *function* which "likes," relates, makes judgments, connects, denies, evaluates. One can have feelings, thoughts, sensations, without being able to do much with them. We may feel (appreciate and relate to) our thoughts, discover their value, or find no value in them at all. The feeling function is that psychological process in us that evaluates. Through the feeling function, we appreciate a situation, a person, an object, a thought, in terms of value. What happens to me, what I think, what I observe and sense about a person become evaluated in terms of my subjective value system. It's more complex than a "yes" or "no," acceptance or rejection.

The feeling answer to "Do you like him?" says Hillman, is "It depends." It depends on the situation, on what I mean by "like," on what aspects of him I am asking about, and so on. (Sounds a bit like President Clinton's play with "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is.") The feeling function sorts all this out; it is a process. Things must be evaluated and related to in order to be integrated into our conscious life.

A superior feeling function can adequately handle both

negative and positive feelings. A poorly developed feeling function would function in a distorted, inappropriate way. I may have positive feelings of love for you, yet be so inferior in my feeling function, I have no way to express that to you. A mark of a superior feeling function is the adequate handling of negative and inferior feelings. I may feel hurt and resentful about something that happened between us and be able to handle these feelings directly with you so adequately that they can be brought into our relationship and make for positive change.

The whole discussion gets more interesting when Hillman brings in the possibility of contamination of one's natural and authentic feeling function by one's mother complex and family of origin dynamics as well as the notion that one's superior function can override or flood one's feeling function to such an extent, we lose touch with this vital instrument of consciousness.

My personal superior function, as an INFP, is my introverted intuition. What I surmise from Hillman is that if I allow my initial intuitive grasp of a person, a situation, a relationship, or some wrong done to me (my initial observation, perception -- my way of noting events and people's behavior, facial expression, or body language and playing with their possibilities and meanings) to override, dominate, or cause me to move away from or to repress an adequate evaluation of it (to misread or misjudge how to handle it), I, like Parsifal, will probably end up with a wounded feeling function. I step away too soon from the process of first *feeling* what happened to me, evaluating how I *feel* about it, placing some subjective value on it. Eventually, according to Hillman, I could end up not knowing how I *feel* about it at all, as I have so eloquently sensed on an intuitive level some reason why this person did this to me, or wasn't available for me, or didn't have the capacity to do what I would have hoped, and, probably forgiven them without any evaluation of the appropriateness of it or its impact on me. I by-pass my feeling function and miss the opportunity to sort out my perceptions in a way that would be helpful to me.

I'm writing about this because it might interest those of us not so learned in Jungian thought to be more conscious of how our superior function can interfere with our feeling function. If *thinking* is our superior function, we may tend to analyze what we feel, too soon trying to figure it out: why, where it came from, what it "means," and instead of feeling, we call what we feel a projection, says Hillman, and try to "take it back," or

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worse, delve into some long discussion about it rather than have the courage to live into the feeling of it. I always have to remind my clients that when they start off with “I feel that . . .”, they are expressing a thought, not a feeling. “I feel” has to be followed by an adjective. (“I feel sad/happy/anxious.”)

If *feeling* is our superior function, we may have the tendency to enjoy our first experience and evaluation of a situation so grandly, we avoid any further differentiation of values, thereby missing the opportunity to grow a more open and developed value system. Hillman says feelers tend to adopt societal values and attitudes and not stray too far. The feeling type may have to suspend their superior function and its values in order to extend the function, or develop a further differentiation of values. Feelers can become inflexible in the way they assign value to people, ideas, situations, and, once they “pass judgment,” they may not feel the need to revisit or reconsider their evaluation. They’re loyal to the values they have established.

“The beginning of feeling education is turning a deaf ear to one’s superior functions,” says Hillman, “whose disapproval—even if tolerantly educative—of whatever is less acts mainly repressively. . . . Feeling requires an education through faith; it begins to function only when we can trust it to function and allow its errors.” The feelings must “first be caught and held in consciousness and recognized as feelings. We have to feel what we actually *do* feel as it happens, admitting and accepting, without the intervention of superior functions.”

This education begins, says Hillman, when I begin to trust my own spontaneous first feeling—“I don’t like his face,” “I feel mixed up,” “I feel angry”—regardless of whether or not this first feeling is generally admissible and acceptable in the collective system of values. When I repress the simplest feeling reactions, I prevent the feeling function from developing these contents into discriminated evaluations.

Now, I don’t think Hillman is promoting our going out and vocally announcing our immediate reaction or feeling evaluation about what everyone does or says to us—verbally spewing out our most unrepressed impressions of people and situations—but he *is* advocating for us to get in touch with our true feelings, our likes and dislikes, before we rationalize, empathize, categorize or romanticize them away.

So, it isn’t just the threat of modern advertising, the easy life, the sweet smell of success that contaminates the feeling function. It isn’t just the mother complex that has us in her hold and punishes our straying too far from her particular thoughts and values. No. It can be the very thing within that we consider our strength, our natural propensity to process a certain way—our superior function—that interferes and even contaminates our ability to keep growing and developing a more differentiated, developed value system and openness to life.

I have probably gotten all this mixed up and not represented Hillman’s thesis adequately. After all, this *is* James Hillman I’m trying to tackle here. At least, he’s gotten me thinking, and feeling. And, hopefully, growing.



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