

Significant Others

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Evening Hike – Don Huntley

During the past holidays, I received an invitation which, like many other such invitations, ended with the words "spouses and significant others welcome." And I found myself suddenly struck by the juxtaposition of the two words "significant others." We all know them as an expression that the language has created to describe relationships which have become common these days and which needed a "title," as it were, to label them.

But I kept reflecting on the deeper meaning of the expression that common language had coined for us, which kept staying with me. What follows are some of the thoughts that those words have prompted for me and some of the meager conclusions that I have reached. I hope that you will be generous in your responses to what is very much a search in progress.

We Jungians are very aware of the notion of "otherness." We search for the meaning of the appearance of strange figures in our dreams and we take into serious consideration their "otherness." They, usually, try to make us aware of some quality still buried in our unconscious and we give the name of

"shadow" to the figures carrying those hidden qualities. Shadow, as we use it, has unfortunately acquired the connotation of being negative. We blithely and very inaccurately say to ourselves and to each other, "Oh! That must be your shadow," forgetting that everything that is unconscious is shadow per se and that there is not one shadow but many. Or perhaps there is one shadow which has so many different aspects that it keeps trying to tug at our consciousness by sending us varied dream figures to force us to become aware of all its different facets. Some are bright and full of life while others are dark and sometimes so vile that we would love to ignore them. But our dreams are relentless and force images on us that we cannot overlook. And, if we succeeded in overlooking the messages that they bring us, life itself would most probably drag us screaming and kicking to the place where we would be again confronted by the same "other" which absolutely requires to be taken seriously.

Can we then pat ourselves on the back and feel pretty smug about our very special Jungian awareness of the "other" in us? I doubt it, though I will grant us a very considerable advantage over those who never turn their energy inward to struggle with

the mighty forces of the unknown. We do accept that consciousness can make for a pretty uncomfortable struggle at times! And struggle we do with our inner demons and our inner angels.

But, in so doing, we can also run the danger of becoming so wrapped up in our inner work that we forget to devote the same energy to our struggles with the "other" in the outer world. The others in our lives who want us to remember that they too should be as significant to us as the inner others of our dreams.

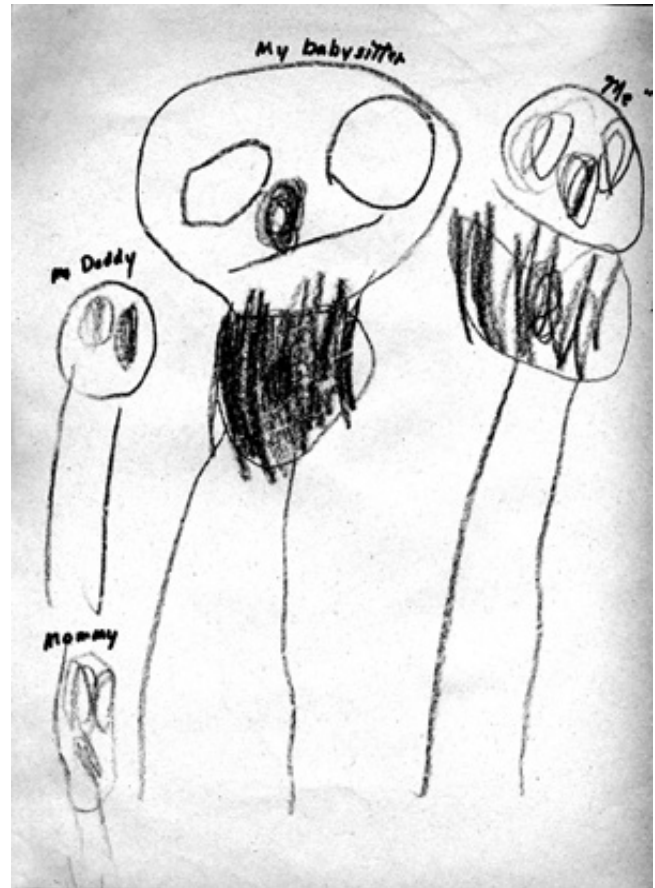
And that is what I found myself reflecting on: the significant others in our lives and what psychic energy we need to devote to them to make those others consciously significant.

As usual, when I start to reflect on an expression, I turn first of all to the dictionary to clarify for myself the linguistic meaning of the words that compose it. And so I found "significant" to mean "1) important, of consequence, 2) suggestive, indicative, 3) having a special, secret or disguised meaning." These are very similar to the nature of the inner other of our dreams. As to the definition of "other" the first three run as follows: "1) additional or further, 2) different or distinct, 3) different in nature or kind." Further definitions have to do with grammatical uses of the word. What I drew out of those two definitions is that the outer other is just as different in nature and kind as the inner one and demands of us the same effort and respect that we accord to the inner one.

Who is this outer other? It may be male where I am female, young where I am old, or old where I am young. It may be terribly poor where I am comfortably off, or very, very wealthy while I need to budget carefully. It may be successful while I am not or a terrible failure, which I would prefer to ignore. Or it may be so similar that I feel my identity to be threatened. How then am I going to grant this other its significance and keep my centeredness at the same time?

We all know how powerfully significant the outer other can be. Most of us have been swept, at one time or another, out of our reasonable stances by the sudden pull of the other on our unprepared psyche. It is an experience that no one would want to have never had. But it is also a truly unconscious experience. It is an experience that leaves us bewildered if we have been lucky enough to hang on to one shred of common sense, but can also have taken us down a very dangerous path. Such a powerful reaction to the significance of the outer other is not unlike the vision of the Grail castle to him who does not know the right questions to ask. The wondrous vision is seen one minute and gone the next because we do not have those questions available to us. Or perhaps there are no questions that could be asked when we are taken over by the tempest of emotions that can be stirred up by such an encounter with the outer other. So we are left, feeling bereft, to traipse through life looking for the lost castle, the all-powerful feelings. At that time, we need to remember that without that first vision, that unconscious pull, we might never have known what it was we were looking for.

Relating to the outer significant other, without being swept off into an unconscious "participation mystique," can take many years of patient work.



My Family – Emily, age 4

Most of the time, we seesaw between making the outer other either much too significant or trying to render it as insignificant as possible. Language here illustrates again our attitude towards the other. Expressions such as: "He's just silly; she is nothing much" exemplify the way that we try to reduce the importance of someone who is posing us with some questions we would rather not have to face. We isolate ourselves or we create small groups of congenial people so we will not have to deal with the message that others convey to us. We generalize and stereotype others to give us permission to ignore their true nature. We project on them our views and our values and condemn them if they differ from what we think is right and just. Marie-Louise Von Franz picked up on this when she said that the Christian message of: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," plays into this danger of projecting on them what are our values and our wishes and of minimizing their values and their wishes. She suggests that we add "if you were they." But we are not "they" and they are not "us." Perhaps we should start asking "them" what it is that they would like to have done unto them and how they would like us to do it. Perhaps we should start listening to the outer others to find out who they truly are, what they truly wish from us, and start giving them their significance.

Even and especially in our most intimate relationships, we need to keep to the thin sword-like edge of balance between making the other too significant or reducing its significance to a comfortable place where we can deal with it; ignoring it sometimes

and, worse, looking down on it at other times. Walking the thin edge between those two extremes is a mammoth task and one that goes hand in hand with the one of dealing with our internal others, but one that we cannot ignore if we are attempting to become truly conscious.

Perhaps a first stop would be to ask the other questions and to listen with an open mind and soul, withholding judgement and welcoming the messages that come to us. It sounds so simple, but it requires patience and an enormous respect for the other. It's worth trying, though. It might go a long way toward alleviating the ills of relationships and--I would go as far as to say--the ills of the world ■