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The Problem of War: Collective or Individual?

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Many of my earliest memories are associated with the events of WWII. I remember playing “war” with my little friend, Buddy, the blackout shades in our home, the anxiety in our family as my uncles all “went off to war,” newsreels at the local theater showing troops in Europe or Japan. Later in my childhood I recall the impact of the Korean conflict and as I entered adulthood the “Cold War” and then Vietnam emerged. War in some form has been for all of us a context of our development and the foundation of much of the anxiety of our times. Since the terrible events of 9/11/01 the declared war on terrorism has brought the reality of war closer than we modern Americans have ever experienced. This war is not just an “over there” event: heightened security at airports and at events like the Super Bowl remind us that we are vulnerable right here at home. It has been observed that life will never again be the same for us. This awareness might well give rise to concerns about our ability to survive in or at least cope with such a tenuous reality. An important response to such concerns is to seek to understand our situation and especially our individual relationship to it.

To achieve such an understanding it is first of all significant to note that war has always been a part of the human experience. Pictographic evidence from societies predating civilization includes apparent battle scenes. Folklore and myth from all civilizations and cultures contain tales of battles. Warfare is not an uncommon motif of art and literature. The great religions of the world have included the concept of “holy war” as a necessary cause. Recorded history provides further proof that war is ever present somewhere on this planet. Much of our understanding of war is of its sociopolitical, religious and/or economic significance. Based on these observations, as students of Jung’s psychology we might be led to consider war a problem of the collective—an “Us” vs. “Them” phenomenon. Certainly on one level this is a valid observation: Germany did invade Poland; the Union and the Confederacy did engage in civil war in our own country.

But what about the individual as the unit

of the collective? Might an understanding of the individual psyche help us understand war? In his essay, “The meaning of psychology for modern man” (CW 10:315) Jung makes the following observation that speaks importantly to these questions:

“Wars, dynasties, social upheavals, conquests and religions are but the superficial symptoms of a secret psychic attitude unknown even to the individual himself. The great events of world history are, at bottom, profoundly unimportant. In the last analysis, the essential thing is the life of the individual. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers.”

A review of Jung’s writings on the relationship of the individual and the community reveals the above statement as representative of a consistent message that all societal divisiveness is but an outward projection of the divisiveness within the individual human psyche. Events such as war ensue, Jung contends, when individual responsibility is sacrificed on the altar of mob psychology.

In order to more fully understand this position relating the individual responsibly to war, one must review some of the basic tenets of Jung’s psychology. Of particular significance is his work on the relationship of the instincts and the unconscious and the concept of projection of inner psychic experience.

INSTINCT AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

In a comprehensive essay on this relationship (Collected Works, Vol 8), Jung, as a man of science himself, states an acceptance of the occurrence of instinctive behavior in humans as in all members of the animal kingdom. In further discussion Jung links biology and psychology of instinctive behavior in humans by observing that such behavior is carried out without awareness and is thus a process of the realm of the uncon-

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scious. As such, human instinctive behavior is necessarily related to archetypally based responses (responses derived from repeated collective experience) also residing in the unconscious. For Jung, instinct and archetype, both of which all members of the human race share in common, form the contents of the collective unconscious aspect of the human psyche. Jung's proposition is that these two intrinsic forces driving human behavior necessarily act in tandem: the instincts are "typical modes of action" (behaviors) which are directed by the archetypes (primordial images derived from collective human experience).

Among the most basic instincts observed throughout the animal kingdom is that of self-preservation, or survival, manifest behaviorally in defensive maneuvers. In all animals, including humans, this instinct is activated in the presence of threat - i.e. something different or unfamiliar that has a perceived destructive potential. War serves as a primary example of the apparently instinctive reaction of humans to threats of destruction. In considering the problem of war in this context, the question of which archetype(s) drives this form of the human survival instinct must be addressed. The archetype of the "Other" as that which is different and poses threat emerges as a helpful consideration. Wars, as we know, are fought over variable differences, e.g. religion, race, social class, all of which present forms of the "Other."

In the individual psyche the Shadow, with its gradation from absolute evil to personal annoyance, is the form of the archetype of the "Other" by which we are related to war. The psychology of war, as Jung perceived it, was based on a collective externalization of a fear of this inner "Other" leading to a defensive response to an identified "enemy" in the outer world. In war a kind of psychic epidemic occurs as the individual "catches" these collective fears against which he/she feels defenseless. An example of this phenomenon may be seen in the numbers of so-called "good, intelligent Germans" who succumbed to the collective hysteria promulgated by the Nazis. The Jungian interpretation of this externalization of an inner experience is called "projection." In war, the powerful inner destructive potential is thus projected on the external "enemy."

THE CONCEPT OF PROJECTION

A central Jungian concept, projection—the redirecting of an inner experience onto an external object—is identified as a basic source of difficulty or conflict, on both individual and collective levels. The fear of the internal "Other" as Shadow and the instinctive need to ward it off at all costs is readily apparent in many areas of both personal and collective experience. On a personal level, experiences with a tyrannical boss, an irate partner, or a hostile salesperson may lead to interpersonal confrontations. Newscasts bombard us daily with stories of racial, sexual and political conflict in the collective resulting in crime, schism, and war. In each case there is an identified "Other"—boss, partner, salesperson, murderer, gay bishop, terrorist—upon whom one can "hang" the problem and thus be distanced from claiming its real source which resides within each individual psyche as unknown Shadow.

Does this imply that no external threats are real? Certainly not. The dynamics of projection are facilitated by "hooks" that exist in external experience that "catch" one's projected inner experience. In the case of war, for example, terrorist regimes may serve as such hooks. What Jung does propose, however, is that we enable these "hooks" to affect us by empowering them with

the denial of our own destructive potential. This becomes an even greater problem when we get caught in the kind of collective projection that leads to war.

BACK TO THE PROBLEM

This identification of external "hooks" that serve to catch the denied and projected "Other" aspects of our own individual psyches brings us round to attempting an answer to the question posed in the title of this article: Is the problem of war based in the collective or the individual? Jung has proposed a powerful answer to this question:

"Since everybody is blindly convinced that he is nothing more than his own extremely unassuming and insignificant conscious self, which performs its duties decently and earns a moderate living, nobody is aware that this whole rationalistically organized conglomeration we call a state or a nation is driven on by seemingly impersonal, invisible but terrifying power which nobody or nothing can check. This ghastly power is mostly explained as fear of the neighboring nation, which is supposed to be possessed by a malevolent fiend. Since nobody is capable of recognizing just where and how much he himself is possessed and unconscious, he simply projects his own condition upon his neighbor, and thus it becomes a sacred duty to have the biggest guns and the most poisonous gas. The worst of it is that he is quite right. All of one's neighbors are in the grip of some uncontrolled and uncontrollable fear."

— "Psychology and Religion" - CW, Vol.10

Although this answer may seem to leave us on the horns of a dilemma, in the same article Jung goes on to propose the following solution that can occur when one acknowledges and is brave enough to withdraw his/her shadow projections:

"Such a [person] knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in him[her]self, and if he/[she] only learns to deal with his/[her] own shadow he/[she] has done something real for the world. He/[She] has succeeded in shouldering at least an infinitesimal part of the gigantic, unsolved social problems of our day. These problems are mostly so difficult because they are poisoned by mutual projections."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Several years ago in the classic comic strip, "Pogo," Pogo and his friends experience perceived danger from an unknown enemy and set off to conquer it. Their foray leads them to the discovery that they themselves were actually the source of the "threats" they had perceived and so return with the now famous report, "We have met the enemy, and it is US !!" And so it is. May we all seek to acknowledge responsibly the powerful "Other" that resides within each one of us as individuals. Only then can we truly be setting our feet on the road to peace ■