



photo, Don Huntley

SCRAPING *the* STAIRCASE

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In the center of my house is a spacious stairway. There are sixteen steps and two landings. The direction of the steps shifts by ninety degrees at each landing. About twenty or so years ago we had replaced a runner on the steps. There were many of us living in the house then and the carpet was to soften the sounds of many footsteps running up and down the steps. I also thought that our toddlers would get less hurt falling down carpeted stairs rather than hard wooden ones. By now my dog and I live here alone. The carpet looked old and tired, dirty from many years of heavy use. I decided to rip it out with the hope to uncover the original wood.

In a telephone conversation with Jungian analyst Sonja Marjasch in Switzerland, I came to realize that uncovering the steps could be an analogy to the analytic work. I will explore the connections in this article. Often the symbolic life manifests

most concretely and obviously in everyday events.

Analysis may start out with an old, worn-out image or persona, or lifestyle that is outdated. Life no longer works as it used to. For example, a friend, a very successful pediatrician who taught at a University in Germany, was denied the final promotion that was meant to crown a lifetime of steadily climbing up the academic ladder. He was profoundly troubled by this and questioned his entire life's goals and purpose. A client of mine, who had been a mother with all her heart, felt completely disoriented and robbed of purpose for her life after her children had left the house. The labor of uncovering what may lie beneath the cover, the old attitude to life, the persona, is a terribly painful process. Peeling off layers of personal identification can feel like a brutal flaying. Eventually, though, it is liberation as well. They say in the construction business that remodeling old houses is always full of surprises and that it always takes more time and money than was estimated – how true this is also for all of us “old houses” when we undertake an analysis.

To return to the staircase in my house: after the first layer, the old rug, had been laboriously pulled off, I made a discouraging discovery: someone had once covered the steps with peeling oil paint, which most likely contained lead. There was no pretty wood. I took a deep breath and reflected.

After an initial high-spirited, labor intensive first phase, the work in analysis gets into deeper layers of the psyche. Then the client may hesitate, dismayed by the difficult and deflating realization that more issues had been hidden underneath the first layer of psychic material. The persona had covered up something that we would rather have kept out of sight. This “something” may be the first sightings of the personal shadow – that which we really do not wish to be or know about ourselves. The purpose of the persona is to separate the ego from the shadow. The carpet on my stairway served to keep me ignorant of the nasty paint job on the wooden steps. It is not unusual at this juncture that the client may even feel worse rather than better. I thought I should have never ripped the rug out. It is like peeling an onion: with each layer there is yet another layer and getting deeper into our psyche is accompanied by a steady flow of salty tears. But once the work has gotten underway, we cannot turn away any more. What was once well hidden now stares us in the face. Analysis is a complex process of un-layering that requires much time, money, dedication and hard work. Although analysis is an “opus contra naturam” in the sense of increasing our consciousness, it is also a natural developmental process, midwifed by an analyst.

As far as my staircase was concerned, I was stumped. I had thought rebirthing the wooden stairway would be similar to the snake shedding her skin: once the old skin is peeled off, there is a shiny new one. Nothing like that emerged from underneath my dirty old rug. I knew I wanted to get to that wonderful wood underneath – I had the image of dark wooden steps framed by light walls: the perfect staircase in a perfect house. Driven by this mirage of perfection, I hurried to Home Depot and talked to a savvy salesperson, who advised: “paint remover”. He sold me several sinister looking canisters with lots of finely printed instructions and warnings, paint brushes, heavy-duty gloves, goggles and a pile of rags. I read most of the instructions and was impatient to proceed. A slimy liquid slid out of the canister and I spread it over the first step. It bubbled up and I scraped the nasty chemicals and paint glob off, terrified that something would pop into my eyes, or burn my skin. From underneath the

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layer of ancient paint emerged an area of fine dark wood.

I was reminded that if we advance with artificial speed in therapy, the client might react with a glob of depression or poisonous anxiety. At times dreams warn us that the process has become too heated, is moving too fast. Although today psychologists promote short-term therapy I have found that specific goal orientation and speed are most often counterproductive for psychodynamic work, for an analysis, because they continue to reinforce the old ego orientation. Urgency, the desire to get on with it, is usually and eventually more often a hindrance than help in the process of soul-recovery as well as paint-removal. The analytic process is a natural developmental process and artificially applying pressure and/or initiating harsh interventive measures that do not carefully assess the situation at hand, can result in unnecessarily painful surprises. Jungian analysis is not primarily concerned with the modification of behavior.

Despite my misgivings, but because I like efficiency, I proceeded to the first landing. I applied the poisonous gook to the wood, but nothing bubbled up. I scraped it all off: almost none of the paint came off. I persisted and tried another application, but the paint remained recalcitrant. I sat there on the steps – disgusted, disappointed and completely at a loss as to what to do next. If the landings could not be cleaned like the steps, then what would be the good of it? Cleaned steps and smeared landings? In analysis we usually find that what is helpful in one situation is not helpful at all for another client. Individuation finds different expressions with each person – it is all about the individual's uniqueness. For example the staircase my client Bob dreams of is never the same staircase that my client Cynthia reports in her dream. Each image is very uniquely tailored for each person, an expression of her or his individual psyche – which is why personal associations and stories have to be brought to each image.

Stumped and discouraged, I decided to take a break. I abandoned the speedy but nasty poisonous paint remover approach. I looked at the situation and came up with the screwdriver tactic: I decided to scrape the paint off. If I tilted the screwdriver to just the right angle, it could act like a lever and, with each application, would split tiny bits of paint off the wood. That would work – more or less. In some spots the paint still stuck to the wood. After weeks taken up with the evening ritual of chipping away at the paint, I realized I would be at this job for months, maybe years ... maybe I would never finish? I reached the nadir of the work and left the screwdriver, cans of poisons, rags and brushes on the steps and headed for the Scotch. For months the staircase remained as I left it in the center of my house. I walked up and down those sixteen steps and two landings many times each day and every time I did so, I knew I had to get back to it. It bothered me – there was unfinished work, but I had no idea how to proceed. I felt stuck and depressed. I understood that the longer I stayed away from what I knew had to be done, the more depressed I would become; but I had no idea of how or where to go next.

There are times in the analytic journey, when the client and analyst can only simply and respectfully sit together, as the latter struggles to stay with a process that seems to lead nowhere. No progress is evident as the client scratches away at the complexes. All efforts appear futile - we're still in the grips of the same psychological forces, no matter how diligently we

chip away at them. Questions about the use and purpose of analysis and life are bound to arise: will there ever be an end to the painful work? When will there be a change of heart or attitude, the transformation we hope for? These are the “swamplands of the soul”; these are the pale, fallow times. We look for a clue from a higher source while we have to sit and let it sit. I used to ride horses. I had a lesson once a week. Often weeks went by without any progress in our work. Riding instructors are known to be impatient and volatile, but there was nothing to be done; until, from out of nowhere - or so it seemed! - the horse and I would suddenly be able to take that longed for next step. In the fullness of time, and by the grace of God, something new constellates. This “something” can take any shape whatsoever.

Several months passed gloomily – it was the gray season inside and out. I was feeling badly about the unfinished business in the center of my house. A friend came to stay with me. A couple of days after her arrival, she noticed the abandoned screwdriver on the steps. She put two and two together and roared with laughter. My friend Gaby is an artist and an authority on paint and wood. She understood that I had no inkling of what the proper tool for the task might be and quickly bought me two scrapers. We started to scrape. What would have taken me months was accomplished in a few days. Again I thought of analysis. At times the analyst can be the authority on the process, someone who has the knowledge, training and personal experience – the right tools - that can help the journey along. In Jungian analysis the right tools to get at what is underneath, in the unconscious, would be the interpretation of dreams, complexes and projections. Sometimes there comes an inspiration either through something that happens in outer life – and that new constellation brings about a change of view, an increase in consciousness, a transformation. Psychic energy flows again and change is in the air. That's when the work feels pleasurable and becomes creative and inspirational for client and analyst alike. It is important to know what aids to use in analysis as well as the timing for interventions. For example, it may be very important NOT to read any psychological literature for a while – yet, at other times, the right book at just the right time may be immensely helpful. There is a limit to what we can do. We need to trust that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

As we scraped the old paint off the wooden floor, I came to another realization. Carried away by the urge to do a really good job, to get every little bit of paint off the wood, I would apply the scraper too harshly and damage the wood. I needed to slow down and reassess. I looked at the entire opus, the whole stairway. Then my mind did one of those one hundred and eighty degree flips. I suddenly understood that I had foolishly followed a mirage, indeed. The steps in my house have been walked, jumped and skipped on for over eighty years. We had decided years ago to buy an old house rather than a new one because we liked that it had history and atmosphere. It felt alive. No matter how much I scraped, the stairway would always bear signs of the people that had lived in this house. I suddenly was grateful that this, my house and its scraped staircase, would never be perfect, but bear witness to all the lives that had been lived here. My children, my husband, our friends and guests, our pets – they all had left their marks. Their tears and laughter, quarrels and loving gestures, barking and meowing,

ugly moods and sheer joy filled this house, made it soulful – and the scraped staircase reminds me of this daily.

By extension, in the twentieth century we had hoped that psychology could provide a perfect cure for all our heartaches and mental illnesses. This turned out not to be true. Analysis has limits and it is important to know when to stop, when to simply let it be. The purpose of Jungian analysis is not perfection but wholeness; we hope to become fully human beings, shadow and all, as aware as possible ■