



Mei-Lan, photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta

Panda-mania

Susan Olson

Question: What is black and white and re(ad) all over?

Answer: Mei-Lan, the panda cub born last year at the Atlanta Zoo.

For “re(ad),” please read “seen.” Since her birth on September 6, 2006, Mei-Lan has been on camera every day of her short life. For the first three months she could be seen 24–7 on Pandacam, the live video feed on the Zoo Atlanta’s website (www.zooatlanta.org). Thousands (perhaps millions) of people have logged on to watch her grow from a 4-ounce pink worm to the 26-pound (as of this writing) fuzzy black and white dynamo she is today. When Pandacam cut back to 7 hours a day, 5 days a week in December, a howl of protest went up among the panda watchers of the world. Dear readers, I confess that I was one of them. In six short months I have become, and am most likely to remain, a certified panda-maniac. No, I have not seen the cub in person yet, but I watch her antics every day and I definitely go into withdrawal when Pandacam goes offline on Friday afternoons. I live for the daily cub updates and for the day (in the not-too-distant future, I hope) when I will round up my granddaughters and head for the zoo. They laugh and roll their eyes when I insist that we watch the cub together. (Their mania is computer games, which leave me cold.) Let them laugh! If I am addicted, then so be it. If I’m going to be obsessed, then let me be obsessed with an adorable, awkward, funny, feisty furball—right?

As I write, Mei-Lan is doing her best to climb the square log structure in her habitat. Aha, she made it! But her mother, Lun-Lun, paces about restlessly, then reaches up and pulls the

cub down from her perch. Clearly Mama is not comfortable with baby’s new trick. Not to be outdone, Mei climbs back up, hangs upside down for a few seconds, then settles down on the log for a nap. But here comes Mama, and down comes baby. Then up she scrambles again, as if to say, “I’m going up there, and you can’t stop me!” This contest of wills has gone on all day, and I have watched while I’ve worked on my taxes, talked on the phone, checked e-mail, and begun to write this article. Now Mei is dozing on the log, chubby legs dangling over the side. Mama is still pacing, but leaves her alone. Baby wins this round, and another developmental step is taken. Don’t ask me why, but I love it.

A few weeks ago I was having dinner with my friends Jacquie and Virginia, telling them that it was my turn to produce an article for this newsletter and bemoaning the fact that I had no idea what to write about. “That’s easy,” said Virginia with a conspiratorial grin. “Write about the panda!” (My friends, you see, are in on my darkest secrets.) Much eye-rolling and laughter followed. But yes, Virginia, you had a great idea, and so with thanks to you and Jacquie for your support (and even for your eye-rolling), I will take you up on it. I don’t want to analyze my obsession to death, for fear of spoiling the fun. But the analyst in me can’t help but wonder what this fixation (and I do not use that word lightly) is telling me and my fellow panda-maniacs about ourselves. Why are we so touched by Lun-Lun’s devotion, Mei-Lan’s determination, and the tender, playful relationship between mother and cub? What do these bamboo-chomping, black-masked bears have to teach us about the so-called “dumb” creatures of the world? And what, if anything, does Jungian psychology have to do with the endangered species that the Chinese call the “great bear-cat?”

I start with Jung’s affinity for animals. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he writes that as a school boy,

“I loved all warm-blooded animals, who have souls like ourselves and with whom... we have an instinctive understanding. We experience joy and sorrow, love and hate, hunger and thirst, fear and trust in common—all the essential features of existence with the exception of speech, sharpened consciousness, and science.... Animals were dear and faithful, unchanging and trustworthy. People I now distrusted more than ever.” (p. 85f.)

Animals have souls? They can be trusted more than people? These are pretty strong sentiments, even for a precocious schoolboy. But Jung’s sympathy for animals persisted into his university years, when his distaste for vivisection led him to avoid animal demonstration classes whenever possible. He writes,

“I could never free myself from the feeling that warm-blooded creatures were akin to us... My compassion for animals did not derive from... philosophy, but rested on the deeper foundation of a primitive attitude of mind—an unconscious identity with animals.” (*MDR*, p. 121f.)

As an analyst, Jung paid special attention to dream animals and regarded them as symbols of neglected or repressed instincts. When an animal appeared in a dream, he would ask: Is it wild or tame? Wounded or healthy? Friend or foe? Is it dying, or is there hope that it will recover? Does it talk to the dreamer? Tell him what it needs to be healed? Is it leading him into a dark forest? Guiding him through a high mountain pass? The answers to such questions provided Jung with valuable infor-

Susan Olson is our June lecturer. See page 3 for her biography.

mation about the state of the dreamer's instincts and the work needed to restore him to health and wholeness.

Our relationships with the animals in our outer lives also reveal the state of our instincts. I remember a day several years ago when I tried to give one of my cats a bath. Bad idea! As soon as she realized what I was up to, she became a writhing, hissing, biting, clawing tiger. As she fought for her life, she scratched me within an inch of mine. I was amazed by her swift transformation from a docile kitty cat into a ferocious beast. But what amazed me even more was my own reaction: if I could have grown fangs and claws, I would have given her a taste of her own medicine. This was an enlightening (and humbling) experience, to put it mildly. Needless to say, I have never attempted to bathe a cat again.

Dear readers, your instincts can probably tell you where I am going with this. I have not forgotten the fascinating subject of pandas and their tenacious grip on my psyche. If a client described such an obsession, I hope I would treat it like a recurring dream or a troubling symptom: as a baffling but illuminating clue about something important emerging from the unconscious. Something panda-like wants this person's attention, I would think. What instincts are surfacing here? Let's stay with the image, bat it around for a while (just as the pandas bat around their big yellow ball), and see what happens.

Watching two-month old Mei-Lan open her eyes, look around, and begin to explore her habitat, I remembered studying human development as part of my analytical training. For example, child analyst Margaret Mahler noted that at about four months of age, babies begin to sit up and take notice of the world around them. Using metaphorical language, she called this stage "hatching" from the "egg" of the early mother-child symbiosis. A few months later, infants start to crawl around and explore their surroundings, returning to their mothers (and these days, fathers) for "emotional refueling." At the age of one year, the growing child learns to walk and embarks upon her "love affair with the world." Now she really takes off and investigates everything she can get her hands on. Although still dependent on her parents, she is developing a mind and will of her own.



Mei-Lan and Mother, photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta

These universal instinctual patterns are repeated, with slight variations, in every child's development. But they also seem fully operational in the growth and maturation of pandas. As Mei-Lan has changed from a miniscule bud of a creature to the stubborn little cuss she is today, she has gone through exactly the same process. Right now she is definitely engaged in her love affair with the world. Her climbing instinct has kicked in, and with every fiber of her being she is compelled to go up, up, up. Of course, she will depend on Lun-Lun for sustenance for many months to come. But when she is not nursing or taking a nap, up she goes again. Mama may try to pull her down, but it is clear that nothing can stop her now.

Another analyst, D.W. Winnicott, noted that the infant's instinct to touch and manipulate objects is the foundation of creative activity and symbolic play. The first "object" is the mother's body, but the baby's attention soon turns to blankets, rattles, teddy bears, blocks, and other toys. In other words, we humans are programmed to create and play. As every parent of a young child knows, anything that comes to hand—a bunch of keys, a box of Kleenex, a shiny earring—is up for grabs. According to Winnicott, the play instinct is the corner-stone of culture. Without it we would be like dumb animals—but wait a minute! Lun-Lun and Mei-Lan are playing fools. So is Yang-Yang, Lun-Lun's mate and the cub's father. As soon as Mei-Lan began to creep around her den, she began to play with everything she could get her paws on. Now that she is fully mobile, she spends most of her waking hours (when she is not nursing or climbing) sniffing, chewing, and poking at tubs, balls, logs, water coolers, and sprigs of bamboo. Everything is fair game and nothing escapes her eagle eye or her prying paws. (As I write this, she is perched on another log—a higher one this time—sticking her nose into an inviting crevice and licking the tasty bark.) But the most fascinating toy of all is her mother's ponderous but surprisingly agile body. Come to think of it, the fascination appears to be mutual. Lun-Lun licks, cradles, tosses, and drags the cub around like a rag doll, but never harms her. Mei-Lan paws, nips, chews, and (of course) climbs all over her mother with great abandon. To see the two play together, you'd think they'd invented the idea. They chase, clutch, kick, and roll

around like two fuzzy black and white beach balls, complete with arms and legs. Panda experts call this "play-fighting" and say that it helps the cub develop strength, coordination, and the ability to defend herself. Whatever its purpose, the dynamic duo goes at it with great gusto. If Winnicott were called in for a consult, I think he'd agree that these two have a very healthy play instinct indeed.

Of course, these bears do not have "culture" in the way we understand it. They do not use language, paint, or play musical instruments. (Some wild animals have been trained to do such things, but that subject must wait for another day.) They do not construct buildings or roads, make war, or (as far as we know) worship any sort of deity. They seem to be blissfully oblivious to the cameras that track their every move, and they are certainly unaware that thousands are watching them on Pandacam. But they do have a language of their own, which consists of chirps, honks, and bleats that make perfect sense to them. They manipulate objects and create new uses for them (a tub be-

comes a bed, for example). They are unselfconsciously “at home in their bodies” (how they would laugh at the phrase, as if they could be anything else!) and they follow their instincts implicitly. Above all, they are most certainly not “dumb.”

According to Jungian theory, instinct and archetype are two manifestations of the same energy. I think of them as two branches of the same tree or two offshoots of a common root. The life force which Jung called *libido* flows through both of them and is the source of their power. Instinct reveals itself in the body, in physical activity, and in material form. Archetype, the psychic counterpart of instinct, appears in universal patterns of behavior, imaginal activity, and symbolic form. In that case, what archetypal pattern is revealing itself in the panda mother and cub? Don’t laugh at me, but the image that comes to mind immediately is an animal version of the Great Mother and Child. (I think of the same thing when I watch chimps, gorillas, and other monkeys cradling their babies.) Take a look at pictures of Mei-Lan in her mother’s arms, and I think you’ll see what I mean. It would be ridiculous to push the analogy too far, but if there were an animal images of the archetype, these two would embody it.

According to myth and legend, the conception and birth of the primordial or divine child often takes place with great difficulty. For example, Greek mythology tells us that Leto labored for nine days and nights before giving birth to Apollo. Pandas are certainly not gods, but they do have a hard time coming into the world. In the first place, the female is fertile for only a day or two each spring. In order for conception to occur, she must get together with her mate at exactly the right moment. But when it comes to procreation, animals raised in captivity often have trouble doing what comes naturally. The instinct may be willing, but the performance is weak. Last year it became clear that Lun-Lun and Yang-Yang, if left to their own devices, would fail to produce a cub. Finally Mei-Lan, like many pandas born in captivity, was conceived by artificial insemination. Next year her parents will have another opportunity to reproduce the old-fashioned way.

Archetypal tales tell us that the primordial child is often threatened by collective forces beyond his or her control. The environment may be precarious or downright inimical. Enemies or jealous rivals may seek to destroy the child. For instance, Kronos swallowed his first five offspring for fear that one of them would supplant him. Zeus escaped only because his mother, Rhea, intervened and hid him away until he grew to manhood. Pandas offer no threat to humans or other animals, and are not pursued by fearful adversaries. Nevertheless their existence is menaced by troublesome factors, most having to do with encroachment by human beings. Logging and farming are destroying their native mountain habitat. Trees, their natural shelter, are disappearing and bamboo is dying off. Hunting and poaching are also taking a toll. It is estimated that in their native China, only about 1600 pandas remain in the wild. Zoos and research centers such as the Chengdu Research Base (from which Lun-Lun and Yang-Yang are currently on loan) now offer

the best hope for the survival of the species.

On a more positive note, the primordial child is often nurtured by a Great Mother figure like Lun-Lun, who appears to be a natural. Safety and nurture are also found in unexpected places. Dionysus was sheltered in the thigh of Zeus; Romulus and Remus were suckled by a wolf; Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses in the bulrushes. Again, I don’t want to stretch the comparison beyond belief. But if human beings are the pandas’ worst enemies, we are also their best friends. Were it not for the people who breed them, feed them, clean up after them, offer them toys, and take obvious pride in their well-being, Mei-Lan and her parents would not be here at all. The same is true for elephants, tigers, rhinos, gorillas, and thousands of other endangered species. Without our care and attention, they will soon cease to exist.

As I finish this article, Mei-Lan is napping on the log again. Soon she will wake up and start to play, and my fellow panda-maniacs and I will be enjoying her next adventure. Watching her, it is easy to forget that the human race is also an endangered species. Like the pandas, we maintain a precarious hold on life in these uncertain times. But if these genial creatures remind us of our vulnerability, they also embody the playfulness, strength, and resilience that we need in order to survive. To borrow a phrase from Jane Goodall, who has spent her life studying wild chimps, these sturdy, winsome animals also give us “reason for hope.” ■

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Mei-Lan, photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta