

Looking for Meaning in all the Wrong Places

A Shadow of the Individuation Process

by Pete Williams

I've been thinking a lot about the notion of *meaning* lately. In one form or another, most everyone who finds their way to my consulting room is seeking to discover some sense of meaning *in* their lives, or some way to make meaning *with* their lives. Of course, the quest for meaning is itself nothing new. From early, archaic cultures to the present day, there have always been various manifestations of a sustained and relentless compulsion to give purpose and meaning to the human experience. But it seems as though there is something very different today. Perhaps it is that, for many of us, just at a time when our world feels so complex, so demanding and so dangerous, we are finding meaningfulness in our lives to be frustratingly elusive. Though we long for meaning and search for purpose, we often seem to come up empty handed—it's as though we no longer know where to look.

Carl Jung says that, "the soul longs to discover its meaning" (CW 11, para. 497) and this, we can assume, is an unchanging psychic reality. We've always asked; why are we here, what is *the* purpose, what is *my* purpose, whom does our existence serve, what is the meaning of life, all life, my life? What I think is unique to our time and our culture however, is a confusing and anxious uncertainty about where to find the answers to these ubiquitous questions. We falter in the face of a growing array of complicated—often competing and contradictory—possibilities. Will we find some sense of purpose in achievement, status, notoriety, wealth, or power? Is there meaning in happiness? Will meaning manifest through the right relationship, the right profession, or perhaps in physical appearance, youthfulness, or fitness? Can meaning be revealed to us through science, or technological discovery and con-

quest? The soul's deep longing compels us to search yet, it seems to me, we often find that we're looking in all the wrong places.

The word *meaning* is defined as "purpose, intent, significance". Etymologically, it is derived from the Old High German words *meina*, "thought, intent, signification", and *minni*, "remembrance, memory, mind" (Oxford Etymological Dictionary). James Hollis (2001) understands meaning as "an experiential byproduct of a life lived in the way it is supposed to be lived—as defined by forces transcendent to consciousness." Mythologist Joseph Campbell saw the meaning of life as being the *experience* of life. And, for Jung, meaning is an *archetypal* component of our psychological existence; "In the same way the body needs food, and not just any kind of food but only that which suits it, the psyche needs to know the meaning of its existence—not just any meaning, but the meaning of those images and ideas which reflect its nature and which originate in the unconscious" (CW 13, para. 476).

Jung devoted a great deal of energy and attention to the concept of meaning in his writings. He viewed it as central and vital to the fullness of the human experience. He recognized the timeless universality of humankind's longing to find a sense of meaning and meaningfulness. There exists, Jung stated, "an archetype of meaning" that represents one of the primary loci of the psyche and, its relentless longing to manifest is itself an archetypal quest. We need to consider however, that as human consciousness has trudged along its evolutionary trajectory, subtle, profoundly significant changes in the character of this archetypal quest have taken place. With Jung's help, I believe it is possible to bring some new insight to our present-day experience by placing the search for purpose and meaning in a psycho-historical context. By overlaying the archetype of meaning with the template of human history, we can identify three primal turning points in the evolution of human consciousness that have brought about a transformation in this archetype from a problem of *mythology*, to one of *theology*, and now to *psychology*.

The first period to consider stretches from the beginning of human history to approximately the time of Homer, around 800BCE. During this time, the human experience was one of undifferentiated identification with the collective. Erich Neumann describes this period as a time of "humankind's fusion with the world, with its landscapes, its fauna, and its animals . . . and it also mirrored a similar phenomenon of fusion between the individual and the collective such that the individual did not exist as an independent entity." Jung describes this as the *participation mystique*, a time when consciousness had not yet begun to separate out of the unconscious. Even as late as the time of Homer, human existence was an archetypal experience of the heavens, nature, gods, goddesses, Kings, Queens, Princes, and heroes.

During this period, consciousness was such that the individual's entire psychic existence was projected onto the external world and meaning was realized exclusively through complete identification with that outer, collective realm. Cultural historian David Ulansey describes this condition as

when conscious individualism was unknown and when the individual was only a link in the chain of generations. Such an

Pete Williams, Ph.D., will be our speaker in July. See program description on page 2 for complete biography.

age had no need of a belief in the immortality of the individual, but it believed in the eternity of life in the sense that life flows through the generations which spring from each other.

The archetype of meaning manifested in a *mythological* context during this early phase in the evolution of human consciousness and we might imagine that the quest for meaning would be articulated by something like, “what is the meaning of all life?”

A major evolutionary shift in human consciousness took place in the Western psyche around 650 to 750 BCE. In his wonderful book, *Passions of the Western Mind*, author Richard Tarnas traces the process of the individual’s movement from a state of total fusion with the collective toward a sense of individual identity. He marks the work of Plato as a major signpost in a movement that would culminate around 330 BCE with the conquests of Alexander the Great and the subsequent dawning of the Hellenistic Age; “With Alexander (the Great) begins man as an individual.” With this awakening of the individual psyche and the consequent development of individual consciousness, however, came the shattering awareness of individual mortality. And with this new awareness of the inevitability of death came the great existential question that would redefine the quest for meaning.

Now conscious of both individuality and mortality, humankind was no longer able to find sustaining meaning exclusively through identification with the collective realm. As a result, the archetype of meaning had to shed its mythological cloak and begin its transformation into a *theological* idea. The individual’s awareness of death had brought about a critical crisis of meaning and, in response, numerous new religions and systems of spiritual practice emerged in a short period of time. The central question for humankind had undergone fundamental change—it had become, “what is the meaning of my life?” The new question, and the nature of the quest it required, found resolution through the formation of transpersonal, spiritual systems that offered the individual a sense of meaning through identification with something infinite, something greater, something other than mere mortal. As we know, it was Christianity that emerged from this period as the dominant such transpersonal system for the Western psyche. It offered meaning through its promise of an eternal life after death, resolution to the existential problem—the immortality of the soul. For nearly 2100 years, it has worked pretty well.

Beginning around the time of Jung’s appearance on the scene 100 years ago, another subtle and yet profound shift began to take place in the nature and character of the archetype of meaning. Erosions and fractures in the container of traditional religion began to appear and as a result, identification with a transcendent “other” has begun to feel less effective in alone providing the individual with a sustaining sense of meaning. Whereas the *existential problem* and the implications it had for the question of meaning brought about a *theological* response, the *individuation problem* that now faces humankind necessitates a *psychological* response. Jung confronts this present-day situation in *Modern Man In Search of A Soul*:

The modern man is a newly formed human being. The modern man must be of the immediate present and must be conscious to a superlative degree. Since to be wholly of the present means to be fully conscious of one’s own existence as a human, it requires the most intensive and extensive consciousness, with a minimum of unconsciousness. The man whom we can with justice call “modern” is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step toward a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original “participation mystique” with the mass of humankind—from submersion in a common unconsciousness. The modern man has a present-day consciousness. The values and strivings of those past worlds no longer interest him save from an historical standpoint. Thus he has become “unhistorical” in the deepest sense and has estranged himself from the masses who live within the bounds of tradition. He has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind all that has been discarded and outgrown. A higher level of consciousness is like a burden of guilt.

The move toward greater consciousness, toward a state of differentiation and individuation, requires the withdrawal of projections onto the “outer” and demands the turn inward. It requires, as Jung says, that we stand in a solitary place, no longer identified with the past or the future, but fully in the present reality of our own psyche.

So there is something different, urgent and perhaps dangerous in the search for meaning today. A move to a new level of consciousness brings a new question and a different type of quest. If we simply search for the meaning of life, we are left trapped in the *historical* question, the question that keeps us “bound to the masses” in a psychologically undifferentiated, unconscious way. The movement toward individuation calls upon the individual to search beyond the theological question of the masses and challenges us to ask the *psychological* question, “what and where is the meaning in my being?” In making the solitary move toward greater consciousness, we also move toward discovering the sense of meaning and meaningfulness that Jung felt was the ultimate goal—an intentional and conscious dialogue with the Self.

As we engage the quest for meaning as Jung describes it, it is important to be mindful that a solitary journey is not meant as a call to solitude. Rather, Jung’s intention is to call us to withdraw our unconscious projections, to dis-identify with all that is not of our own psychic structure. It is a call to be the unique individual that we are and to then bring that uniqueness out into the world, into our relationships and into our daily lives. It is in this way that we as “modern” individuals can realize the meaning, the purpose and the sense of meaningfulness in and of our own unique being. This is the *journey into wholeness* ■