



An Introduction to William Willeford

Based on an Interview
by Mary Davis

My interest in Bill Willeford's story began several years ago at a Jung Society dinner when I overheard a conversation between Dr. Willeford and James Hollis, Ph.D. Willeford asked if Hollis also feels that Zürich is "home," which Willeford himself feels no matter where he lives or travels. Willeford, Hollis, and Susan Olson continued discussing the importance to them of their time in Zürich. At that point, I decided I'd like to know more about this thoughtful man who, unless he is the lecturer, always sits quietly in the back of the room at Jung Society meetings.

We met for our interview at Emory University in the library of the Institute for Vico Studies, surrounded by the warmth of walls of bookshelves filled with old, rare books. Seated at a library table, I asked questions about his life story including his time and experiences in Zürich, and this interview is just a beginning of his story.

Willeford has Southern "roots." His parents and grandparents were from northern Tennessee, which his parents left when they were young, "running away" to Detroit. When he was a boy, they moved to Tulare, California (in California's Central Valley).

As a young man, with a B.A. in Anthropology ("an exciting subject, but in the fifties, what they were doing with it was not so great") and an M.A. in English, he left for Pakistan under the auspices of the San Francisco-based Asia Foundation, which was interested in preserving the English language on the Indian sub-continent. When he arrived to teach at the University of Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan, he discovered that he was the only Westerner at the University. His chairman was a "superb London educated Pakistani man," who started a Masters program and made it co-educational (two thousand men and four women students). The college was second from the

bottom in the rankings of thirteen or so colleges and the conditions were primitive with no running water and broken windows left from the Partition of India. Willeford taught English there for two and a quarter years and created an English Studies Circle. Despite the extremely difficult physical conditions, their M.A. students placed first on the University's competitive exams!

He then found himself in the process of "getting over and out of" a brief early marriage, and he felt at a loss as to where to go next. He considered finding an analyst or returning to Berkeley, and then, he says, "I had the odd idea of writing to Joseph Campbell for advice." Still in Pakistan, he received a letter from Joseph Campbell, not "easy or diplomatic," saying, "Why don't you write to Jolande Jacobi in Zürich?"

So, off he went to Zürich and three months in analysis with Jolande Jacobi plus some courses at the Jung Institute. He thought he was "cured," knew what he needed to know, and was ready to go on. Back in Berkeley, he started working towards his Ph.D. in English, half-heartedly, in a poor economy while he was also "scrabbling" for wages. He kept up his correspondence with Dr. Jacobi. They discussed his returning to Zürich, but he told her it would take him a long time to be able to do so. Jacobi thought she could help, and she found a scholarship for him. He returned to Zürich and his studies at the Jung institute, where Marie Louise von Franz was his training supervisor.

At that time, when one was half way through the Jungian Studies program, one began to see patients. These patients were usually persons who could not afford the fees of an analyst. During this period Willeford also chose his dissertation topic about Fools (see the beginning of his book, *The Fool and his Scepter*, in which he describes a man on a Zürich tram, playing a harmonica, dancing up and down, jeering and crowing like a cock at dawn). After completing his studies, he received his diploma in 1962.

Once again, Willeford faced the question, "Where do I go from here?" He had an M.A. in English and his diploma from the Jung Institute. He decided to complete his Ph.D. in English with a minor in the History of Religion, and he began studies this time at

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the University of Zürich. He married a Swiss woman, Ali Wildi (now deceased), and they had two children. At this point, Dr. Willeford had spent approximately nine years in Zürich.

Then, as he discussed with Dr. Hollis, he reached a point, as many Jung institute students reach, he says, when he realized that he had become very deeply attached to Zürich. He cited his friend Vernon Brooks as an example. Brooks went to Zürich, and finding that he needed to learn Latin to complete a university degree, he stayed for years. Even though he returned to the United States, he requested that after his death his ashes should be taken to Switzerland, and his wishes were honored.

Continuing to discuss “Zürich as home,” Willeford said that the German Swiss are “reserved in reaching out to foreigners” and that Zürich is a very commercial city. But, he continued, “The people of Zürich have a high tolerance for introverts. When one goes to a coffee shop, nobody questions one’s being quiet.” Plus, he says the Jungian community there is a “community of extraordinary people, including at that time, Jolande Jacobi, Marie Louise von Franz, and Barbara Hannah.” Willeford himself taught several courses at the Jung Institute at various times. He noted that Dr. Jung said that the Institute would be vital for about twenty years. Currently, we have seen the reality of some of Jung’s predicted changes.

When Willeford completed his Ph.D. studies, he was at another decision point. With a Swiss wife and family, should he stay in Switzerland or return to the United States? He had always wanted to become a Professor of Literature and a Jungian analyst. He returned to the United States for five or six interviews, and many of the universities wanted him but had no funding. However, the University of Washington in Seattle both wanted him and had the resources to hire him. So, he moved to Seattle and taught at the University of Washington twenty years from 1967 to 1987. He taught mostly Shakespeare and “whatever needed to be taught.” This included comparative literature, fairy tales, mythology, literature and psychology, and then also religion and psychology in a religious studies program.

He moved from Seattle to New Hampshire, a move precipitated by the fact that his current wife, Ann, was completing her Ph.D. in French at the University of Washington and was offered a teaching job at the University of New Hampshire. They and their family remained in New Hampshire for six or seven years. When they were ready to find a different situation, they considered Atlanta. Their good friends Rena Williams (who had been his student in a graduate Shakespeare seminar at the UW) and her husband, Steve Harrison, had moved to Boston and then to Atlanta, which they found hospitable. So the Willefords decided to try Atlanta! The Willefords still have ties to the Pacific Northwest: a son in Seattle and a daughter in Portland, plus grandchildren.

At this point in our discussion we returned to the topic of Jung and Zürich. Willeford did not know Dr. Jung himself or even meet him. He did attend Jung’s 85th birthday party and Jung’s funeral. It was a custom that everyone who was receiving a diploma at the Jung Institute was supposed to have an interview with Dr. Jung himself. But one had to



William Willeford and his students at the University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

request the interview, and Dr. Willeford had not asked for it. Finally, “to get Jolande Jacobi off my back,” he requested the interview in a note to Aniela Jaffe, who said that Jung was then too ill. Dr. Willeford questioned the point of all these interviews. Would all these people be “crippled by transference or by the adulation of Jung?” He felt that he had met enough instances of this.

I asked about Marie Louise von Franz. He said, “At that time, she seemed to be an earthy, independent person, who thought Jung was right about things.” In Zürich, Jung had established a psychological club, very early, for people interested in psychology either via having been in analysis or just interested. Originally, the Jung Institute was housed in the Psychology Club’s building. This was the location for Willeford’s training and where Marie Louise von Franz and Barbara Hannah taught. One evening, Willeford received a phone call from Marie Louise von Franz, in which she said, “Psychology Club members are getting old and dying, and the Club wants new members...” “They would take in four to six of us, not offering membership, but as ‘statutory guests,’ she said with some embarrassment.” He said it was not at all “clubby” but was a Jungian community of truly extraordinary people scattered around the city.

Willeford’s Zürich experience included analysis not only with Jolande Jacobi, but for several years with Heinrich Fierz. He said their styles were very different. Jacobi’s was “busier” and Fierz’ style was “withdrawn, intuitive.” Willeford remembers Fierz as an eccentric genius, who when he was “hot, was very hot, in a way often expressed in what seemed a throw-away line to be understood much later.” The Jung institute at that time required analysis with both a man and a woman, and Jacobi and Fierz were his “remarkable choices.” He says, “I’m kind of a living fossil; that world does not exist anymore.”

“That world” for Willeford included working for years at Dr. Binswanger’s Sanatorium Belle vue in Kreuzlingen. When Willeford worked there, the founder’s son, Wolfgang, was Director, and Heinrich Fierz (Willeford’s analyst) was Medical Director. They held case conferences in which they talked and argued about their cases. The sanatorium itself was a family

corporation (now closed) begun by the famous Ludwig Binswanger who had been a friend of Freud and an acquaintance of Jung. He was not a “card-carrying Freudian,” but he maintained a friendship with Freud. The sanatorium’s philosophy was that every patient should have a psychotherapist. The patients included persons with the “range of what you’d find in a psychology textbook.” This included persons who were kept in locked cells.

Several side notes: Heinrich Fierz had a brother, Marcus, who was an atomic physicist, and their mother was close to Carl Jung. Jung sold the Fierz family land abutting Jung’s land at Bollingen.

Toni Frey was also a psychotherapist at the sanatorium. The son of a banker and the “business brains,” he wanted to create a small, new clinic which would be Jungian, the Zürichberg Clinic. Heinrich Fierz was the Medical Director of this new clinic; C.A. Meier was one of its directors; and Willeford was in charge of group psychotherapy, and at one time headed the atelier where patients did art work.

Here in Atlanta, Dr. Willeford is a Visiting Scholar at Emory University as well as a Jungian Analyst. He continues to see analysands, to lecture, to write, and he was recently the President of the Society of Georgia Jungian Analysts. His wife teaches French in Atlanta. Willeford also enjoys painting. Jolande Jacobi made her analysands draw and paint. “I loved it,” he says, “especially the short time when I had a studio.” Dr. Jacobi created a book of her analysands’ paintings, and a New York collector purchased Willeford’s work. He still paints with fair regularity. Painting is his “practice.” He is currently working on an article about the person, C. G. Jung and revisiting a 1934 Jung article, “The Development of Personality,” which he finds very interesting, but “immensely problematic.”

Dr. Willeford’s publications include numerous articles, many published in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology*. He is the author of two major books, *The Fool and his Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*, and *Feeling, Imagination, and the Self: Transformations of the Mother-Infant Relationship*. Both books are out of print, but some copies are still available from online booksellers. Noted scholar David Miller and others have been encouraging publishers to reprint them, and they are worthy of being read again. I have read excerpts from *The Fool and His Scepter* and I have read all of *Feeling, Imagination, and the Self*. Published in 1987, his concepts, especially regarding the importance and implications of the mother-infant dyad are similar to those being discussed in current works on neuroscience and psychology.

In his books, Dr. Willeford brings us the breadth and depth of his knowledge of literature, psychology, mythology, and religion. To give one a sense of the breadth of *Feeling, Imagination, and the Self*, the chapters’ titles are:

- 1 – Baby, the Given, and Doing Theory
- 2 – Being True to Oneself in Abundance and Limitation
- 3 – Abandonment, Wish, and Hope in the Blues
- 4 – Festival, Communion, and Mutuality
- 5 – Magic and Participating Consciousness
- 6 – Receptivity, Commitment, and Detachment

Quoting briefly from Chapter 2 (“Being True to Oneself ...”), pages 38 - 39, Willeford quotes Jung (CW 9.ii, 2nd ed., pp. 167-

68) and then comments:

“... Further, as Jung has said, the self ‘is the smallest of the small, easily overlooked and pushed aside. Indeed, it is in need of help and must be perceived, protected, and as it were built up by the conscious mind, just as if it did not exist at all and were called into being only through man’s care and devotion.’ On the other hand, ‘older than the ego... it is actually the secret *spiritus rector* of our fate.’ And manifest in ‘a situation within which the ego is contained... the self cannot be localized in an individual ego-consciousness, but acts like a circumambient atmosphere to which no definite limits can be set, either in space or in time.’

“Such statements may seem regrettably paradoxical to logical reason; and indeed, Jung presents them as paraphrases of utterances employing the vocabulary of soul and spirit. But in lived experience, the self is not at special pains to accord with logical reason, and does participate in modes of reality that the vocabulary of soul and spirit was created to describe. The phenomenology of the self in lived experience is to be found in imaginative products that require imagination to comprehend them.

“There is another reason, too, why one sees the self darkly. This is that the self, though it is the broadest organizing principle of psychic life, also manifests itself in disorganization... One can invoke another religious figure of speech to express the potentiality of the self for disorganization and for being known in disorganization: ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth’ (John 3:8). The wind inspires, enlivens, but also blows things about and may indeed become the whirlwind ...”

And the last two paragraphs of Chapter 2 (pp. 94 - 95) seem especially relevant today:

“... Whether this development takes the form of the masculine protest against anything feminine, and whether the son comes to experience his father as Saturn eating his children, depends partly on the kind of father the son has and the kind of male society he is being asked to join. But it also depends very significantly on his mother’s sense of the value of her own femininity, and on her way of mediating the values of the Father World. If she is successful in supporting her son’s self-validation, while encouraging respect and love for femininity, and supporting masculine drives to autonomy and competitiveness, she will help assure that *logos* for him remains grounded in *eros*, and she will make him aware of a form of community in which self-validation opens out in felt appreciation of mutuality and complex interconnectedness, including that of the natural world. In this sense cultural sanity is served by regarding Earth as Mother.”

“It is thus important to grant the fundamental cultural importance of the mother-infant bond. Indeed, it is worth bearing in mind that through such institutions as the festival... even highly patriarchal cultures offer means for their adult members to renew contact with the level of themselves suggested by ... the mother and the baby feeding one another. As we will see, a festival is not simply a regression to instinctual gratification and celebration of the idols of the tribe: it also revivifies the sense of mutuality of which I have just spoken.

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This sense is essential to the education of the heart by which we may someday become decently human.”

By chance, I recently picked up a volume in our Jung Society Bookstore and within it discovered a tribute to Dr. Willeford. Therapist Lynette Walker in her memoir, *Mothering, Breast Cancer, and Selfhood*, says “I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my therapist, Dr. William Willeford, who, with unwavering patience endured and supported my highs and lows, my intensity and indifference, my articulation and my incoherence as I struggled to bring the contents of this book out of the depths and into the light of day. His astute psychological wisdom and his literary knowledge of language and literature have contributed greatly to the form and substance of this material.” Her book is dedicated to her mother and “to William Willeford who has rendered me visible.”

SOURCES:

Interview with William Willeford.

Feeling, Imagination, and the Self: Transformations of the Mother-Infant Relationship, Copyright 1987 by William Willeford, Northwestern University Press. Brief quotations are from Chapter 2, pp.38-39, and pp.94-95.

Mothering, Breast Cancer, and Selfhood, Copyright 2002 by Lynette Walker, Trafford Publishing. Brief quotations are from the Dedication and the Acknowledgements.

In addition, the reader may find much information online about “that time in Zürich” and Marie Louise von Franz, Barbara Hannah, Jolande Jacobi, Heinrich Fierz, Dr. Jung, Bollingen, and more.