

2/23/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 4C – The Bed of the Stream

This section opens with a young woman writer beset by an obnoxious, intrusive, living companion, who retreats to her room to spend happier times with an imaginary replacement. Nitya shows how each is an admixture of real and unreal elements, mitigating the starkness of our normal concepts of reality:

Now the question is, is the imaginary grandmother only a recomposition of fragmentary memories and therefore of no consequence, or is she a psychological reality that is dynamic enough to make Sunanda's inner life calm, bright and full of loving warmth? And as to the unpleasant old woman who actually exists in the physical world, is she a one hundred percent external reality or is she partly a psychological peg on which to hang all the projections of the person who hates her?

Although the division between the inner world of subjectivity and the outer world of objectivity appears to be clear and well defined, a closer look makes the line of demarcation hazy, and we should not be surprised if we again and again tumble into experiences which cannot easily be discerned as being solely of one type or the other.

Until we realize how much of our reality is a personal composition or projection, we are helpless to influence it. We tend to think of ourselves as victims of an implacable fate. Once we discern that we are affecting what we experience, it opens the door for us to alter its impact through the introduction of greater knowledge and self-awareness. This is in fact the essence of the game we play in mounting a "spiritual" search.

To illustrate this Nitya takes recourse in the image of a burning stick being twirled in evening darkness, something we've met before, in Atmo, verse 33:

Knowledge, to know its own nature here,  
has become earth and the other elements;  
spiraling up, back and turning round,  
like a glowing twig it is ever turning.

Nitya's elucidation of this verse in *That Alone* is a highly worthwhile companion read. I hope if I clip in the end of it I won't spoil his subtle buildup in *The Stream of Consciousness*:

This whole universe which we see, with all its vastness, is the composition and organization coming from our own individual consciousness. No one else sees for us or knows for us. Even what are considered to be the experiences of other people have to be recycled and made our own before we can truly know them. The vastness we see is what we have created out of something so small: a tiny spark.

This is one of the greatest miracles of life, that the very creator whom we praise for having made all this universe is still sitting here and creating the very nucleus of our own being. Your nucleus and the nucleus of the universe are not two. When you attain that identity in every moment of your daily life, you become the centerpiece of the universe; your actions, your ideas and your thoughts become the very thoughts, ideas and variegations in the composition of your universe. This brings you to an ultimate identity with the creating faculty. You are at once the Absolute and the very many relatives within it. You are the one unconditional Being who is also causing the many conditional states.

Deb noted that Nitya loved the word *confection*, which to him meant a meaningful mixture of inner and outer realities, both subjective and, if not exactly objective, at least less subjective. He's asking us to wonder how much of that old woman is a peg to hang projections on and how much is she a "real" grandmother.

Part of our progress is to try to tease out where all of these strands are intertwined, to understand what that confection is in our psyche and in our world.

Beverley's entertaining response in Part II focuses on projections from a Jungian perspective. Don't miss it!

One thing I wanted to point out was that the two grandmothers are closely related to one another: the writer's extreme positive fantasy caregiver is commensurate with the strength of her negative reaction to the "real" companion. It's clearly a projective situation, and without the polarity, there wouldn't be such a need to escape. Because pleasant situations are more attractive, it makes us unconsciously exaggerate the polarity, to push away the negative. By taking responsibility at least for the part of situation you are exaggerating from your own feelings helps mitigate the extreme disconnection.

We should definitely see how this applies to us, because we are more likely to have a healing influence if we understand what's going on below the surface.

Admittedly, retreat might be more necessary when you're young and haven't gotten established in your ground yet. As your confidence develops, you can withstand the intrusion of less ideal situations. I'm grateful for my time living in fire stations with a wide range of people. I had plenty of opportunities to observe interpersonal polarizations. There were some really great people and some amazingly obnoxious ones, and it was much more fun to stay within your peer group and run down the others. Yet you couldn't let it get so extreme you couldn't work with them when you had to, which was much of the time. The natural reaction was to play up how bad they were, almost as if they were scapegoats for our self-indulgence. And my friends and I were the epitome of evil as far as some of those others were concerned.

Andy was brought in mind of Nitya's Yoga Sutras commentary. In the latest class with Nancy Y, the topic being considered was contentment, which he felt was probably relevant

here. He read out a couple of excerpts from Sutra II.42:  
“Unsurpassed happiness comes from contentment.”

The world of necessity holds before us the need to nourish and sustain the body, to tickle the senses, to over-awe the mind. These all belong to the negative pole of the vertical parameter. There is a noble desire that transcends all these: the desire to free oneself from the dictates of the transient, to gain absolute freedom. This is the desire for emancipation or realization. Emancipation comes with the recognition of the homogeneity of the worthwhileness of every passing moment. It is a peak experience, not a transitory peak but a continuous one in which the fluctuating differences in the environmental factors that envelop each situation are glorified for whatever merit is outstanding in that given situation. (285)

Nothing prevents any of us from making every passing moment the highest and the grandest. This requires the sensibility to appreciate a higher value and a realistic attitude of knowing exactly where you stand and how, from that vantage point, you can have the clearest vision of the most magnificent gift of life. (285-6)

To Andy, this is all about knowing exactly where you stand. He feels we often want to be heroes to ourselves, but we find it impossible. We're victimized by our own mental loops. If you admit this, it's a kind of realism, allowing yourself to accept where you actually stand as a starting point. He talked about a recent meditation retreat that went on for several days, where he found he was caught in a mental loop about somebody he knew. He would be sitting, watching his breath, and this fixation just kept coming up. He felt the self-portrait that began to emerge was of a pretty hateful person, turning this over hour after hour in his mind. He thought, “This is really how my mind is presenting itself to me in the present. That means I have to accept it. I felt that this is really

what compassion is about, how you start with yourself, just looking at the stuff in absolute awareness.”

Andy continued, if the woman has a fantasy grandma, what’s wrong with having a fantasy grandma? If she knows she’s a fantasy, and knows where she stands, that’s honest, isn’t it? He reiterated that we would love to be spiritual heroes, yet the truth is we are not spiritual heroes.

My comment was we are prejudiced about ourselves as much as we are about the other person, and in much the same way. Not all of us want to be spiritual heroes, but almost everyone wants to be beyond reproach, to be “good.” We have, as Nitya puts it above, a “noble desire.” When this loses its nobility, we tend to gild the lily, or worse, invent a bouquet of gilded lilies to obscure the manure pile.

Bill, also in the Yoga Sutra class, said, “We can realize there’s a lot of layers of stuff influencing our perception. The question I heard about the fantasy grandmother, is it all a fantasy or is there value there?” Paraphrasing Patanjali, he added that observing comfort (or contentment) is a way to realize eternal happiness. You learn to take the good things that come your way. You accept and enjoy them, but don’t want more. Equipose allows you to take crummy things that come along and treat them the same way. You are content if you don’t want things.

Nancy insisted she doesn’t see any difference between the two states, the two “grandmothers.” Our perception doesn’t change whether it’s on one side or the other. You should be able to experience the fantasy one just as you do the real one, as long as you know that one is physical and one is more in your head. As you go through your day you alternate between those two states all the time.

Deb agreed with Nancy, that we go back and forth between actuality and imaginings, but in this situation, instead of having an interaction or correction, she went into her room and closed the door. If she’d held her ground, it might have made that actual

transactional world more constructive for both of them. We can engage with the world and not run away from it.

I didn't want us to minimize the pressure we feel from parental figures, with their bossing and harassing. Sometimes we have to escape from that to reclaim our own innate value. Only when we know ourself can we withstand those pressures constructively. It's okay to take shelter from the storm.

Andy maintained that every moment of your experience has an ananda component, and if you can locate the ananda component you have found the absolute in the relative. Even so, some situations are unendurable, like when the pipes burst in your house and the only place to go is full of COVID.

Kris admitted how with someone you don't like it seems like everything is wrong, but if it's a friend, you excuse the same behaviors. She has two sisters, and if they do exactly the same thing, one annoys her and the other doesn't. The older one is really bossy, and she realizes that she's not giving her as fair a chance as she could.

Nitya makes a cursory suggestion to help us with these dilemmas, by mentioning in passing Francis Bacon's idols of perception. Bacon catalogues the ways in which perceptions that seem to be true can be deceptive, so that what appears valid often is not. This article has a cogent, bite-sized explanation of the idols, largely in Bacon's own words: <https://fs.blog/2016/05/francis-bacon-four-idols-mind/>. Try to ignore that Western-trapped thinkers imagine that no one thought of these things before the European Enlightenment....

Anita wanted to know how a recent experience of hers fit in with this topic. She has a cleaning woman occasionally, and they've become friends. That morning she had been going to clean an area where all the electric cords are tangled up, and Anita warned her to be careful of the cords. Nonetheless, she vacuumed up the phone charger cord and broke it. Anita is very dependent on her phone, and got quite upset. She realized how annoyed she was, and tried not to show it, but she became aware that the situation

was making her feel all these nasty physical feelings. Now she wants to know how we set ourselves up to get annoyed—what's the mechanism to explain frustration? What is happening in the brain and body that this outside objective event is causing all this dis-ease?

Deb sympathized that it wasn't just that she vacuumed up her cord, it imperiled her sense of safety. We have unstoppable defense mechanisms for fear and lack of security. Then too, there can be a perverse pleasure in holding on.

I suggested it goes back to expectations, how we're habituated to things being a certain way, and when they aren't we get a chemical reaction. Last week Charles mentioned the physiological 90 second reaction time, and there's much about it in those notes. In terms of this week's topics, the mind and body become enflamed, just as a stick of wood catches fire and turns into a burning ember, leaving bright trails in the air. If you look at what happened from an alien perspective, it's minor—no big deal, and easy to fix. (Anita now has a new cord *and* a backup.) Yet how and why we light up is a total mystery.

The most important part was not that Anita got upset, but that she adroitly handled the situation and even came off with an improved friendship with the woman who had irritated her. After 90 seconds the fight-or-flight chemicals are beginning to be processed, so if we hold on to our anger longer than that it is because we want to. If we want to get over it, we can, though the trails tend to persist for some time. But this is the point I tried to make earlier. If Anita had gone in her room to sulk and fantasize about perfect hired help, the problem would still be hanging around, and the friendship might have been fatally compromised. Instead, she acted like a grownup, and the outcome was a win-win. She might have spent her first 90 seconds in bed with the covers over her head, restoring her balance, but then it's best to come back out and see if your improved state of mind can cope, and rectify things. In my experience, it almost always succeeds,

sometimes even miraculously. The other person may be waiting for a gesture of good will before they respond, and that's all it takes.

Of course, if someone acts a certain way toward you over and over again, that requires a different kind of processing.

Jan felt Andy's earlier example of being stuck in that mental loop was a great one. The upset is finally transformed when there is acceptance and compassion for yourself—the trick is getting to that place with yourself and the other person. You don't have to lower your standards, but reframe them. Embedded in that process is self-nurturing.

Deb recalled Chogyam Trungpa's teaching in his heyday: far from being a spiritual hero, you had to accept the soil, the dirt that was you, that you grew out of. (His classic book *Meditation in Action*, opens with the *Manure of Experience*.) It's a gift to stop thinking of yourself as a spiritual hero, which is a dead end. You have to come to the point where you can be who you are. It takes sorting out the tangents of our psyche.

I agreed we have to work with our foibles and limitations. We want to be perfect because it's the most defensible position: for a child, the only way to avoid criticism or pain is to be perfect. It requires a conversion to accept the fact that we are screwed up and we make mistakes. I just rediscovered a perfect expression of this, at the end of Nitya's *Atmo 83* commentary in *That Alone*. The "ontological richness of life" is pure Nataraja Guru; the rest is vintage Nitya:

Nataraja Guru, in his commentary on this verse, wants us to especially notice the ontological richness of life. Although this body is a decaying and perishing one and this mind is an ephemeral experience, within it is also placed this grand scheme of universal truth shining in all its resplendence. You have a mortal body to introduce you to the immortal theme, a stupid mind to lead you to the highest of all wisdom, and deep darkness to become the backdrop for the brightest of all lights. For all this you need a body, a life, a mind. When you see this,



it is not a paradox that frightens you but a paradox that surprises you and brings you so much beauty.

Andy is beginning to think there's something paradoxical about the spiritual cliché of “practice.” The guy who was running his yoga retreat said, “I try to lower my expectations about meditative practice.” Andy realized you're not helping yourself out if you are whomping on yourself to follow some preset pattern. You can have a lower set of expectations. The important thing is knowing exactly where you stand.

Susan had just read about piano teacher who died at 93 — said she didn't believe in practicing, she said we are *making* music. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/insider/cornelia-vertenstein-piano.html?searchResultPosition=1> . (Includes a link to the moving frontpage feature on her from last May.)

Yeah, I agree: we've practiced long enough—let's start living!

Deb cited Oregon's master poet William Stafford's advice: “If you don't like the poem you are writing, just lower your standards.” It made me realize that standards are another form of expectations, usually imposed from without. Lowering the pressure you put on yourself is bound to help, but why not dispense with it altogether? I suspect that's what Stafford was hinting at: standards and expectations are an obscuring layer interfering with our direct artistic expression. Deb talked about some of the ways she pressures herself with inhibiting thoughts: “I want to be able to become a *good* poet. I'm just practicing for my next lifetime. I'm engaged in the wrong process.”

Summing up how to cope with a number of common anxieties, Deb passed along a dear friend's template. In her difficulties with people, she has a 10 year rule: give the problem 10 years to get fixed. She gave her step-children 10 years to learn to like her. Get that backyard project done in 10 years. Why not allow yourself a long time? Everyone in the room thought of stalled projects they felt guilty about—what if they figured they'd get

them done in ten years. And if not, give yourself another 10. Susan gleefully allotted another 10 years for all her knitting and sewing projects tucked away in her attic.

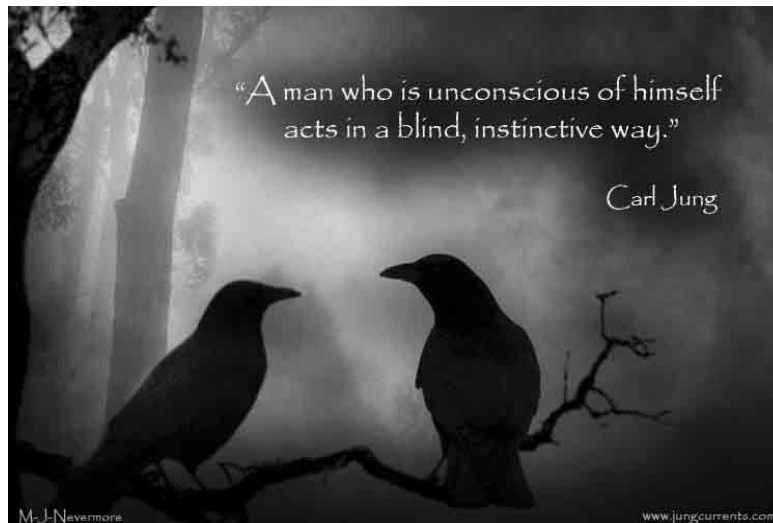
Why not permit ourselves ten years to become decent human beings? And then another ten after that, just in case....

How will Nitya extricate us from this tangled web we weave? Stay tuned!

## Part II

Beverley's illustrated contribution—

### Thinking about Projections and the Shadow Complex

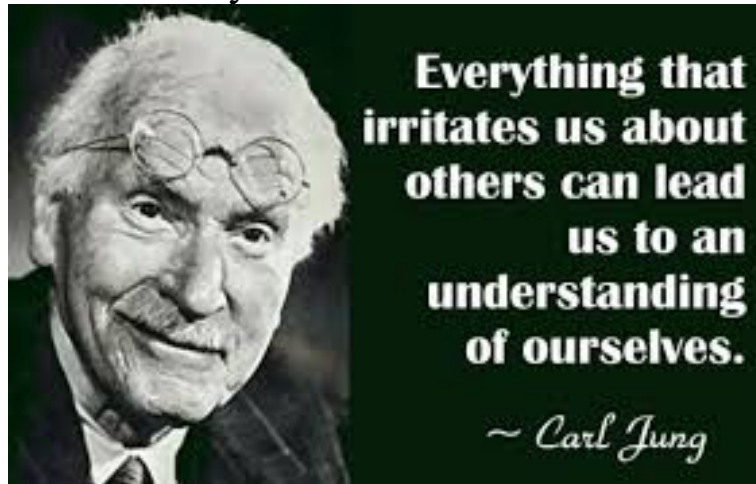


Jungian Psychology is my main guide in understanding myself and my behaviour. I like his concept of the various complexes of energy in my personal unconscious. I imagine the border between my conscious and unconscious mind as being flexible and porous in some way.

I think of the web of neurons in my brain as being interconnected in energy nodes in a myriad of ways. If I consciously connect with this I think in words and call it my memory. The nodes act as complexes of instinctive and learned emotional reactions and behaviour. This is like a shadow land, and

when a shadow is activated it causes a projection. This goes on all the time; reacting to stimulus is part of being alive.

I need to remember that projections are an unconscious process. I do not make projections, I meet them. They are my shadows of what is in me that I unconsciously superimpose on others and I can only meet them indirectly there.



Recognising that I am reacting in my daily life to unreal projections is never done. Some ingrained behaviour seems to be impossible to stop. I am not good at thinking what I am saying in the moment. I tell myself I should talk less and listen more. The trouble is I love verbal ping pong. Texts and emails are easier to check. However, I am getting better at retrospective conscious awareness. If I feel upset, irritated indignant or critical I usually think - admittedly after a while - to ask myself why and sort myself out.

I agree whole heartedly with what Jung is saying here.....



THE BEST POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND  
SPIRITUAL WORK WE CAN DO IS  
TO WITHDRAW THE PROJECTION  
OF OUR OWN SHADOW  
ONTO OTHERS.

CARL JUNG