**Active Imagination**

Fantasies as imaginative activities are seen by Jung as expressions of psychic energy. In the various descriptions of ‘Active Imagination’ the observation of the inner image and the dialogue with inner figures, if possible, are important. The model of symbol formation, as Jung describes it, can be experienced in doing ‘Active Imagination’.

Jung mentioned the idea of active imagination in 1916 for the first time in his essay ‘The transcendent function’ (CW 8, **§**131-193). In this essay he describes the formation of symbols. He does not use the expression ‘active imagination’, but deals with the question of how human beings are able to concentrate on their phantasies and to shape them. Especially important for him was to eliminate critical attentiveness. These inner images or inner words have to be expected, perceived, and expressed in words or paintings, even sculptured with the whole body: this was his primary accent.

Jung spoke about ‘active imagination’ in more detail in his introduction to Richard Wilhelm's ‘*The Secret of the Golden Flo*we*r*’ (GW 13, §18, 19, 20, 24). In those remarks he spoke in the first place about the psychic faculty of allowing the flow of inner images to happen unhindered as a prerequisite for dealing with fantasies. The psychic faculty of letting happen is comparable to the flow of inner images. It is not easy because anxieties may block the flow of images. The inner critical voice, according to Jung, has to be eliminated. However, I think the critical voice can also be portrayed in visualisation and dealt with there.

In a 1947 letter Jung describes in a brief way what he understands by ‘active imagination’:

The point is that you start with any image…. Contemplate it and carefully observe how the picture begins to unfold or to change. Don’t try to make it into something, just do nothing but observe what its spontaneous changes are. Any mental picture you contemplate in this way will sooner or later change through a spontaneous association that causes a slight alteration of the picture. You must carefully avoid impatient jumping from one subject to another. Hold fast to the one image you have chosen and wait until it changes by itself. Note all these changes and eventually step into the picture yourself and, if it is a speaking figure at all, then say what you have to say to that figure and listen to what he, she [or it] has to say.

Thus you can not only analyse your unconscious but you also give your unconscious a chance to analyse yourself, and therewith you gradually create the unity of conscious and unconscious without which there is no individuation at all.

(Letter to Mr. O., 2 May 1947, Letters Vol. II, p.76)

There is a correspondence between Jung’s understanding of complexes and our imaginations: complexes develop a fantasy life. Complex episodes are narratives of difficult dysfunctional relationship episodes that have occurred repeatedly and are internalised with episodic memory. This means that the whole complex episode (the image for the child and the image for the aggressor, connected with emotions) is internalised and can get constellated in everyday relationship.

Therefore inner dialogues do not necessarily qualify as active imaginations, often they are the expression of complex-episodes, very similar to fruitless soliloquies. If imaginations of this kind are repeated, new symbols and new possibilities of behaviour are not found. On the contrary; old patterns of behaviour and fantasies are perpetuated and become cemented. Imaginations of this kind need an intervention by the analyst. In clinical examples different kinds of imaginations are discussed.

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