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# Mundus Imaginalis

## Module 2: Jung's Theory of Active Imagination

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## A Bridge to the Self

We naturally access the imagined reality every day and every night of our lives. At night we access our imagination through our dreams and by day we access our imagination through day dreams, fantasies, play, creativity, archetypes and symbols. And it is this playing with fantasy that forms a bridge to the unconscious and from the Jungian standpoint, to the Self, the ordering centre of the psyche.

Jung came to see that it is our imagination which moves us away from that which is ordinary towards something other, absent, missing in our lives. It is our imagination that opens us up to the possibilities that exist, to the extra-ordinary, allowing us to connect with the transpersonal and the numinous. It brings a sense of vitality and meaning to our lives, gives shape and meaning to our existence and helps us move towards the unknown.

Imagination connects us to our desires, brings together the past, present and future and provides us with the means to build a cohesive story of our lives, to discern the meaning of our lives. Imagination is therefore the agency that enables us to create our world and to keep creating new and endless possibilities. Imagination connects us with movement and change, compels us towards the new.

Active imagination is a method of accessing the unconscious through the process of visualising. The process of active imagination uses the image producing function of the psyche, namely the imagination, to form a bridge between our inner and outer worlds. A threshold between our everyday awareness and our fantasy life, between our conscious ego and the unconscious; and so allows the inner self and the totality of our psyche to act out whatever messages the unconscious is trying to communicate to the conscious mind. This marriage between consciousness and the unconscious provides us with insight, energy, passion and meaning.

Active imagination is a process used to create a bridge between the conscious ego and the unconscious, opening up oneself to the unconscious and giving it free rein to fantasy, while at the same time maintaining an active, attentive, conscious point of view. It is a way of accessing the contents of the unconscious translated into images, narrative or personified as separate entities. A process, that leads to a synthesis that contains the

perspectives of both the conscious ego and the unconscious but in a new and surprising way.

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## The Beginnings...

Jung discovered active imagination during the years of 1913 to 1916 following his parting of ways with Freud. We read in Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* that during these years a period of inner uncertainty, a state of disorientation, overcame him and his moods threatened to overwhelm him. Driven then by this inner necessity, Jung had to find a way of healing himself from within, a means of dealing with and confronting the unconscious.

Around this time he began to experiment with specific meditative procedures:

*"He (Jung) came to see that his task was to find the images that are concealed in the emotions. He continued his experiments, trying out different ways to enter into his fantasies voluntarily: sometimes he imagined climbing down a steep descent; other time he imagined digging a hole, one shovel-full of dirt at a time. With each descent, he explored the landscape and got better acquainted with the inner figures. He used a number of expressive techniques (mainly writing, drawing, painting) to give symbolic form to his experience."* ("Jung on Active Imagination: key readings selected by Joan Chodorow pg. 2

Through these experiments, through turning his gaze towards the inner world of imagination, Jung came to see that we could "distinguish ourselves from the unconscious contents" leading to an enormous release of energy and new insights that gave him a new orientation, ultimately reshaping his life.

Jung's first recorded active imagination began as he was sitting at his desk, thinking over his fears when ...

*... "he made the conscious decision to 'drop down' into the depths. He landed on his feet and began to explore the strange inner landscape where he met the first of a long*

*series of inner figures. These fantasies seemed to personify his fears and other powerful emotions. Over time, he realized that when he managed to translate his emotions into images, he was inwardly calmed and reassured. He came to see that his task was to find the images that are concealed in the emotions.” Jung on Active Imagination: key readings selected by Joan Chodorow pg. 2*

“The Transcendent Function” (1958) is Jung’s first paper about the method he later came to call active imagination. It has two parts or stages: Letting the unconscious come up and coming to terms with the unconscious.

During these experiments Jung encountered an array of interesting internal characters in his psyche, naming them Elijah, Salome and Philemon. Coming to the realisation that his experiment in self-healing was successful, he began to teach the method of active imagination to some of his patients.

Jung demonstrated this process by telling this story in every seminar on active imagination he gave, and so we continue his legacy:

*“There was a drought in a village in China. They sent for a rainmaker who was known to live in the farthest corner of the country, far away. Of course, that would be so, because we never trust a prophet who lives in our region; he has to come from far away. So he arrived, and he found the village in a miserable state. The cattle were dying, the vegetation was dying, the people were affected. The people crowded around him and were very curious about what he would do. He said, “Well, just give me a little hut and leave me alone for a few days.” So he went into this little hut and people were wondering and wondering, the first day, the second day. On the third day it started pouring rain and he came out. They asked him, “What did you do?” “Oh,” he said, “that is very simple. I didn’t do anything.” “But look,” they said, “now it rains. What happened?” And he explained, “I come from an area that is in Tao, in balance. We have rain, we have sunshine. Nothing is out of order. I come into your area and find that it is chaotic. The rhythm of life is disturbed, so when I come into it I, too, am disturbed. The whole thing affects me and I am immediately out of order. So what can*

*I do? I want a little hut to be by myself, to meditate, to set myself straight. And then, when I am able to get myself in order, everything around is set right. We are now in Tao, and since the rain was missing, now it rains.” (Jung on Active Imagination, p. 19/20)*

Many fundamental concepts of Jung’s analytical psychology come from Jung’s experiences with active imagination, key concepts such as the Shadow, the Syzygy (Anima and Animus), the Persona, the Ego, and the Self. These are key concepts in Jungian psychology but they are at the same time personifications of different structures and functions of the psyche. Affect, archetype, complex, libido – all of these terms are based on real, human experiences.

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## Distinguishing between Fantasy and Active imagination

Jung took this playing with fantasy a step further, distinguishing between active and passive fantasy:

- *...“ a passive attitude toward fantasy does nothing at all. With a passive attitude, fantasy is not evoked, rather it drifts around unnoticed, or it erupts into consciousness uninvited. Lacking the active mood of participation of consciousness there is the danger of identifying with a mood or dream or fantasy. ...Passive fantasy is always in need of self-reflective, critical evaluation from the conscious everyday standpoint.” (Jung on Active Imagination, p.6)*
- *“An active fantasy may be evoked when we turn our attention toward the unconscious with an attitude of expectation; something definite is about to happen. Such a state of readiness brings new energy and consciousness to the raw material emerging from the unconscious; themes are elaborated through associations with parallel elements. Through this process, the unconscious affects*

*and images are clarified and brought closer to consciousness. Such an active, positive participation of conscious and unconscious corresponds to the method of active imagination. Active fantasy does not require criticism: rather, the symbolic material needs to be understood.” (Jung on Active Imagination, p.6)*

What distinguishes passive fantasy then from active imagination is that we bring consciousness to the process, we become active participants in the process and in this way, we uncover the hidden meaning, the messages and wisdom of our imagination.

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## Overview of the Active Imagination Process

At no stage in his Collected Works does Jung outline the exact process that he used to conduct an active imagination process but clues to this process can be found in many of his key works including CW5 - The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche; CW7 – Two Essays on Analytical Psychology; CW9 – The Archetypes and the Collective; CW13 – Alchemical Studies; CW16 – The Practice of Psychotherapy; Unconscious; CW18 – The Symbolic Life. And in his autobiography Memories, Dreams, Reflections.

Uncovering the active imagination process then is no easy task and to this end we owe a huge debt to the work of Joan Chodorow for tracking and collating key passages in her book Jung on Active Imagination.

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## The Steps to Active Imagination

Following these clues and accessing the imaginative faculty of the psyche, we have translated Jung’s process of active imagination into six sequential steps:

### Accessing the Unconscious

The process of active imagination begins by inviting the unconscious to communicate, allowing the unconscious material to rise up to the surface and present itself in the form of an image or symbol, so that you can begin the dialogue. Active imagination can be done in the comfort of our own imagination, through writing, dance, music, painting and sculpting and by working with our dreams, emotions and the creative self via the vehicle of imagination or fantasy. Next week we take this step.

### **Associations**

Once the contents of the unconscious have presented themselves, the next step in the active imagination process is to bring consciousness to the process, to find your personal associations for the symbolic material that has arisen.

### **Amplification**

Moving from personal to the wider world, we then add depth to our understanding by finding the mythological associations for the symbolic material that arises.

### **Analysis**

At this stage, we bring reflection to the process and become aware of the key messages that the unconscious is communicating through the active imagination.

### **Assimilation**

We are now ready for an ethical confrontation with the key messages of the active imagination and the ego decision on what we will take with us on our journey.

## Actualisation

Having gained some new insight or knowledge, it is important to perform a physical ritual that carries the power of the inner world into the outer world. By doing this, you say to your deepest self – “*I understand you*”. This will not only fill you with a sense of reverence, but also resolve some of the conflicts lurking deep inside the psyche. Using Jungian terminology, we could say that the opposites will come together to create a more integrated whole.

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## Conclusion

Active imagination gives voice to sides of the personality that are normally not heard, thereby establishing a line of communication between consciousness and the unconscious. Beyond simply observing the fantasy or image and honest evaluation of what they mean about oneself, as well as a morally and intellectually binding commitment to act on the insights, brings us treasured insights, new attitudes, new ways of being in the world.

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## Application

Jung's famous Red Book was the product of decades of his work with his own dreams and fantasies. It is a document of dialogues and paintings of what he called his "confrontation with the unconscious." He later said that the years that he spent engaged with this work laid the basis for the development of his entire psychology. Let's follow in his footsteps and prepare for active imagination:

- Record your dreams during the upcoming week. Post a dream on the forum.
  - Take note of the moods that dominate your week.
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## RECOMMENDED READING

**Memories, Dreams, Reflections** by C.G. Jung

**Jung on Active Imagination** Key readings selected and introduced by Joan Chodorow