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# Mundus Imaginalis

## Module 3: Accessing the Unconscious

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## Paradox and Ambiguity

Much of our thinking, feeling, judging, and actions are driven by our unconscious, which is why Jung said:

*“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”*

To invite a dialogue with the unconscious then, provides us with an opportunity to become aware of the paradoxes and ambiguity of our lives, a means of liberating us from one-sided thinking, a way of resolving inner conflicts and an opportunity to lead richer, fuller lives in our journey towards becoming conscious, complete, authentic human beings.

Jung discovered the method of active imagination by working with his emotions.

*“To the extent that I managed to translate the emotions into images – that is to say, to find the images which were concealed in the emotions – I was inwardly calmed and reassured. Had I left those images hidden in the emotions, I might have been torn to pieces by them. There is a chance that I might have succeeded in splitting them off; but in that case I would inexorably have fallen into neurosis and so been ultimately destroyed by them anyhow. As a result of my experiment, I learned how helpful it can be, from the therapeutic point of view, to find the particular images which lie behind emotion.” (MDR)*

Achieving great success with this process he then began to teach the technique to some of his clients.

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## Approaching the Unconscious

The first step in the active imagination process is to invite a dialogue with the unconscious and in this way gain access to unconscious material within our psyche. At this stage of the active imagination process, the unconscious takes the lead while the conscious ego allows the fantasy images to arise and serve as a kind of attentive inner witness and scribe. This involves:

*...“ a suspension of our rational, critical faculties in order to give free rein to fantasy.” (Jung on Active Imagination p. 10).*

To enter into this frame of mind, it is important to set the stage, finding a quiet, comfortable and distraction-free place in which to engage with the unconscious. An active imagination process can take anywhere between 20 minutes to an hour, so make sure you have this uninterrupted time at hand. Decide how you are going to record your active imagination. Keeping a journal in which you can write down the active imagination either during the process or immediately after the process, provides a reference point for you to return to the active imagination as you bring consciousness—that is—your thoughts and associations to the process. Enter into a spirit of playfulness. Play involves the free movement of fantasy.

*“Active imagination as the term denotes, means that the images have a life of their own and that the symbolic events develop according to their own logic – that is, of course, if your conscious reason does not interfere.” (Vol 18 par 397)*

Active imaginations can begin from a number of different starting points. We look at four approaches:

**A: You can begin with a disturbing mood or an irrational outburst.**

The raw material of the unconscious is made up of emotions, impulses and images. When choosing to work with a mood, begin by connecting to the overwhelming feeling or emotion, the mood itself. Here Jung suggests taking the emotional state as the starting point by:

*“He must make himself as conscious as possible of the mood he is in, sinking himself in it without reserve and noting down on paper all the fantasies and other associations that come up. Fantasy must be allowed the freest possible play, yet not in such a manner that it leaves the orbit of the object, namely the affect. Jung 1916/58) ”*  
(par 167

Connect to the emotion by asking, “what am I feeling – is it depression or anger or anxiety or sadness or frustration or irritability or restlessness,” etc.

- ❖ Having named the feeling, next try to get a sense of the feeling.
- ❖ Does the depression feel dark?
- ❖ If depression feels dark, then enter the feeling of darkness – where are you?
- ❖ Are you lost in the woods?
- ❖ Are you at the entrance of Hell?
- ❖ If anger feels explosive, then enter into the explosion.
- ❖ Perhaps anger feels like the Hulk ready to smash everything in sight, then enter into the realm of the Hulk.
- ❖ If anxiety feels like fear, then enter the feeling of fear. Again, ask yourself where am I? Is fear a big, scary monster?
- ❖ Are you running away from something?
- ❖ If sadness feels like a well of never-ending tears, then enter the well.
- ❖ If frustration feels restless, then enter into the feeling of restlessness.
- ❖ Perhaps an image of jumping onto a bike and riding into the sunset will come into your mind.

At this stage, don't attach any external meaning to your mood. Don't say I'm depressed because I've lost my job or because of my broken relationship or my childhood wound.... Move past that. What you are trying to do is harness the raw energy that's behind the anxiety or depression or anger. Behind all of the symptoms lies the numinous experience. As Edward Edinger said:

*“Our whole unconscious is in an uproar from the God who wants to know and to be known.”*

Moods from this perspective are an inner calling from the gods within, an invitation to invite the archetypes of the unconscious to come up to the surface and make contact with you.

As you sit with the mood and move beyond your typical internal dialogue or other ideas about it, then eventually you reach a point where all you have is the tension of that raw emotion or feeling. If you stay with the tension long enough, it will eventually form an image with which you can interact.

From this perspective Jung wrote:

*“You can also use a bad mood as a starting-point, and then try to find out what sort of fantasy-image it will produce, or what image expresses this mood. You then fix this image in the mind by concentrating your attention. Usually it will alter, as the mere fact of contemplating it animates it. The alterations must be carefully noted down all the time, for they reflect the psychic processes in the unconscious background, which appear in the form of images consisting of conscious memory material. In this way conscious and unconscious are united, just as a waterfall connects above and below.”*  
(Jung on Active Imagination, p. 167)

Here we see that active imagination is grounded in the idea that our psychic processes will inherently produce images—images that become animated—moving, shifting and taking on a life of their own—and bring them into relationship with consciousness.

*“It is not too difficult to personify them, as they always possess a certain degree of autonomy, a separate identity of their own.”* (Jung, MDR)

Your task at this stage of the active imagination is to watch what unfolds and record what transpires.

Jung, working with a mood, describes how during the Advent of 1913, he was thinking about his fears and writes:

*“Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as though the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic. But then, abruptly, at not too great a depth, I landed on my feet in a soft, sticky mass. I felt great relief, although I was apparently in complete darkness. After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark cave, in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he were mummified. I squeezed past him through the narrow entrance and waded knee deep through icy water to the other end of the cave where, on a projecting rock, I saw a glowing red crystal. I grasped the stone, lifted it, and discovered a hollow underneath. At first I could make out nothing, but then I saw that there was running water. In it a corpse floated by, a youth with blond hair and a wound in the head. He was followed by a gigantic black scarab and then by a red, newborn sun, rising up out of the depths of the water. Dazzled by the light, I wanted to replace the stone upon the opening, but then a flue welled out. It was blood. A thick jet of it leaped up, and I felt nauseated. It seemed to me that the blood continued to spurt for an unendurably long time. At last it ceased, and the vision came to an end.”*

Robert A Johnson, in *Inner Work*, describes how Dante’s *Divine Comedy* sets up the invitation to access his unconscious.

*Wandering in the dark forest, Dante falls through a hole in the ground, and finds himself in the inner world. He is at the threshold of Hades. He meets the poet Virgil, who, as he discovers, was sent to him by the beautiful Beatrice. Virgil guides him and talks with him as they hike through the various levels of hell. (Inner Work, pg. 166)*

This is a classic example of how to begin an active imagination with a mood. Sitting with the mood, the image of being lost in a dark forest, feeling lost, at the threshold of hell. At this point characters / guides enter the fantasy and animate the story. Here we see how Dante's ego lives through the entire experience, reacting, taking part in the events, dialoguing with the inner people. He finds in his imagination a spontaneous outpouring of his unconscious.

### **B: You can begin an active imagination with a dream image or dream figure.**

Marie-Louise von Franz wrote that dreams "are the voice of nature within us." Dreams may be the sacred place where human and cosmos meet and interact.

*"... in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man dwelling in the darkness of primordial night. There he is still the whole, and the whole is in him, indistinguishable from nature and bare from all egohood. It is from these all-uniting depths that the dream arises ..."* (CW (10

Contained within the symbols, images and dream figures, are many answers necessary for the dreamer's growth. But dreams have their own logic, turning us inside out, their shifting points of view taking us to new heights, playing with our emotions and sometimes leaving us adrift. As we awaken from this dreamscape we might be left with unanswered questions or plagued by feelings of unease. In these cases, we can invite further dialogue with the unconscious, starting with a particular dream image or dream figure. Begin by focusing on the image or dream figure, contemplate it and carefully observe how the image begins to unfold and / or 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 alternation of the picture. You must carefully avoid impatiently jumping from one subject to*

*another. Hold fast to the one image you have chosen and wait until it changes by itself."*

When someone or something does arrive, invite them to begin the dialogue. Try to observe and watch closely as the picture continues to unfold or alter. Note all the changes that you feel or see at that time. Try to 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 it is trying to say to you.

In the words of Jung:

*"When you concentrate on a mental picture, it begins to stir, the image becomes enriched by details, it moves and develops. Each time, naturally, you mistrust it and have the idea that you have just made it up, that it is merely your own invention. But you have to overcome that doubt, because it is not true... We can really produce precious little by our conscious mind. And so when we concentrate on an inner picture and when we are careful not to interrupt the natural flow of events, our unconscious will produce a series of images which make a complete story."*

Throughout this process you need to suspend the rational, the need for control and the need to understand the images that arise. You need to enter into a state of playfulness. "It is in playing and only in playing," writer D.W. Winnicott tells us, "that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."

### **C: You can begin an active imagination by turning to your daydreams or the fantasies that travelled through your mind during the day**

Fantasies are excellent divining rods, so if a fantasy is running through the back of your mind, you can safely assume that it is expressing symbolically some form of inner dynamic or conflict calling for attention. If you find that you have a recurring fantasy that stays in your mind all day, this points to the unconscious trying to get your attention and



returning to the fantasies that occupied your mind during the day is a way to turn passive fantasy into active imagination.

Begin by choosing an image, a person or a place or situation from the fantasy and use the image, person or place as the starting point of the active imagination.

Jung speaks about his experiments with fantasies in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

*"In order to seize hold of the fantasies, I frequently imagined a steep descent. I even made several attempts to get to the very bottom. The first time I reached, as it were, a depth of about a thousand feet; the next time I found myself at the edge of a cosmic abyss. It was like a voyage to the moon, or a descent into empty space. First came the image of a crater, and I had the feeling that I was in the land of the dead. The atmosphere was that of the other world. Near the steep slope of a rock I caught sight of two figures, an old man with a white beard and a beautiful young girl. I summoned up my courage and approached them as though they were real people, and listened attentively to what they told me. The old man explained that he was Elijah, and that gave me a shock. But the girl staggered me even more, for she called herself Salome. She was blind. What a strange couple: Salome and Elijah. But Elijah assured me that he and Salome had belonged together from all eternity, which completely astounded me ... They had a black serpent living with them which displayed an unmistakable fondness for me. I stuck closest to Elijah because he seemed to be the most reasonable of the three, and to have a clear intelligence. Of Salome I was distinctly suspicious. Elijah and I had a long conversation, which, however, I did not understand."* (pg 205)

**D: You can begin an active imagination with a desire to engage the unconscious.**

Robert Johnson describes this as being the purest form of active imagination, where we simply clear our mind, go to the imagination and wait to see who or what will appear. If you focus your mind long enough you will usually find that some image is waiting in

the wings, ready to come on stage and present itself for our attention. Here Johnson advises us:

*“When this figure does appear, you should not stand in judgment, give into your prejudices, or reject it. It is best to assume that it has something to say that is relevant.”*

Here you approach the visitor with complete receptiveness and the simplest invitation is to ask – who are you? What do you have to say? And so the dialogue begins.

If you find this approach yields nothing, then go to a place in your imagination, a beautiful field, a woodland area, a beach, a garden, and start exploring to see who you meet there. Usually when you do this, your imagination will take you to the inner place where you need to go and connect you to the inner characters that you need to meet.

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## Final Thoughts

Whilst the above starting points of active imagination have focused on inner dialogue and take place mainly inside the mind, active imagination can also be given form through painting, drawing, sculpting, dancing, weaving and sandplay.

Joan Chodorow describes in Jung on Active Imagination how a 45-year-old woman created her first sculpture. Here she writes:

*The depression of recent days has still not passed, but it has gotten better. I feel as though I am in a cobweb. I had the intention of making something in clay and it took a huge effort to overcome my resistance to doing it, although I did sense that it would help me. I didn't know how to begin. At last I thought of the black man that occupied my fantasies so very much lately, but he didn't want to come out. So I squeezed and kneaded the clay for half an hour between my fingers and observed the forms that*

*arose. I saw heads of animals; I felt the cold clay and gradually stopped thinking. And then I saw how finally the figure of a child emerged out of the clay as if from the very earth. This child had a toothache and ran to its mother to lay between her breasts. Thus the figure of a mother and her child gradually arose.*

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## Conclusion

Active Imagination is not without danger because it can carry you too far from reality. The major danger of active imagination involves being overwhelmed by the powerful affects, impulses and images of the unconscious. If you are with a psychologist or psychiatrist, please discuss it with them before you undertake the technique. The unconscious is powerful. If you are going to approach it, respect and care are in order.

One has to walk a tightrope in using active imagination. One danger is that we don't open ourselves sufficiently to the unconscious, but instead edit what comes out before it has had a chance to really emerge. Or we may start interpreting what this all means instead of simply remaining open to what is emerging. We need to just let what wants to come up, come up.

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## Application

It's time to begin an active imagination and access the unconscious.

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Begin by choosing your starting point. Do you want to begin with a mood or a dream or fantasy image or figure or do you simply want to go to the imagination and see what happens?

Watch and record what unfolds.

Post your active imagination to the group.

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

Memories, Dreams, Reflections by C.G. Jung

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

Inner Work – Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth by Robert A. Johnson