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# Mundus Imaginalis

## Module 1: The power of imagination and fantasy

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## The Cognitive Revolution

We begin our journey into Active Imagination by exploring the world of imagination. What is this facility (faculty) of imagination? Does it serve a purpose, a function, a use in the development of Homo sapiens and our own individual lives?

Imagination defined as the act of forming mental images of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality, was not accessible to the first Homo sapiens but came into being around 70,000 years ago, in what is now known as the Cognitive Revolution.

The Cognitive Revolution thrust us into a dual reality where, on the one hand, we live in an objective reality of rivers, trees, animals and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, symbols and ideas. The opening of the imagined reality allowed Homo sapiens to imagine what could be done or achieved. It enabled humans *“to change their behaviour quickly, transmitting new behaviour to future generations without any need of genetic or environmental change.”* (Yuval Noah Harari - Sapiens A Brief History of Humankind pg. 37)

From this time to our modern age, imagination has allowed us to see possibilities beyond the actual, to represent times other than the present, to transmit information and create stories about things that do not really exist. It is in the imaginal realm that we have been able to form and manipulate images, propositions, concepts, emotions, and sensations above and beyond, and sometimes independently, of incoming stimuli, to open up the realms of the abstract, the figurative, the possible and the hypothetical. (e.g. regarding a company as a legal entity separate from the individuals who work in it.)

Think about how money came into being. Our ancestors began by bartering and exchanging goods or services for other goods or services, swapping a bag of rice for a bag of beans and calling it an even exchange. But what happens when they couldn't agree on the value of the exchange? Or if a person in need of a specific commodity or service had nothing the person who had this commodity or service wanted? To solve this problem, they developed what today we call money. They imagined that a piece of paper or a coin held value and that this then could be exchanged for goods or services. Today we don't even need to carry around these pieces of paper or coins, we simply imagine the money as

a number held in a bank account, and that this number can be transferred from one person's account to another person's account. That is the power of imagination: We are able to turn to symbolic thinking and act as if is real and so it becomes real.

Einstein, considered to be one of the greatest minds of all time, shared the idea of imagination as being powerful, saying: *"Imagination...is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."*

With the opening of the imagined reality—the facility (faculty) of imagination, our ancestors were able to access the world of alternatives and possibilities, form associations and connections and change their perceptions and attitudes.

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## The role of imagination and fantasy in our lives

Imagination infuses much of our lives, providing us with fantasies of our future, our relationships, conjuring up images from the past, evoking stories about other people, the meaning of our interactions with them and how they react to us.

Think about the last argument you had with your partner or a dear friend. What inner dialogue, story, did this bring up for you? I remember a time when I noticed a dear friend becoming aloof, shut down and not engaging with me. This continued for some weeks and I become more and more convinced that this change of behaviour meant that I had somehow offended her and that she was no longer interested in a friendship with me. Unable to stand the tension any longer, I confronted her. Turns out that her business was in financial trouble and she was completely absorbed in her worries.

As they play, children imagine all sorts of things. Ideas of what they want to be and do when they grow up are fundamental in their development. Most people have ambitions of one kind or another, imagining being promoted, or seeing something they have accomplished recognised publicly.

In our idle moments too, or in diverting ourselves amidst tedious tasks, we might imagine winning the lottery or our hero scoring the winning goal in a match or, more sinfully, an obnoxious colleague falling under a bus.

When we meet or talk to anyone, whether we are assessing them as potential friends or enemies, lovers or colleagues, we are imagining what they would be like in certain circumstances.

Imagination is also involved in the most ordinary experiences. When I go for a walk, I might imagine what it is like to live in a particular house I see, or if it is dark, I might suddenly imagine that there is something following me. In thinking what to cook for dinner, I imagine what I can do with the ingredients I have. In choosing clothes, I imagine what they would go with and the occasions on which I might wear them.

In perceiving anything, I might imagine it transformed in some way, coloured differently, radically restructured, or simply moved to another location. Indeed, it is difficult to find an experience in which the imagination is not somehow at play.

At first glance it may appear that the world of imagination, of fantasy and daydreaming, offer little else than some mindless escape from the demands of our lives—a waste of our time. Many psychoanalysts have observed that an inability to fantasise is just as pathological as an excessive immersion in fantasy. Our imaginative fantasy life moves us forward, opens up possibilities, allowing us to contemplate alternatives, imbuing our lives with meaning, making the lived experience richer.

Our inner world of fantasy and 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 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.

In the words of Jung:

*“The great joy of play, fantasy and the imagination is that for a time we are utterly spontaneous, free to imagine anything. In such a pure state of pure being, no thought is ‘unthinkable’ (Jung on Active Imagination p.5)*

Throughout his work, Jung came to recognise that the world of our imagination, fantasies and dreams was an authentic reality; in other words, just as real as the world in which we live and that this imaginal world contained a “witches’ cauldron” of inner knowledge and wisdom.

*“Every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination, and have their source in ... fantasy. Not the artist alone, but every creative individual whatsoever owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy. The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, a characteristic also of the child, and as such it appears inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has every yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable.” Psychological Types CW  
6 par 93*

Here Jung is telling us that whether we are children or adults and whether we are conscious of it or not, imaginative activity goes on within us all the time and that this imaginative activity is part of our inborn psyche expressed in many ways—through play, dreams, fantasy, creativity and active imagination.

It is through this playing with fantasy, through imagination that we:

- Have a direct experience of the unconscious and active engagement with it.
- Break down the barriers we face in our lives and move beyond our circumstances.
- Connect to the life enhancing emotions of joy and interest which have the power to heal.
- Gradually transform troublesome complexes.
- Enlarge and enrich the personality.
- Constantly progress in our lives.
- Access our inner wisdom.
- Undertake the journey of individuation, moving towards becoming authentic.

*In the words of C.S. Lewis, “reason is the organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning”.*

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## The use of imagination in psychotherapy

Within a number of different types of therapeutic approaches—far too many to discuss in this module in detail, we are able to see how the realm of imagination and fantasy is accessed in order to help clients to clarify and uncover their past, explore relationship difficulties, resolve conflicting feelings and desires and seek truth and clarity. This accessing of the imaginative realm takes place in the hope that clients may unburden themselves from a myriad of complex thoughts or feelings and in this setting imagination and fantasy form a vital role in the transformation and healing process.

An overview of some of these modalities provides insight into the richness and possibilities that can be harnessed via the imaginative process and the number of ways in which we might approach the unconscious and put the facility (faculty) of imagination to work.

Freud, the father of psychology, points us towards the importance of imagery, metaphor, symbols and dreams. Exploring the mind without hindrance, censorship or embarrassment is a key tenant of Freudian therapy, and is known as free association. The idea behind this concept is that by speaking freely, a person will, through imagery, metaphor and language, reveal deeper aspects of their unconscious mind, which for several reasons may have been covered up. Freud believed much could be deciphered from a person's unconscious processes, bringing to light and making the individual's inner life clearer through the use of language, imagery and metaphor. He encouraged people to express any and all thoughts which floated into their minds during a session. No image, thought or idea was too small, and all held value and meaning.

This key premise—the expression of all thoughts and mental imagery without censorship and the value and meaning to be found in all images that arise—forms a vital foundation to the art of Active Imagination.

In Gestalt therapy, dialogue is active and can be verbal or nonverbal. Nonverbal imagery can be accessed through song, dance, sculpting, painting or any modality that

expresses the energy of the inner world and the energy between the therapist and the client. According to Gerald Corey, therapy can include:

*“imagining a threatening future event; guided fantasy and visualisation, setting up an imaginary dialogue between a client and some significant person in his or her life; dramatising the memory of a painful event; reliving a particularly profound early experience in the present; assuming the identity of one’s mother or father through role-playing; focusing on gestures, posture, and other nonverbal signs of inner expression.”*

The inner world and the unconscious can be approached through nonverbal mediums such as song, dance, sculpting and painting. Jung encouraged his patients to draw, paint or dance when they were depressed or beset with conflicting desires. Jung himself describes how he sketched every morning in a notebook, small circular drawings, a mandala which seemed to correspond to his inner situation at the time, saying:

*“My mandalas, were cryptograms concerning the state of the self which were presented to me anew each day. In them I saw the self – that is my whole being – actively at work. To be sure, at first I could only dimly understand them; but they seemed to me highly significant, and I guarded them like precious pearls. I had the distinct feeling that they were something central, and in time I acquired through them a living conception of the self. The self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents this monad, and corresponds to the microcosmic nature of the psyche.”. (Jung Memories, Dreams, Reflections, p.195 - 196)*

From Gestalt therapy we also see how the unconscious can be invited to dialogue with the consciousness through guided fantasy and visualisation or through carrying on an imaginary dialogue between conflicting parts of the psyche or through dialoguing with the inner child or other archetype within the psyche and so on.

In Play therapy, adults and/or children engage in a therapeutic alliance that focuses on play, choosing from a variety of modalities such as movement (body play), sand play,

dream play, nature play, social play, pretend (fantasy) play, creative play, storytelling, and vocal play.

In Expressive arts therapy, similar to its cousins drama therapy and music therapy, people utilise expressive arts such as writing, drama, dance, movement, painting and/or music to explore their responses, reactions, and insights through pictures, sounds, explorations, and encounters with art processes. A person is not required to have artistic ability to use or benefit from expressive arts therapy.

Jung himself used a number of expressive techniques in active imagination, writing, drawing and painting to give symbolic form to his experiences, so keep these different imaginative expressions in mind as we journey towards active imagination and the form that this may take in your unique starting point into an active imagination experience.

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## Conclusion

Imagination and fantasy are vital to our psychological health, forming a bridge between our inner and outer worlds. In the words of Jung:

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

Imagination and fantasy allow us to make the unconscious conscious, to uncover and see the patterns directing our lives, providing us with a means to see alternatives, opening up new ways of being and helping us on our journey towards finding meaning and experiencing the richness of the lived experience.

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## Application

Let's begin our exploration into the imaginative realm by becoming aware of the fantasies that fill our days. As you go about your life during the upcoming week, keep a notebook by your side and jot down your daydreams and fantasies.



- Include sexual fantasies.
- Include objects or clothing that you are fantasising about buying.
- Include holidays that you are dreaming about taking?
- Include songs that suddenly appear and play on repeat throughout the day.
- Take a look at the lyrics of these songs. What fantasy is playing out?
- Include fictional characters or movies or books that keep popping into your mind. Conversations with others that you are playing on repeat, turning over and over again, replaying in your mind.

### **Recommended reading**

Memories, Dreams, Reflections by C.G. Jung

The Force of Fantasy by Ethel S. Person