

Review of: "Jung on the Meaning of Life"

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Jung and the Meaning of Life by Sanford Drob: A Review by Alan Briskin, Ph.D.

In this wonderful paper, Jung's seemingly contradictory declarations about the meaning of human life or lack thereof are held together side by side for the reader to witness, to ponder, and to use for nurturing their own personal inquiry. I have been a long time student of Jung's writing and have stayed in Jung's castle like structure, Bollingen Tower, built on the shores of Lake Zurich. There, I viewed the mural of Philemon he painted, an imaginal figure who served as Jung's guide into the psyche. This article, in its own fashion, serves as a guide into the complexity and spaciousness of Jung's writing and thinking.

From the beginning, the article presents Jung's forceful declaration that "just as the body needs food...the psyche needs to know the meaning of existence." Yet the author also portrays Jung's radical doubts and disclaimers, "I should be prepared," Jung writes "to make transcendental statements, but on one condition: that I state at the same time the possibility of their being untrue."

Jung wrote most intensely from the period of 1914, after his break with Freud, to the end of his life in 1961 with the publication of his autobiographical *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. His private reflections, contained in the *Red Book*, took place during his middle years, a period from 1914-1930, when he was 39 years old and extending to age 55. This was a period of great turmoil and even greater insight, fueled by the bold break with Freud and his standing on the precipice of a daring and expansive world view.

During the same years that Jung's relationship with Freud was deteriorating (1910-1913), a new professional relationship was beginning. Albert Einstein, teaching in Zurich, would join Jung for dinners and discuss ideas that culminated in his general relativity theory. These conversations led Jung into his own explorations of relativity's association with psychic phenomena and also foreshadowed a future relationship with the quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli. Jung and Pauli would work out what would become one of Jung's most well-known accomplishments, a formulation joining meaning with randomness, the idea of synchronicity.

This background is helpful for recognizing the article's intention to show that what might appear random or contradictory elements of Jung's writing was part of a greater search for wholeness. Jung's particular genius was his ability to hold the tension of opposites, recognizing randomness, irrationality, shadow and the search for meaning as all complementary with wisdom. As the author recounts from a passage in Jung's *Red Book*, "the melting together of sense and nonsense... Produces the supreme meaning."

For Jung, solutions to ultimate questions was not the goal because cerebral answers would result in failures to comprehend and feel the full range of human experience. Instead he was seeking mystery, the embodied relationship to a larger reality beyond cognitive understanding. This fueled Jung's conviction that being with the unknown and transcendent vitalized the psyche and soul.

The article is particularly useful in recognizing Jung's wrestling with the value of taking the question of meaning seriously but not falling prey to Western assumptions about how that can be achieved. Jung recognized a prejudice in the Western world view that belittled chance and distrusted one's instinctual spontaneous nature, admiring rationality, causality, and repetition which led to imitation. "Mere imitation is childish," the author writes of Jung's view regarding the search for meaning.

Instead Jung proposed that self-realization had divine significance, one that transcended individual morality and collective conventions. Each of us must find our own path without rigid formulas or prescribed solutions. Quoting from the Red Book, the author cites Philemon, Jung's guide into the psyche, that Christ's work "would be completed if men managed to live their own lives without imitation." I am reminded of a similar sentiment from the Japanese Zen tradition that Jung admired, poet Matsuo Basho: "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought."

The article also discusses Jung's radical and paradoxical relationship to mortality. Jung recognized mortality and the encounter with the psychological experience of non-existence as essential for growth, yet also an experience that is fearful and overwhelming. "But when one is alone and it is night and so dark...then all profundities about life slink off to some undiscoverable hiding place, and fear envelops the sleepless one like a smothering blanket." Jung was never shy about naming the fears and uncertainties we all face.

Yet, at the same time, Jung never failed to recognize the pragmatic and resilient quality of the psyche. The article quotes Jung's reflections from an interview in 1959, two years before Jung's own death: "I have treated many old people and it's quite interesting to watch what the unconscious is doing with the fact that it is apparently threatened with a complete end. It disregards it. Life behaves as if it were going on, and so I think it is better for an old person to live on, to look forward to the next day, as if he had to spend centuries, and then he lives properly...looking forward to the great adventures that lie ahead."

These previous examples are a few of the paradoxes and riddles that the author animates from Jung's life and writings. I think the reader will find many more. One of my favorite sections of the article involves how Jung wrestled with the idea of life's continuation, even questioning whether physical death was the end of consciousness.

Jung recognized life's meaning as more than simply existence. He was fascinated and stirred by encounters with different kinds of people, transcendent mystery, and questions carried forward through generations. He believed each soul entered the world with a question and the discovery of that question led to a more fulfilling life. However, he also recognized that it is not simply the answer to the question that satisfies, but how the pursuit and posing of that question enlarges its meaning for the world. In *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, the author notes, Jung wrote:

I also think of the possibility that through the achievement of an individual a question enters the world, to which he must provide some kind of answer. For example, my way of posing the question as well as my answer may be unsatisfactory. That being so, someone who has my karma – or I myself – would have to be reborn in order to give a more complete answer.”

The questions Jung raised and the open-ended ways he pursued them are this paper's gift to his legacy. Like good seed, the author provides the reader with ample opportunity for greater cultivation.