Brief Psychotherapy: A Jungian Approach
Dennis L. Merritt, Ph.D.

Jungian analysis is generally a long-term process, but the realities of modern health care makes a brief therapy model necessary. In this article I will discuss how I, as a Jungian psychoanalyst, conceptualize and use a Jungian analytic approach in brief therapy. Ten to twenty sessions is often the limit covered by insurance, with many managed care organizations and HMO’s reducing the number to six to ten sessions. To understand my brief therapy approach an overview of Jungian concepts is necessary.

Most important in Jung’s system is the idea of the collective unconscious. This postulates that all humans are basically alike with some fundamental differences between the sexes. We have brains that are basically alike, a sexual dichotomy of physiological and morphological differences, have the same basic intra-psychic structure and activity, the same basic needs, go through the same stages of life, and have basic ways of perceiving and responding to the world emotionally and behaviorally. Charles Darwin was the first to recognize universal emotional expressions in human faces throughout the world. The collective unconscious is composed of archetypes, operating like inherited psychic organs. Archetypes are discovered by looking at basic themes and imagery in religions, fairytales, classic stories and art across time and around the world and by looking at the basic aspects of human development and behavior. Each person has the potential to manifest the full complement of archetypes with genetic differences and life experiences determining the potential strength of the various archetypes and their combinations. More testosterone for example is likely to produce more aggressive, Ares-type behavior. (See “The He Hormone” by Andrew Sullivan in The New York Times Magazine, April 2, 2000, Section 6, pp. 46-89) Some factors causing the constellation (classical theory) or emergence (complexity theory) of archetypes associated with masculine or feminine energy are (1) what it feels
like to be in a male or female body in terms of shoulder versus hip
development, etc., (2) the different hormones flowing through one’s
system and (3) the feel and experience of the genitalia.

The interaction of operative archetypes is succinctly portrayed
by the psychological dimensions of astrology irrespective of a
possible synchronistic link to the stars. Having a sense of the
archetype active within us and/or in our culture links us to all of
humanity in a mythic manner.

It is particularly important that the archetype of the good
mother emerges in a child. This is necessary for a basic sense of
well-being for a child as well as an adult. A child comes into the
world with a potential for the archetype of the good mother to
emerge. It perceives and can respond behaviorally and emotionally to
what D. W. Winnicott called “good enough” mothering from the
environment. The myth-making potential of the psyche turns the
“good enough” mothering experience into the Virgin Mary in a
Christian context, a fairy godmother in fairytales, or as a tree with a
gift-giving white bird as in the Grimm’s version of “Cinderella.” The
image and particular aspects of the personal mother, such as red hair
or a certain height or body build, becomes imprinted as the personal
image of the archetype of the good mother. This relationship of the
personal to the timeless collective is often confused or unrecognized
by many psychologies, resulting in a loss of a sense of the mythic in
one’s life.

An easily recognizable archetype in cultures throughout the
world and across time is the archetype of the hero. Luke Skywalker
and Batman are recent incarnations of the hero archetype in American
movie culture. The archetype of the divine child was seen in semi-
mythic form as Fiona in the movie The Secret of Roan Inish and more
commonly as the younger daughter Penny in Ulee’s Gold. The
archetype of the trickster as expressed by the Greek god Hermes and
the archetype of the puer aeternis (eternal youth) was well
represented as Ferris Buhler in Ferris Buhler’s Day Off. Other
archetypes in the movies are the witch (Glen Close’s character in
Fatal Attraction), the magician (in Batman and Morpheus in Matrix),
the Wise Old Man (Ben Obi Wan Kenobi in Star Wars) and the Wise
Old Woman (the mother in A Passage to India).
Four archetypes particularly important for understanding personality structure are the persona, shadow, soul image (anima and animus) and the Self. The persona is the archetype of adaptation, the mask the individual wears that is molded by social mores, values and expectations for individual and professional behavior. It is the archetype of the interface between the ego and the outer world. It helps tune one into the expectations of the world that, if not met, will generate considerable friction between oneself and the world. A classic presentation of defiance of cultural expectations and the consequences was Paul Newman’s Luke in *Cool Hand Luke*. The personas of doctors, teachers, bankers and rock stars are distinct. Total identity with the persona leads to a one-dimensional person. Difficulties in the transition out of the culturally determined personas of the 1950’s was portrayed in the movie *Pleasantville*.

The shadow is an archetype of the same sex as the individual that has positive or negative traits that are suppressed and unlived for individual, family, religious and/or cultural reasons. The shadow is often seen as the darker side of two brothers, as illustrated by Richie Valens’ brother in *La Bomba* and Brad Pitt’s character in *A River Runs Through It*. The deadly consequences of not recognizing and bringing a homosexual shadow into consciousness was represented by the retired Marine general in *American Beauty*.

The anima is the archetype of the feminine traits and qualities in a male, personified as his inner woman in ideal or problematic form. These traits are more deeply unconscious than the shadow and therefore more likely to get projected onto a woman. Leonard Cohen’s song *Suzanne* is an excellent illustration of the anima in popular music. The animus is the inner masculine side of a woman. The anima and animus in dreams are personifications of the deeper unconscious levels, putting a face on the unconscious, and a counterpoint to the persona as the face between the ego and the outer world. How one relates to the anima and animus therefore is an important indicator of the quality of the relationship with the unconscious. Movies present a full range of anima and animus figures in the male and female characters, since most characters in the movies are idealized in some way.

The inner nucleus of the psyche is the Self, archetype of wholeness and a centering force. It has a numinous (inner light),
sacred sense, the experience of which is of utmost importance to the individual. Jung made an important contribution to psychology with his recognition of the many forms the Self can manifest in dreams: a circle; particular animals like an elephant, horse or bear; the number four or groups of four; a tree (the Tree of Life in many cultures and the Sundance tree in Lakota Sioux culture); a crystal (symbolic of order and spirit in nature); a diamond; etc. At the cultural level the Self is expressed as God, Yahweh, Jesus, the Tao, Buddha, Mohammed, Wakantanka, etc. Of great significance is that the contra-sexual archetype, the anima and animus, at their deeper levels are a function of the Self. Union with the opposite sex, including sexual union, is one of the most common images of the union of opposites, symbolic of wholeness and therefore of the Self. Its archetypal dimensions are recognized by marriage endings in many fairytales and movies. The longing for union and wholeness is the archetypal core of many love songs.

Recognition of the god image in the form of numinous animals in dreams can be used by the therapist to help connect a person in a sacred way to the animal world and all of nature. Animals can appear in our dreams in no less a sacred way than in indigenous peoples. It’s how these images are worked with and consciously recognized that makes all the difference. The analyst can also work with numinous landscapes in dreams to help the analysand develop a sacred sense about the environment. See the “meadow dream” in the introduction to the “Spirit in the Land” section and other ecopsychology articles on my website. Therapists can and should play a vital role in helping clients develop a deep, even sacred, connection to the land and in developing a sense of place.

How the four personality structure archetypes operate in an individual’s psyche tells the analyst and analysand a great deal about the person. They can show where a person is stuck, trapped, projects their psychological content onto others, and why they have difficulties with particular people and situations. Incorporated into these four archetypes is Jung’s psychological type system—introvert, extravert, thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition. There is an innate tendency towards becoming one of the sixteen combinations of psychological types, for example, an introverted intuitive type with thinking as an auxiliary function. Knowing one’s type helps to understand how one perceives and responds to the world, what things
come easily and what one has to struggle with, and which people, typologically speaking, one has difficulty with. Three Jungian typological tests help evaluate these functions. The psychological type test has become popular in the business community to help place psychological types in jobs most suited to them. An intuitive type, for example, would suffer in an accounting job that requires close attention to details: a sensation type would be more “natural” for such a job.

Cognitive psychology research has determined that 90 to 95% of our responses to the world are unconsciously determined. The Jungian approach is to work with unconscious material, realizing that dreams provide the best, unvarnished access to the unconscious. Dreams succinctly reveal one’s complexes (“hang-ups”) and show how the unconscious is wrestling with the difficulties to move the individual beyond the problem. The complexes are the dark spots in a person’s psyche, areas loaded with affect, and indicative of maladaptation. Dreams provide images for these otherwise nebulous feelings and affects, making it easier to recognize the complexes and keep them in conscious view. It’s when they are unseen and unrecognized that they attack us from behind and trip us up. The people and situations in our dreams literally personify the energies, problems and anxieties we live with. Working with dreams allows us to consciously enter the dramatic play created by the more complete psyche, the Self. Every person has a master playwright and visual artist within that molds experiences and impressions of the individual’s personal life into an archetypal framework of compelling intensity. Dreams provide a focus for the analytic work, with life history, especially early family life, giving one a sense of how the complex developed and why a particular archetype was constellated or emerged.

The power of dream images can reveal how one feels at a deep level and often shocks the individual with their stark presentations. A very intelligent, educated woman functioning as a subservient housewife and mother dreamt she was going around the house picking up feces from her husband and children. I reminded her of this dream many times during our work to lead her to full consciousness of how her own deeper Self viewed her subservient position.
At the core of every complex is an archetype, so complexes are one access to the mythopoetic realm of the psyche. The modus operandi of the mythopoetic level appears strange and irrational to the Western scientifically conditioned mind. A feel for myths and fairy tales is essential for working in a Jungian manner with this realm. Archetypes are the most basic level of the neurosis, psychosis or complex, far below the symptom level. Work at this level has the farthest reaching consequences in the individual’s life, ramifying outwardly like ripples from a stone dropped in the water. To discover one’s myth or fairy tale and take a courageous attitude in dealing with the demons and dragons therein is what the Jungian process is all about. As an analyst one has to understand the basic stages and process of transformation that occurs deep within the psyche. Jung realized that the alchemists provided westerners with the best imaginal approach to this level of work. The more enlightened alchemists realized they were symbolically working on turning their psychological lead into gold. Understanding the symbolic aspect of alchemy is a sort of roadmap of the soul for a Jungian. (See The Dairy Farmer's Guide to the Universe, volume 1, Appendix D: The Alchemy of Psychoanalysis)

The stages and processes of alchemy can be seen in fairy tales. “Cinderella” is the most universal fairytale theme, with over 700 versions world-wide. The story of abandonment, loss of love and recognition is therefore a most basic human issue. This theme has been recognized by the now dominant psychological theories of object relations and self psychology and studies on mother-child bonding. It has moved psychoanalysis past the classical Freudian hang-up with the Oedipal complex.

It is absolutely necessary for the analyst to have undergone a thorough personal analysis. Only by doing this can the analyst be aware of his or her own complexes, and therefore be less likely to project them onto the analysand (counter transference) which interferes with the analytic process. The analyst’s analysis gives the analyst a feel for the unconscious and an appreciation for the symbolic realm.

Sex is recognized by Jungians as only one aspect of being human. It is especially important to recognize the symbolic dimension of sex as mentioned before in discussing the anima,
animus, and the Self. Jungians don’t shrink dreams to a sexual interpretation. Sexual and father-mother-sibling issues are explored psychodynamically while attempting to see these issues as aspects of basic, archetypal human experiences.

Images are amplified, “fattened out,” by referencing whatever myth, fairytale, legend, poem, great literature, painting, etc. they may relate to. The analysand is encouraged to work with the dream images to further connect with and understand them through a process called active imagination. It may include an imaginary dialogue with images, journaling, painting, writing a poem, dancing, creating a sandtray (see Menu), etc.

The analysand may have to research an animal in a dream to learn its natural history as well as its occurrence in myths and fairy tales. Everyone has their totem animal symbolic of an aspect of the Self or representing the totality of the Self.

This kind of work extends the dream and furthers a relationship with the unconscious. The Chinese ideogram for the sage, “the ear listening to the inner King,” represents the goal and process of the Jungian approach. A dialogue between the ego and the Self, with the Self and not the ego at center stage, is what one seeks to establish in therapy and in one’s life.

Another experience Jungians pay attention to is synchronicity. This concept, foreign to most Westerners, is that the environment can mirror a psychic state, that there are meaningful coincidences. For example, one can formulate a question about a life difficulty, toss coins to generate the number of a hexagram (combination of six solid [yang] or broken [yin] lines), and get a meaningful answer from the I Ching, a Chinese book of wisdom. The experience of this process gives one a sense of deep relatedness to others and to the environment. (See "Use of the I Ching in the Analytic Setting" in the Menu).

Timely use of the I Ching in conjunction with dream work can have a profound effect on the analysesand and bring about major shifts in their life. A man in his early 30’s was getting very stoned on marijuana every two or three weeks. He brought a dream into his fourth or fifth analytical session that a doctor and nurse his age had
just delivered a baby on the top floor of a many-storied hospital building. The baby was born dead. The doctor tells the nurse that he suspects the reason for the still birth is that he was stoned during the delivery of the baby.

Babies can symbolize a new birth, a new beginning in the psyche. A birth dream is often seen at the beginning of the analytic process or when the therapy begins to move or takes a significant new direction. Smoking marijuana is often described as getting high, represented in the dream by the top floor of the multi-storied hospital building. The meaning was clear to the analysand but it was difficult to think of giving up something he enjoyed so much.

This is an example of a point in therapy where I suggest using the *I Ching*. He asked about smoking marijuana and got hexagram 12. Standstill / Stagnation with no moving lines, meaning the situation was not changing. The hexagram consists of three yang (solid) lines atop three yin (broken) lines. Yang lines are associated with light and spirit and move upward, with three yang lines together being associated with heaven. Yin lines are heavy and move downward, with three yin lines together being associated with the earth. Commentary on the hexagram says heaven and earth are out of relation to each other, which leads to standstill and stagnation.

Connections between dream imagery and hexagram answers can almost always be seen and it was obvious to this analysand. People often get stoned to escape, to fly above, depressive feelings. This is contrary to the alchemical process of facing the lead in one’s life as the first step of a transmutation to gold. The combined impact was great enough for the analysand to give up smoking for four months, after which the habit was broken.

The analyst functions as a psychic mid-wife, helping the analysand to understand what their unconscious is saying and what suggestions it has for a new direction. Analysts work imaginally and symbolically with dreams and life material to help the individual see their life as a story and a personal myth. The sense the analysand gets from the unconscious is of being led by some force much deeper and wiser than the conscious ego. We are of the Self which extends beyond the boundaries of time and space as synchronistic experiences demonstrate. Following its lead can give one a sense of fate and
destiny, a sense of meaning in one’s life—a process Jung called individuation.

All indigenous cultures had ways of forcing people into the deeper levels of the unconscious using initiations, visions quests, intense rituals or deep meditative and imaginative processes. Today most people don’t undertake the journey into the unconscious and wholeness unless compelled to do so. Loss of a job, a divorce, death of a friend or family member, a life threatening illness or just plain emptiness and boredom may compel a person to seek a new approach to life. Jung said we don’t become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by bringing the light of consciousness into the unconscious.

The Jungian approaches described here cannot be used with every analysand in brief therapy. There may be tremendous resistance to looking at unconscious material: it may seem too overwhelming and frightening to be approached in this manner or in a limited number of sessions. But for many people this approach can be the most direct, powerful and transformative experience possible within ten to twenty sessions. Dream work, active imagination, the I Ching and the psychological type test can quickly give analyst and analysand images and feelings for the motivating forces and complexes that affect the analysand, plus an understanding of their personal psychic structure. The neurosis, one’s cross to bear, becomes a stepping stone to a greater sense of wholeness and depth in one’s life. Within twenty sessions, one may be fortunate enough to get one’s personal image of the Self, an experience so profound that it can establish a foundation in the individual that gives them courage to face whatever challenges, inner and outer, that life presents to them.

e-mail: DLMerritt@cal.berkeley.edu

Telephone: Madison: (608) 255-9330 ext. 5

                                   Milwaukee: (414) 332-7400

Fax: (608) 255-7810

Website: www.EcoJung.com