

Jung's Theory of Active Imagination and the Shadow: An interview with Anna Guerra

Zoe Tao: Thank you so much for coming in today. Will you tell me a little bit about the work you do at the Jung Center?

Anna Guerra: My name is Anna Guerra, and I'm a psychotherapist in private practice and I have been teaching here at the Jung Center for about thirteen years now. And I teach a variety of classes-I've taught just about every class on analytical psychology and there were a couple of years where I did a two-year program where I taught all the basics in Analytical Psychology, all the Jungian courses from archetypes to shadow to complexes to dreams to active imagination. So what I do here is teach courses on psychology from a depth psychotherapy perspective.

ZT: And so when did you get started at the Jung Center?

AG: This October will mark thirteen years, and I started with a class on Jung's technique of active imagination which is a topic that I teach here pretty regularly-and one in which I am very, very interested in.

ZT: So would you say it's one of your favorite theories of Jung's?

AG: It is one of my favorite theories of Jung's-as a matter of fact, Jung himself said that his psychotherapy, or his technique of active imagination, explained his method of psychotherapy. So if you understand how his technique of active imagination works, you understand how he liked to work in psychotherapy.

ZT: What do you think is the greatest benefit of active imagination to people?

AG: You know, it has several benefits-but basically in the technique of active imagination, it's a twofold process. You're allowing the unconscious to manifest, you're allowing that part of yourself that is that you're unaware of to come forth in whatever way that you are you have chosen to do so-because active imagination uses the expressive arts. So through the use of painting or drawing or writing or dancing or sculpting, or other expressive techniques, you are giving form to the imagination and the unconscious. And so that's the first part-you let the unconscious come up and then the second part is to make sense of what's there. Jung said that the imagination was the image-producing function of the psyche. So the imagination produces images, and then the ego, or that other part of us that can make sense of things, makes sense of what emerges. So you can see how that translates to psychotherapy-people come into psychotherapy with all sorts of problems and oftentimes, they're not aware of what's going on-why am I behaving this way, why am I not happy, and they just can't put their finger on it. Sometimes people do come in with problems, like I have some anxiety, or I have to resolve some trauma, or I feel depressed-but what we start to find as we start to do the work that often part of the issue is that they're unaware of what's contributing to these things. So we have to find ways to become aware and help the individual become aware of what's functioning in them.

ZT: What do you think is the big take away from therapy practice that clients can do on their own in their daily lives?

AG: I think that it's important for us to have an understanding that we are individuals that are not completely aware of our motivations and our desires-that there are parts of us that are unconscious-and that there is this depth underneath. And so it's important to have that understanding and then to have some ways to access those parts of ourselves that we are not aware of. And there's all sorts of ways to do that. And sometimes it could be just tuning in and having a mindful moment. People talk a lot about mindfulness today. Mindfulness simply means paying attention. So if you can take away from your experience in psychotherapy that idea, that we periodically can pay attention to what's going, pay attention to what is my feeling, what are my thoughts, what are the images, what are the fantasies in me-then you've taken away something very valuable that can help you in psychotherapy or in your daily life.

ZT: What do you think is the most difficult thing for clients to grasp, or to attain?

AG: You know, there's a couple of things that come to mind. One is Jung's theory of the shadow. It's a very important theory and concept. We all have what Jung called the shadow parts of ourselves. These are parts of ourselves that have been deemed unacceptable, and that we repress because they've been unacceptable to our parents to our schools or other influences as they were growing up. And these parts of the repressed or denied, but they can wreak havoc on us. We act them out unconsciously because we are not aware of them and yet they're still part of us. And then sometimes there's parts of us that can actually have an enlivening quality, and sometimes we feel deadened and not whole because there's parts of us that have been relegated to the shadow. So it's important to recognize that there is such a thing, and to work towards bringing these into a more integrated sense of self.

ZT: Do you think that it's an issue that not only people with very heavy shadows, with heavy psychopathology have, but that everyone who is going about daily life may have to a lesser extent?

AG: I think that everyone going about through daily life have in their shadows parts of themselves that are more damaging, or have more of an impact on their psychic economy. But I think we all have shadows-it's part of our socialization process. As we are being socialized, we are told this is acceptable and this is not acceptable, and that's just part of our being socialized and civilized.

ZT: And how does this translate to the classes that you teach-a therapy session versus a class you teach at the Jung Center?

AG: It's a little bit different-I like to bring in examples in my classes. I will bring in things from movies. For example, I teach a complex class periodically as well-Jung's theory of complexes and sometimes I'll show clips from movies that depict how a complex works. Sometimes I've shown the movie American Beauty, for example. And there's an example in there where there is this coronel who rails against homosexuals throughout the movie. And then at the end he tries to kiss the Kevin Spacey character and we realize that the reason he was railing against that homosexuality is because he hates that in himself-he has a complex. It's a shadow piece in him and the movie depicts very nicely that enormous energy and self-hatred we have towards those parts of ourselves that are unacceptable.

ZT: And so when you look at a person and you see someone who is doing harmful things to others, it's something that's kind of reflective of how they treat themselves as well?

AG: Sometimes, yeah. When people have very strong reactions towards others, when they rail against this other-they don't just have a philosophical problem or theological problem with whatever this other person is doing when they have that kind of strong reaction-something's up. And it's probably a shadow piece.

ZT: What do you think is one of the most frequently occurring shadows in our postmodern society?

AG: Oh boy, there's a lot of that. If you think about how some men, for example, were raised to not have a tender side, to deny their feelings, and oftentimes that's one of the most damaging things in their socialization. And you can see how that's expressed in some men's inability to have tender moments with other people, with their wives, with their children-to not have those kinds of connections, that in itself can be very damaging. And racism is another one-we can project onto the other the people that look so different from us, who are different those aspects of ourselves that have been deemed unacceptable. That person is lazy for example, or that person is the person who is responsible for crime, or for my not having a job or for my not having success or whatever.

ZT: And so when someone is hurting themselves, they're often dehumanizing others?

AG: When somebody is hurting themselves, they're often dehumanizing others. An example that I often see in my practices is that we can have people that are very harsh critics, very critical of others. And normally when I see this I think that this person is also very hard on themselves. Yeah, it goes both ways.

ZT: Do you see this a lot in the classes you teach as well among your students, who are harsh critics of themselves or afraid to show or to reach out because they're very critical?

AG: I think there is a progression-I think sometimes as people start to come to the Jung Center and learn about the shadow and about complexes, they are much better able to understand how that works. And you see people coming here for a while accept themselves more and more, and start to embrace that idea of wholeness and authenticity and really yearn for the experience of being more authentic.

ZT: Do you think people often change careers or change life paths because of coming here?

AG: Yes I think so, and I'm actually an example of that. I was an attorney in my late twenty's. I graduated from law school when I was twenty-four, and I practiced for seven years, so about thirty-two. And the reason I became a Jungian-actually a psychotherapist-was that I went to a negotiation seminar, on how to negotiate cases of all things, legal cases, and the professor there that was teaching the course talked about Carl Jung and his theory of archetypes. And I had taken psychology courses before, but they had been behavioral classes. But the way he talked about this kind of understanding of ourselves through the archetypes really excited me. So I left that course, that workshop, and I immediately got on the phone and I called somebody who I knew came to the Jung Center and I said, I really need to learn more about this Jung guy. And within the year I was in analysis, within a year I was back in school, and changing career paths.

ZT: And so how has it been for you-especially since you have the professional comparison between what you see in a law workplace as opposed to in a therapy workplace?

AG: When I was an attorney, there were satisfying aspects of that-I'm very analytical, and I like analysis. That has helped me as a psychotherapist, but it felt very much like I was patching things up. And in my own practice, because there is a depth perspective, I get to go in a lot deeper with people. And I feel like I can make and help people make significant changes, so it's different.

ZT: Do you feel like there's a lot that you learn from your clients as well, as you go?

AG: Oh absolutely. I learn from them, and I learn from them and I learn a lot about how collective stories work. I had this group for many, many years-it was an active imagination group-and people came in every week and they drew images from their unconscious. Sometimes they were the images from their dreams. And I got to see the archetypes, the images that exist in our collective stories, in our religions, and in our fairy tales, just spontaneously emerge and be relevant to an individual psyche. And that is a very exciting thing, to be among something so profoundly alive.

ZT: And that's so powerful that even someone's trauma or suffering is never experienced alone-it's never something that happens independently of others.

AG: It does not happen independently of others. And one of the things that Jung was famous for saying was that one of the things that we connect to when we connect to the universal story is how we are not alone, that my story is a story of mankind.