

## **Psyche and Soul: An interview with Dr. Herb Agan**

Zoe Tao: Thank you for coming in today! Will you tell me a little bit about the work you've done as a clinical psychologist?

Herb Agan: Yes. It helps that we define our terms. Psyche means “soul” in Greek. It’s the same word for butterfly and breath and mind, which the academics like to use. As a psychologist, I enjoy helping individuals and couples and families find healing and new tools for living, while they discover a deeper meaning in their current crisis. My daughter, when she was a teenager, used to say that I'm half a psychologist, as in “a psycho.” Cute, eh? Soul work looks for something deeper that is unfolding in our life through dream work, synchronicities, feelings, neuroses, fantasies, life events and complexes, which lead to our true self.

I've been consciously involved in soul, the presence of the Divine and unconscious forces, since I was a teenager. But while finishing my studies in business at the University of Texas, I had a spiritual awakening that led me in to study theology and join a Christian youth ministry. While working with high school students in Dallas and East Texas, I realized they had a lot of problems that I didn't know how to address. That led me to Houston to get a Masters degree in Guidance and Counseling at UH and to serve at a Harris County mental health facility for almost seven years, working with a variety of mental and soul-wounded patients. While I was there, I did my doctoral work in clinical counseling psychology at the University of Houston. I started a private practice in which I am in my 35<sup>th</sup> year, as I continued to lecture at churches, schools, renewal conferences and medical and business venues.

Around twenty years ago, while I was speaking at spiritual renewal retreat, some woman asked me to have lunch and it turned out she hired lecturers for clinical psych at the University of Houston. Over a meal she said, “You need to be teaching at the University.” And I remember saying, “Well, I don’t get along with institutions, you see, I've been fired from three different church groups.” And she said, “Oh, you'd be perfect!” So, as it turned out, this fall I will start my nineteenth year at UH. I am so fortunate to be teaching five classes to students from so many different cultural backgrounds and soulful paths. I think depth psychology, which the Jungian approach is called, is essential for undergraduates in psychology to encounter. At the archetypal level we are all alike; at the level of our persona or personal presentation to the world, we are all uniquely different. The academic world acts as if the only things that matter are those human aspects that can be digitized, but we all know through our experience that there is great Mystery, wonder and passionate purpose underlying our humanity. Jung, among others in religions, philosophy and psychology, has taught us this, in our efforts to understand ourselves.

I've been coming to the Jung Center since 1975 or 1976, as a student of inspiring, informed and reflective teachers who have shaped and helped to form my thinking, values and passions as an evolving person, therapist and an effective pedagogue. I have continued in Jungian analysis regularly since 1984, and since Fall Semester 1996, I have been privileged and challenged to teach here one night a week, while teaching parenting classes weekdays at the Center for many years. Like I said, my daughter says I must be a bit of a “psycho.” But it’s all very fulfilling and fun to learn and grow with my teachers and students, and to get paid for what I love.

ZT: So what attracts you to Jungian psychology in particular?

HA: Well, some of that I just answered; but I will continue. Jung ideas sort of picked up from his own tradition, watching his father's, eyes go dead as a pastor, while church work seemed to kill the spirit in his father. And historically, Nietzsche was probably the first modern psychotherapist who said “God is dead”. But you have to finish the quote, “and we killed him”, using that language. Well, Jung came along and said something like, “Wait a minute-the Mystery, the numinous, the sacred, the soul of life, God is alive, in our ordinary life, in our complexes, in our depression, our anxiety, our dreams, in our synchronistic events--all through our experience.” Using Plato's idea, we're not human beings looking for some spiritual high, like the ecstasy of the Astros winning or singing an old hymn or taking communion or falling in love, but that we're actually spiritual beings

having a human experience. Jung said that life is a luminous pause between two great mysteries. So we're born with a purpose and we're searching for meaning which involves re-connecting with our Source. Of course, I love that because that's what my understanding of the New Testament message is, which is that there's a life within us that wants to get out. So, I'm big into transformation and development of personality and the emergence of one's true Self. Jung just fits into my understanding very well, just as long as we don't overly define our terms. It's the experience we are after. It's Mystery we are encountering.

ZT: So tell me a little bit about the classes that you teach here at the Jung Center.

HA: I have taught many classes for many years. I try to teach classical Jungian psychology, while using many of the neo-Jungians and respecting other points of view. Jung said on his last BBC interview, "I am glad I am Jung and not a Jungian." Too funny and so wise! My first analyst, who had been an analyst of Professor Jung, said one time, "Jung is dead, but we're not, so let us try to figure this out."

I am sure that you know the old Chinese statement of "If you want to learn, teach." I want to learn a lot of things and I want to help others on their path. And I want to serve the Jung Center by offering what is relevant and needed in the community. I usually ask Jennifer or whoever is putting the class schedule together, "Tell me what's not being taught, that you think is important, and I'll teach that." So I've taught several classes on the midlife transition, since I have been in one for a couple of decades, it seems, Jung said "The program for life's morning is rendered inoperative in life's afternoon, for in the morning what was true will in the evening have become a lie." Many students love and respond to that class. Let's see, I've taught classes on Individuation—Jung's term for becoming your true self, classes on The Shadow, always draws a crowd, classes on complexes, which Jung said was the royal road to wholeness, classes on Archetypes (which my son used to call Archetypes), classes on the Self, the spiritual dimension of the psyche—which I'm doing this summer. Other classes that I have taught include: stages of Consciousness, Relationships, Finding your Calling, Living the Unlived Life, Never Waste a Crisis; Creative parenting; Dealing with Change; Healthy Families; Practical Jung; Singlehood; Anima/Animus Issues, etc., many classes on many topics. I've been very privileged because I love to study, I love to learn, and I've taken many classes here myself over the years.

ZT: Do you think there's a common thing that people seek out of these classes?

HA: Well that's a great question. I think the self, our true essence, is always coming up, not unlike the watermelon seeds in my garden that are all perking up. So, your unfolding life can't be held down. That's what Jung's whole point is. He had a positive view of the unconscious, whereas Freud thought the unconscious is where we dump stuff that wasn't acceptable in the conscious world. Jung saw it as the map of the soul, delineating Nature's intent with images and symbols. We're all searching for meaning and purpose and something deeper than satiating the appetites and instincts, which the collective always seems to be greatly engaged. And so, people from their twenty's to their eighty's come to my classes searching and seeking for knowledge, healing, understanding, meaning, creative expression and fellowship. What I appreciate so much about the Jung Center is that we provide a safe place where people can stop, learn and reflect to make sense of their lives, whether you are introverted or extraverted. And it's a place to connect with others who are consciously evolving and growing at whatever stage of awareness they find themselves.

ZT: What do you think are maybe some of the most pressing problems in psychology and daily life and culture today—and you mentioned this search for meaning?

HA: That's another great question, and, of course, this would be very Jungian for me to say... I don't know. Can you state it another way?

ZT: What are some of the most pressing problems maybe today in psychology and culture in daily life?

HA: Well, through social media, TV commercial onslots and the 24-hour news cycle, we are discovering the

diversity in the cultural and economic opportunities of America that has always been there, but, more recently, seems to invade the space of traditional, collective images. There seems to be an onslaught of many incoming missiles of ideas, values, relationships, religions, sexualities, customs, psychologies and personal expressions. Change is in the air and many are over-whelmed by it. Jung spoke of a necessary deconstruction as a prelude to a reconstruction of things in a more adaptive, creative way. This is a life-long process, personally, socially and globally. It threatens our stability and sense of self, especially when justice and fairness is undermined.

The world is deep, that there everything has meaning and value. One of the themes that I teach is that although we develop a different persona, or a mask, we are, at the archetypal level and the instinctual level, just the same. For example, every tribe, every culture, every group eats-and we eat different foods, based on our region and history and everything. And we all have babies and raise children, we all get married. We all have these great archetypal themes that are just common to everyone. And, actually, one of the things Jung did for us is awaken our understanding of these archetypes or human themes that run us and their positive and negative aspects.

He shared in the Vision Seminars that we all have a magic circle, a unique archetypal array that makes us different. But at the core level we're all unique expressions of some cosmic wonder trying to express itself in this thing called life. And it's nature's intent to get out whatever that is though the integration of the "good and bad" in our personality, for the common good.

And so, I teach that our commonality is that we're all people on the planet for a purpose. And what's unique is that we all experience and think it things differently. We all need love and acceptance. We all need to be heard and we all need to be valued for who we are. We all need a safe place to live and prosper in our interests. I think to understand myself, helps me to understand someone else. And to understand my history and my background and the issues that are part of my resolution dealing with my father and my mother, dealing with the collective, dealing with God and religious expression, helps me to understand that everybody else is working through these things too, even if they don't know it.

ZT: So you would say that you've learned a lot from your students as well.

HA: I told my class last Monday night that, first, I'm the number one student. And second, I'm the luckiest person in the world. Seriously! Teaching at that Jung Center! Here's all these wonderful people who are seeking, healing, knocking and looking with so much to offer and having impacting lives in the community. Many of them could be teaching the class, and I often say that. But I teach in order to learn. Jung said, "There's always two students in the counseling temenos, the sacred space of the counseling office. If there's not, something is going awry."

A lot about Jung is folklore from people who worked with him. One of the great analogies I heard in describing Jung as a teacher, healer, mystic declares that while Freud asked his students to sit at his feet so he could pontificate his truth in that one-up, patriarchal model, which is everywhere in the medical, religious and psychological world, Jung was described as the master teacher who asked students to stand on his shoulders to see what they could see. And so in my classes, and as a therapist, and as a person, I hope that I help people see more of what's going on in their lives, because the eternal Mystery is always up to something interesting, creative and fulfilling.