

# **Bushwhacking Through Narcissism: The Making of a Jungian Analyst**

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## Two

### **Lisa**

What I failed to learn from Mara did not leave me alone. I had been back in Boston only a few months after my graduation in Zürich when what I came to call the "wildness of the American psyche" frightened me and left me grateful that my practice was growing slowly. I thought I was fortunate to be suffering financial difficulties rather than overwhelmed with too much fragmentation in my consulting room. Even hospitalized patients in Switzerland did not seem to be so uncontained and explosive as the "garden variety neurotics" I was encountering at home.

I discussed this with a European psychiatrist who had been practicing in the United States for several years. She agreed with my observations and believed as I did that it must have something to do with the less structured nature of American society. The Swiss seemed to know where they belonged, geographically, professionally, and socially. Even disaffected youths who complained about the rigidity of the structure and bragged about their refusal to conform were contained at least by the certain knowledge of what it was they protested against.

Americans seem to have no such certainty. Everything is expected of us; our origins are supposed to be unimportant; for any American "can become President" or a millionaire or (best of all) famous -- although very few of us succeed at any of these things. We are alone in a chaos of social and economic forces we cannot understand. If we do not "win," there is something wrong with us, and we have only ourselves to blame.

Switzerland contains its citizens at the level of "persona," the realm of social consensus, where society's expectations and the metaphors for daily life are generally accepted. Americans know only that they must "succeed," rather like pioneers in a world of wild animals and savages. We are expected to meet daily soul-threatening crises with courage and aplomb but without benefit of models -- aside from the impossible idols of Hollywood, rock music, and entrepreneurship. As a society, we try to deal with the savagery and lack of discipline in our daily environment by making more and more laws and regulations to contain the chaos of sexuality, violence, influence-peddling, and the like. But there is little consensus for these measures. Indeed, they appear to exacerbate the contentious divisions of our public environment and to leave us adrift.

Jung mourned modern society's lack of "myth," a profound source of symbolic meaning that addresses itself to the soul's deepest needs (the collective unconscious). America shares this lack with Switzerland; but we suffer an additional lack of consensus at the level of persona, what Jung calls "collective consciousness."

The "wildness" or explosiveness I found in the American psyche seems to be a consequence of our not being contained at *either* level. The comparison with the Swiss demonstrated to me that a reliable set of persona expectations provides a defense against the terrors of a poorly integrated sense of selfhood. Thus Mara's deep inner divisiveness was not immediately apparent. She did not feel herself in danger of falling apart; there was "just" the recurrent depression. She believed she was functioning very well in her daily life, and indeed she did not seem to be mistaken. I felt her deeper fragility at a subliminal level that I could not articulate, and this guided my response to her dreams, which were direct communications from her deep woundedness. Her sense of security in everyday life provided a margin of safety, a vessel of containment for the forces we worked with.

Such was not at all the case with Lisa, one of the first Americans I worked with. She was about the same age as Mara, also married, also deeply wounded. But Lisa's daily functioning was seriously compromised by bulimia and alcoholism. Surely these were symptoms of "narcissistic issues," as they are often called, or a lack of a coherent sense of self. But her sense of hurtling from one crisis to another was too urgent to enable a leisurely consideration of her dreams. In fact we did no dreamwork at all.

I was in the soup immediately and threw theory to the winds. I felt her distress as an overwhelming sense of isolation. The impulses that moved her felt "sick" and "crazy" to Lisa and proved her unacceptability as a person. She believed, and I am sure she was right, that she had an unerring capacity to recognize the patterns and traits of bulimia in others. In her mind, she belonged with these pitiful misfits, destroying themselves through bingeing and vomiting because they had no right to exist. Her feelings she found to be weird and incomprehensible. She could not hold a job; her husband failed to understand and had probably become disgusted with her; and who could blame him?

I set out to work directly with her lack of persona, her sense that she belonged nowhere. I was not sure how theoretically defensible this procedure might be, but saw no alternative. Because she felt her every move and impulse was invalid, I attended to her feelings about food and shared mine with her. We talked about the tastes and textures of foods, the yens we might have for certain foods at certain times, the tremendous comfort that eating provided, how great a cup of coffee tasted in the morning. We steered clear of overtly "narcissistic" issues -- not for strategical reason, but largely because I was not yet good at recognizing them. I only knew from the emotional "soup" in which we were simmering that her feelings about food were the primary locus of her "craziness"; and I set out to show her that she was no crazier than I.

We met twice a week for about six months. She seemed to make real progress, gave up drinking, and radically reduced her bingeing and vomiting. In retrospect, I can say only that a genuine personal connection had been achieved. The therapy was terminated at the point that her husband sent her back to the southern state of her origins, both because he could not bear her a week longer and because they were both sure that she could get meaningful work there

in her field. Her greatest fear at going was that she would have to terminate her relationship with me, and this manifested itself in her having to be hospitalized twice in the last two weeks for dehydration due to intensified bouts of vomiting. Her psychiatrist at the hospital verified that in his opinion the increase in symptomatic behavior had to do with her enforced termination.

When she left, I felt both a failure and relieved, believing I was too inexperienced an analyst to deal with the severity of her disturbance without myself suffering a crisis in self-confidence. Two years later, however, I received a long-distance call from her. She was free of bulimia and leading a therapy group for eating-disorder sufferers. Her husband had responded to her recovery and had returned to live with her. They had never been so happy. Finally, she had made me a painting to thank me for the essential role I had played in her healing process. She called again the summer following and the summer after that, each time with firmer confidence that her life had been turned around.

It has now been nearly a decade since I have heard from her. I have no reason to believe that she has not continued to flourish, but one consideration has troubled me. Lisa and I worked exclusively on her persona, as I thought, rehabilitating her connection with the public world. Did we leave the essential work undone, or is it possible the fragmentation of her deeper self underwent a simultaneous reknitting? Only one piece of evidence points in this direction. It has to do with what I felt upon hearing her voice on the telephone after two years' separation: "Hi, it's Lisa Smith, do you remember me?" I was immediately transported back to the time of my meetings with her, and I realized for the first time how much I loved her. I actually had the image of a dam bursting in my chest, and a river of affection pouring toward her from the very center of my being.

I had never noticed such an explicit and heart-felt love during the period of her therapy. Apparently it had been too much in the background. Perhaps, in my fragility as a beginning analyst, I could not have borne to let myself notice my love for her. But I was certain at that moment of the truth of Freud's comment to Jung,<sup>[1]</sup> "The cure is effected through love." A caring link had been established between us that had anchored Lisa and allowed her to believe for the first time that she was indeed an acceptable person -- the same link that made me fear her hardened pathology would undermine my faith in myself as an analyst.

With all the hindsight of decade or more, it now seems clear that despair and hope were struggling on a plane that lay outside our immediate vision. Surely we knew the issue between us had to do with whether life was worth living and whether Lisa had the competence to try it. It was implicit in everything we said, though we never made note of it. Deeper still, however, was the shudder in my soul that told me I was in trouble with Lisa. I was skeptical of my own integrity. Perhaps I was nothing but a charlatan. Perhaps her despair was a more accurate take on life than my hope. Perhaps I had no business trying to be an analyst. Perhaps my analytic training was but the latest stone in the defensive wall I had been building all my life to shield me from the horror of my own fragmented sense of self. Perhaps I was relieved when she left, for letting me off the hook and allowing me to ignore these doubts.

If anything substantial and lasting was accomplished with Lisa, it must have had to do with our having held our despair and hope in a precarious tension. Very likely, she was only able to accept my trust in the psyche's innate capacity for coherence and balance to the extent I could allow myself to share her sense of meaninglessness and chaos. How could she have trusted my feeling of internal coherence unless I had dared to fall apart? At the time I would have said "daring" was never in question, for I had had no choice in the matter. There is no doubt that my tremulous sense of the danger she posed for my self-image as analyst was evidence enough of my having been "infected." And in retrospect, my sense of fragility was probably the only thing that could have assured her that I had engaged with and understood her deep terror. Granting that this had remained largely unconscious to me, my precarious mixture of confidence and trepidation may have demonstrated that I could contain both myself and Lisa. My belief in our wholeness -- however untested, however foolhardy -- had indeed persisted in the face of fragmentation, if only because I had been relieved of the burden before I lost my balance.

To have borne all this mutually for weeks on end amounted to a profoundly intimate experience -- even if I was not secure enough to have allowed myself to feel it at the time. Two years later, when I heard Lisa's voice on the telephone, I no longer needed to protect myself from her. Hence the gush of love that burst the dams of my defenses. Love is a complicated emotion, even though it involves "fusion," "psychic infection," or what Jung called "*participation mystique*." When we "mystically participate" in one another, we lose our boundaries, become permeable, risk the loss of our separate identities. The expression, *participation mystique*, has almost universally a negative connotation in the writings of Jung and his followers. Yet few would deny it is the one essential ingredient in any analysis that "takes." My involvement with Lisa forced me to reexamine the concept.

The term [2] usually denotes an unconscious state of fusion. But "fusion" is a loose term that covers many degrees of intensity and levels of depth. For example we may find ourselves in a mystical participation in the *field of persona*, where we are all seduced into thinking and acting alike (Jung 1931, par. 653):

The spirit of the age . . . is a bias, an emotional tendency that works on weaker minds, through the unconscious, with an overwhelming force of suggestion that carries them along with it. To think otherwise than as our contemporaries think is somehow illegitimate and disturbing; it is even indecent, morbid or blasphemous, and therefore socially dangerous for the individual. He is stupidly swimming against the social current.

On the other hand, *participation mystique* may involve us at the much deeper level of the *self field*, where there is no question of *ideas*, but of collective emotions. Jung (1961: 241f) describes having experienced this kind of fusion while travelling in Africa, where he suddenly found himself surrounded by a large group of highly excited natives, dancing and digging a canal to the sound of drums. They worked all day until they dropped by their shovels with exhaustion and slept the night. Jung was fascinated but frightened, and suffered several days of diarrhea as a consequence of being "psychically infected."

This scene taught me something: these people live from their affects, are moved and have their being in emotions. Their consciousness takes care of their orientation in space and transmits impressions from outside, and it is also stirred by inner impulses and affects. But it is not given to reflection; the ego has almost no autonomy.

These two dramatic instances of *participation mystique* serve well as models of what the phenomenon of fusion can mean for the individual. But they are too extreme to do justice the unconscious unity I felt with Mara and Lisa. In both cases, what guided my work with them was a much more limited infection. Their fragility at the level of the self field engaged with mine so that I felt fragile as a person and I felt my relationships with them as too fragile to tolerate any kind of aggressive interpretation. Indeed, I was so afraid of blowing over the house of cards that was our therapeutic alliance, that my awareness of my own fragility was largely repressed. I unconsciously saved myself from dissolution into a chaotic bundle of emotional states by hanging on to my persona-identity as analyst. In retrospect, it appears to me that this was only marginally a conscious activity. As unflattering as this discovery may be to me as an analyst and as a person, the limited success I had with Mara and Lisa cannot be understood without it.

Implied in my psychological vulnerability are two important theoretical facts. First, I would not have been in touch with the foundational reality of either patient's emotional life if I had not become infected. I was able to recognize their woundedness by rediscovering my own. The analysis would not have been possible had there been no *participation mystique* at the level of the self field. I would have failed to understand them; and whatever interpretations I might have been able to make would have been out of touch with the central issue of their lives. It was less important for me to have *named* this reality than simply to have felt it and acted out of it. Thus my degree of unconsciousness actually served as an asset.

The second fact regarding *a participation mystique* in the analytic process is that it cannot involve a complete loss of the analyst's ego-observer function. An analyst needs to have one foot *in* the fusion state and one foot outside of it. The ability to *observe* my infection and draw conclusions from it -- however rudimentary -- describes my role in the interactive emotional field of analysis. It points again to the simultaneous multiplicity of psychic states that Jung articulated as the complex theory.[3] It is not only possible but essential that an analyst be aware of and utilize conflicting emotional states in working with an analysand. *Participation mystique* puts us in touch with our client, while our largely intact ego allows us to use what we learn from the emotional infection.

A dramatic example of such learning occurred for me with a young woman who appeared a month or so after Lisa had left for the South. Suzannah was in her early twenties and had been hospitalized three Christmases in a row for manic episodes. At her first meeting with me, Christmas was again only three months away; and she was terrified of another psychotic episode.

She said had consulted a Jungian because she wanted to do dreamwork. She was taking lithium to stabilize her moods and had regular meetings with her psychopharmacologist to monitor her progress. This doctor enquired about dreams only to assess whether their imagery was "bizarre" enough to warrant increasing her medication. Suzannah had therefore come to fear her dreams and was looking for someone who could discuss dream imagery in a more respectful manner and reassure her that her unconscious was not essentially psychotic.

She began our weekly meetings by describing dreams that had occurred years earlier, in the safely distant past. I found them to be "archetypal" and filled with spiritual and mythic themes that were not particularly "crazy." After two months of what seemed to me to be very

good work, Suzannah disappeared without warning or explanation in the middle of November, shortly after she had dared to begin discussing her current dreams. I believe she got what she came for and did not suffer a psychotic break at Christmas. But I never heard from her again, so I have no verification of this.

What she came for, I think, was to find a new attitude toward her dream-life. Formerly, powerful dream images scared her and made her think that they could overpower her and draw her into their chaotic world. But I treated them as meaningful statements and showed her that she could stop running away and listen to them.

The episode from which I learned the most occurred in her first hour. She was telling me with great bravado about her careless way of life and how she often neglected to take her lithium. I felt confused and a little scared, wondering whether I was up to the challenge her "wild" psyche posed, when I *saw* a little monster crawling out from under the couch where she was sitting. It walked about half the distance to my chair before it disappeared. I did my best to show no reaction to this event -- out of fear of frightening Suzannah, as I told myself at the time. But it is probable I inadvertently gave myself away with a facial expression or change in posture. In any event, she immediately halted her narrative and told me she had to stop talking that way because she was scaring herself. She said her bravado was a pose and her life nowhere near as undisciplined as she had described. Most importantly, she almost never forgot to take her prescribed lithium doses. From this point on the atmosphere in the room settled down to a confidentiality I could trust.

Still I was not completely satisfied; so after her departure at the end of the hour, I sat in my analyst's chair again and called up the image of the monster, to have a closer look. Whereas formerly its very appearance had frightened me into seeing it fuzzy and undefined, now I could see it in detail. It was Yosemite Sam, the two-gunned, big-hatted blow-hard in chaps and moustache I knew from the comic books and movies of my childhood -- a largely harmless braggart. I was relieved to see the monster was not dangerous and felt confirmed in my assessment that the emotional atmosphere in the room had settled down once Suzannah had confessed her bravado.

An hallucination like this was an enormous revelation for me. I realized immediately how unconsciously dependent I had been on my supervisors in Zürich. And, although I had made a conscious decision to eschew supervision for the first year or two of my private practice in order to get my own feet on the ground as an analyst, I had called a couple of my colleagues for telephone consultations. Suzannah had unsettled me more than any; but even before I could have thought to seek assistance, my unconscious had provided a more effective counsel than any senior analyst could have done. I had not had dreams about any of my American analysts at this point and consequently had felt very much on my own. Now I knew I could trust my unconscious for important commentary, even when I was awake, even during a session.

After my hallucinatory experience with Suzannah, I found I could count on frequent imaginal comments. My habitual practice was to play classical or jazz music on my stereo for the last couple of hours in the evening before going to bed and to read the literature of psychology, religion, or fiction. I found my reading was frequently interrupted with seemingly random memories from analytic moments of the day, usually transformed by

imaginal contributions that referred to aspects of the emotional field I had not attended to while sitting with my analysands. I learned to stop my reading and ponder these images, for they threw new light on my work and helped to bring new factors into consciousness.

Furthermore, I found I could extend them with conscious effort. I learned I could call up an image of the self-field connection I had with each of my patients. Usually it took the visual form of a tube connecting us at the centers of our bodies, but the tube had a different appearance for each analysand. In one case it was transparent and hollow; in another it seemed to be a technologically advanced mechanism; in a third it was a living bundle of tentacles, each resembling an elephant's trunk, one of them caressing the cheek of my analysand. In the last of these cases, my analysand was a man whom I experienced at the conscious level as pushing me away. It seemed that the caressing tentacle represented my unconscious response at the level of the self field and that it expressed the loving concern I knew he wanted but was afraid to recognize.

My experiences with Mara and Lisa, therefore, led me to recognize the self field as a foundational emotional dimension of the analytic exchange, from which the analyst can derive information both directly in the form of emotional disturbances and indirectly in the form of fantasy images.

The contrast between these two women also led me to some conclusions regarding the persona. Mara "had" a persona. She saw herself as rebellious, original, and irreverent; and she had a position in the social world as housewife, partner of a physician, and successful graduate student. Furthermore, she was proud to be one of only nine Swiss women who were licensed hang-gliders; and on a more personal level, she enjoyed her power over men as a *femme fatale*. Each of these factors was a pillar supporting her ego-image, so that only her recurring depression reminded her that something was wrong. Her persona provided a nearly successful defense against "narcissistic" issues at the level of self that manifested in the unconscious aggression and envy depicted in her dreams.

Lisa, on the other hand, seemed to have no persona at all. She was unsuccessful professionally and unacceptable to her husband. Her obsession with her body, manifested in bingeing and vomiting, derived from an unsatisfying attempt to fit the persona ideal of American femininity. Objectively, she was extremely attractive and had the body of a fashion model; but subjectively, Lisa could accept her beauty only as a sham, achieved by the disgusting and "crazy" rituals of her bulimia. She felt herself to be an empty shell, and hated herself for it. To destroy the phoney shell of her pretensions, she would binge. But this left her without any hope of respect -- however hollow -- and so she would vomit to win it back.

It appears in retrospect that my hope for her therapy was two-fold. First, I wanted to help her achieve a persona as solid as my own -- even though I was acutely conscious of my own limitations in social interaction. Later, once we had wrought a conscious self-image of some modest resiliency, we might be able to approach the deeper flaw in her self, the narcissistic wound that she felt as her hollowness. I hoped that a decent sense of identity in the social world might be sufficient to sustain her while we tackled the far more dangerous issue that lay at the root of her multiple dysfunctionality.

If it was true that the deeper issue was being unconsciously addressed at the same time that we were occupying ourselves with more superficial concerns, I would have to re-examine my understanding of persona.

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1. Letter of December 6, 1906.
  2. Jung derived the term, *participation mystique*, from the turn-of-the-century French armchair anthropologist, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Cf. 1923), who referred to the tendency of individuals in pre-literate cultures to be more conscious of their place in the tribe than of their own individuality, to feel at one with nature, and to think in analogies rather than in Western logical categories.
  3. In emphasizing the pathological effects of a complex, it is customary to describe how "a complex can have us," as though some "devil" has gained control of our behavior. This is, indeed, the neurotic capability of a complex. But it is also possible to feel that a complex has been activated in us without losing our capacity to stay oriented in the emotional field we share with our analysand.