

The Living Image

by
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Part I: Introduction

This morning, upon awakening, I had a sense that I had been traveling in the night. I remember, at first, visiting my old high school English class, then, stopping over at my University alma mater, and, finally, encountering an old acquaintance whom I haven't thought about or seen for well over 25 years. I began wondering. "Where was I traveling? How was I traveling?" Sometimes—most times—these questions are too much to consider, too abstract to be bothered with. After all, I do have my concrete everyday life to attend to, a life which forever waits right outside the door, a life always filled with such urgency and such demand. But, on occasion, I do get curious. I can't help myself really. I become fascinated with these journeys of inner space. It doesn't happen all the time, just sometimes, almost always when I make the time to wonder. Or, when what I encounter is so scary or so beautiful that I can think of little else.

While traveling last night, I visited landscapes as alive and intricate as any I have known. Some were familiar, most were not. Familiar or otherwise, I had the definite experience of being there. I was active in a very active landscape. I never felt that these places were not real. In fact, it was only when I woke up, and now, when I write about these experiences, that I call them dreams at all. Last night as I traveled, it seemed I was participating in a continuous series of events that had a reality of their own.

I had no doubts about the sleek, powerful lion on the prowl last night or about the dark haired sensual, lover who shared herself with me in intimate embrace. These nighttime travelers came to me unannounced, yet their appearance was quite clear and their actions deliberate, purposeful.

It is startling, at times, to realize how alive the figures of dreams actually are. They have bodies; they move about; they interact with one another; and they inhabit very specific locations. Yet, of course, they are not "real" as I ordinarily understand the term, real. In an interesting way, though, these dream entities sometimes resemble familiar people and/or settings that I know. On other occasions, however, these dream persons and

places seem to originate from realms I do not know, far away places—places I have never in actual fact visited. In either case, they seem as real as most “reality” that I know. In fact, over time, I have come to frequent these landscapes and encounter these figures time and again and have even established ongoing “friendships” with a number of them.

Of course, it is impossible to say with certainty just who or what these figures are, or for that matter, where or how they exist. What is certain, however, is that they exist in a realm where images are as “alive” as we are.

Part II: The Living Image

At times, living images come with very particular faces; at other times they do not. Living images exist both as figure (the visual image in a personal dream or vision) and as impulse (the non-visual sensation one experiences in a felt-sense or intuition). An example from one of my own dreams explores the nature of a personal dream image and suggests how dream images are, most essentially, alive and active. In “my” dream:

I am in the living room of our home. William Shakespeare appears. It is good to see him. I am feeling stuck in my writing and am experiencing writer’s block. I tell of my discouragement and frustration with writing. He listens somewhat impatiently. His back is turned to me, and he seems busy reading a book he took off the shelf. I keep talking anyway, and now he becomes deeply interested in my predicament. He turns and faces me. Asking probing questions and making no sense from my confused explanations, he offers detailed suggestions as to the way out of my writer’s paralysis. He tells me about some creativity exercises, many of which I have never tried—like writing down everything that moves through my mind for twenty minutes each day and paying particular attention to the first, original ideas. He suggests specific readings in alchemical texts. I’ve never seen the titles before, but I recognize their images from my own superficial thumbing through old manuscripts. I feel better and better talking with Shakespeare and learning from him. As he leaves, I have the sense that he is really still present and available to me.

When the dream ended, I felt as if Shakespeare had been right there, in the room with me. To this moment, what remains so alive is the specificity and precision of his recommendations.

I was visited in my dreams by a very vivid presence. As I write this, I am still haunted by this mystery. With whom did I converse? Who was that dream person, that imaginal teacher who seemed more real and more alive than most people I meet during my waking day? Who spoke in this dream? Was he a part of me, an aspect of my personality, perhaps compensatory to my fear or angst? Was he a representation of my deeper sense

of Self, an embodiment of the central archetype, the presentation of the “Primary Person”? Was he a shade, an ancestral memory making a visit? Was he a reflection of my personal history, a stand-in for a particular teacher or an image used to represent a composite of teachers that I have known? Was he an archetype, the voice of the form, the teachings of the universal construct of mentor? Was he the ghost of Shakespeare himself?

Perhaps the answer to any or all of the questions above is simply, yes. The dream image of William Shakespeare may be considered in terms of one or all of these explanations. Certainly, there is ample dream theory to support any of these possibilities. However, in my actual experience, none of these explanations adequately describes my direct encounter, at the time and to this day, with the reality of this living, breathing image-person. Who was, who is, this presence that visited in the night?

What visited in my dream, I believe, was/is a living image. The living image, William Shakespeare, is an imaginal figure with body and appearance. As the image of teacher, William Shakespeare, is manifest in the presence of an actual dream person. He is an image with form, shape, and identity—walking about in the “flesh,” distinctive, incarnate. I could see and experience him in the dream as clearly as if he were there in the room with me. William Shakespeare, the dream figure, is a living image with imaginal body and independence of action.

At the same time, however, I experienced his presence as an expression of something else. In addition to his being a visible dream person, Shakespeare was a felt sense, a transcendent rhythm orchestrating my capacity to write. As an animating presence, he was an energetic force, a creative impulse. He was there to move me—similar to the evolutionary forces inherent in all life. In my experience, William Shakespeare, the living image, was the creative push, the vitality that vibrated invisibly through my being.

I believe William Shakespeare, as all dream images, exists as both image body with identity and “subtle body” with imaginal presence. Living images have dual natures. They exist in substance, as image with body; and they exist in subsistence, as fields of implicit energy. In its duality, the dream image William Shakespeare is both an alive, visible embodiment and an invisible, energetic spontaneity of the dreaming psyche. The living image is, paradoxically, in and of itself, a whole entity—a complete being with identity. Concurrently, it is one aspect of the whole—one impulse of an implicit psychic field.

Part III: The Dreamer, the Living Image, and the Dreaming Psyche

The living image functions as an intermediary between the dreamer and the dreaming psyche. In its appearance as a particular figure, the living image, most often, relates the

dreamer to very specific life circumstance—to personal history or to an inner-subjective experience. At times, it might also suggest social and environmental occurrences associated with the dreamer. In its life as an implicit energy, the living image connects the dreamer to the energetic underpinning of the psyche. Connection to this generative resource gives the dreamer access to the rhythm of life itself. In both capacities—embodied figure and implicit energy—the living image makes a claim on the dreamer, affecting the way he participates in life, shaping his being and his becoming.

Just as the living image shapes the dreamer, the dreamer, too, influences the expression of the living image. The dreamer exists in a state of duality, similar to the dual nature of the living image. We recognize the “actuality” of the dreamer as an embodied person. We identify him by name, personality, body type, and recognizable mannerisms. Distinguishing features such as brown hair, hazel eyes, broad shoulders characterize an individual and set one person apart from another. We “know” that a person exists because we can see, touch, sometimes smell his presence. What is less obvious, however, is that the dreamer has another, more subtle nature—that of an imaginal presence. The dreamer is an image in the dreaming psyche—an imaginal psychic presence affecting the activity of dream life. For the psyche, the dreamer himself is a living image.

The dreamer, the living image, and the dreaming psyche are related to one another. They are all part of the same psychic totality. The dreamer is necessary for an awareness of the living image. Similarly, the living image gives expression to the intentions of the dreaming psyche. The dreaming psyche, in turn, re-connects the dreamer and the living image to the harmonic of the life—an interaction which is essential for creating new life forms. Each deepens the pulse, the resonant experience of the other. The dreamer, the living dream image, and the dreaming psyche are related to and interdependent with one another.

Part IV: Dreaming and Healing

This interdependence of dreamer, living image, and the dreaming psyche opens the possibilities for psychological healing. Each dimension of experience resonates in its own way. It is my belief that in the correspondence between dimensions a person experiences the sensation of “healing.” For example, when a person “understands” a dream, regardless of the system of understanding, there is a sense of connection to additional textures of psychic life. There is an experience of relationship, a mutuality of shared contact. It’s not, “Yes! Now I’ve got it.” It’s more like, “Oh shit! This is bigger than I am and it, too, is alive with the pulse of life.” This sympathetic harmonic among the dreamer, the living dream image, and the dreaming psyche is what I believe to be the goal of dreamwork and psychotherapy.

Therapeutically, the resonant quality in dreamwork is most available when the dreaming psyche is experienced as a field of interacting image bodies. Only when living bodies interact is there the occasion for a correspondence between essential natures. When the dreamer experiences the dream image “cat,” for example, as a living, breathing, active creature—a dream animal with body and pulse—a relationship between two beings begins to form. There is an empathy, a meeting of natures. Healing is possible in this contact. Some would simply call this harmonic, “the dance of life.” When this dance is experienced as an expression of the organicity that informs all phenomena, the individual touches into the resonant field of the whole—the life force that is, essentially, the dreaming psyche.

Part V: Conclusion

Living images are not alien to our experience. Rather, they help to create our experience. They are active shapers of the reality of our everyday lives. Each day, our eyes open and we emerge from a world of nighttime images. With eyes that can “see,” we realize that in a curious way, the world, too, is awake and alive—a realm of living images. Each person, each creature, each thing of our world is animated by the pulsing heart of the dreaming psyche. We are born out of it, we will die unto it—imaginal creatures in the reality of psyche dreaming.

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