13.2: A Brief Biography of Carl Jung

At the beginning of his autobiography, entitled *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung (1961) described his life as "a story of the self-realization of the unconscious." Jung believed that our personality begins with a collective unconscious, developed within our species throughout time, and that we have only limited ability to control the psychic process that is our own personality. Thus, our true personality arises from within as our collective unconscious comes forth into our personal unconscious and then our consciousness. It can be helpful to view these concepts from an Eastern perspective, and it is interesting to note that "self-realization" was used in the name of the first Yoga society established in America (in 1920 by Paramahansa Yogananda).

Carl Gustav Jung was born on July 26th, 1875, in the small town of Kesswil, Switzerland, into an interesting and notable family. His grandfather of the same name had been a physician, and had established the psychiatric clinic at the University of Basel and the “Home of Good Hope” for mentally retarded children. At an early age he had been imprisoned for over a year, for the crime of having participated in a demonstration supporting democracy in Germany. Rumored to be an illegitimate son of the great Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, though there is no convincing evidence, the elder Carl Jung died before his namesake grandson ever knew him. Nonetheless, Jung was greatly influenced by stories he heard about his grandfather. His maternal grandfather, Samuel Preiswerk, was the dean of the Basel (Switzerland) clergy and pastor of a major church. He was one the first people in Europe to suggest a restoration of Palestine to the Jews, thus establishing himself as a forerunner to the Zionists. Samuel Preiswerk also believed that he was regularly surrounded by spirits (or ghosts), something that likely had quite an influence on Jung’s theories (Jaffe, 1979; Wehr, 1989).

Jung’s father, Johann Paul Achilles Jung, married Emilie Preiswerk in 1874. Johann Jung was a scholar of Oriental languages, studied Arabic, and was ordained a minister. In addition to being a pastor at two churches during Jung’s childhood, Johann Jung was the pastor at Friedmatt, the insane asylum in Basel. During Jung’s early childhood he did not always have the best of relationships with his parents. He considered his mother to be a good mother, but he felt...
that her true personality was always hidden. She spent some time in the hospital when he was three years old, in part
due to problems in her marriage. Jung found this separation from his mother deeply troubling, and he became
mistrustful of the spoken word “love.” Since his father was a pastor, there were often funerals and burials, all of which
was very mysterious to the young Jung. In addition, his mother was considered a spiritual medium, and often helped
Jung with his later studies on the occult. Perhaps most troubling of all, was Jung’s belief that his father did not really
know God, but rather, had become a minister trapped in the performance of meaningless ritual (Jaffe, 1979; Jung, 1961;
Wehr, 1989).

An only child until he was 9, Jung preferred to be left alone, or at least he came to accept his loneliness. Even when his
parent’s guests brought their children over for visits, Jung would simply play his games alone:

…I recall only that I did not want to be disturbed. I was deeply absorbed in my games and could not endure being
watched or judged while I played them. (pg. 18; Jung, 1961)

He also had extraordinarily rich and meaningful dreams, many of which were quite frightening, and they often involved
deeper religious themes. This is hardly surprising, since two uncles on his father’s side of the family were ministers, and
there were six more ministers on his mother’s side. Thus, he was often engaged in religious discussions at home. He
was particularly impressed with a richly illustrated book on Hinduism, with pictures of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (the
Hindu trinity of gods). Even at 6 years old, he felt a vague connection with the Hindu gods, something that once again
would have an interesting influence on his later theories. These dreams led Jung into deep religious speculations,
something he considered to be a secret that he could not share with anyone else (Jaffe, 1979; Jung, 1961; Wehr, 1989).

Jung’s school-age years were a mixture of experiences. He enjoyed school, in the sense that it was easy for him and he
found other children to play with. However, he also began studying Latin with his father and taking divinity classes. He
found the classes on religion terribly boring, and the more he got to know his father, the less he believed that his father
understood either God, religion, or spirituality. It didn’t help that he was well-aware of the continued turmoil in his
parent’s marriage. In a cave in the garden he tended a fire that he meant to keep burning forever, and although he
allowed other children to help gather the wood, only Jung himself could tend the fire. At the age of 11 he began
attending the Gymnasium in Basel (something like an advanced high school). The other children were quite wealthy,
and Jung became aware of how poor they were. Although this led him to feel some compassion for his father, the
Gymnasium created a number of problems. Jung simply did not understand mathematics, his divinity classes became
unbearably boring, and so, school itself became boring. This led to a severe neurosis at the age of 12 (Jaffe, 1979;
Jung, 1961; Wehr, 1989).

Jung had been knocked down by another boy on the way home from school. He hit his head on a rock, and was nearly
knocked out. He was so dizzy that others had to help him, and he suddenly realized that he did not have to go to school
if he was ill. Consequently, he began having fainting spells any time he was sent to school or to do his homework. He
missed 6 months of school due his psychological problems, and Jung loved the opportunity to spend his days exploring
the world in any way he wished. He was eventually diagnosed with epilepsy, though Jung himself knew the diagnosis
was ridiculous. One day he heard his father expressing great fear to a friend about what would become of Jung if he
were unable to earn his own living. The reality of this statement was shocking to Jung, and “From that moment on I
became a serious child.” He immediately went to study Latin, and began to feel faint. However, he consciously made
himself aware of his neurosis, and cognitively fought it off. He soon returned to school, recognizing “That was when I
learned what a neurosis is” (Jaffe, 1979; Jung, 1961; Wehr, 1989).
As he continued through school, his personal life continued to be quite strange. He began to believe that he was two people, one having lived 100 years earlier. He also had heated religious debates with his father. Fueling his courage during these debates was his belief that a vision had led to his understanding of true spirituality:

One fine summer day that same year I came out of school at noon and went to the cathedral square. The sky was gloriously blue, the day one of radiant sunshine. The roof of the cathedral glittered, the sun sparkling from the new, brightly glazed tiles. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the sight, and thought: “The world is beautiful and the church is beautiful, and God made all this and sits above it far away in the blue sky on a golden throne and ...” Here came a great hole in my thoughts, and a choking sensation. I felt numbed, and knew only: “Don’t go on thinking now! Something terrible is coming, something I do not want to think, something I dare not even approach. Why not? Because I would be committing the most frightful of sins. What is the most terrible sin? Murder? No, it can’t be that. The most terrible sin is the sin against the Holy Ghost, which cannot be forgiven. Anyone who commits that sin is damned to hell for all eternity. That would be very sad for my parents, if their only son, to whom they are so attached, should be doomed to eternal damnation. I cannot do that to my parents. All I need do is not go on thinking.” (pg. 36; Jung, 1961)

However, Jung was not able to ignore his vision. He was tormented for days, and spent sleepless nights wondering why he would have to think something unforgivable as a result of praising God for the beauty of all creation. His mother saw how troubled he was, but Jung felt that he could not dare confide in her. Finally, he decided that it was God’s will that he should face the meaning of this vision:

I thought it over again and arrived at the same conclusion. “Obviously God also desires me to show courage,” I thought. “If that is so and I go through with it, then He will give me His grace and illumination.”

I gathered all my courage, as though I were about to leap forthwith into hell-fire, and let the thought come. I saw before me the cathedral, the blue sky. God sits on His golden throne, high above the world - and from under the throne an enormous turd falls upon the sparkling new roof, shatters it, and breaks the walls of the cathedral asunder. (pg. 39; Jung 1961)

Jung was overjoyed by his understanding of this vision. He believed that God had shown him that what mattered in life was doing God’s will, not following the rules of any man, religion, or church. This is what Jung felt his own father had never come to realize, and therefore, his father did not know the “immediate living God.” This conviction that one should pursue truth, rather than dogma, was an essential lesson that returned when Jung faced his dramatic split with Sigmund Freud.

When Jung decided to enter medical school, he did not leave his interest in strange spiritual matters behind. His cousin Helene Preiswerk led séances in which she would fall into a trance and channel strange spirits. The climax of these trances was often a mandala (a mandala is a geometric figure that represents wholeness, completeness, and perfection), which she would dictate to Jung, and then attempt to translate what was told to her by the spirits. Eugen Bleuler urged Jung to publish his studies on occult phenomena (remember that Bleuler defined schizophrenia), which Jung did, under the title On the Psychology and Pathology of So-called Occult Phenomena. Another important event that occurred early during Jung’s medical training was the death of his father. The church had no provisions for the family of a deceased minister, but one of his uncles loaned Jung the money he needed to continue his studies. Upon completing medical school, he joined Dr. Bleuler in Zurich at the Burgholzli Mental Hospital, and soon became the first assistant physician. The Burgholzli clinic was a renowned institution. Bleuler was considered one of the two most influential
psychiatrists of the day, and the clinic had come to prominence under his predecessor Auguste Forel, who was the first person to formally publish the theory that neurons communicate through synaptic junctions (though just how was not well understood at the time; Finger, 1994). Jung worked hard at Burgholzli, as Bleuler expected nothing less. He also spent some time in France, at the internationally recognized Salpetriere hospital, where he met Pierre Janet. Janet is a curious figure in the history of psychoanalysis. He claimed that he developed everything good in psychoanalysis, and that everything Freud developed was bad. Janet also apparently suggested that only the corrupt city of Vienna could be the source of a theory that traces the development of personality to sexual urges (Freud, 1914/1995). Jung spoke favorably of what he learned from Janet; Freud soundly rejected Janet’s claims, but did grudgingly acknowledge that Janet did some important work on understanding neuroses (Freud, 1914/1995; Jung, 1961).

In 1906, Jung sent Freud a copy of his book *The Psychology of Dementia Praecox* (an earlier term for schizophrenia), which Freud found quite impressive. The two met in February, 1907, and talked for nearly 13 straight hours. According to Jung, “Freud was the first man of real importance I had encountered…no one else could compare with him.” Very quickly, as evidenced in the letters quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Freud felt that Jung would become the leader of the psychoanalytic movement. In 1909, Jung’s psychoanalytic practice was so busy that he resigned from the Burgholzli clinic, and he traveled to America with Freud. During this trip the two men spent a great deal of time together. It quickly became evident to Jung that he could not be the successor that Freud was seeking; Jung had too many differences of opinion with Freud. More importantly, however, Jung described Freud as neurotic, and wrote that the symptoms were sometimes highly troublesome (though Jung failed to identify those symptoms). Freud taught that everyone was a little neurotic, but Jung wanted to know how to cure neuroses:

Apparently neither Freud nor his disciples could understand what it meant for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis if not even the master could deal with his own neurosis. When, then, Freud announced his intention of identifying theory and method and making them into some kind of dogma, I could no longer collaborate with him; there remained no choice for me but to withdraw. (pg. 167; Jung, 1961)

Clearly Jung could not accept a dogmatic approach to psychoanalysis, since he believed that God Himself had told Jung not to follow any rigid system of rules. Even worse, this was when Jung first published his “discovery” of the collective unconscious. Freud wholly rejected this concept, and Jung felt that his creativity was being rejected. He offered to support Freud in public, while extending honest opinions in so-called “secret letters.” Freud wanted none of it. Almost as quickly as their relationship had grown, it fell apart (Jaffe, 1979; Jung, 1961; Wehr, 1989).

The loss of his relationship with Freud, following the loss of his father, led Jung in a period of personal crisis. He resigned his position at the University of Zurich, and began a lengthy series of experiments in order to understand the fantasies and dreams that arose from his unconscious. The more he studied these phenomena, the more he realized they were not from his own memories, but from the collective unconscious. He was particularly curious about mandala drawings, which date back thousands of years in all cultures. He studied Christian Gnosticism, alchemy, and the *I Ching* (or: Book of Changes). After meeting Richard Wilhelm, an expert on Chinese culture, Jung studied more Taoist philosophy, and he wrote a glowing foreword for Wilhelm’s translation of the *I Ching* (Wilhelm, 1950). These extraordinarily diverse interests led Jung to seek more in-depth knowledge from around the world. He traveled first to North Africa, then to America (to visit Pueblo Indians in New Mexico), next came East Africa (Uganda and Kenya), and finally India. Jung made every effort to get away from civilized areas, which might have been influenced by other cultures, in order to get a more realistic impression of the local culture, and he was particularly successful in this regard in meeting gurus in India (Jaffe, 1979; Jung, 1961; Wehr, 1989).
Through it all, he continued his work in psychology. He had developed his concept of psychological types, one of his most significant contributions, and published his work shortly after the break with Freud. He continued to develop his own form of psychoanalysis. Jung’s family was also an important part of his life. He had married Emma Rauschenbach in 1903. They had four daughters and one son, followed by nineteen grandchildren and many great-grandchildren. Emma Jung was very supportive of her husband, especially during the more turbulent periods of his career (including the break with Freud), and she was no stranger to his work. She had done some analytical work with Freud herself, she wrote essays on Jung’s concept of anima and animus, and she was the first president of the Psychological Club of Zurich. When his wife Emma died in 1955, Jung wrote in a letter that the loss had taken a lot out of him, and that at his age (80 years old) it wasn’t easy to recover. Yet two years later, he began dictating his autobiography to Aniela Jaffe. Looking ahead to the end of his life, Jung said:

The world into which we are born is brutal and cruel, and at the same time of divine beauty. Which element we think outweighs the other, whether meaninglessness or meaning is a matter of temperament. If meaninglessness were absolutely preponderant, the meaningfulness of life would vanish to an increasing degree with each step in our development. But that is - or seems to me - not the case. Probably, as in all metaphysical questions, both are true: Life is - or has - meaning and meaninglessness. I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle.

When Lao-tzu says: “All are clear, I alone am clouded,” he is expressing what I now feel in advanced old age. Lao-tzu is the example of a man with superior insight who has seen and experienced worth and worthlessness, and who at the end of his life desires to return into his own being, into the eternal unknowable meaning. The archetype of the old man who has seen enough is eternally true. (pp. 358-359; Jung, 1961)

Carl Jung died at home in 1961, in Kusnacht, Switzerland, at the age of 85. As psychologists today examine more deeply the relationship between Eastern and Western perspectives, it may be that Jung’s legacy has yet to be fulfilled.

discussion question \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Even as a child, Jung had vivid dreams that he believed were giving him insight and guidance for the future. Have you ever had dreams so vivid, dreams that left such a powerful impression on you, that you felt they must have some special meaning? How did you respond, and what consequences, if any, followed your responses?

Placing Jung in Context: A Psychodynamic Enigma

Carl Jung holds an extraordinary place in the histories of psychiatry and psychology. Having already been an assistant to the renowned psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, he went to Vienna to learn more about the fledgling science of psychoanalysis. He became Freud’s hand-picked heir to the psychoanalytic throne, and was one of the psychiatrists who accompanied Freud to America. Later, however, as he developed his own theories, he parted ways with Freud. Freud eventually came to describe Jung’s theories as incomprehensible, and Freud praised other psychiatrists who also opposed Jung’s ideas.

The most dramatic contribution that Jung made to psychodynamic thought was his concept of the collective
unconscious, a mysterious reservoir of psychological constructs common to all people. Jung traveled extensively, including trips to Africa, India, and the United States (particularly to visit the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico), and he studied the cultures in those places. He also observed many basic similarities between different cultures. Those similarities led Jung to propose the collective unconscious. How else could so many significant cultural similarities have arisen within separate and distant lands? Jung did not reject the concepts already developed by Freud and Adler, including the dynamic interaction between the conscious mind and the personal unconscious, but he extended them in order to connect them with his own theory of our underlying collective unconscious. As strange as this theory seemed to Freud, and Freud wondered whether it even made sense to Jung, such a concept is not difficult to understand from an Eastern perspective.

Initially Jung’s theories had more influence on art, literature, and anthropology than they did on psychiatry and psychology. More recently, however, cognitive-behavioral theorists have begun to explore mindfulness as an addition to more traditional aspects of cognitive-behavioral therapies. As psychologists today study concepts from Yoga and Buddhism that are thousands of years old, Jung deserves the credit for bringing such an open-minded approach to the modern world of psychotherapy. Many famous and influential people admired Jung’s work, including psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, psychologist Erich Fromm, the authors Hermann Hesse and H. G. Wells, and Nobel Laureate (Physics) Wolfgang Pauli (for a number of interesting testimonials see Wehr, 1989). In addition, Jung’s discussion of how the libido has transformed throughout the evolution of the human species sounds very much like sociobiology, which was not an established field until the 1970s. Clearly Jung did not simply dabble in a wide range of ideas, but rather, he had an extraordinary vision of the complexity of the human psyche.