ROBERT JOHNSON

This file is concerned with Robert Johnson. b. 1921. One of the most noted Jungian authors and lecturers. Robert has spoken to the Jung Society of South Australia on several occasions, drawing hundreds of participants. When he lectures, it seems to me, every sentence is distilled down from hundreds of hours of experience and thought. He speaks quietly, but clearly and reminds one of a Buddhist master, gently sharing his knowledge.

A note. When we look at Robert Johnson, I want you to consider his pathway to becoming a therapist. There are many paths to becoming a therapist. For von Franz, falling in love with Jung and intellectual interest. For Joe Wheelwright, typological strife with his wife and a neurosis based on mother and anima complexes, then analysis and an awakened new career. For Fordham the British establishment, psychiatry and a good seasoning of psychopathology. For Robert Johnson?

.....

Robert Johnson is a Jungian analyst who began his training in Zurich in1947 (at a very young age for Zurich) – the year that the institute opened. Sounds conventional. But his story is anything but that. And it is beautifully recalled in *Balancing Heaven and Earth* (BH&E) (1998, Harper, San Francisco). A few themes predominate in all his works. The need to seek what he called the 'golden world': the inner world of the collective unconscious. Both a blessing and a curse. The need to be on an inner journey and to be guided by the 'slender threads' of synchronicity, fate, god, dreams call it what you will: and of course to attend to these threads. To RJ, the inner world is the most important one, outer events (like money) incidental. The need for a religious attitude – openness to wonder, awe and reverence – respect for the numinous. And, perhaps contradictorily, the need to relieve a terrible lifelong loneliness. Although he doesn't discuss it specifically in his autobiography, he seems to have developed his extraverted attitude as he has aged (as Jung might have predicted) and acquired many, many friends in all parts of the world.

He does claim to have developed his thinking function with age (he is an IF with secondary N), but it isn't apparent in his description of his life. Perhaps though in the clarity and logical structure of his books, though he doesn't mention it! He also makes the good point that developing (though one might argue 'using') one's inferior function can result in a breakdown or a dark night of the soul. And perhaps a transformation. To be brought up and used when life transformations are needed. So that important statements could be made in very simple and clear language. I would call him truly wise.

"There is one right thing and only one right thing to do at every moment. We can either follow or resist the slender threads." (BH&E xii)

RJ was brought up near Portland Oregon. And had a very unhappy childhood and young adulthood. He had an abandoning father – a failed solitary who was dependent and didn't

live his own life – and a mother who had to be both parents and was so, but gave no feeling relatedness, hid all her own feelings and didn't want Robert to show his. Later he had a docile, servant-like step father who Robert rejected. Eventually he did gain what he calls 'godparents – adults who mediated between RJ and his inner world as he put it – Mr. Thomas and the pipe organ, a sensitive, ne'er do well artist Ambrose, to a degree his mother's mother and so on, but his home life was pretty dismal.

Then at the age of 11, he had an accident, when his right leg and knee were crushed by a car. He has had an artificial leg ever since. Because of an undetected blood leak, he very nearly died and underwent a near-death experience. He was in a glorious world and describes pure light, gold radiant, luminous, tranquil, joyous and so on. But essentially indescribable. The 'golden world'. He came back to consciousness only very reluctantly and was 'spoiled for regular life'. His life was essentially an attempt to recapture the golden world thereafter, changing only as his perception of it changed. (enlarge in terms of growth – well shown in the book). He quotes William Blake.

"To see the world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand

And eternity in an hour"

He next recaptured the vision (see also the grail quest – his alternative name) when he was 16 and managed (with obvious difficulty) to get a job. From 6pm all night in a cannery. Hard, noisy and boring, hand-trucking heavy loads of hot cans. Completely exhausted and rather suicidal at 4.30 am he drove up into the hills and witnessed the sun rise and was in the golden world again –he saw, smelled and tasted the sunrise (synaesthesia). Then reluctantly back to the grey everyday world. A question. Two ecstatic experiences but did he earn them? Or, was he compelled to be religious??

RJ argues that westerners hunger desperately for glimpses of the golden world. That obedience to cultural tasks leaves us spiritually hungry. He himself went to the hill top again many times hoping to see the GW, but was unsuccessful. His situation was not desperate enough, he thought.

RJ had a great talent for music and this helped him to escape from the everyday world when he was young. Especially the (pipe) organ. His music teacher (Miss Rand – ever polite) also taught him about art, mysticism and religion. He eventually became organist and choirmaster at a Portland church. A disaster. He had no social skills and liked playing Bach not hymns.

1944 was a dark time in his life (again). He couldn't join the war, so he got two jobs. As a case worker with the Red Cross (winter) and as a fire watcher in summer. Helping others and living a solitary life – a precursor of the rest of his life. He discovered that a meditative aloneness is a cure for loneliness. Contact with the inner world (undistracted by city life) as compensation perhaps for loneliness. Learning to loves ones introversion/inner world, one might say.

In 1945 he drove to California and spent 2 years trying to find salvation with Krishnamurti. The Messiah of the Theosophians who had decided that he wasn't the Messiah and that people needed to find their own salvation. He learnt many things – for example that Indians like the individuality/drop of dew analogy and believe that the highest attainment is to merge one's individuality into the primal sea, whereas westerners cling to everything that defines them as individuals. That, to Indians death is to be welcomed, not feared. And so on – a very Jungian priming. That alchemical gold should be owned, not projected onto others. And so on. And that one should just be aware.

(Joe Wheelwright had something to say on this subject, too. He spent some time in San Francisco helping perhaps two hundred Californians to die. Many of them went out screaming, he said. And his explanation was that they were still attached (by their projections) to people and things: so that, at the moment of death, strings were breaking everywhere.)

But Krishnamurti was Johnsons last attempt to find the gold in someone else. Eventually he had a dream in which he found his own alchemical gold by digging down into a muddy hillside on his own. And so he moved on.

A friend recommended a Jungian Analyst – Fritz Kunkel in LA. After an early rejection, he sat on Kunkels doorstep and pleaded with him for analysis. Of course, he got it. Eventually he stopped the analysis after a dream in which he walked with Kunkel, Kunkel got tired and RJ had to take over his briefcase.

By now it was 1948 and RJ was rather inflated by all he had learned but not yet digested and decided to go to Europe with almost no money. He became terrified and seasick on the voyage, but then had adventures, meeting very caring families, and criminals. One friend, Art, seems to have been some sort of con artist. He eventually disappeared, but only after giving RJ the money (presumably dishonestly obtained) needed to study to be an analyst. He used the money to train at the Jung Institute rather than handing it over to the police (thinking types, especially, might question the morality of this).

Late in 1948, RJ spent a month in Strasbourg for a music festival etc, then almost by chance wandered across to Zurich (not very far). Here he phoned Jolande Jacobi, a friend of Kunkel's, visited her, and found himself enrolled in the Jung Institut (which needed students at that time. He felt kidnapped by this extravert. He was the youngest student and the only one without a PHD or MD. The lecturers were Jacobi, Meier, Emma, Barbara Hannah, Toni and Marie-Louise. He was fascinated by Emma's lectures on the holy grail. He loved Hannah and learned about active imagination from her.

Jacobi was not the right analyst for him. She gave him unwelcome advice and tried to pull him out of his extreme introversion. He resented her pushiness and she frightened him by pacing the floor. She wouldn't analyse 'unsuitable' dreams so he ended the analysis. She never forgave him and apparently did her best to discredit him in Jungian circles

As his psychological world began to function, he no longer needed music so much. Then too, while psychology was his calling he felt a need to keep a balance between earning a living and developing knowledge.

An encounter with Carl Jung. At age 26 Johnson approached Emma Jung and worked with her. A kind and sensitive soul. Meeting Carl Jung, though, was an overwhelming experience! He had an extraordinary dream in which he was repeatedly the best friend of Buddha over the ages. This dream was passed from Emma to Carl Jung and Jung confronted Johnson about is. Telling him that he must never join an organisation and that he would never marry. All good advice or true, but overwhelming at the time. If you read any of Johnson's autobiography, you should read this passage!

Many years later, Johnson realized that terrifying or extraordinary experiences of the unconscious can be divine grace and that Jung was right. His life has been a fulfillment of the Buddha dream. He also came to believe that our society was about to undergo transformation (although this feeling of living in the 'latter days' is often a part of religious participation and is resisted by the forces of capitalism).

Johnson now returned to California, felt isolated (again) and ignored Jung's advice about organizations. He started a practice and gave Jungian lectures in a church psychology school. When the school closed, he gave weekly classes for some of the students and his practice grew out of this. Other clients arrived because of chance meetings e.g. with his doctor. He teamed up with Helen Luke (another analyst) and her family and for many years they were his family too (until she had a breakdown and the two boys grew up). His approach to analysis was to assume that the dream has the answer not to lecture, manipulate, or 'know' anything. People fear invasion in analysis and put up resistances. He used painting therapy from early on. His observation was that Americans (the 'me' generation) have not grown up and assumed adult responsibility. And that they need to do this quickly so they can start on the second half of life. He tried to bring out the second – the 'ancient' – personality in his clients.

Next, after a dream in which he was in danger of drowning he went to London to train with Toni Sussman. 1954. Age 33. A very concentrated analysis of 7 hours per week. A rather fierce, part Jewish catholic convert woman. His 'mad' analyst (his words) decided it was his destiny to reorganize the catholic church and took him to a Benedictine abbey to take charge. He managed to escape, but continued the analysis! He learned to trust his own inner intuition. Toni eventually gave him a piece of paper 'certifying' him as a Jungian analyst.

Back to LA and a booming practice. Then a dark night of the soul as he develops his thinking function (probably when developing as a lecturer and author). A very important Jungian conference was now held in LA. Johnson not invited as not considered well enough qualified. The next year the second Panarian conference and he was invited to speak (after much behind-the-scenes activity)! He trembled in terror in anticipation for six months (introverts, take heart). He tried to write a scholarly lecture, but all his friends hated it. So he made just a few notes and improvised his talk using his feeling function (he says). It worked and the lecture became the basis of the book We.

At this point he lost his 'family' and made the major mistake of joining a monastery in Michigan. He did a lot of therapeutic work with the other monks, but never fitted in. He fell out with the hierarchy and was placed on an invisible black list, wasn't allowed to therapise

or even bake bread and eventually left. He concluded that you need a medieval mind to live in a monastery and he didn't have one (more or less).

Now in 1967 he moved to San Diego in his mid-fourties. An office in a church, a simpatico environment and a stream of patients (his word). He purchased a small house on a cliff with three guest rooms. Here he write He – his first published book. He was creating his own modern monastery. He was taken up by Harper & Rowe and his career as an author took off. And as a lecturer.

Johnson fled to India at the age of 51 in 1972. In a sort of daze of disbelief. This is detailed in the last third of his autobiography and is endlessly interesting. He went to an ashram in Pondicherri (south of Madras). He experienced a tremendous sense of homecoming as he entered a feeling society where true devils and saints walk the street. And where people are psychologically whole and, in a sense, innocent. Apparently India has 96 words for love, none for nuts and bolts. And hundreds of thousands of gods to worship. Religion also tends to be the main topic of conversation in cafes, on trains, or just on the street. Decades-long friendships were made. He describes a bus trip to Pondicherri with a new friend, who didn't at all understand what loneliness might be, slept under RJs bed when he was in hospital with dysentery and offered to die for him (a common way of expressing love in India). He concludes with a description of his last visit, in old age, in 1995. Let's leave him there.

Some Books

In about 1995 RJ decided not to write any more books. After a dream in which he discovered that his pen was no longer producing ink, but rather water. He was then (over some time) persuaded by Jerry Ruhl to write an autobiography. Note that the dream had been a little ambivalent.

HE: Understanding Masculine Psychology

The story of Parsifal. A story of individuation in the male (with some assistance from a positive mother). And the quest for the grail (of course).

SHE: Understanding Feminine Psychology

The story of psyche (and Eros). A myth for women and their individuation in a patriarchal society (then and now) that has mostly masculine values and rules.

WE: The Psychology of Romantic Love

The story of Tristan and Iseult. Possibly the best of the lot.

According to Johnson, romantic love is the single greatest energy system in the western psyche. It has supplanted religion as a source of meaning, transcendence, wholeness and ecstasy. It is only a mass phenomenon in the west, albeit present in every culture. We assume it is the only form of love to base marriage and relatedness on. In most cultures marriages etc are based on other forms of love (which clearly he prefers – but has he ever experienced romantic love himself, one might ask?)

Romantic love is a whole psychological package – a combination of beliefs, ideals, attitudes and expectations . We automatically assume that when we are in love we have found the ultimate meaning of life, and revealed in another person. We are complete. The package demands that the partner always provides these feelings. This relates to the way that the great wound in our society is loneliness. Or so says Johnson! And, perhaps, the loss of a collective shared unconscious. And romantic love is a great psychological phenomenon that we haven't yet integrated into consciousness and turned to good. It has overwhelmed our collective psyche and permanently altered our view of the world. We turn it into tragedy and alienation.

To RJ, the vehicle for exploring romantic love is the myth of Tristan and Iseult. One of the greatest of the epic tales. Particularly about the development of individual male consciousness. The short summary of his interpretation is that Tristan represents the modern man who has broken away from patriarch through the vehicle of romantic love, but is overwhelmed by the experience and turns it into disaster instead of progress. But is T. a whole man, or an emerging (perhaps shadow) element of the unconscious, as Iseult is? The reader might ask themselves why Tristan doesn't want to be king himself – just to serve a king.

Owning Your Own Shadow

A guide to what the shadow is, where it comes from (origins and acculturisation) and the destructive and golden aspects. How we are born whole, but then are split by our society.

The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden

Two stories. The fisher king is essentially an essay on the woundedness of men in our society: unable to live and unable to die. The handless maiden is about the sense of uselessness that many women have, outside of domestic duties. Like many men, such women cannot find joy, worth and meaning.

Transformation

Don Quixote, Hamlet and Faust are used as examples of (some of) the developmental stages of men. The Hamlet level is purgatory. According to Johnson, Faust achieves wholeness and enlightened consciousness. But this does depend on the version of Faust that one reads, or sees.