

Lent: A Season for Self:Knowledge

Lenten Reconciliation Service

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By Jane Via

I recently reread Carl Jung's book, The Undiscovered Self.¹ In it, Jung He notes that most people equate themselves with their conscious self.² For Jung, equating the conscious self with the whole self prevents access to our souls and to religious experience, because both reside in the unconscious, not the conscious.³ Also in our unconscious reside the human capacity for good and the human capacity for evil. For Jung, when we fail to do our "soul work", when we ignore our unconscious, we then ignore our individual capacity for evil, project it onto others and onto institutions, and regard ourselves as "harmless". We recognize that terrible things happen, but we delude ourselves into believing it's always "the others" that do them. For Jung, when we fail to recognize that we bear within the capacity and inclination to do evil, we are more vulnerable to become instruments of evil. None of us, Jung says, stands outside the collective human shadow.⁴

Jung also believes we fear the capacity for evil within and, absent self-knowledge, project our fear outward onto others. A lack of insight can "deprive us of the capacity to deal with evil"⁵, which results in scapegoating even though we no longer ritually lay the evil within us and among us on a goat and drive it into the wilderness.

¹ A Mentor Book, THE NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY, Times Mirror: New York and Scarborough, Ontario, 1957-1958.

² Id., p. 108.

³ Id. at p.101. Jung is careful to say that our unconscious is not identical to God but the medium of religious experience. See. P. 102.

⁴ The Undiscovered Self, p. 108.

⁵ Id, p. 109.

Because our culture does not acknowledge the importance of the unconscious to the manifestation of evil, we accept as “normal” – for instance – the invention and use of the nuclear bomb. We don’t think of the physicists who invented nuclear weapons as criminals. Reason leads us to justify and accept what is logical despite the nuclear threat to the survival of our planet. When we rely on reason alone, we condemn ourselves to create or experience the evil we project outward.

It is important to be reminded of the Beatitudes. But if Jung is right, we can’t simply promise to be better people and become better people. We can’t *will* ourselves to experience personal transformation or seize the good within. We must do “soul work” and connect with the unconscious. This Lent, part of our “soul work” might be to set aside two illusions: the illusion that we can live the gospel without addressing our individual and collective shadows; and the illusion that reason alone is sufficient.⁶

Many of us do soul work. We work with therapists; keep dream books; journal; work with spiritual directors; do image work; meditate; compose, sing or play music; paint or do other varieties of art, or combine some of these. Each is a means to access our unconscious and our inherent human power for good and evil. The more conscious we become, the more aware of our shadow we become, the less we “act out” of the unacknowledged evil within and the more able we become to deal with evil in ourselves and others.

Tonight we take an opportunity to expand our self-knowledge. We recognize our actions or reactions which are, or have been, harmful to ourselves and others. We do this not for the purpose of self-recrimination but to open a pathway within to self-knowledge. The more “soul work” we do, the more able we become to channel the power of the unconscious toward good rather than evil.

⁶ D. pp. 111-112.

There is hope in individual self-knowledge. Jung believes the on-going spiritual transformation of individuals can have a cumulative effect on all individuals and the spiritual transformation of humanity itself.

Lent is a season for the pursuit of self-knowledge. May we do our part for the spiritual transformation of humanity.