

GROUP INTERACTION FROM AN IMAGINAL PERSPECTIVE

Running Head: Group Experience: An Imaginal Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I describe four different aspects of the group experience from an imaginal perspective. They include the inter-subjective imaginal group field, a dream and an extra-ordinary group experience, the evolution of the class as a group and, finally, an oracle for the following year's group experience. I conclude that the group functions within a complex imaginal matrix. Relating to the group imaginally can add an additional dimension to the group experience, while relating to it more inwardly, in Eros, can deepen understanding and potentially permit experiences that would otherwise be repressed or ignored.

GROUP INTERACTION FROM AN IMAGINAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to briefly examine four different aspects of the group experience from an imaginal perspective, with particular reference to my PhD class at Pacifica Graduate Institute. First, I explore the nature of the inter-subjective imaginal group field. Secondly, I identify and examine a group experience in relationship to a group member's dream. Thirdly, I make some observations on the evolution of the class as a group over the past two years. Finally, I meditate on the meaning of an oracle cast on the nature of the group's experience over the coming academic year. My reflections suggest that the group and one's relationship with it consists of a richly textured multidimensional tapestry.

The Inter-subjective Imaginal Group Field

The inter-subjective imaginal group field can be defined as a subtle space involving an aspect of the vital or life world *per se*. It is a life space where the individual egos and selves of each of the group members meet with the group-self. By becoming conscious of this subtle field and one's play in it, one can allow for compensatory indications from the inter-subjective imaginal field. A sensitive person, especially with high status in the group, for example, a professor, can use this insight to favourably effect outcome of group behaviour. That is to say, compensatory factors can be brought to the light of consciousness of the individual concerned that may, on occasion, be passed on to other individuals and the group itself. The group unconscious, which may otherwise make itself felt in a less than salutary fashion, can carry messages which, when assimilated to consciousness, can affect group activities. In this process care must be taken not to direct events based on ego desires and the power principle, but to allow Eros and life its full play through increased consciousness. As always, it is a question of enhancing consciousness-life.

The teacher, the subject and the students each make a major contribution to the nature of the inter-subjective group field. In a student-teacher relationship, both the subject itself and the teacher have a considerable impact on the nature of the imaginal field. By way of illustration, I refer to the reader to the drawings done by a student during each of three courses given during the summer semester. The drawings were informally shown to each member of the class. There was a general consensus that they, at least to a degree, reflect the atmosphere and the imaginal field during each of the three courses.

For class one, represented by drawing one, most students found the subject matter uninteresting and the presentation lacking stimulation. As a result, there was considerable discontent, restlessness and even passive-aggressiveness, impressionistically represented in the drawing. Members of the class generally found the material in class two more interesting and well presented. Moreover, the professor taught with a certain amount of humour and sensitivity to the mood of the class. As one might expect the inter-subjective field for this class, as imaginally depicted in drawing two, was relaxed, balanced and contained. Class three was presented in a way that was highly sensitive to the mood of the group along with interesting insights. Not surprisingly the imaginal field, as impressionistically depicted in drawing three, was relaxed, balanced and open.

In addition to individual teachers and their style of presentation and subject matter, the students themselves have a major impact on the nature of the inter-subjective imaginal field. Students of cognitive psychology or lawyers, for instance, may have found the subject matter for course one involving legal and ethical issues, more interesting than did members of our group, who tend to be oriented in other ways, probably more inwardly and imaginally. More innate interest in the subject matter on the part of the students would certainly have contributed more positively to the class atmosphere and imaginal field.

A Dream and an Extra-Ordinary Group Experience

The protagonist, a male, dreamt that he was with an attractive woman who is a superior baseball pitcher and who had recently thrown several no hitters. He wanted to pitch, but she insisted that she continue in that role. He still wanted to play and the indications were that perhaps he would, although in a less central role.

The extra-ordinary group experience in question involved our group creatively contributing to the festivities for the graduating class. The protagonist volunteered for a role [metaphorically as pitcher] which involved him delivering, Hermes-like, a message to the graduating class. At one point, just prior to doing so, there was a brief period of spontaneous and chaotic movement when it became evident to him that another person, a dramatic young woman, would be far better at playing that particular role. He quickly described to her the role and then wrote some notes on a piece of paper and gave them to her. She happily took on the part and played it superbly to everyone's delight. The protagonist participated playing a minor role.

From the point of view of consciousness, it appeared to be a case of Eros born out of chaos. From the perspective of the dreamer's unconscious, the dream indicated that intelligent nature, that is to say, a highly capable anima [the pitcher who was pitching no-hitters] and/or a real woman would take over and direct matters [pitching] in the play of life (baseball). The dream ego or dreamer himself ended up as spectator or, at best, a more peripheral player. The person, who had the dream felt that the symbolic dream unrolled in reality in an intelligent, purposeful yet spontaneous fashion. The ego, that is to say, the dreamer himself abdicated his ideas of wanting to play a central role [i.e., wanting to pitch] to the workings of consciousness-force, which is to say intelligent nature as embodied in an actual woman.

It is interesting to compare the role of the man here to a man [or woman] who represses Eros and the feminine for one reason or another or does not become involved at all at that level. Repression would not have permitted such a spontaneous move, for reasons of ego, norms, rules, procedures or policy of some form or description. The message would, then, have been delivered in a much less interesting way to everybody's detriment including the dreamer's. Or else, there would simply be a lack of involvement. In the latter case there would be a distancing or emotional absence, if not physical withdrawal from the happening. In fact the man was joyfully present. In this case the protagonist participated in Eros, while giving sanction to what transpired, non-interfering while allowing intelligent nature to take over. Archetypally, such a scene can be amplified by referring to the play of the primordial male and female principles, Adam and Eve, Purusha and Prakriti.

Evolution of Class as Group

From an imaginal perspective, the evolution of the group can be examined by applying Eric Neumann's theory on the evolution of consciousness. To begin with, it is necessary to assume that there is a group-self that goes through an evolutionary process, a phenomenon that has long been observed. In addition, the class group-self must also be seen in the perspective that it is part of a larger group, Pacifica Graduate Institute, with its well defined goals, policies, structures and hierarchy of power that embraces the individual class group-self from the outset. Moreover, the professors themselves play a decided role in defining the class group-self.

Thus, right from the beginning, the Great Father, embodied in the Pacifica Graduate Institute had established a certain order and defined work that must be accomplished by the group and by each group member. Indeed, formally, the class group exists for no other conscious reason. Despite this overreaching umbrella, the group in itself seems to have gone through at least some of the

stages imaginally depicted by Neumann. It appears to be destined to go through the remaining stages as well.

Typically, a group life begins with a relatively unconscious immersion in the group as Great Mother, where differences of opinion are held to a minimum. This follows with increasing awareness of the group as place of both containing and devouring energies. Personally, I experienced this especially regarding my understanding and appreciation of Jung. The first stage for me was quite brief, as I fairly early on felt the need to express my opinion, even though it seems to differ quite radically from some, if not most of the professors at Pacifica. My fear, although never excessive, was that the group, especially the professors, would not accept my view and that I would be required to go along with their opinions, or at least write papers from that perspective. I soon became aware that I need not worry about that and imaginally, one might say, there was a something of a resolution with the group as Great Mother in that regard. That is to say, there was an essential attitude of trust on my part that my opinions would be accepted and even, at times, encouraged, at least, from my fellow students.

In the process of attending classes and doing assignments there has been a gradual move towards reconciliation with the Great Father as well, that is to say, members of the group are becoming prepared to enter the world as research oriented, clinical depth-psychologists. During the coming year more research tools and opportunities to refine one's tools will be provided. The means for this include course work, written assignments and the preparation of a dissertation concept paper.

Once the course work is completed and the group no longer continues to meet, the individual hero archetype begins to become dominate. First, one will be engaged in preparing a written dissertation, which is more of a heroic solitary vocation than group work. Finally, one is responsible to present to the world

one's defined position, which at least in part, includes a mission that one shares with other graduates from Pacifica, including one's own classmates. In fact, it includes a wide body of depth oriented therapists, in my case, particularly oriented towards Jung. In the final analysis, however, even this mission will differ considerably between individuals depending on one's personal history, experience of life, and conscious experience of the collective unconscious and the Self. In my case, not only has Jung been a major influence in my life but so has Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and this, too, needs to be integrated into my sense of mission.

Before completing this section a few comments on the group-self are in order. The group-self, to some minor degree, carries the projection of wholeness for the individual, at least in one's relationship to the group. Each individual member of the group tends to carry projections of some aspect of the personality, which affect the role or roles played in the group. For example, in our group, one person plays the role of class clown, another, the sexually permissive, another the nurturing mother, another the informed father, another defender of the male psyche, another, the outsider, and so on. From my own experience, I observe that the same people may play very different roles, sometimes almost reversed in different groups. The group itself, therefore, seems to have a mind of its own, even though it draws on the psyches of each of the participating individuals.

The Oracle for the Coming Years Group Experience

A book method of casting an oracle on the nature of the group experience over the forthcoming year was processed. Three books were opened at random, each one by a different person, in search of an oracular reading. From the I Ching came Grace, from a dictionary, marriage and from another source, opposition. In such a way an oracular forecast was taken on what will transpire next year for the group. The oracle seems to suggest something like a marriage of opposites, resulting in conflict and oppositional viewpoints within the group, contained,

however, in aesthetically pleasing form [what the I Ching refers to as Grace]. The Chinese book of wisdom informs us that Grace builds civilization but somehow does not penetrate to the existential nature of reality. Nonetheless, it does seem to provide a container for the play of opposites and internal opposition and, therefore, the possibility of increased consciousness something, according to the oracle, the alert individual can be privy to next year.

There is, however, a risk of over attention to form, while missing the underlying conflict and potential for increase in consciousness. In the language of the second line of the Hexagram Grace, there is the danger of devoting too much energy to the "beard on the chin," that is to say superficial talk, anima sentiment and animus opinion and perhaps the aesthetic attitude. The danger is that there will be little regard for the existential deeper conflict and opposition, from which comes consciousness.

Conclusion

The group interactional experience transpires in various ways at different levels. To begin with, the class group experience at Pacifica needs to be understood in the context of a larger group defined by Pacifica Graduate Institute itself. Secondly, the inter-subjective imaginal field differs depending on circumstance, e. g. teacher, subject, students, etc. Thirdly, although it may not be a normal occurrence, individuals can participate in the group experience at a level of Eros where they can witness intelligent nature take over. Fourthly, the class group is going through an evolutionary process that can be observed imaginally. Finally the oracle, taken on the group experience for the coming year, indicates the possibility of becoming more aware of the play of opposites and internal opposition and increasing consciousness accordingly, although there is the risk of being too superficially concerned with form.

The group operates within a complex interwoven imaginal matrix. Individuals can experience their interactional relationship with the group in various ways and at different levels. Observing the group and one's relationship to it imaginally can enrich experience while adding another dimension to it. Relating with the group more inwardly in Eros deepens understanding and potentially allows for experiences that would otherwise be repressed or ignored.