



Psychological Perspectives

A Quarterly Journal of Jungian Thought

ISSN: 0033-2925 (Print) 1556-3030 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/upyp20>

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Thomas Elsner

To cite this article: Thomas Elsner (2017) The Introversion of War, *Psychological Perspectives*, 60:1, 39-43, DOI: [10.1080/00332925.2017.1282253](https://doi.org/10.1080/00332925.2017.1282253)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332925.2017.1282253>



Published online: 10 Mar 2017.



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The Introversion of War

Thomas Elsner

This article brings personal experiences, dreams, synchronicity, archetypal amplifications, and Jungian theory to bear on issues surrounding the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and explores some ways in which the unconscious psyche encourages reflection in the context of political projections. The introversion of war—a phrase borrowed from Jungian analyst Barbara Hannah—is placed in the context of Jung’s theory of individuation as the means by which the death and rebirth of collective values, and hence the creative transformation of society, take place. Standing between my deceased father, whose values mirrored those of Donald Trump, and my 11- and 14-year-old sons, whose values are already quite different, I describe the phenomenology of how psyche seeks to create new values through experiences of death and rebirth.

In a short, taped speech released on the eve of the presidential election, Tuesday November 8th, before the results were in, President Obama acknowledged how insane this election cycle has been and what a toll it has taken on us. After recognizing the trauma that the United States, the whole world in a way, has been through, and the possibility that there could be more where that came from, Obama ended his short message with these words: “No matter what happens, the sun will rise in the morning.” The next day, in his speech in the White House Rose Garden announcing that there would be a smooth transfer of power to President-Elect Donald J. Trump, Obama repeated himself, “The sun will rise in the morning.”

The sun did rise in the morning on November 9, 2016. After not sleeping very much that night, surprised by how visceral the reaction of my body was to watching the election results on CNN up into the early-morning hours, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of me as I lay awake in bed, I walked outside of our home in Gaviota, California, to the most beautiful sunrise. The eternal world of nature, still here, still the same.

When Obama reminds us the sun will rise tomorrow, he is stating an obvious fact, but he is also speaking the language of archetypes. What is a more primal archetypal image than the rising of the sun? It is in the ancient Egyptian myth of the sun god who dies every night in the West and then is reborn in the East, the African myth of the Elgonyi who spit in their hands to welcome the rising sun, the myth of the Pueblo that Jung encountered on his travels there, as he was told by a Native American elder, “We are the sons of Father Sun, and with our religion we daily help our father to go across the sky. We do this not only for ourselves, but for the whole world. If we were to cease practicing our religion, in ten years the sun would no longer rise. Then it would be night forever” (1989,

pp. 251–252). When we are in danger of getting lost in the temporal world, we need to connect experientially with the eternal informing the temporal. This is what Obama was doing, knowingly or not, and this was the main point for Jung (1989):

The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interests upon futilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance. . . . If we understand and feel that here in this life we already have a link with the infinite, desires and attitudes change. (p. 325)

Whatever happens, the sun will rise in the morning. When we are related to the infinite, desires and attitudes change. This point may strike us as trite pabulum, or childish escapism, or denial. Bringing up one side brings up the other. Whomever I told Obama's sunrise story to on November 9th always came back with the "Yes, but. . . ." My neighbor texted back, "Yes, whether humans are here or not, this will be the case!" Or my partner, Monika Wikman, said, "Yes, if the night-world lets it rise again." Our 11-year-old Bennett, who was worried about Trump, had this to say after I texted him Obama's affirmation, along with a photo of the sunrise, the morning after the election: "Yeah, but the sky will be filled with ash from all the nukes Trump is going to set off." Eleven years old?? Really? No parent wants to hear his or her child say such a thing. The ashes of fear threaten to obscure the sunlight. I guess most children growing up in the United States today are living in a different world than the idyllic innocence we might wish for them.

The human world can obscure the eternal, like the ash of nuclear war blotting out the sun. Yet the opposite danger also exists: the eternal obscuring the human. This is where our other boy, Jake, 13 years old, went on November 9th, texting me after the news that Trump won: "Here we come, Ireland" with an Irish flag emoji and a photo of the ocean sweeping along a rugged Irish coastline. He mentioned Ireland because Monika, his stepmom, who has Irish ancestors, is in the process of trying to get Irish citizenship. There's nothing wrong with moving to Ireland, but it's interesting to track down the fantasy involved in it, where Ireland as a symbol or metaphor sits on the psychic map as well as the geographical map. A fantasy of living in a place where nothing bad ever happens and we can watch the sun rise every morning, so to speak, represents an eternal dream-state that we yearn to get back to, one that favors the dream over reality, and that can become dangerous if it turns into escapism.

Some days following 9/11, in Switzerland at the Center for Depth Psychology according to C. G. Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz where I was training as a Jungian analyst, I was shocked into awareness of my own tendency to go there, to live out a fantasy of escaping to another country where the problems of the world do not exist. This happened as I was playing ping-pong one evening with one of my teachers. The ping-pong table was located in a converted bomb shelter built during World War II. As we were playing, I began to goof around, probably to relieve the tension we were all feeling after 9/11. I joked that I felt pretty safe at the moment because I was in *Switzerland*, the most neutral country in the world, in *the most holy part of Switzerland*, near the hermitage of the only Swiss saint, Niklaus von Flue, in a retreat center that is also a *convent*, and in the *bomb shelter* of the convent. At just that moment I heard an explosion. It sounded as if a bomb had gone off in the room. I could not see it, but what had actually happened was that a large fluorescent light right above and behind my head exploded the moment I had joked about being safe from the conflicts of the world. Glass flew everywhere, and for a

couple seconds I was totally knocked on my heels. I really thought a bomb had gone off. Theodor Abt, with whom I was playing ping-pong, told me later about how shocked and completely freaked out I looked, how my face went utterly ashen. I tended at that time to believe, or want to believe, that I could hide out from world problems and avoid them, when in fact I was in the exact right place to run into them. The literal place I was in—the neutral country, the holy center, the bomb shelter—was a symbolic place I inhabited. In a process of deep introversion, I ran right into the world and began to discover ways in which the collective and individual interface. In fact, it was in Switzerland, 10 days after 9/11, that a dream came to me speaking of an antidote to the problem of war that required me symbolically to “drink my own blood.”

Over our lives there are a few dreams that will remain with us for the duration, and this dream is one of them. In our current times, shortly after this presidential election, I am brought back to the intelligence in this dream again and again. Here is the dream:

It is night and I am at a gathering of men, like some kind of secret society, outdoors in a parking lot. We have all driven there. I am going to give a lecture to this group. At one point two men are talking about the situation in the Middle East, with Afghanistan. They are having an argument about it. One is my friend. I realize that my friend knows half the story from the U.S. side, and the other man knows the other half of the story from the Afghan side; they each have half the truth. As I realize that, I consider that it is my job to somehow unite them. They need to come together. I am told what must happen for this reconciliation of the American man and the Afghan man to occur. A ritual must take place. It is like a black Mass. What I must do is, first, cut my right hand with a dark iron blade and drain the blood into a chalice and then, second, drink my own blood. I can bear to go through with the first step of this dark ritual and cut my right palm and put the blood into the chalice. But I cannot go through with the second step of drinking my own blood. I can't bear it, it's too much, and the whole thing is too overwhelming.

To make an offering towards world peace, the dream says (in mythopoetic symbolism) that I must drink my own blood. If I want to do something to help with the problem of war, I can start by extracting, containing, and then integrating my own psycho-physical life. When I had this dream over 15 years ago, it was frightening and seemed to represent something dark and bizarre, so much so that in the dream itself, although I could go through with the first step of the ritual to cut my right palm and let my blood drip into the vessel, I could not go through with the second step of then drinking the blood. What now strikes me most vividly about this dream is that it is profoundly ethical. As Jung said, “If we are to develop further we have to draw to us and drink

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down to the very dregs that, because of our complexes, we have held at a distance” (1969, par. 184).

Many years after I had this dream, I was shocked to discover a parallel to its symbolic imagery in Jung’s (1970) *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. In a section entitled “Regeneration of the King,” Jung presents the alchemical image of celebrating a Last Supper with oneself, and he interprets this image as having to do with taking back shadow projections in the context of sociopolitical conflict. The following is Jung’s alchemical prescription, so to speak, for the introversion of war:

If the projected [sociopolitical] conflict is to be healed, it must return into the psyche of the individual, where it had its unconscious beginnings. He must celebrate a Last Supper with himself, and eat his own flesh and drink his own blood, which means that he must recognize and accept the other in himself. But if he persists in his one-sidedness, the two lions will tear each other to pieces. Is this perhaps the meaning of Christ’s teaching, that each must bear his own cross? For if you have to endure yourself, how will you be able to rend others also? (1970, par. 512)

I was shocked when I first read this passage because Jung exactly describes both the context (the problem of war) and the imagery (drinking one’s own blood) of my dream, as if Jung were writing directly to me across the decades. Jung recognizes that the symbolism of drinking one’s blood is a type of Mass, a new version of a traditional religious ritual, one made as an offering to the unconscious with the hope that the darkness will be appeased.

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Is it dangerous to encounter the archetypal depths of the collective unconscious? Might it not disrupt our collective adaptation? Might it not overwhelm us? Yes, yes, and yes. Another common objection to engaging in psychological work is that it is impractical. But what if enough people do not do it? The result will be perpetual war. If enough individuals in the United States and the Middle East, for example, do not live through the symbolic death of their current entrenched assumptions and values, if they do not turn around and face the collective

shadow that they see only in the other, if they do not drink their own blood as opposed to the blood of other nations, then the United States will always be the great Satan; Iraq, Iran, and North Korea will always be the axis of evil. But *how* can we get there? Individuation has something to do with it—individuation, as Jung understood it, namely as the “blossoming and unfolding of the individual as the experimental, doubtful and bewildering work of the living God, to whom we have to lend our eyes and ears and discriminating mind” (1975, p. 592; letter to M. Serrano, 14 September 1960). The challenge, though, is great. Jung does not mince words when he recognizes that our development, which is crucial to our survival, will be experienced as symbolic death before the rebirth comes.

Like Jung, Martin Luther King, Jr., uses the language of death and rebirth to describe how he sees our culture and where it is headed. In his last book, King wrote: “For

its very survival's sake, America must re-examine old presuppositions and release itself from many things that for centuries have been held sacred. For the evils of racism, poverty and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born" (1967, p. 157). I know that a rebirth of values can happen from undergoing my own symbolic death and rebirth process, and also by standing between my father and my sons, looking back on my father's life as well.

My father was a right-wing capitalistic businessman whose ultimate value was success. He was, effectively, Donald Trump. The alchemical gold for him was literally money, which meant power. This was his highest value, not something bad, but something good; the spell of the literalization of gold was the best thing he knew and he fought for it. But in the last days of his life, his wife having died the year before from cancer, now dying in the hospital of cancer himself, he told me a story. He remembered, he said, being out on a date with a woman after graduating from UCLA (where he was in the ROTC) and returning from his service as a lieutenant on a minesweeper in the Korean war. "All I want to be is a success," he had told this beautiful woman as they sat across from each other. But then, after becoming just that capitalistic version of the success story he had envisioned, lying in a hospital bed at the age of 61, with only days to live, he looked at me and added, "You work hard your whole life only to get there, then your wife dies, and then you get cancer. It all seems so stupid now," implying that all he had done with his life, sacrificing for money and prestige, was fundamentally off. And I was the son that had built my own life on his values, in my first year of law school because of him, doing everything I did out of the values he lived. In that moment it was as if he was trying to release me from playing his values out as my own. There, in the last days of life, he transformed; his exhale at the end of life was filled with the courage to turn towards a bitter truth and see it. Such an act has a quality of soul, of owning the shadow; he died before he died, losing everything in that moment, and gaining something of incredible value. If he had continued to live, he would have been a different man.

I left that hospital room stunned; a crack began to open then in my sense of self from my father's words, a crack that would, over the years, upset my entire adaptation. I had built my life on his back and what now? But this cracking apart of old values, my father's last gift to me, also led to my work in analysis, and with that the possibility of finding my inner values, my own life, and living with my sons in such a different way than my father did with me. Integrating this experience with my father is part of what it means to me to drink the blood line. It gives me hope that things can change, close in and at large, and it scares me as well: Frightful things must come before the time is ripe.

Thomas Elsner, J.D., M.A., is a Jungian analyst with a private practice in Santa Barbara, California.

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