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## STEPPING INTO A PAINTING

by Bianca Daalder-van Iersel

Until the *Red Book: Liber Novus* was published in 2009, we knew of C.G. Jung's personal adventure with the psyche and its influences on his life, as he described them in his chapter *Confrontation with the Unconscious* in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. He called it "the *prima materia* for a lifetime's work" (1963, p. 170-199). But without the *Red Book*, it would have been impossible to imagine how deep and torturous Jung's descent into the world of his inner images really was. The full extent of his interactions with the figures that manifested on this journey he would later call "active imagination." My initial reading of the *Red Book* elicited feelings of awed respect for the density, complexity and daring of the text and paintings. Closer exploration was followed by a sense of new freedom related to my own personal experiences with active imagination. It was especially Jung's admonitions and warnings to experience one's own inner world as unique and incomparable to any other that gave new breath and meaning to my personal experiences with active imagination. This feeling of expansion became the inspiration for this article, in which I describe my own encounters with images of the unconscious and their influence on both my inner and outer lives.



Figure 1. Incubation–Sleeping in the Temple, 2009 (acrylic painting on linen-covered panel, 10” x 10”) by author.

“There is only one way and that is your way; there is only one salvation and that is your salvation. Why are you looking around for help? Do you believe that help will come from outside? What is to come is created in you and from you. Hence look into yourself. Do not compare, do not measure. No other way is like yours. All other ways deceive and tempt you. You must fulfill the way that is in you.”

C.G. Jung (2009, p. 308)

One of the earliest formulations of the term “active imagination,” coined by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, was “active fantasy.” Jung considered this to be “one of the highest forms of psychic activity,” as he wrote in his volume *Psychological Types*, published in 1921 (Hull, 1971, p. 115), “fantasy as imaginary activity is identical with the flow of psychic energy,” (p. 116). In a lecture series in 1932 Jung uses the German word *betrachten* as a better term to explain the kind of psychological looking that “brings about the activation of the object; it is as if something were emanating from one’s spiritual eye that evokes or activates the object of one’s vision” (p. 117). Apart from looking, regarding, and contemplating, *betrachten* also means, “to make pregnant” (Weis, 1951, p. 135).

So to look or concentrate upon a thing, *betrachten*, gives the quality of being pregnant to the object. And if it is pregnant, then something is due to come out of it; it is alive, it produces, it multiplies. That is the case with any fantasy image; one concentrates upon it, and then finds that one has great difficulty in keeping the thing quiet, it gets restless, it shifts, something is added, or it multiplies itself; one fills it with living power and it becomes pregnant. (Jung, as cited in Hull, 1971, p. 118)

Among the many other words Jung used for the process he was developing, both in his writings and his lectures, were the “transcendent function,” the “picture method,” “active phantasying,” “trancing,” “visioning,” “exercises,” “dialectical method,” “technique of differentiation,” “technique of introversion,” “introspection,” and “technique of the descent” (Chodorow, 1995, p. 3). Joan Chodorow writes about this “technique of descent,” as the act of “dropping down” into the depths: “he [Jung] realized that when he managed to translate his emotions into images, he was inwardly calmed and reassured. He came to see that his task was to find the images that are concealed in the emotions” (p. 2). At the same time it was crucial to “maintain a self-reflective, conscious point of view.” Jung himself described the first one of those experiences as follows:

I was sitting at my desk once more, thinking over my fears. Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as if the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic. But then, abruptly, at not too great a depth, I landed on my feet in a soft, sticky mass. (1961, p. 179)

The lecture series *Analytical Psychology; notes of the seminar given in 1925*, which only existed in mimeographed form for a long time, was not published in English until 1989.

Jung's lectures contain much detail about the method of working with fantasy images in language similar to what we find in his autobiographical work *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961). In those early lectures we are introduced to some of the encounters Jung had with the figures that inhabited his unconscious, as he set out to explain the beginnings of his realization that these "active fantasies" have much value. For example in Lecture 4 of the seminar (1925/1989) he said:

But it cannot be done by just lying down on a couch and relaxing, it has to be done by a definite giving over of the libido in full sum to the unconscious. I trained myself to do this; I gave all my libido to the unconscious to make it work, and in this way I gave the unconscious a chance, the material came to light and I was able to catch it *in flagrante*. (p. 34)

It was not until ten years later, in 1935, during the lecture-series in London that would become known as "The Tavistock Lectures" (Jung, 1935/1968a) that an English speaking audience was finally able to hear Jung publicly speak in their language, and engage with him in discussions about the method which was then officially called "active imagination." In the lively transcribed discussion after Lecture 5 (pp. 188-204), Jung gives extensive examples of work with patients and also recounts one of his own childhood experiences. He especially emphasizes the necessity to suspend disbelief, and let the unconscious do its work while paying careful attention to all its movements. "But you have to overcome that doubt, because it is not true. We can really produce precious little by our conscious mind. All the time we are dependent upon the things that *literally fall into* our consciousness; therefore in German we call them *Einfälle*" (p. 193, emphasis added). In this last discussion the importance of giving form to images in various ways, such as painting, modeling in clay or stone, or dancing, is stressed. One of the participants brought a series of visual images made by one of his patients for Jung to comment on, and he plunged with gusto into an analysis (pp. 198-204).

## ENCOUNTERING ACTIVE IMAGINATION

It was not until I became engaged in Jungian analysis in my 40s, and started studying for a master's degree in counseling psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute a few years later that I began to hear and read about active imagination and attempted to engage with it myself. This method seemed to be somewhat familiar to experiences I had from an early age with my creative work, specifically the unexpected autonomy of inner images that would reveal themselves to me as I was drawing or painting, but which I had not consciously invited, and that were surprising and often totally unwelcome visitors as far as I was concerned. These experiences elicited much fear in me back then, and I did not talk about them to anyone, fearful they might reveal something to be wrong with me; that I might be judged weird and unacceptably different. Even as an adult, taking part in professional art shows, the echoes of this fear stymied my attempts to let my work be seen. When starting Jungian analysis the sense of discovery, recognition and a new feeling of freedom, slowly leading to the acceptance of my inner experiences and the creative work that flowed out of them, changed the course of my life.

Some of the first books containing accounts of active imagination that were brought to my attention were Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961) and Robert Johnson's *Inner Work* (1986), an extensive guide based on "Jung's model of the unconscious" (p. 5), the second half of which is entirely dedicated to active imagination. At the time I started my studies, the master's program at Pacifica included a quarterly creative project related to the material that was the focus of study, to be executed and presented by the students. Despite some trepidation I decided to experiment moving into an active imagination with one of my own paintings. Actually, this image was the very first oil painting I ever made and virtually my first serious work in color, after having been primarily a printmaker who preferred the clean flatness of an almost one-dimensional pristine black and white. I began to paint the year before starting my studies at Pacifica without much forethought. The sudden emergence of a need to work with oils and color was what I can only call my *Wizard-of-Oz*-experience: Much like in the movie classic (Fleming 1999), when Dorothy opens the door of her little farmhouse, after having been transported from her former life, depicted in black and white, to the unexpectedly vibrant Technicolor of the land of Oz and exclaims to her dog when seeing that new vista, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." Jungian analysis and the developments that flowed out of it helped me open the door to new vistas and dimensions, resulting in this spontaneous and unexpected change in technique. In turn, this artistic change accelerated things forward towards inevitable changes reflecting my inner and outer development, and new creative expressions that now seemed validated as perfectly credible expressions of my inner world.

The conversations I tried to engage in with the two figures inhabiting this painting, entitled *Guess It*, while sitting in front of it, were somewhat stilted and stiff. I tried to emulate the examples I had read, but ended up forcing a conversation with them, while part of me was fighting disbelief about the reality of what I was doing. Despite this resistance the two figures began to reveal a very different reality than I had imagined for them while painting. But it was not until I finally closed my eyes, took a deep breath and imagined stepping "into" the painting itself that my experience became so visceral and embodied that the authenticity of the internal architecture of the painting became three-dimensional and physically real to me. Time slowed down, as did my movements:

When I step into the painting I can only enter behind the wall in the deepest shadows .... My feet must be bare because I feel the floor is wet as I take a step .... I don't know what to think of that carpet. It is heavy, soggy wet. Is it blood? I cannot see beyond the confines of the frame, although I feel something light at one end. I am stuck. I cannot go any further, and I am afraid.  
(Daalder-van Iersel, 1994, p. 54)

I was only able to sustain being in that world for what seemed a very short time. Fear propelled me back out of the painted reality—breathless, my heart pounding—but my understanding of the reality of the two figures that inhabited the painting was now inexorably changed. What I had not really believed in my initial attempt at connecting with them had now become a vibrant reality during the short time I was able to co-inhabit their world. The

experience left me hyper-energized, confused but full of excitement too, and I wrote down the story of the painting as it had now been revealed to me, determined to gather my courage and present this otherworldly adventure to my cohort. In her 1976 lecture “Confrontation with the Collective Unconscious,” Marie-Louise von Franz warned her listeners: “The Self is hostile and dangerous in its first impact. Everything from the unconscious, every powerful content of the unconscious is perceived that way when it first turns up—even that which we would define as the highest value of the core, the highest value of the personality” (2016, p. 299).

This first experience with active imagination set me on an adventure that has not stopped since. The mystery of the worlds to be found in an image, a dream character, a mood, a memory, a seemingly ordinary situation, or behind the frame of a painting, is forever fascinating, often profoundly moving, and always generative: increasing knowledge of the width and breadth of this vast inner world of the psyche. In the years that followed these first experiences, active imagination never became a practice I engaged on a formal or regular basis. Sometimes I seek the experience on purpose, but often it comes spontaneously. No matter how entered into, the encounters with this inner reality always carry a strong numinosity and engender an immediate enlivening effect on my conscious life. They are remembered as clearly as “real-life” experiences. They tend to manifest themselves at moments when a meditative stillness is in the air; when there is the possibility of “openness” to “other.” Often they seemed more like an *Einfall* to me than a movement that I have consciously initiated. This feeling of *Einfall* was dramatically illustrated when I felt arrested in my movements while walking alone on the beautiful grounds of Pacifica’s lower campus in my second year of study. It was a still and sunny day, and I moved slowly, reluctant to join my cohort in class. Suddenly I was overcome by the feeling that something both in me and simultaneously deep in the earth under my feet was growing and widening, a twinning process of connected spaces unfolding that would be able to contain more than I could have ever dreamt of; more of *what exactly*, though, I was not sure. I have no idea how long I stood there motionless, experiencing this feeling of inner and outer expansion, but for hours after I was in what can only be called an ecstatic state that, when it slowly dissipated, had inevitably shifted something in me that was hard to define.

Whether consciously looking for an active imagination—as, for example, when engaging with character that presented themselves in a dream; connecting with images, as I am describing in this paper; or following an active imagination that seems to arise spontaneously, as the one above—these experiences seem equally autonomous to me. What is crucial is the quality of the engagement with them, which should neither be one of passive phantasizing or of attempting to take control.

In her moving journal article on the active imaginal encounters she had with “the old woman,” Jungian analyst Molly Jordan writes, “In order to benefit from active imagination, it has to come alive through a genuine encounter with an *other*” (2015, pp. 212, 213)—that is, with an *other* not connected to our everyday ego self. There also has to be a willingness to stay with the experience and let the characters reveal themselves, to remain in deep focus, in active alertness and awareness, with great respect for the reality that is encountered; otherwise it will evaporate. In *The Red Book: Liber Novus*—the record of the experiences Jung had, starting in 1913, when

he first began recording his personal adventures with the unconscious in black notebooks (which were later elaborated on in the beautifully inscribed lettering and illustrations which we came to know in their full glory in 2009)—Jung’s inner figure and mentor Elijah admonishes him for not realizing that he and Salome are “real”:

E [Elijah]: “You may call us symbols for the same reason that you can also call your fellow men symbols, if you wish to. But we are just as real as your fellow men. You invalidate nothing and solve nothing by calling us symbols.”

I [Jung]: “You plunge me into a terrible confusion. Do you wish to be real?”

E: “We are certainly what you call real. Here we are, and you have to accept us. The choice is yours.” (p. 249)

### EMBODIED IMAGINATION

Another way to experience active imagination is through “embodied imagination,” a phrase coined by Jungian analyst Robert Bosnak (2007; p. 70), a method I first experienced in his 3-day intensive workshop, “Embodied Dream Imagery,” at Pacifica Graduate Institute in 2005. This technique is based on Jung’s active imagination, but focuses almost exclusively on the physical states within the experience by exploring these states with the help of another person or group. Jungian analysts Jill Fisher and Robert Bosnak (the originator of this method) have been teaching and working with embodied imagination since the 1970s. Fisher (2013) explains: “A key element of EI [embodied imagination] is the exploration of ego-alien (dystonic) images, those with which the dreamer does not originally identify. Slow observation of the sensory details of these images facilitates a type of mimesis through which the dreamer inhabits an unfamiliar body along with its associated subjective state” (p. 74). Fisher describes the method of embodied imagination as a “synthesis of principles first developed by C.G. Jung, especially his work on alchemy and active imagination” (p. 73). She continues, “It also draws on the work of [archetypal psychologist] James Hillman who focused on the multiplicity of autonomous states and on the work of [philosopher and theologian] Henri Corbin and his notion of the imaginal” (p. 73). She quotes Jung’s initiatory “fantasy” or “vision,” later to be called *active imagination*, as he recounted it in *Memory, Dreams, Reflection* (quoted earlier in this article), as the starting off point for embodied imagination.

In 2008 I participated in a 3-year certificate training in embodied imagination in Los Angeles with Bosnak and Fisher. Much work was done in identifying as well as entering the in-between “hypnagogic state; a state of consciousness that naturally precedes the onset of sleep” (White & Fisher, 2012, p. 244). In the work itself, “a dream or memory is re-experienced as a composite of its many perspectives simultaneously” (p. 244). Encountering someone or something “other” is not only recognized while using this method, it can be actively experienced in the body, or felt as “if one is inhabiting another body” (p. 244). An illustration that parallels this work is the first segment of a video entitled *Parallel Universes Meet at Infinity* by Manual Saiz (2006, video file). The video shows two screens of identical seize. The right screen frames the body of a snow owl; the left one shows the upper body of a woman, who mirrors the alternate

stillness and subtle movements of the owl in real time. In a blog post I wrote:

I was struck by how it, apart from being a unique, stunning expression in it's own right, is also a great illustration of the EI technique of moving into a being that is "other" to us and our waking ego. If you try to follow and imitate the movements the owl makes with its head ... you suddenly have a new, alternative physical experience of an entirely different body, a neck that has uniquely different functions from our human neck. This moment of inhabiting the owl is startling and adds an experience that would have been difficult to create in any other way but through mimesis. (Daalder-van Iersel, 2009)

As our training progressed I started to bring reproductions and original artwork into our group, curious if the technique would also work with paintings and other images, both created by others and by myself. My motivation did not spring from a need for inspiration or the removal of a creative block, but was solely motivated by curiosity and longing to penetrate more deeply into the reality of the mysteries within the images in question.



Figure 2. Incubation–Sleeping in the Temple, 1996 (pencil sketch on paper, 6" x 8") by author.

### STEPPING INTO THE PAINTING, TWICE

On January 15, 2010 my cohort/dream-worker Judy and I worked with one of my paintings. A pencil sketch (Figure 2), which was the seed for this painting, was made years before, in 1996, triggered by a lecture about the temple of the famous Greek healer Asklepios. Pilgrims would come to this temple in the hope of having a revealing and healing dream in the sacred "abaton," a special place where seekers would sleep. That original sketch showed only a low

bed, on it a form I then imagined to be a “dreamer,” and a stairway going up between Greek columns, creating a spacious empty environment, a place in which something mysterious might happen. Under the sketch I scribbled: “Incubation—Sleeping in the Temple,” which also became the title of the painting. When, inspired by the almost forgotten sketch, I started to paint the image in 2008 (Figure 1), the woman holding the pomegranates and the snake seemingly came out of thin air, without my conscious intention, and imposed themselves on the image, with the white clad woman claiming the most prominent placement.

At the time of the first of these two sessions of embodied imagination, the painting was exhibited with some other works at a group show entitled *A Step Beyond* at The Manhattan Beach Creative Arts Center in California. Seeing it hanging there between some of my other work, a persistent curiosity about the female figure led to my wish to try an embodied imagination with the image. All quotes from the following two embodied imaginations were taken verbatim from a transcribed audio file.

In the initial experience of imagining stepping into the picture I close my eyes but hesitate, a bit afraid of what I will encounter, but then I “step” into the front right of the image, and find myself looking down on the body lying there (Figure 3.). I am wearing a Greek-like wrap of cotton material, much like the woman holding the pomegranates who “is in my peripheral vision,” but who holds no further interest for me at this moment (Daalder-van Iersel, 2010, transcript #1, par. 5).

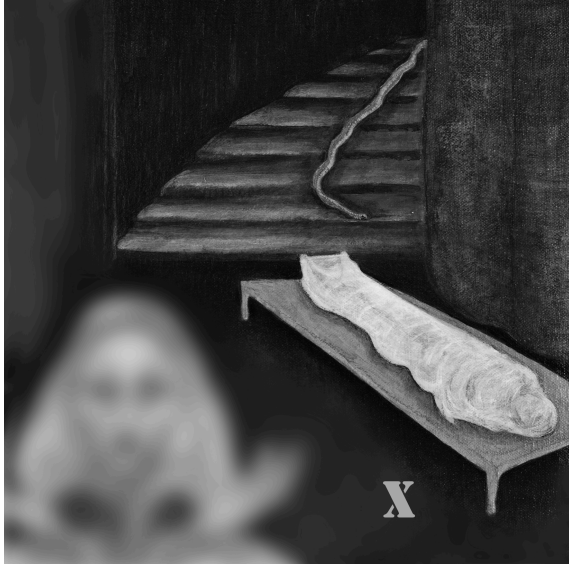


Figure 3. Incubation (*right side*)

My focus is totally on the body lying on the bier while I am also aware of cool, slightly damp air touching my body. With the help of gentle inquiries from my dream-worker I tune into the atmosphere and architecture of my surroundings. I am starting to perceive the cavernous quality of the environment, then I turn towards and, after some more hesitation, am able to move into the shrouded form on the bier, which is a frame or stand on which a corpse or a coffin containing it is laid before burial. Focusing on the body is initially an unnerving experience, since I don't know if



the form, wrapped tightly in layers of white material, is dead or alive. But then, when I am suddenly able to imagine becoming and “inhabiting” this body, I feel and “know” that

The figure itself ... it's kind of tenuous. There's a pupa there ... it's not alive but not not alive either, it's in a very different state. Not limbo, it's an in between state, the middle of a transformation, the chrysalis. We don't know yet, although the outcome is already in there. It's in suspension ... I know from the temperature it's not dead, it's in between. Lukewarm. A hint, you just know it's not dead. What's happening in there, like a seed in the ground, you don't know what's going to come out, but you know it's there, it's still alive. (par. 11)

Later, when I become conscious of the snake, initially I again feel some fear, almost immediately alleviated by the physicality of the experience. Still situated in the wrapped body on the bier, I first hear the rustling and know it is the “sound” of a large snake coming down the stairs.

There is something very odd there. As if there is a commonality there, Between the pupa and the snake. There is a purpose, but there's not a purpose I as a human being know anything about. It's not in a coma [the pupa], it's very much there. There's a lot of intention. A very primordial ... the intelligence, the purpose is ahead of the sound [of the snake]. It's like a wake behind a boat. (par. 14–15)

With “a wake behind the boat,” I meant that the snake seems to propel a wave of energy forward, an intention ahead of itself, announcing its coming. Our work lasts for about an hour and then is concluded by recapitulating the various bodily states the dreamer/imaginer has gone through during the session, together forming a “composite” experience, in order to absorb the experience as a sense memory, often reported to have a healing function for the body when practiced seriously. Even though I am not very good at consciously holding the various points of the composite, the totality of this “living” experience is still etched in both my mental and physical memory as a real life event: the consciousness of actively waiting, of a stillness pregnant with something to come, of something precious incubating in which all the senses are alert but still, longing and hoping for a moment of enlivening, for transformation or re-birth.

Robert Bosnak, present by Skype to this session as supervisor, commented that it is important to remember that “the picture is a lens through which you enter, so that you don't stay in the picture itself, but through it move into the space that is behind it” (2010, personal communication). What I experienced throughout this and the next journey into the painting was a disappearance of the two dimensional frame of the painting altogether. The space “behind” became a three-dimensional world that opened up with no limitations, with its own architecture, atmosphere and physicality, and with inklings of an even larger world connected to it.

The woman in the painting had still not been “met,” and her image would not leave me alone, there was still something waiting for me to engage with, to uncover. In *The Red Book in the Context of Jung's Paintings* Paul Brutsche writes, “He [Jung] perceived them [the

images] above all as totally valuable autonomous bearers of meaning” (2011, p. 8). A few months later, on April 1, 2010, Judy and I got together in my office again to see what would happen if I attempted to once more step into the painting. This time I jumped into the image very quickly in contrast to the earlier hesitation, I seemed to know where I was going, and landed “behind” the woman with the pomegranates almost immediately. Once there I slowed down, turning around and looking “out” of the painting, as the woman is, into another reality (Figure 4):



Figure 4. Incubation (*left side*)

I slowly turn. I see a little bit of light, and as I turn more, and look in the same direction as the other figure [the woman], the view opens up. At first glance it looks like a catacomb-like place. I’m a little bit behind the woman ... There is some strange stillness about the whole situation. I step and I turn very, very slowly, looking at this very dark, seemingly empty ... it seems it’s like cut out of a mountain, feels like a very large cave. It’s very dark. There is a very dim, little bit of light coming from the right ... That light is not daylight that’s coming in, if anything it’s moonlight, I don’t know how I know that. (transcript #2, par. 1)

The experience that unfolds is so visceral, has such a unique dynamic, that I still can be swept up in the memory. I feel the same cool, slightly damp air through the same thin wrap I wore before, and again perceive the cavernous quality of the environment. But only now, looking out, do I begin to get an inkling of how enormous and partially “in” the earth this place really is. It feels as if I am tapping into something eternal, into a unique feminine experience enacted through the ages, having its origins in Greek temples. “We” are all wearing the thin, flowing Greek wraps, no underwear or any adornments, and are barelegged with sandals on our feet.

It feels like there’s more of us. There is only two of us here, but I have the sensation that there are more of us. There is a ritual function. It feels there’s

a group, they're not here, but yes, there's a group. The carrying of the fruit, there's only one person who can do that ... there's an enormous alertness and when I go more into that, I realize it's going to be a long wait. This is something that cannot be hurried ... there's a deep, very patient waiting going on here. There's more knowledge there; it's not only in the spine, the hearing is very much involved here. The juice of the fruit is already dry, so there's waiting ... something that will be communicated through a sound. (par. 5–8)

When I shift into the body of the woman who holds the fruit I begin to feel how hard it has become for her to hold these two parts over time, the two pomegranate halves have become heavier as time is passing, maddeningly slowly. Still, the holding of the fruit is supported by the many other women whom I feel to be present behind me, all engaged in symbolically helping to hold the fruit until the moment is right, when the waiting will be over, and a sign will be given to proceed to another part of this unnamed ritual. A deep sense of longing arises, the pomegranate seems to be bleeding and yearning for something: “that whole process that's happening here so silently is very painful. It's painful for the person holding the pomegranate and for the pomegranate itself to be cut [split] in two, into two parts that still want to be together” (par. 12). During the exploration of the body of the fruit itself, my dream-worker asks: “Is there a place in the body of the pomegranate where this longing is felt most?” (par. 13). I don't answer her specific question, but verbalize my felt experience of that moment:

It's felt in the *heart* of the woman who's holding them. That's the place where it's felt. So in other words, the communication through the hands is apparently going also through the heart, that's the one place, and ... and ... the pomegranate itself it's really a ... there ... I think the heart is holding part of what is happening, and then I think the seeds are not sad, the seeds are doing something else. (par. 14)

The seeds are actually full of life and eager to get into action, a feeling that has the quality of very young children, itching to get moving. I can feel it in my legs, which suddenly turn very restless, it is difficult to stay still: the patient waiting, and by now painful holding of the pomegranate on the one hand, and the hankering of the seeds to be sown or planted, the impatience of new life wanting to start growing and manifesting itself, on the other. Going over this material now, years later, I am struck by the fact that both encounters in this world of the painting seem equally pregnant with possibilities. Similar qualities are experienced in both visits, hints of life, of death and transformation, action temporarily arrested, something quietly growing, incubating. An overarching feeling of stillness and waiting indicates something momentous is about to happen, just at the ordained moment. I felt it in the dormant suspension of the pupa, in the stillness of all the women—seen and unseen—who support the holding of the fruit, and in the ebullient energy of the pomegranate seeds, only just held in check. All are waiting, barely breathing in expectance of a sign or a sound to break into this stillness, to set something in motion. There is a strong longing for this moment to come, but some fear too. This is the hush of the in-

between moment, of being on a threshold. The only movement in the scene is indicated by the barely audible soft, dry sound of the snake slowly undulating down the stone staircase.

### **STEPPING BACK**

I wonder, stepping back, looking at this small painting now: How many active imaginings have happened here? Did it begin with the little sketch, made spontaneously while I was drifting away into a phantasy of sleeping and dreaming in Asklepios' temple while half-listening to a lecture, an image that kept its potency over time and seemed to demand my attention even years later? Or when I picked up a pomegranate fallen from its tree in the backyard of the house we recently moved into, struck by the blood red interior of a fruit I had never touched or eaten, and was not familiar with apart from its association with the myth of Demeter and Persephone? Or was psyche already preparing a portal for the two later adventures, making it possible to step into other meanings and connections? Waiting to add yet new layers and vistas to create another lived experience, a new connection with, it felt to me, another time and place; an archetypal realm?

Before the full image came into being, I had kept the two halves of the fruit in my studio, and without any conscious thought the various image-components came together when I started to experiment with acrylics on a small, square panel. All the moments that finally led to the act of imaginably stepping into the painting suddenly started to link together. Each separate detail of the image had arisen during moments of dreaming away, giving over to some reverie, during an in-between state in which associations could float around and find a place to land without interference of my conscious, thinking self. These moments of timelessness often happen when painting or making images in any medium, when time changes in quality and becomes suspended, when surprises happen that come from a world not consciously anticipated. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a woman holding bleeding pomegranate halves appears, the fruit as stigmata on her palms. Later a snake slithers uninvited down a stone staircase. A slash of vertical yellow, twinning the color of the snake, adds the dimension of a thin sliver of moonlight, hinting at an expanse of a moonlit night outside. When in that "other" realm I am loath to give meaning, the act of creating marries inner and outer, suspends time for a while; it is a gift that imperceptibly opens up to show itself over time. My task is to struggle and stay an honest conduit, making the image come to completion with whatever medium and creative means I have at my disposal. "As long as we ourselves are caught up in the process of creation, we neither see nor understand; indeed we ought not to understand, for nothing is more injurious to immediate experience than cognition" (Jung, 1978, p. 78).

Then suddenly, I know the painting is finished, it has become whole and autonomous, and over time I have learned to resist further interference, to stop doing more—not to change things related to ego concerns like the limitations of artistic abilities, aesthetics or the fear of being judged. At this point I have a tremendous resistance to lifting the veil of the image's mystery through any intellectual approach or amplification. I want to stay in this state of satisfaction, wonder and ticklish delight that I feel when looking at the small scene propped

up against the wall of my studio. Being a slow worker I have been in an intimate and not always easy relationship with this image on and off for a year or so, and for now it will stay private and intimate until something shifts. That might be when another image demands attention or, as was the case here, when I was asked to be part of a group exhibition.

In her 1976 lecture Marie-Louise von Franz talked about “the ethical confrontation, when one mainly sits back and reacts with one’s true ego as one should to a real situation ... Draw conclusions from your active imagination as you would do in real life” (2016, pp. 301,302). Even though I had realized the main theme of my later adventures already in the painted image, after the embodied imaginations I felt even more connected to the archetypal reality of the Demeter—Persephone myth, but now in a different, physical way, as if I had actually been participating in an experience similar to the secret Eleusian Mysteries. In *The Psychological Aspects of the Kore* Jung writes, “individual images ... need a context, and the context is not only a myth but an individual anamnesis” (1968b, p. 189).

The painting and my later experiences in its particular environment gave form and solace to the difficult struggle of having to let go of my mother/caregiver identity. Becoming a mother had changed my relationship to the feminine, it seemed to me as if my daughter’s growing phases and my own—now much more conscious inner growth—were linked together in a parallel process. I had sought out Jungian analysis in the first place because of my fear of repeating the *un*-mothering that had been handed over from my maternal grandmother to my mother, who was so desperately ill-equipped for the task. My delight and surprise about this late, almost written off pregnancy, and the intimate physicality and rhythms of the early developing mother—daughter relationship, propelled me into embracing the identity of being a mother with all my heart.

When Persephone, also called Kore, the maiden, is abducted by Hades, god of the underworld and death, her mother Demeter desperately searches for her everywhere. “The god of the underworld gave Persephone “only a single pomegranate seed, she barely noticed”; and forever after she was in his power” (Kerényi, 1991, pp. 133, 134). In her desperation and grief at failing to find her daughter anywhere, the grain goddess Demeter causes the grain to stop growing, and it is not until Olympian gods intervene that a solution is found: Persephone will divide the year evenly between the underworld realm, where she is now queen, and “on” the earth with her mother.

Demeter and Kore, mother and daughter, extend the feminine consciousness both upwards and downwards. They add an "older and younger," "stronger and weaker" dimension to it and widen out the narrowly limited conscious mind bound in space and time, giving it intimations of a greater and more comprehensive personality which has a share in the eternal course of things. (Jung, 1968b, p. 188)

In 2001 my daughter was at that magical in between stage, still a girl, a maiden, but at certain moments the woman was already foreshadowed. One day, she and a girlfriend were goofing around at home. I tossed them each a sheet and told them they were now Greek maidens cavorting. They certainly did cavort, and the series of photographs I made that day felt reminiscent of Kore dancing in the meadow with her companions, footloose and delighted to be alive,



Figure 5. Kore, photos (2001), and digital collage (2007) by author

just before things so drastically changed and Hades abducted her. Those images were helpful later, when my daughter left for college, and a barren feeling of loss descended on me. Much as I had prepared myself for this moment, it was nothing compared to the reality of the grief, emptiness and desolation I now felt. Demeter's grief was mine, with the knowledge that nothing would or could ever be the same; one part of the mother role was played out, another one had to be created. The myth helped me, but I had to find my own way in this different landscape, which was not easy, although as always giving some visible form to the experience was helpful (Figure 5). My daughter's moving back to Los Angeles to finish college here, turning 21 when we moved into the house with the pomegranate tree, and leaving again a few years later to start living her own, independent life, were periods in which I tried hard not to cling or fall back into the old mother role, wanting to give her space, but often failing. And as my daughter did, so did I, graduating, becoming certified as a Jungian analyst in 2007, changing, transforming, entering a new phase of life.

A lot more can be said about the meaning of the different images in the painting, and of the active embodied imaginations with it. I could amplify the significance of the pomegranate fruit, the possible appearance of Asklepios in the form of the snake, or the stages of molting, pupation and dissolution, eventually leading to the birth of a butterfly, symbol of the soul as possibly symbolized by the form on the bier. But even as I find it important to try and communicate these experiences with active imagination as best I can in written words, part of me remains

hesitant. This reluctance comes out of a concern that I might flatten the mystery and make these images and experiences too one-sided, too personal, in the process killing the feeling of an entirely unique and archetypal connection someone else may have with these symbols—and with that singular connection, the possibility to reveal an entirely different story. Jung writes in *The Red Book*: “This play that I witnessed is my play, not your play. It is my secret, not yours. You cannot imitate me. My secret remains virginal and my mysteries are inviolable, they belong to me and cannot belong to you. You have your own. (2012, p. 246)

In two footnotes that refer to Jung’s earlier black books, preceding the creation of the illustrated *Red Book: Liber Novus*, he writes, “You can enter only into your own mysteries. The spirit of the depths has other things to teach you than me” (*fn* 163, p. 246). Footnote 164 adds:

Thus, my friends, you learn much about the world, and through it about yourself, by what I say to you here. But you have not learned anything about your mysteries in this way, indeed, your way is darker than before, since my example will stand obstructively in your path. You may follow me, not on my way, but on yours. (p. 247)

Contrary to this warning, Jung’s admonitions have played a big part in setting me free of the worries of doing active imagination the “right” way. The fact that so little is said during my imaginations, just a word or a single line here and there, does not bother me anymore. Whether an active imagination is intentionally sought or spontaneously emerges, I try to host it with the proper attitude, and be open to its “other-ness.” If an active imagination comes during meditation, when I’m supposed to empty my mind but suddenly find myself in an anything but meditative adventure, or if a painting opens up and seems to invite participation—which once happened at a De Chirico exhibit on a quiet weekday at the Getty Villa in Santa Monica—I will try to listen to that invitation. Or alternatively, I may have to struggle to stay with the intention of penetrating into a image or a dream that will not leave me alone. I may have a strong reluctance to start a creative project that has patiently been waiting for me to catch up with the seed idea of it, and now does not want to wait anymore, demanding that I push through the resistance and succumb to what has to be communicated. What all these different engagements have in common is their insistence that the psyche and its inhabitants are real and need to be treated as such, as Elijah says: “We are certainly what you call real. Here we are, and you have to accept us. The choice is yours” (Jung, 2009, p. 249).

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