"Images of Immortality": Jung and the Archetype of Death and Rebirth

David J. Dalrymple

Jung challenged modern men and women to take conscious account of their non-rational experiences. Jung's challenge specifically names the belief in immortality as a locus for religious imagination:

> A man should be able to say he has done his best to form a conception of life after death, or to create some image of it—even if he must confess his failure. Not to have done so is a vital loss. For the question that is posed to him is the age-old heritage of humanity . . . which seeks to add itself to our own individual life in order to make it whole. (Jung, 1961, p. 302)

A person goes beyond the "known framework" or "bounds of consciousness" set by reason when reflecting upon the archetype of immortality. Jung believed this endeavor was therapeutic for the soul's health and nourishment. Do contemporary men and women heed Jung's challenge? If not, where might individuals in modern times recognize such images of immortality?

An Intrinsic Concern of the Soul

My interest in this theme began as a boy when I became conscious of the reality of death. I took a bus ride with my father. My father's body was warm, secure, smelling of tobacco; he wore a red and black checked wool shirt. He felt like the Rock of Gibraltar—dependable, continuous, and eternal. His presence conveyed a feeling of immortality. Suddenly I realized, "This man will die one day!" I felt a profound recognition that "even the most dependable will die." This was my first conscious recognition of death. Not long after, I was listening to a radio preacher talk

about afterlife. He spoke metaphorically about life beyond death, using an image which I remember to this day. He invited the listener to imagine a fetus in the womb as having consciousness. Its amniotic world would be its experience of "life," and its experience of "birth" would be perceived as "death"—the ending of an accustomed world. He asked, "Might this be an image for immortality? What is experienced as death might really be a birth into a new experience?" This was my first experience of eschatology, a reflection on endings; it shows how religious conceptions use images to convey non-rational insights and intuitions. The boy's questioning whether death might not be a final and unambiguous event illustrates how intrinsic the idea of immortality is in human experience once there is an awareness of the reality of death.

A Difficult Belief in Contemporary Life

The theme of immortality has fallen into neglect in modern times. Death has often come to be seen as the final annihilation of the individual personality, the absolute and irrevocable end of personal existence. Belief in an afterlife is often dismissed as having little significance, as being an anachronism. Even Shirley MacLaine's recent writing about her belief in reincarnation is entitled, *Out On a Limb*, suggesting it is a bit risky or lonely to share one's belief in immortality.

As a hospital chaplain, I sat with men and women preparing for death. Many individuals do not inwardly trust that personal awareness will continue after death. Public polls say the majority of Americans believe in a life after death; however, this may be a statement about "explicit faith" imposed from collective consciousness rather than an "implicit faith" unfolding from personal experience. Many "good Christians" are overwhelmed in their sick beds: although they have said, "Yes," to catechismic questions, they have little heartfelt trust that death might not be the final event of their experience. Why is this ancient belief so "lifeless" in contemporary religion?

Others (Grof and Grof, 1980; Kelsey, 1979) suggest that dehumanization and alienation of "the soul" in Western culture is the shadow side of our materialistic and scientific bias. Industrialized society has alienated people from the "biological basics" of life—birth, sex, death, and spirituality. Many individuals are taught that a belief in immortality is incompatible with modern science. The Cartesian-Newtonian world view suggests that consciousness is the product of the biological brain and that it ceases

at the time of biological death. Until the past decade, science has avoided discussions of life after death. The possibility of consciousness after death was rejected because it was not compatible with existing scientific theories—not because it was contradicted by any clinical observations. A news article recently suggested, "Near-death experiences deemed worthy of serious research," but still highlighted the tendency of the scientific/medical community to dismiss these experiences as "made-up fantasy," "biochemical or neurophysiological states caused by lack of oxygen or drugs," "the result of religious programming," or a defensive "denial of unpleasant experience" (Jan Ziegler, *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1985).

Another reason why belief in immortality has lost its vitality is religious orthodoxy. Religion is often externalized: religious teachings have become creedal and dogmatic rather than existential and inward. The authority in religious matters becomes external—the Bible, the Pope, the creeds and dogmas. People do not look within personal experience for that inner connection to belief. They look outwardly for cues as to belief rather than reflecting inwardly to imaginative processes.

Psychoanalytic Thoughts on Immortality

Similar biases were reflected in psychoanalytic tradition. Sigmund Freud (1949, 1961) suggested the aim of life was death, that there was an innate tendency for human life to return to an inanimate state. Freud stressed the biological truth about death—the absolute destruction of the organism. Freud believed people should be educated to accept reality; he slighted religion as the chief supporter of humanity's illusions. Spiritual comfort was a neurotic support for people who could not outgrow childish illusions. People needed to face the hard realities of life and death with no false hopes. A belief in immortality was compensation for the reality of death which was hard to face: to see death as not being total and final was a false hope. The only real hope was "the rational pursuit of truth." Death was final—the total annihilation of individual. Freud may be admired for his impatience with humanity's ability for self-delusion and for his recognition that facing death could heighten the vitality of living. However, Freud did not value the emotional impact of symbolic experience upon the psyche whether or not a spiritual reality exists behind the "illusions" associated with religious belief.

Recent psychoanalytic thought has acknowledged this limitation in Freud's thinking. R. J. Lifton and E. Olson (1974) recognized that Freud

"did not grasp the symbolic significance of images of immortality. In this he underestimated the human need for images of connection beyond the life span of each individual" (*ibid.*, p. 58). Freud did not do justice to the human tendency to continually create and re-create images which could symbolically connect an individual beyond one's own life span. Lifton and Olson conclude that our images of immortality are "psychologically extremely powerful" (*ibid.*, p. 55). The writings of Ernest Becker (1973, 1975) articulate a theory of human nature compatible with Lifton's revaluation of images of immortality. Becker concluded that humanity's innate fear of death underlies modern collective madness: The fear of death and desperate need for symbolic immortality create the dependencies behind authoritarian states.

Jung's Appreciation for the Belief in Immortality

Jung was struck by the fact that myths of all cultures and ages contain beliefs about life after death. Reflections on the unknown mysteries of birth, life, death, fate, and immortality are needed emotional experiences:

> The belief in immortality gives life that untroubled flow into the future so necessary if stoppages and regressions are to be avoided. Although we like to use the word "doctrine" for these—psychologically speaking—extremely important ideas, it would be a great mistake to think that they are just arbitrary intellectual theories. Psychologically regarded, they are emotional experiences whose nature cannot be discussed. . . . To experience them is a charisma which no human art can compel. Only unreserved surrender can hope to reach such a goal. (Jung, 1966, par. 186)

The belief in immortality was "hygienic" in that it added to the meaning, animation, and quality of life. Life could be lived most fully to the end when we had viable images of immortality. As Jung admitted, "When I live in a house that I know will fall about my head within the next two weeks, all my vital functions will be impaired by this thought, but if, on the contrary, I feel myself to be safe, I can dwell there in a normal comfortable way." This admission could be seen as an argument for illusion. However, Jung's respect for immortality was not an illusory denial of death. He admitted that death was "a cruel reality which we have no right to sidestep" (1961, p. 314). Jung suffered great loss at the time of his wife's death as well as at the deaths of friends. The separation from one's loved ones was painful for him—"a silence that has no answer."

Meditating upon images of immortality helps us sense the eternal

timelessness of the soul: "If we understand and feel that here in this life we already have a link with the infinite, desires and attitudes change" (1961, p. 325). Jung recognized he had contributed one important scientific recognition to the problem of life after death—his empirical investigations showed the psyche extends into the realm of timelessness and spacelessness (Jaffé, 1979*b*). He expressed this in his essay, "The Soul and Death" (1969*a*). He had highlighted this to a good friend's widow in a letter on December 23, 1950:

> This spectacle of old age would be unendurable did we not know that our psyche reaches into a region held captive neither by change in time nor by limitation of place. In that form of being our birth is a death and our death a birth. The scales of the whole hang together.

Jung pointed out that rebirth was a purely psychic experience which could only be conveyed indirectly through personal statements (1969*b*). Even though direct, empirical observation of such mysteries was scientifically impossible, Jung valued the personal accounts of death and rebirth. The archetype of death and rebirth is inherent in Jung's theories of the transformation of libido and the symbol-creating processes of regression and progressive renewal (1956). Death and rebirth can be seen in such individuation experiences as working through life transitions or within the analytical process as analysands assimilate aspects of the unconscious. Death and rebirth can be seen in passages through major crises, such as puberty, marriage, illness. In speaking of the archetype of the Self, Jung saw that images of immortality are symbols of "the treasure hard to attain": the water of life, the healing herb, the elixer of immortality, the philosopher's stone, miracle rings, magic hoods, winged cloaks. This "treasure" suggests that immortality corresponds analogously to self-discovery and the individuation process. In all creative acts, there is a liberation of what was held captive and an acquisition of some "treasure" which releases productive energy in the soul.

Archetypal Images of Immortality

Jung alluded to the "age-old heritage of humanity" which still seeks to address us in images of immortality. Burial customs contain ancient images of immortality associated with the myth of Osiris, the Lord of Eternity. Osiris was dismembered, his sacred phallus underwent a descent to the Underworld; ascension and reconstitution followed; then Osiris fathered Horus whose lineage connected to the Sun principle (the Sun descends

nightly and ascends each morning so this was an image of immortality). Osiris was shut in a chest whose wood was seen as connected to the enduring life of the earth; the coffin made the corpse everlasting. The preservation of bodily shape through embalming was connected to personal afterlife. In the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, there is a recurring expression, "Together with Osiris." This was the promise that the Ba Soul (the inner presence animating the body) could travel between the land of the living and the land of the dead. This image suggests the psyche has a connection to an eternal world of timelessness and spacelessness beyond the temporal world of consciousness.

The teachings of Zoroaster had an eschatology expressed in images. The "Wise Lord" was imagined as judging the ethical balance of a person's life through tests of fire or weighing scales. Graphic images suggested accountability in the experience of death. The Chinvat Bridge was the Bridge of Judgment. The upright man approaching the Bridge smelled sweet scents of the Garden of Paradise Beyond. A beautiful maiden was met personifying his conscience. She guided him to the House of Song and reunion with the Wise Lord and his righteous company. However, the evil man was forced to inhale a sickening odor and his conscience was a fat, naked, obnoxious, ugly woman who shoved him off the Bridge and into the abyss of Hell below.

The early Hebrews believed that the human being was a body with breath for his soul and organs, whose functions were both physical and psychical. They were not convinced that a dead person was altogether dead. The early Hebrews felt the soul after death was still a body—shadowy replicas of the flesh called *raphaim* (shadows or ghosts). The Hebrew cosmos was three-storied: the heaven above, the earth beneath, and *Sheol* or the abode of the departed below the earth. To the early Hebrews, there was little hope associated with Sheol. It was pallid, unreal, and undesirable. One of the major factors in redeeming Sheol from its original negativity and in arousing hope of resurrection to full life again was the extension of Yahweh's sovereignty to the underworld. Sheol transformed as an image: it ceased to be a meaningless, non-moral land of darkness. It became ethically significant with reward and punishment.

The Biblical hope of life after death was influenced by the growing experience of personal religion—an inward, intimate relationship between the individual soul and God. This "inner connection" yields an experience of essential timelessness, a kind of fellowship with the numinous which

suggests its own continuance. If God cares for the individual and dwells inwardly, it feels impossible that the relationship will be abruptly terminated at death. The first Christians applied inherited images of immortality to the death of Jesus, his stay in Sheol, and his bodily resurrection. Millions of Christians still confess their faith saying, "Jesus died . . . descended into hell . . . and rose again." This was a story echoing Jewish themes and highlighting a physical resurrection to restored vitality on earth. This "resurrected body" was the Christian image of life after death even though there was confusion about what the body meant. For Paul, it was not the corruptible flesh and blood but the incorruptible body of man. It was a raised "spiritual body." Eventually, this was imagined as an interior experience. The Gospel hope was not for resurrection on earth but for an eternal life that was not a post-mortem goal but an inner and present posssession of the soul: ". . . whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus was the model of a filial relationship with God, a vital experience carrrying confidence that death is an open door through which the soul's life with God moves onward (Hick, 1976).

Images in Modern Experiences of Life After Death

New accounts (Moody, Osis & Haraldsson, Rawlings, Ring) remind us of these ancient concerns about the soul after death. They challenge Western science's dismissal of enduring consciousness beyond death. The first study of near-death experience was by a Swiss geologist who had a mystical experience in a near fatal fall in the Alps (Grof and Grof, 1980). He became interested in the subjective experiences related to life-threatening experiences. Another investigator, Karlis Osis, analyzed questionnaires from physicians in 1961. Vivid visions and images were experienced by patients the hour before death: images of heaven, paradise, the Eternal City, beautiful landscapes, exotic birds, idyllic gardens; very seldom were there terrifying images of devils, hell, or judgment. In 1971 Russell Noyes, a Professor of Psychiatry, studied accounts of people facing death and the autobiographical accounts of exceptional people, like Jung himself, who had described near-death experiences. He identified three successive stages in the patterns: *resistance* (danger, fear, struggle, acceptance), *life review* (reliving memories of one's life trajectory), and *transcendence* (mystical, religious, cosmic consciousness). A composite model of the typical after-

death state has been reconstructed from the accounts of individual experience (Grof and Grof, 1980, pp. 12–13). Characteristic elements occur even though these do not necessarily occur in rigid sequence. The experience is ineffable or hard to put into words. The person hears himself pronounced dead. There is a sense of peacefulness. Noises such as buzzings can be heard. The person is drawn down a tunnel-like space such as a narrow valley or well. There is separation from the body as one is drawn through and out of it. There is a sense of isolation and separation. There is the meeting with friends or family who have already died. There is a coming into the presence of the "being of light" who asks two essential questions—"Have you gained knowledge and wisdom?" and "Have you experienced love with others?" There is a review of the person's entire life. The person feels in touch with all wisdom and knowledge. One sees the city of light or heaven. There are observations of other souls who are caught or cannot make up their minds. There is a rescue from death, or a protective presence, or a point of no return and blockage from going farther. There is frustration in returning to normal life. There are profound changes following this death and revival experience.

A man trapped in a nuclear plant with toxic fumes shared his near-death account. It was like standing on a lake shore being surrounded by fog. He felt joy and freedom as pain was gone—"like a gull floating on air currents"—and was on a definite course guided by something. He saw things, but they were hard to describe; what he saw was good. When the fog cleared, he became aware of his anger with the doctor who resuscitated him since he did not want to leave the serenity and peacefulness. This experience had a qualitative impact upon his life and relationship to death. As he summarized,

> I don't think I will ever be afraid to die because of this experience. It was like being able to open the door to a room just a crack to peek in but not allowed to open it all the way to enter. I have now changed my life style and goals and started to live and grow as a person realizing that there are other things to life than working constantly. Before this experience I never let myself become totally involved with people. I don't know if it was because I feared being rejected or if it was selfishness on my part. Since I have reflected on death, life has become more important to me. I've learned that I don't have to wait until death is at my doorstep before I start to live. I should live the years that I have left, live each day as if it were the only one that I have left and start to live life instead of merely passing through it. "Stop to smell the roses," is an expression I am fond of. But that simple expression can mean so much when I really start to do it. I want to enjoy what God has provided for me in the limited time that he has given me to live. It's not the quantity of life that a person has but the quality of that life that counts.

In 1944, Jung suffered a heart attack and had a near-death experience with powerful visions: "It is impossible to convey the beauty and intensity of emotion during those visions. They were the most tremendous things I have ever experienced" (1961, p. 295). Jung's visions are vividly described in his autobiography; they are rich with images of immortality which profoundly affected his life and work. These visions had a "quality of absolute objectivity" in which Jung experienced "the ecstasy of a non-temporal state in which present, past, and future are one."

Transpersonal States of Awareness

Altered states of consciousness yield images of immortality. Mystical or transpersonal experiences of "ego death" can be induced by psychoactive drugs or by the evocative breathing facilitated by the Grofs who use hyperventilation and powerful music. The Grofs use the analogy of the birth experience for death and rebirth experiences. There is the initial "good womb" of life's stability and tranquility and then a "no exit" when strong anxieties invade the good womb. This is followed by the "birth/death conflict" as suffering and agony are contained in the womb. Lastly, there is the releasing "birth/death experience" as the cervix of passage opens and birth occurs with its liberating expansion. The archetype of death and rebirth is central to all ecstatic, mystical, or transpersonal experiences whether induced by dance, breathing, music, psychedelic drugs, crisis and spiritual emergencies, or ritual encounters; it is the core of shamanic initiation, rites of passage, and the ancient mystery religions (Eliade, 1958). The Greeks used to say, "For one who is initiated, death is not the worst enemy."

A friend's story illustrates a death and rebirth experience. He was traveling with hippies who shared their psychedelic fare. The driver suggested, "We could hit another car head on." My friend felt physical resistance to suggestions of death. Finally, he yielded to this awareness. He had visions or "transpersonal imagery" of a whirling uroboric serpent, the Garden of Eden, feminine guides, the Egyptian pyramids and vibrating hieroglyphics. He felt currents of "life's eternal energies." There was a beautiful peacock whose heart pulsed vivid, acrylic colors that swirled out

through the tail and into concentric, whirling mandalas of color that seemed to spread to the limits of his skull. Then his ego consciousness returned and he could relate to time, space, and the human community. Several days later he synchronously discovered Jung's work, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*; he found an image of the peacock, a Gnostic and Christian image of the immortality of soul (1969*b*, p. 375). An ancient image had manifested itself in his ecstatic experience.

Dreams and Death

Dreams present images of immortality. Jung and von Franz observed that dreams respond to the imminence of death no differently than they do to most major life experiences. The unconscious views death with less anxiety, apprehension, and concern than does the conscious ego. It is as if a deep part of the psyche knows life is a conjunjction as much as it is a separation. Jungians have written about images of death in dreams. Jung knew that dreams in which the dreamer dies do not suggest physical death but may image a change of consciousness. Herzog (1967) wrote on psyche and death in archaic myths and modern dreams, noting the evolution of the images onto which we project our concepts of death (animal, human, mother, marriage, and fate); he noted how primitive images of death reappear in modern dreams. Jaffé (1979) took an archetypal approach to death dreams and ghosts. James Hall (1977) gives illustrations that the psyche "seems to contain archetypal images of death being something other than annihilation" (p. 310). James Hillman (1979) sees death as a metaphor for the ego's sense of death; he suggests that our living connection to death or the underworld has gone into the unconscious and that, "Depth psychology is where today we find the initiatory mystery, the long journey of psychic learning, ancestor worship, the encounter with demons and shadows, the sufferings of Hell" (*ibid.*, p. 65).

Dreams can be useful with terminally ill patients. The dream can be a bridge over which inner connections are made to feelings, memories, and intuitions of immortality. A woman dying of cancer had the following dream:

> *I am on a railway train. I am not sure where I am going. At first, I feel a lot of anxiety and fear since I do not know the destination. There is a helpful man who accompanies and guides me on this journey. We travel through two room-like realms. This space is dark, like nighttime; however, the moon hangs in the sky in this middle realm. At the end of this journey, I meet my father, who welcomes me with an embrace.*

This dying woman felt no control over her fate; she was afraid of the unknown. The helpful man reminded her of the calming presence that she had associated with Jesus earlier in her life, "a religious teacher and guide." There is the passage between the familiar realm and the unknown place. The moon hangs symbolically over this journey—an image of immortality since its birth, death, and resurrection phases each month symbolize immortality. The moon symbolizes the dark side of Nature as well as the spiritual light in the darkness as the "eye of the Night." Time is measured in lunar phases. It is the bringer of change, decay, suffering. Moon goddesses were controllers of destiny and weavers of fate. As this patient associated to her father, she began to cry as she remembered his love.

A patient dying of kidney failure shared this dream the day before his death. He was a farmer who was reluctant to give up control and hooked anxieties around his vocation. He dreamed:

> *I am in my tractor. A swarm of bees comes across the furrowed field. They seem to drive me out of the cab of my tractor. I walk out onto the field. I realize that I have done all the plowing already. There is nothing more to do now. I feel good about what I have accomplished in the field. The swarm of bees moves down the field. I follow in that direction.*

This patient consolidated feelings about his life's labors; he seemed to be letting go, recognizing he had accomplished a great deal in his life and could move on. The bee symbolized the soul in Orphic teachings since honey followed their labors and the migration in swarms from the hive was analogous to human souls "swarming" from the divine unity. The archetype of death and rebirth was central in the Orphic mysteries. The bee is connected to Dionysius, the Lord of Souls who was also a dying and reborn god.

A dying woman had the following dream as she grieved the lost opportunities of watching her young daughter grow up. This dream anticipated reconciliation to her death:

> *I am in a house. It is a familiar house. I have explored all of the rooms. However, there is one door which I have not walked through yet. I know there are many corridors and spaces yet to discover on the other side of that door. I stand in front of it. There are animals lying down at my feet—a lion, a lamb, and a deer. An Oriental wise man stands beside this door I have not yet walked through; he has a circular, elaborate gold gong that hangs suspended in front of him. This gong has religious teachings engraved on it in an Oriental script. This holy man holds a stick to strike the gong with. I wonder if the door will open once he strikes the gong.*

There was calm expectation as this woman elaborated her dream. She used the dream images to explore beliefs about life and afterlife. She died

with trust that her journey would not end with dying. She expressed curiosity about the possibilities on the other side of the dream door.

Death needs to be talked about from "the inside" as much as from the outside. Experiential approaches such as sharing dreams, drawing pictures, symbolic death rituals, and guided fantasies can be used. The Simontons (1978) use active imagination at their Cancer Counseling and Research Center. Using a relaxation technique, patients imagine their deaths and funerals, and what will happen to them after death. They let consciousness go out into the universe until in the presence of whatever they believe to be the source. They review life experiences in detail with this presence. They imagine returning to earth in a new body and creating new life plans. They come to appreciate that the process of death and rebirth is continuous with every change in feelings and beliefs (pp. 225ff). The implications of this "Death and Rebirth Fantasy" suggest that images are different, personal, and unique. The experience is not as painful as people fear; valuable insights are gained to ease the inevitable pain and sadness of death. Old beliefs die as new attitudes unfold from imaginal experience of life after death.

Immortality as an Ex-centric Belief

The belief in immortality is less an anachronistic belief than an ec-centric belief. It is ex-centric in nature: it reminds us that human existence is "ex-centric." Several months before his death, Jung wrote:

> It is quite possible that we look at the world from the wrong side and that we might find the right answer by changing our point of view and looking at it from the other side, i.e., not from outside, but from inside. (Letter on August 10, 1960)

Our images of immortality help us see from inside or from outside our circle of consciousness. They remind us that something profoundly "other" walks with us. "Consciousness" means "knowing with another"; a "co-knower" is part of being conscious. There is some other vantage point which makes consciousness possible. We are always living and knowing with "another." We see ourselves, hear ourselves, observe ourselves, know ourselves with this "other." This "other" is not merely in humanity, it seems to make humanity. This "other" is transcendent in constituting life, death, and consciousness. This "co-knower" is indeed a mystery. Quite independent of death, this "companioning other" perceives and in perceiving posits an existence beyond death as witnessed in our images of immortality.

Death reminds us of the ex-centric character of our lives. We live with consciousness between the two great mysteries of birth and death, of the before and of the afterward. The fact that we can speak of a before and an after reminds us that death, like birth, is not fulfilled in our mortal lifetimes. In traditional Jungian understanding, death and immortality help us displace the center of personality from the ego to the deeper Self, to the inmost experience of the individuation process. The personality senses the transitory character of the ego—it is relativized. The individual intuits some partial affinity with the Self. We savor an inner consciousness as the ego experiences the deep, abiding, eternal, and immortal Self. As we attend to the primary phenomenon of images, we are companioned by the specific face of the mystery seeking our attention. We hear something hidden shine through the phenomenon of the images even as their mystery remains veiled. We experience what Jung called "*esse in anima*," a being-in-soul. We feel the animating connection to the deep mysteries of birth, life, death, and afterlife which address us from within the images of immortality.

Jung's observations and challenge help us step beyond the grip of limiting cultural attitudes about death and immortality. Jung affirms the emotional impact of images of immortality:

> To the intellect, all my mythologizing is futile speculation. To the emotions, however, it is a healing and valid activity; it gives existence a glamor which we would not like to do without. Nor is there any good reason why we should. (1961, pp. 300–301).

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