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Madness and Creativity

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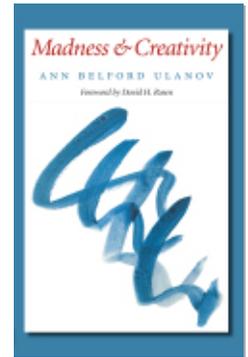
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CHAPTER 1



Personal Madness

Madness belongs to all of us. It comes in many forms and many degrees, from the craziness at the bottom of our neurotic symptom to a derangement that engulfs our whole life. Madness is simpler than it looks: it is our effort to express unbearable pain. Pain of shame, of humiliation for “not having the goods”; pain at being annihilated as a person with agency over her own life, treated as of “no account, so no accounting is necessary”; pain of catastrophic anxiety, so one goes dead to communicate being made dead; pain of being treated as another’s object, at their disposal, like a prop for sexual release or burst of violence, filling their need to get ahead, steal one’s land, annex one’s country.¹

Breakdown

Madness springs from the shattering of our self. We communicate this loss by living in a void, a no-man’s land. We use supervigilant control to prevent our flying into myriad fragments. But that control stretches to a vibrating extreme and then snaps. We become confetti. Or madness shows in an engulfing fog of abysmal confusion, obscuring any orienting direction of north and south or time sense of then and now.

We cannot represent in word or image what is happening to us. We spin into outer space, out of body, out of mind. In dread of disintegrating panic, we do not go outside, lest its terrific force fell us in the supermarket, as one man said, leaving him lying in the aisle as women push their grocery carts over him. Madness on the way to recovery digs up parts of us left in shadow that are unadapted, still archaic, so that we feel as bizarre to ourselves as we appear to others. Yet we need just this primitive energy to find our way through madness.

I am aware that this subject introduces strain. Speaking of madness brings it near, felt, breathed in again, with all the dissolving of meaning that madness inflicts. Through the generosity of my analysts, who give permission to cite some of their words, we can feel the theme of madness and associate our own specific variations. To bring in as well Jung's experience described in *The Red Book* bolsters our courage to look into our madness, to see what is there and not there for us. Something happened to Jung that took him down, gripped by necessity to find what he missed. For us to read this volume is to fall into a world that astonishes, for we are gripped as well. We can take courage from Jung's saying he also felt "violent resistance . . . and distinct fear" to engage these erupting fantasies.²

To approach madness in the more customary way, through clinical terms for disorders of mental distress, puts it at a distance and removes us from the scene, as if madness happens only to the other guy. I do not want to do that for two reasons. Labels such as borderline, narcissistic, and the like make us feel judged; we recognize bits of ourselves in these disorders and feel fear when put into categories of craziness. Also, madness is not ours alone, but part of the human condition; we cannot segregate it over there apart from our own lives. Jung asks, "What is there, when there is no meaning? Only nonsense, or madness." But, his soul declares, "*Nothing will deliver you from disorder and meaninglessness, since this is the other half of the world.*"³ Any meaning we find or construct must, then, include this other half, too. Recognizing that bears huge implications for our shared existence in society and for our religious attitude, whatever that is, including our rejection of religion and things spiritual.

Trying to speak and write about madness induces its felt impact:

words slip, slide, and break, fall into nowhere. Disorder defeats any clear line of exposition. Like a spell or a fog or pollen in the air, to speak of madness is to be infiltrated by experiences of its derangement that we both know and deny. I do speak and write about madness precisely because it is a country we share.

A specific Jungian view of what promotes healing includes knowing that our particular suffering partakes of human suffering. The personal and impersonal meet, and that nexus counteracts the horrible isolation madness imposes on us. We feel crazy, and no one can understand and we cannot explain; that conviction is itself a symptom of the madness that afflicts us. To know in fact that we share in a larger human problem relieves our humiliation of being caught like a rabbit in a trap and softens the isolation we feel from being subjugated to a force outside our agency, tempering our judgment that we are insane. Seeing our madness as part of the human condition restores dignity of meaning to our suffering. We are working on a human problem, in our own small version of it. Insofar as we find solutions and release, we contribute this healing to others; we do our small part to contribute to the healing of suffering in the human family.⁴

To know and accept our role in the community quiets our strain and may even replace it with curiosity about this state of being, a being-state that feels like nonbeing, a nothing state. One analyst describes it as a life lived in an airport, arriving from nowhere and departing to nowhere, just wandering to and fro in nonexistence, triviality, emptiness. This description echoes Jung's in *The Red Book of Hell*: "There is nothing but motion. . . . Everything merely surges back and forth in a shadowy way. There is nothing personal whatsoever."⁵

Madness is traumatic; it tears us from our familiar self, leaving a gap so big that it threatens us with no return once we fall into it. Trauma brings its own vocabulary, which we learn bit by bit in the aftermath of the shocking event that instigates it, such as a murder or suicide, a mugging, a rape, a terrorist attack, or that cumulatively doses us over years with dread of its recurrence, such as incest. Or trauma can result from lack, what is not there, what was not done and should have been given, such as being welcomed, noticed, picked up and loved, not blocked out by another's depression or tragedy. Our defenses of our

fragile selves can hurt others; our failures to thrive can eclipse the life-giving warmth of emotion to our children; our fearful withholding can blight the growth of affectionate living with our partners.

Madness springs from hurt that goes deep, that ruptures our sense of self, leaving us helpless to shelter the person we are becoming. We lose a sense of agency over our own life and fall victim to how another defines us. Our thread of going on being is broken, and we live with this gap in our identity.⁶ Our sense of being alive feels intruded upon and disturbed; there is no rest for us anywhere.

The specific vocabulary such traumatic experience leaves in its wake is a complex of images, emotions, and behaviors that differ among us but hold in common a sense of being in the grip of a force that compels us to go round and round with obsessive thoughts about what happened or should have happened, what we failed to say or do in response. We feel utterly defeated, unable to verbalize or find an image for what has happened to us; instead, we walk around dazed, mute, caught in an abyss of confusion. We feel obliterated, cast aside, discarded like so much trash, not merely rejected, but annihilated. We feel blanked; no meaning is graspable, no value in our self, but vacated, a no-thing.

The lost good object is our self.⁷ We can make nothing of what has happened to us. We lose the world, too, the connection to others, to any sense of space between us, to meanings we inhabit together. In analysis, this mad state may express itself in staring blankly, or weeping uncontrollably, or falling into futile silence. What Jung calls a complex is what we inhabit now, but a complex of imagery, emotion, behavior that is no longer a normal part of our psyche, but abnormal in that it overtakes our ego functioning.⁸ We are in it, pushed round and round in a washing machine without end, with no release into fresh perceptions laundered of madness, but only the lunacy of retelling the hurt, the insult, the injury, the being treated as a worthless object in another's sight or in society's disposal of us into unemployment, a psych ward, an item in a psychoanalytic theory. An analyst who became a scientist grew up in a ghetto where he heard from the cops, schoolteachers, adults on the street that he was nothing and would always be nothing.

Psychosis is a modern word for such affliction of nonbeing, such loss of heart, such loss of soul, so urgent that Jung found he had to go looking for it and, indeed, came to see this was the search for all of us, the plight of “modern man.” Analysts with different theories know about this gap and write about it as basic fault, deadness, false self, fusion complex, or centers within us of not-I-ness.⁹

Knowing and Not Knowing: A Complex

Madness yields a strange knowing and not knowing, inducing in us separation from whole areas of experience that something in us knows but that we do not consciously register. We do not represent this experience of disorder to ourselves in word or image. It is dissociated, not repressed, because it never was conscious.¹⁰ The meaning exists in us in our body and shows in our behavior, so we repeat destructive actions, knowing and not knowing we are doing this.

For example, a woman continues to see a man who, while with her in a restaurant, is asking the waitress’s phone number. His disregard for my analysis made her feel suicidal. Her continuing to see him made her feel caught in lunacy. Only in willingness to take on the pain of painstaking work to look into this mad repeated behavior did she become conscious that the emotional abandonment he inflicted dragged into light her earliest abandonment. She knew about that loss as abstract information but never registered its deep suffering. At birth her mother left her with her grandmother for three years. When the grandmother died, without explanation to her three-year-old self, she was whisked back to her mother. Her current reenactment that made her feel mad, exposing herself to this man’s destructive behavior, she came to see was her effort to feel the connection between what was happening in the present and what had happened in the past. Unconsciously her compelling behavior pushed into consciousness a coherent complex that in effect stated, I feel emotionally abandoned and want to kill myself. Achieving such clarity of image, affect, behavior allows a complex to cross over into consciousness, where we can relate to its symbolic meaning.¹¹ We can find words to talk with ourself and communicate with another what we suffer, find images

of distress, recognize impulses that we can behold and study. Space emerges between us and our former compulsive behavior. We find its meaning.

Or, after many years a man divorces his wife to whom he had to devote time and energy to take care of her because of her mental distress. He marries another who needs his constant care for her physical distress. The known-unknown thing he attends to in his partners moves around to different locations, first the mind, then the body, but his repetition of choice in a partner bypasses consciousness because the trouble still locates in the other, not himself. Our somatic problems can carry un-lived psychic afflictions trying to get into consciousness. Legitimate physical maladies, often chronic and grave and arising from physical origins, get made use of to signal un-felt psychic contents or actions—for example, sorrow that needs to be lamented consciously, not wept out through blistering, weeping sores of the body.¹²

The complex rules us and traps us in its repetitions; yet the complex tries to communicate something we know and do not know, need to know, to unravel and find symbolic representation for, so we can be freed from acting it out and discover what precious part of ourself has been sheltered there. These dissociated behaviors are painful to endure—symptoms of losing things, of getting sick before social engagements or professional presentations, of leaving preparations to the very last minute or even losing opportunities because of procrastination. We feel trapped in their iterations and defeated again and again. Yet the complex, like a good dog, keeps at us, herding us toward the opening into consciousness to receive its communication. Hiding there are dots of light. Madness and creativity coexist.

Social Effects

Our madness is not ours alone but infects others, often gravely. We drive each other crazy. Clinicians know this and have long training to recognize their countertransference in order to have in mind their own potholes where sanity gives way to insanity. Yet clinical work in depth requires the analyst really to experience where the analysis is

caught in knowing-unknowing, like the woman who knew perfectly well not to continue seeing the man who flirted with other women under her nose, but she did it anyway.

In another example, a man whose multiple wives and lovers all end up refusing to talk to him goes on presenting himself to himself and others as reasonable and commendable, dismissing his partners as “these difficult women.” He remains unknowing of the poison he inserts into them. He sounds rational, friendly, innocent, all the while emotionally abandoning the woman, removing himself from her, thus making her feel crazy, destroying her grasp of the situation. The clinician has to go into the analysand’s mad state to look around, feel its power, to see that things are not what they seem and locate with him the path to consciousness, which is a dangerous role to be in. Sue Grand describes what every clinician feels when we cannot do this: “I could not fall through the holes in my known world,” that is, into the mad world of the analysand. When, together with the analysand, we connect with the area of madness, “new forms of subjectivity make their appearance.” Schwartz-Salant sees madness as an overwhelming, disordering inner state that occurs when we seek new forms of order. How does one suffer chaos without losing one’s mind? How does one find that imaginal space to make hidden meaning visible? That is the work of therapy; that is the message the repeating complex is trying to deliver.¹³

Not only do we contaminate each other with what makes us feel demented, uncentered, inferior, that is ours to look into; we also instead locate it in the other. You are the problem, even you whom I love, not just you who are my enemy; the other group is deranged.

The effect of our madness in the larger society stems from its being contagious. We can derail those who love us from plain speaking. They become wary strategists to get around the elephant pit of our complex. If they are the mad ones, we defend against their madness, urge them to “move on,” “get over” the hurt and anger instead of trust truth between us to win through. Without a shared container of meaning, those with larger rations of psychotic elements in themselves act out publicly the mental illness. They strap on bombs to get rid of evil we all fear, that they have translated into the narrative of

their own madness. They transmogrify their own life into a weapon to kill others, to make deadness in the name of serving a living God, a cause, or a collective vengeance. The madness is not just personal but extends to whatever we believe is our guiding meaning, to hold it now as a religious duty to enforce. Our madness connects with our religious attitude, what we say is the good, the true, the worth dying for. Even if our cause is to wipe out religion, the passion of devotion is as if to a god.¹⁴

The Ruling Principle

Jung calls this guiding meaning our “ruling principle,” our version of the good we heroically seek to embody and enforce. This does not work because we want to ascend “to become part of its magnificence” and leave out the bad, because the “good and the beautiful freeze to the ice of the absolute idea, and the bad and the hateful become puddles of crazy life.” In making our version of the good, the principle that should rule, we make a god and try, with “unconscious cunning and power,” to coerce our neighbor to serve it: “Enamoured of our own design . . . we . . . demandingly . . . force others into following the God.” We fail to see its one-sidedness, its implicit exclusion of others who have different guiding principles. Others must believe in our good, our cause, or they are the violent ones; we are serving truth. Jung says we must accept the violence as part of ourselves lest we kill in our neighbor, literally or through discrimination and prejudicial laws, what we cannot accept in ourselves.¹⁵

All this must be sacrificed, Jung learns. Against his repugnance, he submits. The sacrifice is to sever our identification with our “formations,” what we hold supreme as the ruling principle—for Jung, his thinking, his science. The ruling principle for each of us is the hero in us who must be slain: “The heroic in you is the fact that you are ruled by the thought this or that is good . . . the goal. . . . Consequently you sin against incapacity. But incapacity exists. No one should deny it, find fault with it, shout it down.”¹⁶ To lose our guiding meaning, our ruling principle, can make us feel mad. What we relied on before, that gave us energy to pursue our goals and reference points through

storms of conflict or self-doubt, now proves irrelevant, useless, or defeated by its opposite looming up.

Here are examples. The executive who seeks analysis because her life feels “suspended,” took meaning from the principle of “work harder,” “be responsible,” “you should know.” But working harder closed a trap around her; being more responsible increased her estranged distance from the flavor of life. What had helped her succeed in the past now left her suspended, watching television, sitting on the couch blanking out, in resistance against more and more work and responsibility.

A young man devoted to being heroic, by which he means fight, win, be strong, find power and exert it, grew more and more exhausted and finds he cannot ignite meaning and passion this way anymore. But what makes me cling to it? he asks. He discovers great fear of its opposite, what Jung calls “incapacity,” and he calls the “Void”—going into a nothing place where he is swallowed in sloth, not finding and creating his self as before but feeling futile, vacant, unused, unable. The loss of heroic verve deeply frightens him.

A woman whose life principle is to do simple acts of kindness, because she believes in this good and because she feels inferior intellectually, that she has nothing to offer, loses the sustaining support of this belief when insistent needs to find and claim her mind, to speak as an authority to her children, to present a public piece of work to her colleagues all rise up within her. She must do this and do it her way, defying implicit rules of her organization. To remain in the background is no longer possible.

Relation to Red Book Themes

For all these people, loss of their guiding meaning that makes sense of life, gives them purpose, is like Jung’s experience that order includes disorder and meaning, meaninglessness. Does this bigger picture invalidate these images of the good that guide our lives with meaning? No. It relativizes them. We see that our constructions of meaning are not ultimate; they improvise and orient; we need them. They are precious values we arrive at. But they are finite.

In *The Red Book*, Jung wrestles with what acts as if a god at the center of our lives and around which we circle. He says, "You cry out for the word which has one meaning, so that you escape . . . from countless possibilities of interpretation," but, "You should be a vessel of life, so kill your idols." Jung sees he has privileged as his ruling principle thinking over feeling, Logos over Eros, the masculine as connected to Logos over the feminine as connected to Eros, the science of the day over another way of grasping reality that he calls magic, intellectual intelligence over paradoxical understanding. The issue is not to get rid of what he finds superior, but to include the neglected opposites along with it, to dethrone it from its superior perch. To renounce the ruling principle as the only truth means seeing he has excluded a whole other half of life that must be embraced. Otherwise, even the superior parts of us become distorted, "an ugly dwarf who lives in his dark cave . . . false and of the night."¹⁷

Jung's soul confronts him: "Be quiet and listen . . . recognize your madness" (in taking one's own ruling principles for the truth). "Life has no rules. That is its mystery and its unknown law." And further, "Nothing protects you against the chaos other than acceptance."¹⁸ Hence this is not a problem to get over but a reality to accept. It demands further grave steps.

Through encounters with multiple figures, each with its own point of view, any notion of having a united self is disrupted. Instead, Jung is shown a multiplicity within his self. He discovers that a host of different perspectives inhabit him. He feels "the boundless, the abyss, the inanity of eternal chaos . . . rushes toward you . . . , an unending multiplicity . . . filled with figures that have a confusing and overwhelming effect." There is another way of reasoning that goes with unreason, nonsense with sense, the laughable with the brutal, the high with the low, the shameful with the pleasant, even the bad with the good.¹⁹

Jung feels the threat of madness and fears he is breaking down into psychosis, so strong is his disorientation. And it is matched outwardly by his severance of friendship and collegueship with Freud, his repudiation by the psychoanalytic community, and his resignation of his university position. He sustains this rupture by his conviction that he cannot unequivocally agree with Freud's theories nor teach psychol-

ogy as it is then conceived when his own work gives evidence of a very different understanding of psychic reality. Inner rupture and outer loss are matched by the horror of Europe's plunge into World War I. Collective belief in inevitable human progress and the supremacy of reason is demolished in the bloodbath of trench warfare.²⁰

Jung is confronted with even more encompassing madness that sees that the Divine is different from the conventional view of the "spirit of the times" and that sees "the problem of madness is profound. Divine madness—a higher form of the irrationality of the life streaming through us—at any rate a madness that cannot be integrated into the present-day society."²¹ This streaming life, which he later calls the god Abraxas, is shown him by the spirit of the depths as the living current of life, not to be explained away by our efforts to make order, to craft principles of meaning that rule us, to devise our versions of the good.

Reading this, we can feel the threat of losing our axioms of ordering knowledge and ethics just as the analysands I quote feel in losing their ruling principles. Does it mean the ethics are bad or wrong? No. They are good, our versions of the good, our "heroic" constructions that confer meaning on us. But they are not conclusive. When we lose them, when they prove ineffective, we lose our sense of meaning we have relied upon.

But Jung reaches a kind of peace; he says, "I accepted the chaos." Then his soul tells him "madness is a special form of the spirit and clings to all teachings and philosophies . . . and daily life." A larger view moves onto the scene in which what we lose as definitive emerges as part of the whole, just not the whole in itself. This changes our sense of self. We must now develop what we rejected along with what we developed. This makes a bigger whole and changes our images of God. Jung sees that "madness is divine . . . which is nothing other than the overpowering of the spirit of this time through the spirit of the depths." Accepting what his soul shows him as a larger reality than he had thought depends on a religious reality that includes the irrational, streaming livingness.²²

This sets us a new task, all of us. In terms of the searches of my analysands, How does one unite flavor of living with an ethic of "work

harder”? How does one bring together the fearsome void of vacancy with heroic ambition to make a difference? How does one put oneself forward as an authority expressing an abstract principle to be heard alongside simple acts of kindness?

Incapacity

In *The Red Book* Jung finds his way to this task and sees it belongs to each of us: we must face the lowest in us, our “incapacity,” which is all we exclude when we identify with our ruling principle. When we give up such identification, “our urge to live . . . went into the depths and excited terrible conflict between the powers of the depths.” These powers are “forethinking,” which is “singleness,” and love, which is “togetherness.” Jung says, “Both need one another, and yet they kill one another. Since men do not know that the conflict occurs inside themselves, they go mad.”²³ But our incapacity and conflict exist, and we must go looking for them in the lowest of our selves.

To get to what he calls “your beyond,” we must experience Hell “in fact through your own wholly particular Hell, whose bottom consists of knee-deep rubble. . . . Every other Hell was at least worth seeing or full of fun. . . . Your own Hell is made up of all things that you always ejected . . . with a curse or a kick of the foot. . . . You come like a stupid and curious fool and gaze in wonder at the scraps that have fallen from your table.” Our own Hell is everything we would cast off, reject. If we do not face our Hell, we continue to deposit the unwanted, the loathsome, the horrific in our neighbor and try to kill it there.²⁴

Let us make no mistake how fearful is this undertaking to include incapacity, to go to the lowest in oneself and embrace all that is inferior in oneself. It really is inferior, other, at far reach from what we know and value. We are faced with something threatening: a rhino staring at us, a mathematician living in our basement. For Jung it was his feeling, left to moral decay, personified as Salome, appearing at first as a bloodthirsty horror, murderer of the Holy One, insane. Even when Salome is redeemed and appears as a loving woman, Jung rejects her love, saying, “I dread it.”²⁵

Think of everything you hate about yourself, shun, do not want to

touch. That is what you must face. Jung sees he must accept “the repressed part of the soul, he must love his inferiority, even his vices, so that what is degenerate can resume development.” This goes against the grain, for what we have developed “represents our best and highest achievement. The acceptance of the undeveloped is therefore like a sin, like a false step, a degeneration, a descent to a deeper level; in actual fact, however, it is a greater deed than remaining in an ordered condition at the expense of the other side of our being, which is thus at the mercy of decay.”²⁶

This hell, this space of incapacity, of accepting the devil of “your own other standpoint,” requires even more, Jung discovered: “You must free yourself from all distinctions,” from the “curse of the knowledge of good and evil,” because “the lowest in you is also the eye of the evil that stares at you and looks at you coldly and sucks your light down into the dark abyss.” At bottom, our madness faces us with evil.²⁷

Yet lurking there in that basest space is also a dot of the creative: “The lowest in you is . . . the cornerstone.” Accepting that “evil must have its share in life . . . we can deprive it of the power it has to overwhelm us.” For “salvation comes to you from the discarded.” “If I accept the lowest in me, I lower a seed into the ground of Hell. The seed is invisibly small, but the tree of my life grows from it and conjoins the Below with the Above. The Above is fiery and the Below is fiery. Between the unbearable fires, grows your life.”²⁸

Hence our personal problem shows each of us that we must deal with the whole notion, whether religious or not, personal and social, of evil. We take up evil and the place of destructiveness in life in chapter 2.