

## Cradled in the Mystery *On Life after Death*<sup>1</sup>

*My focus for this talk is not concerned with beliefs, opinions, theories, scientific or philosophical conjecture, nor even psychological analysis. I am focusing on subjective experiences, personal and written accounts that have instilled in me a deep-seated and silent reverence for the undying soul.*

*Jung shared his personal encounters with death and dying, his reflections on an afterlife, and his confrontations with the depths of unconscious life. In doing so, he invites us to see through our prejudices, and intellectual, scientific, and psychological paradigms that close the doors to other worlds and ways of knowing. He suggests we need myths about death. I invite you to let the dead have their voice, and allow the mysteries and images of your own experiences touch your soul.*



*Angel of Death*  
Evelyn De Morgan

### **Death as a Companion on the Journey of Life**

The mystery of life itself is suspended between two mysteries - birth and death.<sup>2</sup> Encounters with death, the dying and the dead are beyond words, conceptualizations or explanations - profound experiences that summon us to consider the sacred conjunction of life and death. As Celtic poet John

O'Donohue says: "A glimpse at the face of your death can bring immense freedom to your life."<sup>3</sup>

Carl Jung lost his sister, his wife, many friends, students, colleagues and patients throughout the course of his life. Yet, even before he was born, there were three dead siblings - a brother who died a few days after birth and two stillborn sisters. Throughout his life, he composed many bereavement letters such as this one in 1918 (age 43) to his friend Alphonse Maeder:

Please accept my heartfelt sympathy over the passing of your mother. Death is a faithful companion of life and follows it like its shadow.<sup>4</sup>

It seems, for Jung, death and life were always interwoven - he speaks often of the significance of death and the dead, as if they supported life. As a student in his early 20s, he gave a series called *The Zofingia Lectures*, which explored psychic process beyond causal and scientific agendas, including the existence of spirits and speaking with the dead. He suggested that death is a gift of life, not only psychologically, but energetically. Death, he says "is psychologically as important as birth and, like it, is an integral part of life."<sup>5</sup>

When Jung spoke of death and the dead, it was from an otherworldly, in-depth and first-hand perspective. He acknowledged that the unconscious contained spheres, not bound by temporal limits of time and space, realms beyond creeds, conceptions and classifications. His nighttime confrontations with the unconscious, death and the afterlife influenced his daytime scholarly papers such as 'The Soul and Death', 'Psychological Commentary on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*', or 'Concerning Rebirth.' Loss is so deeply personal and affective, charged with angst, pain, distress and profound grief, but Jung also brought attention to the timeless and transpersonal qualities of death that are in stark contrast to personal suffering. This paradox, he suggests, exists when we view death from the "point of view of the ego" or the "point of view of the psyche."<sup>6</sup>

Jung invited us to participate with the dead. When Jung "talks about the dead he means the dead. And they're present in images and present as images. They still live on."<sup>7</sup> For instance, Jung describes his experience of feeling that his neighbour, whose funeral he had attended the day before, was in his bedroom, at the foot of his bed.

In his vision, the friend was asking Jung to follow him. Jung participated; in his imagination, he followed his neighbour to his house and into his library, which was unfamiliar to Jung. The neighbour climbed on a stool and showed Jung the second of five red-bound books. Then the vision ceased. The next

day, Jung was so curious he went to his neighbour's house and asked his widow if he could look up something in the library. There was the stool which Jung climbed on and saw the books with red bindings – the second volume was entitled *The Legacy of the Dead* – he was not interested in the book itself but the title was significant.

Death and the dead, as Jung said, are faithful companions on the journey of life. James Hillman summarizes Jung's contribution:

Jung calls attention to the one deep, missing part of our culture, which is the realm of the dead, the weight of human history .... we're living in a world which is alive with the dead, they're around us, they're with us, they *are* us.<sup>8</sup>

Jung encouraged a conversation with the dead, with life's unanswered questions, and with its mysteries.



*Death and Life*  
Gustav Klimt

### **Discovering Life on the Precipice of Death**

When Jung was 68 years old (on February 11, 1944), he lost his footing on some black ice and broke his leg. Shortly after being treated in hospital, he suffered a heart attack. As he describes, he "hung on the edge of death". Being close to death, on a potion of oxygen and camphor, he had a

remarkable series of visions which he described as “the most tremendous things I have ever experienced.” He also said that it was “impossible to convey the intensity and emotion of these experiences”.<sup>9</sup>

Those who have envisioned death, sat with a dying person or undergone a near-death experience will resonate with the feeling tone of Jung’s experience. Of interest here is that Jung is not referring to a psychological death, but to his own peri-death encounter, rising above his body and seeing the Earth from afar.

The intensity of his visionary experiences was so awe-inspiring that he was not able to distinguish whether he was dreaming or in ecstasy. A nurse later told him that he was surrounded by a bright glow, a phenomenon she had often observed with the dying.

Jung’s vision reached what he described as the ‘outermost limit’, allowing him to look down on the earth, which was bathed in ‘a gloriously blue light’. Far below his feet was Ceylon. Floating in space he saw radiant colours, the Red Sea, the snow-capped Himalayas, some of the Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup> Then turning in space he saw a ‘dark block of stone’ whose entrance led into an antechamber. At the entrance sat a black Hindu in a lotus position awaiting him. He felt as if ‘the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence’ was being painfully stripped away, yet it left no regret, as he felt whole, everything that he truly was. About to enter the temple of the mysteries, he was anticipating the answers to his many unanswered questions of life and death.

While he was contemplating these questions, an image floated up towards him – he recognized this as the doctor who had been treating him, but now his image was in primal form, as ‘a basileus of Kos’. The doctor had been sent to tell Jung that he had to return to his body. And as Jung tells us: “The moment I heard that, the vision ceased.”

He was disappointed that he had returned to the three-dimensional world. It took Jung three weeks before he felt as if he would or even could live again. He was angry at his doctor for bringing him back, but also, worried about him, as he recognized that the visionary experience of his primal, archaic form might signify the doctor’s death. On April 4, 1944, the day Jung was allowed to sit on the edge of his bed for the first time, his doctor took to his bed, dying shortly after. Two doctors simultaneously experienced life and death – one was called to return; the other to depart. Jung remained in hospital for another 10 weeks continuing to experience his glorious visions, which sustained and supported his destiny and lifework.

Jung was released at the end of June, 1944 having spent five months in hospital. No letters are published in his volume of letters during the months in hospital. I find it of interest that the first two published after his release refer in a way to the transforming images of his visions.

The first letter was to Karl Kerényi referencing Asclepius. One of the best-known sanctuaries to Asclepius is on the island of Kos, the place that located the doctor in the image of *basileus* (monarch/king) in Jung's near-death vision.

Poignantly, eleven years later, Jung received a letter from this doctor's sister from the island of Kos. He was deeply moved and wrote back to her about how her brother and he were associated with Kos in a mysterious way. He shared his vision, how he saw her brother as the Prince of Kos, and how he knew her brother would die. Jung wrote of the synchronicity of him sitting up in bed for the first time, while "your brother took to his bed never to rise again."<sup>11</sup>

Hippocrates was born on the island of Kos and it is hypothesized that he learnt his healing craft at the sanctuary of Asclepius situated on the island. Asclepius, the god of dreams and healing, and Hippocrates, the father of rational medicine, are implicit in Jung's vision. The island of Kos is at the crossroads where West meets East. Jung's two personalities, the doctor of science and the doctor of soul are at crossroads in his vision: the doctor of soul healing lives, while the biomedical doctor dies.

The second letter to Frau N, dated 11 July 1944, considers his hyper-real experience - his glimpse into eternity, which reinforced his meaning of life and trust in the afterlife. He wrote:

"What happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imagination and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception of it."<sup>12</sup>

A year later he wrote to his student and colleague Kristine Mann who was dying of cancer. He described his illness as "a most valuable experience, which gave me the inestimable opportunity of a glimpse behind the veil." The world he described to her was not "imprisoned in a system of 3 dimensions" nor "caught up in the turbulent stream of time." He shared his experience to comfort her, ending his letter saying: "Whatever you do, if you do it sincerely, will eventually become the bridge to your wholeness, a good ship that carries you through the darkness of your second birth, which seems to be death to the outside."<sup>13</sup>

Thirty years later another doctor, Raymond Moodie would coin the term 'near-death experience' and quite emphatically state: "there is an afterlife" having researched thousands who had experienced this phenomenon. In my consulting room I have heard many accounts of these experiences that have changed the person's respect and reverence for life and death.

### **Synchronicities at the Moment of Death**

My father was startled when awoken in the middle of the night with a vision of the bedroom flooded with light. As he lay in bed the doors of the closet disappeared and, in the cupboard, he saw a stone monolith with names of the dead inscribed on it. At the base of the monument was a car, a station wagon. Early that same morning we received a phone call that my parents' close friends and their two sons had been killed in a car crash.

At 19, my best friend David died. He drowned in the lake where we all loved to swim; the afternoon he died I was with another friend who did not know David. A spider was crawling up the wall in the room where we were sitting. My friend raised a newspaper to kill it. I grabbed his hand and yelled "No". He was bamboozled, but when I told him why, he understood - David was studying to be an entomologist. He loved insects and bugs and the study of them - it was his calling. He would want the spider to live - the next day I learnt that David had drowned at the same time as my encounter with the spider. The sensation of being connected in that moment through time and space remains with me today.

It is a story I have heard often. The most recent was a friend who dreamt the following dream on the night her a male friend died. While unsettling, she described the dream as the most intense one she ever had:

I was standing on the curb with a male waiting to be picked up. An Uber driver in an old car pulled up alongside us. My male friend jumps into the front seat alongside the driver. I open the back door of the car & am getting in when the driver turns around and looks at me .... he looks like a motor bike rider or Darth Vader ... face all covered & all black ! I instantly felt terrified & jumped out of the car .... the car sped off & I stood there feeling guilty thinking that maybe I should have gone with him, as I knew in my heart, I would never see him again !! I then woke up ....

She awoke about 3 am, synchronous to the time her friend had suffered a fatal stroke.

Jung tells a similar dream of experiencing a threshold moment between the dying and the living:

I dreamed that my wife's bed was a deep pit with stone walls. It was a grave, and somehow has a suggestion of classical antiquity about it. Then I heard a deep sigh, as if someone was giving up the ghost. A figure that resembled my wife sat up in the pit and floated upward. It wore a white gown into which curious black symbols were woven. I awoke, roused my wife, and checked the time. It was three o'clock in the morning. The dream was so curious that I thought at once that it might signify a death. At seven o'clock came the news that a cousin of my wife had died at three o'clock in the morning.<sup>14</sup>

Jung's dream is recorded in his Black Books where he also describes being woken by a strong noise from the window shutters, as well as something being in the room. The 'curious' designs on the white gown were images, described as "witches or heretics, who are burnt at the stake."<sup>15</sup>

Disturbances in the atmosphere of the living alongside death images in the accompanying dreams and visions involve us in the mystery of living and dying. Whether cradled or troubled by the mystery feels as if this is dependent on our ways of thinking, preparations, reflections and engagements with the mysteries.

Ancient cultures speak of the restless dead, those who hover on the boundary of death; in ancient Greece, those shades who could not make the journey across the Styx into the underworld haunted the riverbank. Those who had not been buried or received funeral rights, those who died violently or prematurely, hovered on the frontier between worlds. Metaphorically, psyche needs acknowledgment of not just the living, but the dying - that the pilgrimage of life honours the eternality of soul.

These stories tell of how time and space are breached. As Jung suggests, under certain conditions time and space are psychic functions, not bound by literal measurements or sensations.<sup>16</sup> In that participatory moment it seems as if both souls are interconnecting and intercommunicating on the timeless portal between living and dying.

### **Visits and Conversations with the Dead**

Four years after David died, he appeared to me in a visionary experience - I could see him clearly even in the darkened room. Overwhelmed and shocked, I cried out loud, and his form disappeared. But shortly after, he

reappeared - what I remember most clearly was my question about where he was and what he was doing and his answer to me was he was still learning, going back to school to finish his studies.

I have rarely shared this experience as I feel vulnerable and always susceptible to ridicule, psychological justification and judgement. It felt as if it were a conversation with the dead, a friend who had died too young. But the experience instilled in me a lifelong faith in the psychic interconnectivity and natural symbiosis between life and death. Years later I read this account of one of Jung's night visions. I felt nurtured by his respect, faith and value that he placed on his night-world experiences. He parented confidence in my deeply felt experiences, which need no legitimization.

He describes his experience as:

I had another experience of the evolution of the soul after death when – about a year after my wife's death – I suddenly awoke one night and knew that I had been with her in the south of France, in Provence, and spent an entire day with her. She was engaged on studies of the Grail there. That seemed significant to me, for she had died before completing her work on this subject.

Jung was not interested in psychoanalyzing the experience, but distilling its inner quality. He continues:

The thought that my wife was continuing after death to work on her further spiritual development – however that may be conceived – struck me as meaningful and held a measure of reassurance for me.<sup>17</sup>

A measure of reassurance, as he says, in the evolution of the soul after death.

About three weeks after her father's death, Marie Louise von Franz had this dream:

It was about ten o'clock in the evening, dark outside. I heard the doorbell ring and 'knew' at once somehow that this was my father coming. I opened the door and there he stood with a suitcase. I remembered from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* that people who died suddenly should be told that they are dead, but before I could say so he smiled at me and said: 'Of course I know that I am dead, but may I not visit you?' I said: 'Of course, come in', and then I asked 'How are you now? What are you doing? Are you happy?' He answered:



'Let me remember what you, the living, call happy. Yes, in your language, I am happy. I am in Vienna (his hometown which he loved and longed for all his life) and I am studying at the music academy'.<sup>18</sup>

Her father was musical but had neglected this gift. He now was able to study at the music academy of Vienna. Marie-Louise was struck by her father's differentiation of happiness with the living and the dead. The dead remind us to live.

Jung wrote a lengthy response to a pastor who was curious about what Jung might say about his experience of having a spontaneous conversation with his brother at the time of his death in another country. Jung confirmed the validity of the experience, but cautioned prolonging a connection with the dead as "it entangles the consciousness of the living too much in that transcendental state, resulting in unconsciousness and dissociation phenomenon."

Contact with his brother was possible "as long as the feeling of the presence of the dead continues. But it should not be experimented with because of the danger of a disintegration of consciousness. To be on the safe side, one must be content with spontaneous experiences."<sup>19</sup> Jung emphasizes not to impose our will or hunger for knowing upon the mysteries; to let them arrive in their own time, psyche's time, when soul is ready.

Death is archetypal and Jung was aware of the gripping force of an archetypal image and its power to possess. He cautioned becoming compelled by the mystery:

There are experiences which show that the dead entangle themselves, so to speak, in the physiology (sympathetic nervous system) of the living. This would probably result in states of possession.<sup>20</sup>

Reconciling, interpreting, making sense of, or authenticating these experiences seems pointless, for as Jung said, "there is no possible way for us to attain certainty concerning things which pass our understanding."<sup>21</sup> Sonu Shamdasani summarizes the task well when he says, "we have to find a place for the dead in order to enable our own living."<sup>22</sup>

## **Dreams and Death**

Edward Edinger in *Ego and Archetype* amplifies a series of dreams a patient dreamt over the course of two years before he died. Edinger's focus was to demonstrate how, under certain circumstances, the unconscious reveals

'metaphysical'<sup>23</sup> themes. Edinger describes the dreamer as undergoing a 'metaphysical initiation' through these dreams. Even though he considered the dreamer to be 'unreligious' and 'unphilosophical' the dreams were in essence preparing him for his transition to death.<sup>24</sup>

Does the unconscious prepare us, and those we love, for Death?

Jo was a member of an astrological dream group, facilitated by Mary Symes.<sup>25</sup> When Jo relocated to Melbourne from the UK, she immediately joined our astrological classes and for over a decade was a vibrant and engaged member of our Chiron Centre community. She returned to the UK in 2011 and died July 30, 2018. In early June, two months before she died, she dreamt:

I was in a cell-like room. It was painted white with white bars at the window. There was a beautiful bright blue butterfly trying to find its way out, but it was feeble. I directed it to a space in the bars and it flew away. I had been able to give it a bit more of life.

In her email, Jo said: "As I lay there, recalling the dream, I asked to see a butterfly as a sign! Honestly, that very day a friend came over and we sat outside in the garden and a blue butterfly appeared and fluttered around us for 15 minutes or so. I don't think I've ever seen a blue butterfly before!"

The inner image appeared to Jo in the outer world, like a visitation from Psyche herself. Jo ended her email saying: "The astrology has been so precise and together with the dream, I know there is a bigger story happening and that gives me huge comfort."<sup>26</sup>

Her guide to the dream world, Mary Symes, is no stranger to dreams and death. Forty-five years ago, her husband David disappeared in a yachting tragedy. No body was ever found. In the abyss of her suffering and grief for the loss of her intimate other, she developed a profound relationship with the dream world. It was in the unconscious depths where Mary found, as she says, "a source of healing greater than anything offered by western medicine."<sup>27</sup>

Western medicine was familiar, as Mary had trained as a nurse. But it was in the healing potential of dreams where Mary found her vocation. As a dream practitioner for forty years, she has encountered the mysteries of death and the dream through her and her clients' dreamworld. Over the years she has dreamt of David, of turbulent seas, of the yacht's disappearance and return. Recently Mary dreamt that the body of David had been identified; therefore, his burial was able to happen. At the viewing, friends from forty-five years ago were able to gather to see and touch David's body.

In all these years, Mary had never dreamt of David's body being recovered or found or identified. We have mentioned how the ancients saw the necessity for the ritual of burial to gain access to the next world. I wondered how this profound image might be part of the healing journey Mary began all those years ago. She replied: "Having David's body identified, able to be viewed covers over or fills a hole that has been leaking energy for over 40 years." It felt as if, in the alchemical present, Mary has an embodied image that allows her to be present, present to life and to death and to David.

Jung was convinced that our relativity to time and space was in proportion to our distance from consciousness; therefore, the deeper realms of the unconscious are less shackled by the linear constraints of past, present, and future; timeless. So in the depths of our dream, we can encounter and interrelate with the dead. He writes:

Not only my dreams, but also occasionally the dreams of others, helped to shape, revise, or confirm my views on a life after death. I attach particular importance to a dream which a pupil of mine, a woman of sixty, dreamed about two months before her death. She had entered the hereafter. There was a class going on, and various deceased women friends of hers sat on the front bench. An atmosphere of general expectation prevailed. She looked around for a teacher or lecturer, but could find none. Then it became plain that she herself was the lecturer, for immediately after death people had to give accounts of the total experience of their lives. The dead were extremely interested in the life experiences that the newly deceased brought with them, just as if the acts and experiences taking place in earthly life, in space and time, were the decisive ones.<sup>28</sup>

Both Marie-Louise von Franz and Carl Jung describe dreams where a dead sister foreshadows death. Marie-Louise describes two dream cases:

a woman dreamed that her dead sister, who had died young, was smiling radiantly, holding in her hands a snow-white mourning wreath. The following day she received news of the accidental death of the sister's ten-year old godchild. Another witness reported a dream in which her long-dead sister appeared, dressed in white, and said to her 'I've come for mother'. Exactly two months later the mother died.<sup>29</sup>

Jung also dreamt of his dead sister, using it as an example of how there may be foreknowledge of death, but not recognition. In his dream his sister was with a deceased friend at a garden party. Jung knew the others who were in

attendance were alive. His sister was accompanied by a woman from Basel who Jung knew well. He had the sense this woman was going to die. When he awoke from the dream it was still very vivid, yet he could not remember who this woman was, even after visualizing all his acquaintances in Basel. A few weeks later he heard news that the woman in his dream had died in a fatal accident. Even though she had been his patient a year before her death, Jung was at a loss as to why he could not remember her after his dream. As he said, "When one has such experiences one acquires a certain respect for the potentialities and arts of the unconscious."<sup>30</sup>

These potentialities and arts of the unconscious present in many different ways. Dreams and visions of death are also experienced by those personally close to the dying.

Four years ago a client dreamt that her husband, Jack was not well. In the dream, a timeline kept reappearing and it was getting close to the end of its time.<sup>31</sup> She tried to make him realize he had to look after himself or go to the doctors. He was agitated, angry and did not want anyone to know about his timeline running down. Another man found out Jack was almost at the end of his line, so Jack killed him. She awoke, startled by the dream. When she fell back asleep, another chapter of the dream continued with Jack now alive, but temperamentally very different.

Three years later, being aware of astrological movements in her family's chart, she consulted me again, fearing that her husband might die. A year later Jack died. The week before he died, my client was aroused in the middle of the night and saw a young boy, about 12, dressed Oliver-like, in tattered old clothes looking over Jack. As Jack awoke the young boy disappeared into what she described as a 'swirling energy portal/vortex'. Two nights later she was awoken again. The whirlpool of energy reappeared, swirling around, but not the boy.

Dreams and visionary motifs of the dying being taken away by relatives, friends, and spirits are common throughout myth, folklore and personal anecdotes.<sup>32</sup> The night before Jung's mother died, he had a frightening dream of a wolfhound which he knew to be 'the Wild Huntsman' who was about to carry away a human soul. Upon reflection, he recognized this image as the *spiritus Mercurialis* who had taken the soul of his mother to "that greater territory of the self."<sup>33</sup>

From my experience, an intimate partner or a close family member is often drawn into the mysteries surrounding the death of their loved one. Perhaps being closer to outer life, they may sense, feel, imagine or see the presence of death, drawn into its timeless and spaceless qualities. While grief and loss are

personally shattering and agonizing, alongside the pain rests a profound sense of an eternal connection to the beloved. Death brings us closer to the essentiality and eternality of being. It is often at these times we turn to the poets like John O'Donohue – from his poem, *On the Death of the Beloved*.<sup>34</sup>

We look towards each other no longer  
From the old distance of our names;  
Now you dwell inside the rhythm of breath,  
As close to us as we are to ourselves.

Jung had many experiences listening to the symbols of death which permeated the psychic atmosphere. In his essay *The Soul and Death*, he says:

In my rather long psychological experience I have observed a great many people whose unconscious psychic activity I was able to follow into the immediate presence of death. As a rule the approaching end was indicated by those symbols which, in normal life also, proclaim changes of psychological condition – rebirth symbols such as changes of locality, journeys and the like. I have frequently been able to trace back for over a year, in a dream-series, the indications of approaching death, even in the cases where such thoughts were not prompted by the outward situation. Dying, therefore, has its onset long before actual death.<sup>35</sup>

No doubt death is on the psychic landscape when symbols, images or profound feelings of death appear in dreams, visions, oracles, or deep emotional states. But it can be difficult to differentiate whether this is an actual or metaphoric death, a bodily or a psychological death. Both are intertwined, but von Franz suggests there is a felt sense of knowing the difference.

It seems to me that one can 'feel' whether the figure of a dead person in a dream is being used as a symbol for some inner reality or whether it 'really' represents the dead.<sup>36</sup>

Jung calls our experiences with the unconscious, our journeys into Self, psychic participation and reflection, or our questioning for meaning, 'a working hypothesis', which prepares us for the final task of death. Jung was very clear about preparing for death, especially as we reached the summit, the midpoint of life. He says "death is not an end but a goal, and life's inclination towards death begins as soon as the meridian is passed."<sup>37</sup> Jung refers here to his metaphor of the Sun passing over the zenith, the meridian's highpoint, entering the second half of life. This is amplified in his essay *The Soul and Death*:

From the middle of life onward, only he remains vitally alive who is ready to *die with life*. For in the secret hour of life's midday the parabola is reversed, death is born. The second half of life does not signify ascent, unfolding, increase, exuberance, but death, since the end is its goal.<sup>38</sup>



*Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

### **Preparing**

Death invites us to live more fully in the present, to be involved and participatory with the rituals of life, and to ensoul our everyday world through beauty and wonder and grace.

When describing a student's fear and defensiveness of death, Jung emphasized the importance of death, especially to the aging. He suggests we need myths about death, as myth offers us images that are "helpful and enriching pictures of life in the land of the dead." While this does not solve the mystery, nor ease uncertainty or pain, having faith in the archetypal images of death allows one to live with his instincts, not fight against them.<sup>39</sup>

When Jung was 51-52, he delivered a memorial for an analysand whose presence and death affected him deeply. As this man approached his death, Jung witnessed him freeing himself from his earthly bonds in preparation for death. Three weeks before he died, his patient had a vision of "his own sarcophagus from which his living soul arose". In the memorial, Jung said:

To many death seems to be a brutal and meaningless end to a short and meaningless existence. So it looks, if seen from the surface and from the darkness. But when we penetrate the depths of the soul and when we try to understand its mysterious life, we shall discern that death is not a meaningless end, the mere vanishing into nothingness – it is an accomplishment, a ripe fruit on the tree of life. Nor is death an abrupt extinction, but a goal that has been unconsciously lived and worked for during half a lifetime.<sup>40</sup>

He saw life, the true life, not in its annual blossoms, but unseen, hidden in the roots. He said:

When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the unperishable world interrupted into this transitory one.<sup>41</sup>

Jung suggested that we have rationalized the psychological need to connect with dead out of existence. He says: “We behave as if we did not have this need, and because we cannot believe in a life after death we prefer to do nothing about it.”<sup>42</sup>

For the most part, our culture, unlike our ancestors, seems to have lost contact with the land of the dead and its myths and imagery. But for nearly two millennia, the ancient Greeks celebrated the mystery of Persephone’s disappearance into and return from Hades, land of the dead.

### **The Eleusinian Mysteries**

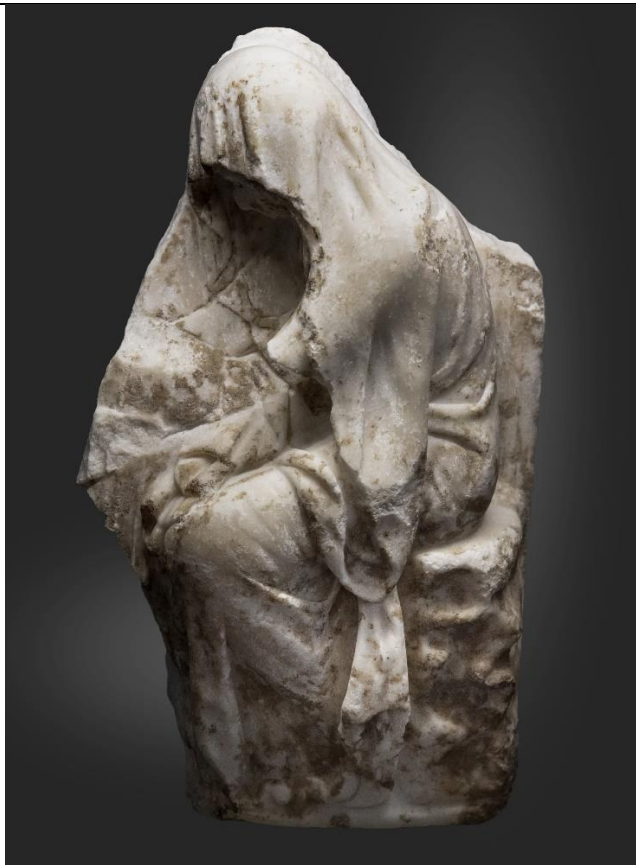
These mystery rites are named after Eleusis, the place of happy arrival, as here Demeter was reunited with her daughter Persephone. The Eleusinian rituals commemorated Persephone’s encounter with death and its life-restoring qualities. Whatever took place in the intimacy of these rituals stimulated an awareness of the journey into the land of the dead and celebrated life renewing itself after death. An Eleusinian epithet reads: ‘Death comes not as a curse, but as a blessing.’

Initiates were sworn to secrecy; hence we have a scarcity of detail; like death itself, the Eleusinian mysteries gave the initiate a sense of closure, leaving no need to betray the experience they had undertaken.

But what we do know is that the Greater Mysteries during the classical period followed a particular order and focused on incidents from Demeter’s

search for her daughter, as well as the re-enactment of Persephone in the darkness of the underworld. In the dark initiates confronted frightening underworld images, which assisted in overcoming their fear of death. The mysteries culminated with showing sacred objects. In a display of brilliant light the hierophant would reveal the holy objects to the throngs of initiates, waiting in darkness and stillness. Suddenly a thunderous gong is sounded. The underworld breaks open and out of the depths the goddess Persephone appears in a radiant light that fills the chamber.

George Mylonas, a classical scholar who devoted many years of research into the Mysteries, summarizes the initiates' return from their pilgrimage as "full of joy and happiness, with the fear of death diminished and the strengthened hope of a better life in the world of shadows."<sup>43</sup> The mythic reenactment of Persephone's horror constellated an engagement with death that instilled a faith in life. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* expresses it this way:



Demeter mourning  
Saint-Raymond Museum (Toulouse)

Happy is that man,  
among men on earth,  
who witnesses  
these things.  
And whoever is not  
initiated  
in the rites,  
whoever  
has no part in them,  
he does not share  
the same fate,  
when he dies  
and is down in  
the squalid darkness.

The Eleusinian Mysteries  
prepared the initiate for the  
afterlife.



### **Afterlife: Living after Life**

Jung's encounters with the unconscious and the dead document experiences beyond replication or proof. He recognized that life after death was a primordial image, a basic and essential aspect of soul, alive in myth, culture, religion. His visionary experiences ensouled a felt sense of life beyond death. Thirteen years after his own near death, in his commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Jung repeated his faith in the afterlife: "As a doctor, I make every effort to strengthen the belief in immortality, especially with older patients when such questions come threateningly close."<sup>44</sup>

James Hillman, the year before he died, spoke with Sonu Shamdasani about the dead and the land of the dead from the perspective of Jung's *Red Book*. He summarizes it succinctly: "You're living and partly dead, not dying but partly dead ..... the afterlife is all around us."<sup>45</sup>

*The afterlife is all around us.*



photo: Nonokas Mota  
Unsplash

Some years ago a friend phoned to share with me her overpowering feelings that had been spontaneously erupting over the previous week or two. She was upset, overwhelmed by emotion and spoke of her fears that someone around her was going to die. These intense sensitivities began after she received a phone call from her son in Queensland, asking if he could visit. Her immediate response was to change the date since it was a very busy time. But as she began to reply, a potent force came over her. She

stopped mid-sentence, knowing in that moment, she had to say yes to his visit.

It was from that moment, she felt death had visited – she was constantly crying and feeling a sense of dread. A week after her son arrived, she fainted. In that instant, before falling unconscious, she saw in her mind's eye her son's life passing before her. Her unconscious knew what consciously she feared, but had not yet experienced. Her son died 24 hours later.

In revisiting this recently, she recollected the wonder of the timing, being amazed by the wonderful gift of life her son had given her. Instead of his reunion with his mortal family, he was reunited with his ancestors in the other world. As she said: "I would have been an emotional and mental wreck if I had said no to his visit and he had died alone in Queensland. This experience totally confirmed for me that there is life after death and humanity's ability to communicate on deeper and more profound levels than words could ever express."

Jung suggested there may be foreknowledge of death, but not recognition, especially when no outer symptoms are consciously presenting. However, the quickening here was a deeply-felt knowing that precipitated, perhaps synchronized, with a profound reconciliation and knowing that in the face of death, their bond was eternal.

Marie Louise von Franz wrote, the "unconscious 'believes' quite obviously in a life after death"<sup>46</sup>. But, perhaps, it is not a matter of believing, but a knowing; a knowing born of one's own experiences with the unconscious. As Jung said: "True, the unconscious knows more than consciousness does, but it is knowledge of a special sort, knowledge in eternity, usually without reference to the here and now, not couched in language of the intellect."<sup>47</sup>

When addressing this question of immortality, Jung said that we must make an effort to form some sort of view about it. As he says. "My hypothesis is that we can do so with the aid of hints sent to us from the unconscious – in dreams, for example. Usually we dismiss these hints because we are convinced that the question is not susceptible to answer."<sup>48</sup> My friend listened to the hints from the unconscious.

Death is a nodal point in life- perhaps the most profound and potentially transforming experience, yet one that is so often negated or denied or rebranded.

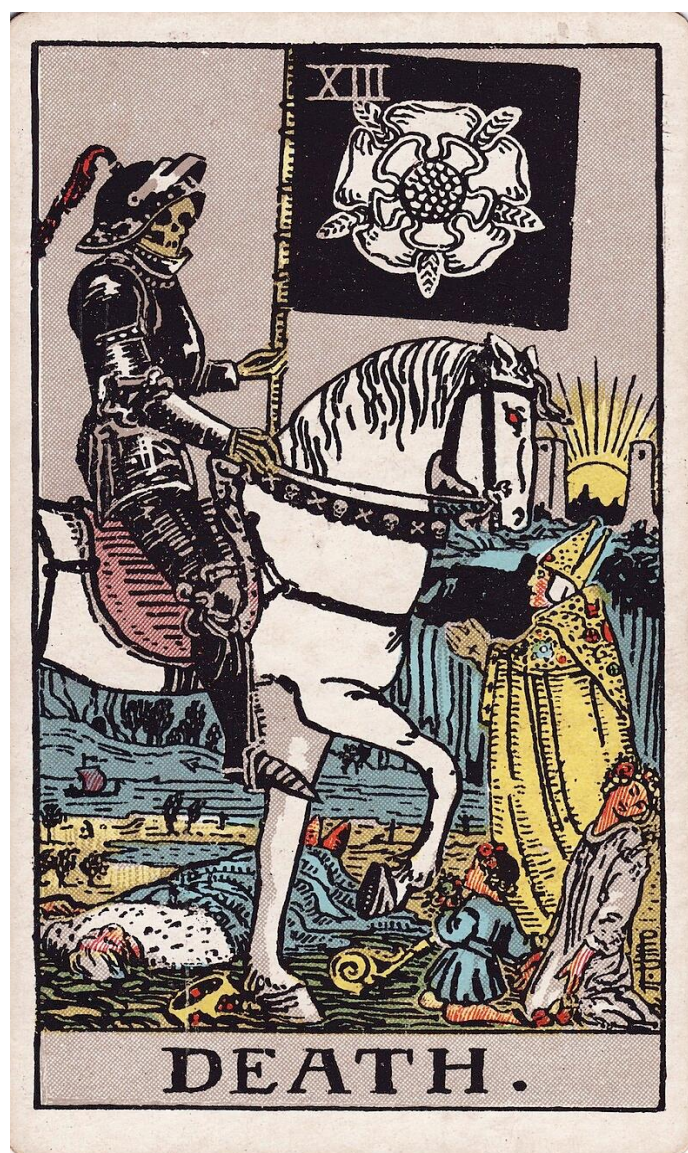
So, the decisive question for man as Jung says is this:

Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon futilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance.<sup>49</sup>

It is a question of soul, an engagement with the mystery of unconscious life, the eternity of being, not in the brightness of day, or in a tradition of belief, but in shadowed light, in filtered light, penumbral light - in the infinite of our interiority.<sup>50</sup> In the infinity of unconscious life, we find our own vision of the afterlife.

Much appreciation to those who have shared their stories with me.

I would like to end with this poem from a favourite poet:<sup>51</sup>





**When Death Comes** by Mary Oliver

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

To buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,  
and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,  
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,  
and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.



## ENDNOTES

CW *The Collected Works of CG Jung*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1953 – 1979.

MDR Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, edited by Aniela Jaffe, translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Pantheon Books, New York: 1973.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Atlantic Magazine has reprinted Jung's chapter "On Life After Death" from *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* – see <https://cdn.theatlantic.com/media/archives/1962/12/210-6/132654498.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> see Sonu Shamdasani, from *Lament of the Dead* by James Hillman & Sonu Shamdasani, W.W. Norton & Company, New York: 2013, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, Penguin Books, London: 2023, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 1*, edited by Gerhard Adler & Aniela Jaffe, translated by RFC Hull, , Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ:1973, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> CW 13: 68

<sup>6</sup> MDR, p. 314.

<sup>7</sup> Sonu Shamdasani, from *Lament of the Dead* , p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> James Hillman, from *Lament of the Dead*, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage Books, New York, NY: 1965, p.297.

<sup>10</sup> Later he approximated he would have to have been a thousand miles high to see what he saw from that perspective. The objective ego was not part of the vision as it was merged into the timeless Self, but is now apparent in this way of thinking about the physical distance he was above the earth. In his letter to Kristine Mann (1945), he suggested it was 15,000kms.

<sup>11</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 2*, edited by Gerhard Adler & Aniela Jaffe, translated by RFC Hull, , Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1973, p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 1*, p. 343.

<sup>13</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 1*, pp. 358-9.

<sup>14</sup> MDR, p. 303.

<sup>15</sup> CG Jung, *The Black Books 1913 -32, Volume 2*, edited by Sonu Shamdasani, translated by Martin Liebscher, John Peck and Sonu Shamdasani, W.W. Norton & Company, p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 1*, p. 256.

<sup>17</sup> MDR, p.309.

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<sup>18</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *On Dreams & Death*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>19</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 1*, p.258.

<sup>20</sup> CG Jung, *Letters Volume 1*, p.258.

<sup>21</sup> MDR, p. 300.

<sup>22</sup> Sonu Shamdasani, from *Lament of the Dead*, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup> This word has many connotations and languaging – paranormal, mystical, supernatural, bizarre, words that seem to evoke a negative judgment in our culture, or a culture that has banished Death.

<sup>24</sup> Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype*, Shambhala, Boston, MA, 1992, pp. 197-224.

<sup>25</sup> See Mary Symes, *Grief and Dreams*, Rene Gordon Pty Ltd. (Melbourne: 1987). Dreamwork is Mary Syme's lifeblood. Called to her vocation through a personal tragedy, Mary has worked with dreams for over 40 years, and for much of this time in tandem with the astrological horoscope and the dream chart.

<sup>26</sup> See Brian Clark, *Soul, Symbol and Imagination*, Astro\*Synthesis: 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Symes, *Grief and Dreams*, p.29.

<sup>28</sup> MDR, p. 305.

<sup>29</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *On Dreams & Death*, p.77.

<sup>30</sup> MDR, p.304.

<sup>31</sup> CW 8: 796. Jung says that: "When death confronts us , life always seems like a downward flow or like a clock that has been wound up and whose eventual 'running down' is taken for granted."

<sup>32</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *On Dreams & Death*, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> MDR, p.313.

<sup>34</sup> Many Celtic poets have mused on this image of eternal connection – recall the moving words to Danny Boy of poignant loss, but eventual reunion.

<sup>35</sup> CW 8, para. 809.

<sup>36</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *On Dreams & Death*, p. xv.

<sup>37</sup> CW 13: 68.

<sup>38</sup> CW 8: 800.

<sup>39</sup> MDR, p.306.

<sup>40</sup> CW 18: 1706.

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<sup>41</sup> MDR, p.4.

<sup>42</sup> CW 11: 855.

<sup>43</sup> George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and The Eleusinian Mysteries*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 1961.

<sup>44</sup> CW 13: 68

<sup>45</sup> James Hillman, from *Lament of the Dead*, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Marie-Lousie von Franz, *On Dreams & Death*, translated by Emmaneul Xipolitas Kennedy and Vernon Brooks, Shambhala, London: 1987, p. ix.

<sup>47</sup> MDR, p, 311.

<sup>48</sup> MDR, p, 301.

<sup>49</sup> MDR, p, 325.

<sup>50</sup> A phrase used by John O'Donohue in his book *Anam Cara*, p.36.

<sup>51</sup> Accessed from the Internet [18 October, 2024] <https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-102/when-death-comes/>