

The Imagination: A Path to Personal and Planetary Individuation

by
Ciúin Doherty

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology

Pacifica Graduate Institute

9 March 2016

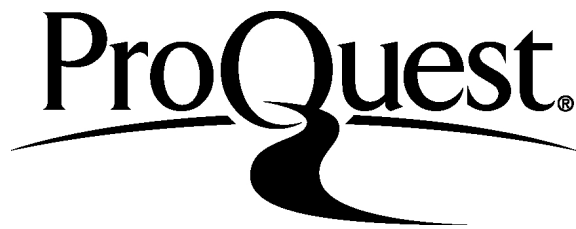
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Sukey Fontelieu, Ph.D., L.M.F.T.
Portfolio Thesis Advisor

On behalf of the thesis committee, I accept this paper as partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology.

Gioia Jacobson, M.A., L.M.F.T.
Research Associate

On behalf of the Counseling Psychology program, I accept this paper as partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology.

Jemma Elliot, M.A., L.M.F.T., L.P.C.C.
Director of Research

Abstract

The Imagination: A Path to Personal and Planetary Individuation

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This thesis draws on Jungian psychology, neuroscience, ecopsychology, and cosmology to explore the role of the imagination in facilitating individuation at personal and planetary levels. Employing the methodology of organic inquiry, it is proposed that our imaginative faculties be revisioned as extensions of an exquisitely creative universe. The potential of engaging these streams of creative energy through active imagination is explored, particularly their capacity to heal trauma by integrating dissociated neural nets into the mainstream flow of the brain. It is suggested that this movement toward internal psychic wholeness may be mirrored in the external world as we step into right brain, imaginal, embodied modes of being. The thesis investigates whether such a holistic lens may allow us to see through the destructive Western myth of humanity's separation from nature, enabling us to reconnect at a profound level, to our one and only life support system, the Earth.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express the deepest gratitude to my close friends, Amanda Espy, Lauren Davis, Allison Duplechain, Kate Savage, and Leo Marrs for their unwavering support during the writing of this thesis. A huge thank you to my advisor Sukey Fontelieu for her belief in me and to my editor Liza Gerberding for all her efforts. Special appreciation is offered to Julian Walker for introducing me to so many great authors in this field and for providing a safe space in which to traverse my interior landscapes. I would like to acknowledge my uncle, Fergal O'Doherty, for inspiring me to shoot for the stars, my sisters, Bríd and Clare Doherty, for keeping my spirits up with their humor, and my brother, Jo Pelowski, for his grounded wisdom. Finally, immense gratitude to my father, Muredach Doherty, for all the fantastic adventures over the years, and my mother, Micki Schloessingk, for her deep and enduring love.

Dedication

To our one and only home, the Earth, and to all the species with whom we share this wise
and ancient planet.

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Chapter I

Introduction

To be human is to be an extension of that original energy that emerged mysteriously at the beginning of time. This energy moving through me was just recently the sun, and the sun itself gets its energy from the fusion process of atoms, these atoms got their energy from near the birth of universe, so coursing through you and me now is the energy of the birth of the universe.

Swimme, 2007, 56:00

No wonder the currents of the imagination can, at times, feel wild, spontaneous, otherworldly. They are the reverberations of exploding stars coursing through our veins, calling us to be part of the creative impulse of the universe itself, beseeching us to give birth to that which is uniquely ours, demanding that we play our part in the evolution of the cosmos. Are we really going to ignore these primeval streams of energy for fear they may upset our orderly, predictable lives? If we are an extension of this ingenious universe, do we not have a duty to notice what is moving through us, to support that which is attempting to be born through us?

Imagination and the Cosmos

Archetypal psychologist and champion of the imagination James Hillman called for a more daring psychology: “I want theories that blow the mind. . . . The value of a psychological theory lies in its capacity to open the mind, take the top of your head off like a good poem or a voice in a song” (Hillman & Ventura, 1992, p. 69). This thesis is inspired by Hillman’s rallying cry and hopes to play some part in bringing forth ideas that stir the heart, thrill and terrify the intellect. It proposes that the imagination be revisioned

as an extension of the inherent creativity of the universe; that our listening to and dialoguing with this outpouring of energy is tantamount to engaging with the generative powers of the cosmos. Furthermore, this thesis suggests that such a dance may facilitate not only one's own individuation, but the evolution of the planet itself.

Wild Frontiers

What engages me about this topic is its wildness. I believe it has the potential to shock us out of our habitual ways of viewing ourselves and our role in the macrocosm.

As theologian Matthew Fox reminded us:

Life is wild. Nature is wild. We come from the wild—from the surging seas of the ocean, from the heat-blasting, hydrogen-exploding sun, from the supernovas bursting, from galaxies expanding, from the cooking fireball: We are made of wild stuff. Carbon, oxygen, sulphur, magnesium—we are very, very combustible. There is fire inside of us as well as water. There is revolution as well as peace. There is the familiar, and there is the shockingly new. (2004, p. 146)

How does the shockingly new arise? It bursts forth when we are catapulted outside the well-worn neural pathways of our familiar self-states, when the castle walls of the ego are breached by the eruption of a wild dream or captivating image.

On a personal level, I was called into this exploration by a number of animalistic dream figures who announced their arrival with claws unfurled and fangs bared. Inspired by Carl Jung's active imagination (Chodorow, 1997; Johnson, 1986), I summoned my courage and turned to face these demonic angels, opening myself to their snarling, otherworldly teachings. However, upon returning to more familiar planes, my inquiring mind demanded that I not take their wisdom for granted, but rather explore why these images felt so compelling, why I should accord them their own intelligence.

In the old scientific worldview, the cosmos was seen as a vast collection of matter, brought about by the purely random association of an infinite number of atomic

and subatomic particles (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 246). However, modern science is now turning this perspective on its head: “We’re enveloped not by a meaningless, mechanical, dead universe, we’re enveloped by a creative, astonishingly intelligent universe, one that expanded out of something smaller than a grain of sand to become galaxies, giraffes and hummingbirds” (Swimme, 2011, 8:00). So might not we Westerners presume that our dreaming and imaginative faculties, which just like us are birthed by this fantastically inventive universe, could also be infused with their own innate intelligence?

Developing a Mutually Enhancing Human-Earth Relationship

I believe this topic is worthy of exploration because to a large extent the imagination has been sidelined in mainstream psychology, in favor of ways of working that are more routinized, measurable, and predictable (Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Moore, 1989). Yet this is simply a hangover of the old mechanized model of the cosmos and the human being; a perspective that views the planet as a resource to be exploited, and the psyche as something to be manipulated and molded until it functions in ways deemed normal or correct. But why on earth would we want to be well adjusted to a society that is currently producing the greatest mass extinction in 65 million years? (Center for Biological Diversity, 2016, para. 1).

What is needed right now is a radical creativity if we are to individuate on personal levels and at the scale of humanity as a whole, both of which are critical to our becoming a life enhancing presence on this planet. We have done ourselves the gravest injustice by cloaking our psyches in identities that are infinitely too small, that constrict

and suffocate our imaginations, and that traumatically sever our connection to our one and only life support system, the Earth.

The Journey

While much has been written on the imagination from Jungian points of view (Chodorow, 1997; Johnson, 1986), we are only beginning to ask what modern science, particularly neuroscience (Badenoch, 2008; McGilchrist, 2011, 2012; Tarlow, 2012) and cosmology (Berry, 1988, 1999; Swimme, 2001, 2007, 2011) might have to contribute to this field. It is time to harness the staggering insights around the origins of the universe and the functioning of the brain to illuminate this most startling aspect of what it is to be human.

The research questions around which this thesis revolves are as follows: How might the imagination facilitate individuation on personal and planetary levels? In what ways might our imaginative faculties play a crucial role in overcoming not only the divisions within our individual psyches, but also the alienating sense of separation we often experience from the Earth?

There are many different ways to conceive of the imagination, but Jungian analyst Robert Johnson (1986) broke it down as follows: “The root of the word *imagination* is the latin word *imago*, meaning ‘image’; the imagination is the image-forming faculty of the mind” (p. 22). For clinical psychologist Terry Marks-Tarlow (2012), “The human imagination represents the pinnacle of evolution. Through the inner channels of the imagination we can see through the eyes of others, travel back to the past, anticipate future circumstances, visit imaginary places and create impossible worlds” (p. 149). *Individuation* is the term that analytical psychology founder Carl Jung (1940/1969) used

to describe the process of integrating the components of the psyche into a well functioning whole: “I have called this wholeness that transcends consciousness the ‘self.’ The goal of the individuation process is the synthesis of the self” (p. 164 [CW 9i, para. 278]). For Johnson (1986), individuation is “the lifelong process of becoming the complete human being we were born to be. Individuation is waking up to our total selves” (p. 11).

If, at the individual level, this integrative process is about becoming conscious of our total selves, then individuation at the planetary level could be imagined as our waking up to our inherent interconnectivity with, dependence upon, and responsibility toward the Earth and all species for whom this is home. This journey would involve overcoming the deeply embedded Western illusion of separateness of self (Watts, 1989, p. 80), recognizing that we are one part of a greater whole encompassing not only this planet but the entire cosmos beyond.

Research Methodology

The research method that I hope will coax this thesis into its fullest incarnation is organic inquiry. “This orientation validates the personal and a nonhierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched. Research is considered sacred and is entered into with an attitude of reverence. The researcher’s attitude is exploratory and oriented toward discovery” (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2013, p. 44). This methodology was chosen because the research topic arose through an inner imaginal dialogue with my own dream images. As such, it calls for an approach that honors my whole self: “Organic inquiry requires the participation not only of the intellect, but of spirit, body and the emotions” (Clements, Ettling, Jenett, & Shields, 1998, p. 121). The procedure that will be

undertaken is “a three step process of preparation, inspiration, and integration. The researcher visits states or sources beyond ego to gather data and then returns to cognitively integrate that data into the ongoing inquiry process” (Clements, 2004, p. 27). This point, “beyond ego,” seems particularly important to me. The ego has become master and commander in Western society, much to the detriment of our many other faculties of knowing. For me, it is time to listen to the imagination, to the “soft animal” of the body, opening ourselves to its guidance as we embark upon our personal and planetary journeys of individuation (Oliver, 1986, p. 14).

Ethical Concerns

My primary ethical concern is that the method of active imagination employed in this thesis may not be appropriate for everyone. For those who have experienced severe trauma, this imaginal process could set them adrift in a chaotic and overwhelming inner world (Kalsched, 2013, p. 13). For such individuals, it would be highly recommended to work with an experienced therapist who could support the regulation of their nervous systems as they gradually approach their interior landscapes.

A second concern is that I am a Caucasian male and as such am writing from this perspective. While I will attempt to remain cognizant of this bias, it will undoubtedly influence my approach and findings. Third, the majority of the sources that I draw from, while influenced by Eastern cultures, are of Western origin and as such will reflect Euro-American cultural values.

Setting Sail

In Chapter II, there will be a review of the maps laid down by those who have ventured into these seas before us, including early pioneers such as Carl Jung (Chodorow, 1997; Johnson, 1986), as well as current-day cartographers like Iain McGilchrist (2012) and Brian Swimme (2001, 2011). Guided by the stars above, we will sail into Chapter III, inviting the winds of the dream world and the currents of the imagination to converse with the tiller of consciousness. In the final chapter, I hope to glimpse the lands of individuation on the horizon, and will listen carefully for what they have to say about personal and planetary evolution at a time when much of the greater Earth community is on the brink of disappearing forever.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Since the beginning of time humans have been asking, what's going on, what is happening, and in particular, why am I here? . . . We know the Africans were asking these questions 100,000 years ago so we're jumping into that stream. . . . We'll never get a completely satisfactory answer but there is something important about asking the questions.

Swimme, 2011, 2:00

This exploration into the capacity of the imagination to ignite individuation at both personal and planetary levels joins this most ancient stream of human inquiry. As the old stories that gave meaning to our ancestors run out of steam in the face of modern scientific discoveries, humans are, as mythologist Joseph Campbell (2004) said, in “a moment of free fall into the future with no guidance” (p. xxiii). Can the imaginative faculties, informed by the latest discoveries in neuroscience and cosmology, give birth to a new myth that is enchanting enough to provide meaningful, inspiring frameworks for today's personal and planetary evolution?

In this chapter, a number of seemingly divergent streams of inquiry will be invited into conversation with one another in the hope that Jung's transcendent function can be invoked, whereby “a tension charged with energy . . . creates a living, third thing—not a logical still birth . . . but a movement out of the suspension between the opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being” (Jung, 1957/1960, p. 90 [*CW* 8, para. 189]). The ingredients that will be stirred into this alchemical melting pot are Jung's ideas around active imagination and individuation (Chodorow, 1997; Johnson, 1986),

Bonnie Badenoch (2008, 2011, 2013), Dan Siegel (2012), and Iain McGilchrist's (2012) groundbreaking work in neurobiology and neuroscience, Bessel van der Kolk (2014) and Peter Levine's (1997, 2008, 2010) investigations into trauma, and Thomas Berry (1988, 1999) and Brian Swimme's (2001, 2007, 2011) explorations in the fields of ecopsychology and cosmology. It is hoped that the interplay of the imaginal and the somatic, the cosmological and the ecological will set the stage for a new level of being, offering a glimpse of that magical *coniunctio*, "the marriage of heaven and earth" (Edinger, 1994, p. 220).

Active Imagination

According to Jung (1921/1971), imagination is the highest form of human potential: "Every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination. . . . Without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable" (p. 63 [*CW* 6, para. 93]). Jung's method of deeply engaging these imaginal realms he termed *active imagination*. This process involves loosening the rigidity of the ego and allowing the figures of the unconscious mind to surface (Jung, 1936/1969, p. 537 [*CW* 11, para. 875]).

First, an image is chosen, be it from a dream, fantasy, or some other part of one's inner world, and then it is given a special type of attention. In German, the word *betrachten* describes this way of looking at something whereby one impregnates it with one's attention (Chodorow, 1997, p. 7). "One concentrates upon it, and then finds that one has great difficulty in keeping the thing quiet, it gets restless, it shifts, something is added, or it multiplies itself; one fills it with living power and it becomes pregnant" (Jung, 1997, p. 661). It is this "conscious participation in the imaginal event, that

transforms it from mere passive fantasy to *Active Imagination*. . . . When we experience the images, we also directly experience the inner parts of ourselves that are clothed in the images” (Johnson, 1986, pp. 24-25). These inner parts could be imagined as personality fragments or subpersonalities, each with their own energy and a certain level of consciousness and purpose (Stein, 2013, pp. 44-50).

Individuation

The process of entering into a dialogue with the lesser known parts of ourselves was essential to Jung’s concept of individuation, which psychiatrist Anthony Storr (2013) described as “a striving toward unity in which divisions would be replaced by consistency, opposites equally balanced, consciousness in reciprocal relation with the unconscious” (p. 18). For Jung, this involved the weakening of ego domination as the persona, our public face, loosened its reins of control, allowing the emergence of those elements that had previously been relegated to the shadow, that part of the unconscious holding all that is considered unacceptable to the personal ideal (Stein, 2013, p. 106).

Through this process of integration,

the centre of gravity of the total personality shifts its position. It is then no longer in the ego, which is merely the centre of consciousness, but in the hypothetical point between conscious and unconscious. This new centre might be called the self. (Jung, 1929/1968, p. 45 [*CW* 13, para. 67])

The self is the “archetype of unity and totality” and for Jung represented the God within (Storr, 2013, p. 20). In pursuing self-realization, the individual becomes a channel through which “God seeks his goal” (Jung, 1957/1970, p. 305 [*CW* 10, para. 588]).

Neuroscience and the Divided Psyche

Modern neuroscience has confirmed Jung’s view that the psyche is composed of multiple semiautonomous subpersonalities (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 280). “From our [split

brain] studies the new idea emerges that there are literally several selves, and they do not necessarily ‘converse’ with each other internally” (Gazzaniga, 1985, p. 346). This inner community develops from the first days of life: “Our brains start out as a sea of neurons with all the genetic possibilities within, but our neurons in the limbic and the neocortical systems aren’t particularly connected when we’re born” (Badenoch, 2013, p. 12). Neural wiring patterns develop through our earliest relationships as the brain’s mirror neurons and resonance circuitry allow us to feel and internalize the inner states of our caregivers (p. 7). Interestingly, Badenoch (2013) argued we do not simply embody the subjective states of the other person, we also encode the part of us that is in relationship to them (p. 7). As adults, we are left with a “whole range of internal pairs inside us that we move through, depending on how our outer environment and inner environment brings them to the surface” (p. 8).

Some such pairs may be beneficial, for example a playful, imaginative father and a delighted, joyful child. However, others may prove harmful, such as a critical, angry mother, and a shamed, frightened youngster. Such engrained dysfunctional states of mind, particularly when associated with trauma, often fail to integrate with the flow of the brain system’s more complex states (Siegel, 2012, pp. 344-346). Neurobiologist Daniel Siegel (2012) echoed Jung when he argued that integrating such semiautonomous states of mind “may be essential to the acquisition of well-being” (p. 348).

Trauma, a Barrier to Individuation

The term *trauma* refers to “experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless” (Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice, 2015, para. 1). Trauma, along with engrained

dysfunctional states of mind, is one of the major obstacles to individuation because overwhelming experiences tend to be dissociated, causing fragmentation of the inner world (Kalsched, 2013, p. 159). This process of disintegration occurs when, faced with an overpowering experience, the parasympathetic nervous system spikes, putting the body into fight or flight. In this state of hyperarousal, blood flows to the limbs in readiness for self-defense, shutting down the higher brain and severely limiting its capacity to process what is occurring. Instead, the embodied and emotional experiences of the moment pass through the thalamus and are stored in a raw, unprocessed form, directly in the hippocampus (Shroder, 2014, para. 26). These split-off emotions and physical sensations are then held outside the mainstream flow of the brain in dissociated neural nets (Badenoch, 2008, p. 206). Due to the fact that the brain operates as a pattern recognition system, if something resembling the original fragmented experience, such as a sight, sound, smell, or tone of voice comes into consciousness, it may trigger that original dissociated neural net, causing the individual to fall into an implicit well of old fear, pain, anger, or overwhelm (pp. 24-25).

Stored in the Body

Somatic psychologist Peter Levine (2008) showed that trauma is stored not only in dissociated neural nets within the brain but that it simultaneously lives on in the body. Through his study of wild prey animals, he noticed that although they are routinely threatened with death by predators, they are rarely traumatized (p. 25). Levine observed that impalas who survived being attacked by cheetahs would tremble convulsively and flail their limbs seemingly at random before bounding off to join the herd as though nothing unusual had happened. Through slowing down this footage, he noticed that the

“seemingly random leg gyrations were actually coordinated running movements. It is as though the animal completes its escape” (p. 26). Not only were the impalas completing the action that was interrupted at the time of the attack, but through this trembling and simulated running they were allowing the massive build-up of stress hormones to be released. Unfortunately, human beings often get stuck in the immobility response following trauma. Without a means to discharge excess cortisol and adrenaline, the brain continues to release these fight or flight hormones, leaving individuals feeling as though they are under continuous threat long after the danger has passed (Levine, 2008).

To work with trauma, Levine (1997) developed Somatic Experiencing, a method that supports individuals to somatically complete the action they could not complete at the time of the trauma. Such completion may be achieved through, for example, punching, kicking, or simulated running motions (p. 152). In this way, the residual survival energy can be discharged, allowing the individual to move out of a frozen state and begin to feel reconnected to life, others, and self: “As we resolve our traumas, we discover missing parts of our beings, those that make us feel whole and complete” (Levine, 2008, p. 80).

The Balance of Power in the Brain

In addition to the process of integrating self states and working with trauma as prerequisites to individuation, psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist (2012) argued that if we are to achieve well-being at individual, societal, and planetary levels we must also pay attention to the balance of power between the two hemispheres of the brain (pp. 428-462). Although the popularized idea that the left brain handles logic while the right brain does creativity is greatly oversimplified, as in fact both sides are profoundly involved in

each function, there are, nonetheless, very real differences in the perspectives on reality offered by the two hemispheres (McGilchrist, 2011, 3:00).

To show how the different hemispherical worldviews evolved, McGilchrist (2011) cited the example of a bird feeding on seeds scattered amongst grit and pebbles. In order to locate the seed, the bird employs the left hemisphere's very narrowly focused, precise type of attention, one that knows in advance what it is looking for. Meanwhile, the right hemisphere looks out with precisely the opposite type of attention, seeking the broadest possible view as it scans the horizon for potential predators, friends, or whatever else is going on, with no presuppositions as to what it may find (5:00). Thus, the right hemisphere has the capacity to see the whole, while the left hemisphere, through its lens of division and separation, sees an agglomerate of parts (McGilchrist, 2012, p. 55). This makes the left hemisphere incredibly skilled when it comes to manipulating and using the world: "The left hemisphere's principal concern is utility. It is interested in what it has made, and in the world as a resource to be used" (p. 55). In addition, the left codes for the nonliving while the right codes for the living, presenting inanimate and animate views of the world respectively (p. 57).

Due to the right hemisphere's openness to the interconnectedness of things, it is the mediator of empathetic identification (McGilchrist, 2012, p. 57). In the absence of this hemisphere, "social intercourse is conducted with a blanket disregard to the feelings, wishes, needs and expectations of others" (Schutz, as cited in McGilchrist, 2012, p. 58). The right side is more intimately connected with the limbic system, which is involved in the experience of emotions of all kinds (pp. 57-58). It is also the center of the embodied self and is responsible for "our sense of the body as something we live . . . the phase of

intersection between ourselves and the world at large” (p. 67). For the left hemisphere on the other hand, the body is something from which we are relatively detached—it is simply another thing in the world, it is devitalized, a mere assemblage of parts (p. 67).

A Skewed Perspective on the World

McGilchrist (2011) argued that for human beings to thrive it is vital to incorporate the very different perspectives offered by each hemisphere. However, since the Enlightenment we in the West have come to favor the take on the world offered by the left prefrontal cortex due to its capacity to provide a simplified, decontextualized, explicit world in which things are known, fixed, isolated, and therefore available for manipulation. By contrast, the right hemisphere’s ever-changing, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, holistic, yet never fully graspable nor perfectly known vision has been pushed to the sidelines (McGilchrist, 2011, 7:00). Whilst this left-shift has led to great increases in material well-being, we have not seen corresponding increases in happiness. In fact, over the past 25 years, levels of life satisfaction in the US have actually declined despite an enormous increase in prosperity (McGilchrist, 2012, p. 434). On an even more worrying note, the left hemisphere’s suppression of the right side’s empathic circuitry and sense of interconnection with an animated planet, has led to the destruction of the natural world on a scale that is truly terrifying (p. 434).

An Autistic Relationship With Nature

Ecopsychologist Thomas Berry (1988) appeared to be pointing to this same phenomenon of profound human/ecological disconnection when he described our relationship to nature and the planet as autistic: “Even when we recognize our intimacy . . . with all forms of existence about us, we cannot speak to those forms. We have

forgotten the language needed for such communication” (p. 16). For Berry, our autistic situation is driven not by any kind of rational process, but rather by a “distorted dream experience” whereby our driving principle of never-ending progress and limitless economic growth is “pure dream vision in its origin and objectives” (p. 205). This myth has left us in a position of ultimate power over the survival of our planet’s basic life support systems (p. 19). He argued that we desperately need to awaken from this cultural pathology, radically reimagining ourselves and our relationship to the planet if we are to have any hope of safeguarding the future of the greater Earth community (p. 205).

The Human as a Mode of Being in the Universe

Berry (1988) suggested that the key to this radical revisioning lies in our recognition that “the human is less a being on the Earth or in the universe than a dimension of the Earth and indeed of the universe itself” (p. 195). Cosmologist Brian Swimme (2007) expanded on this concept when he argued that in order to truly understand who we are as human beings, we have to see ourselves from a cosmological point of view:

In terms of bodies, the atoms we are composed of were created by the stars. These are actual events, actual exploding stars, and the remnants of that are now in the form of my flesh and brain. I’m these atoms speaking. So I’m the atoms from the beginning of time and the exploding stars, the energy from the beginning of time and it’s all here now speaking. That’s what it means to be present, it’s like the universe as a whole has pressed into this moment. (35:00)

Furthermore, the universe in which we are enveloped is neither dead, nor mechanical; rather it is profoundly creative and astonishingly intelligent:

In the modern period we use the term intelligent to describe humans and maybe God but not the universe, not the Earth. That was just stuff, it was resources, it wasn’t intelligent. Say you had a piece of matter smaller than my hand and it expanded out to become universes and hummingbirds, does that qualify as

intelligent? Or maybe we should use intelligent for the little humans who haven't yet figured out how the universe did that? (Swimme, 2011, 7:00)

The universe, since the very beginning, has been infused with a mysterious self-organizing power (Swimme & Berry, 1992, p. 238). Somehow it knew the exact rate at which it had to grow for life to blossom. Had its expansion been one trillionth of one trillionth of one percent slower it would have collapsed into a massive black hole. On the other hand, if the expansion had been one trillionth of one trillionth of one percent faster it would have been too rapid for the galaxies, stars, and planets to form and it would simply have diffused into dust (Swimme, 2002, para. 23).

For Berry (1988), as a dimension of a truly ingenious universe, humans can tap into this ultimate source for guidance on the most pressing issues facing our species and the Earth community today (p. 195). This wisdom makes itself known through “the spontaneities within us, spontaneities that come from an abyss of energy and a capacity for intelligible order of which we have only the faintest glimmer in our conscious awareness” (p. 195). Berry suggested that these primal movements of energy speak to us in a transrational manner via nonordinary states of consciousness such as the revelatory dream experience (p. 201).

To truly hear the spontaneities within requires the development of what Swimme (2001) termed “cosmic sensitivity” (p. 91). As one of the primordial powers of the universe, cosmic sensitivity allows us to deeply take in reality. Just as water absorbs minerals and draws them into the life of plants, we must learn to absorb the world. This profound process of letting the cosmos in “means dissolving the universe, absorbing it into your new self” (p. 88). For example, as we look at the moon we can simply register an image of the moon or we can actually absorb it (p. 91). If we are practicing absorption,

then the photons of light from the moon will be interacting with the elementary particles in the body, altering our quantum state and bringing us into a new state of being, one in which our “totality is permeated with the moon’s presence” (p. 92). However, if we have failed to develop our cosmic sensitivity then the moon cannot truly show itself and we in turn are unable to taste its riches (p. 93). In this way, hardened minds may be incapable of sensing the spontaneities of the natural world resonating inside their being, making it impossible to either savor nature’s breathtaking splendor or feel its grief as ancient forests are clear-cut, rivers poisoned, and oceans acidified.

The Destruction of the Natural World

Human activity is currently causing species to disappear at what is estimated to be 1000 to 10,000 times the natural rate of extinction (Chivian & Bernstein, 2008). If we are to safeguard the biodiversity of this planet, we must develop not only cosmic sensitivity, but also the capacity to embrace our own creative potential. As Swimme (2001) emphasized, “The universe has unfolded to this point. It has poured into you the creative powers necessary for its further development. . . . For the unfolding universe your creativity is as essential as the creativity inherent in the fireball” (p. 29). Right now our creativity is being called upon to bring forth a new vision, a fresh story that recognizes our deep interconnection with and total dependence upon the health of the entire Earth community (p. 34).

It is this type of encompassing narrative that the great mythologist Joseph Campbell (1988) called for shortly before his death: “The only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet, and everybody on it” (p. 41). For Berry (1988),

our recent scientific discovery that every person, every species, and every part of the cosmos share one common ancestry in the original fireball or big bang “when recounted as a story, takes on the role formerly fulfilled by the mystic stories of creation. . . . Science has given us a new revelatory experience. It is now giving us a new intimacy with the Earth” (p. 18).

Could it be that science is providing us with the myth we so desperately need for the next stage of our personal and collective evolution? This pressing question is considered in the next chapter alongside an investigation into my own experience of “the spontaneities of the universe” (Berry, 1988, p. 195) arising in me through a number of dream images and active imaginations. The capacity of these imaginal journeys to facilitate my own individuation through the reimagining of old narratives and the integration of dissociated neural nets will also be explored. If the imagination does indeed allow the overcoming of intrapsychic divisions, could it also heal the destructive psychic split between humanity and the Earth?

Chapter III

Findings and Clinical Applications

The world is always larger, more intense, and stranger than our best thought will ever reach. And that's the mystery of poetry, you know, poetry tries to draw alongside the mystery as it's emerging and somehow bring it into presence and into birth.

O'Donohue, 2015, 15:00

Dreams and the imagination, like the world itself, often appear so intense and strange that we may be inclined to turn away in confusion or overwhelm. In this chapter however, I will follow the poets' lead in attempting to draw alongside their enigmatic nature, giving them the space to speak in their own native tongue. Through this process of listening into the mystery, I hope to explore the main question of this thesis, namely: How might our imaginative faculties facilitate individuation at both personal and planetary levels? For me, this is a crucial line of inquiry, as it seems that in our left hemisphere-dominated Western world, we are facing a crippling poverty of imagination with regard to our individual identities and our role in the cosmos. I am going to suggest that our imaginal capacities are like shooting stars blazing brilliantly in the night sky of our minds, trailing the startling creativity, vision, and enchantment upon which our personal and planetary evolution depends.

In this chapter, Jung's method of active imagination will be employed in order to investigate a number of my own dream images. Thereafter, I will explore whether this dialoguing with the unconscious may facilitate individuation through two key processes: Firstly, via its potential to integrate dissociated neural nets within the brain, and secondly

as an imaginal version of Levine's (1997) method of somatic experiencing (p. 152). In addition, the right hemisphere perspective necessitated by active imagination will be analyzed with particular attention paid to the implications of taking in oneself, others, and the world through this holistic lens. Lastly, the potential impact of these processes on the ways in which we imagine humanity and our role here on Earth will be drawn out.

The Great Escape

The first active imagination to be explored centers on the dream image of a tiger. As a child, the tiger was my favorite animal; its stripes were scrawled all over the margins of my school books and I was frequently visited by this magnificent creature in my dreams. I loved its ferocity, beauty, and strength. However, as I grew up this old companion was left behind, gradually disappearing into the mists of time. Having lain dormant for 30 years, when I began researching topics for this thesis, the tiger erupted once more in my dream life.

I decided to invite this powerful visitor into conversation with my waking psyche whilst taking a series of yoga classes. Held in this meditative, embodied, right-brain space, I allowed my mind to freely wander and found myself transported back to a difficult childhood memory. Once again, I was alone on the deck of a huge ferry, waving to the distant figure of my mother on the dock below. We were to be separated for the duration of the school term, and as was the pattern at each of these separations, my heart was breaking anew. Yet, in this active imagination, in this state of moving reverie, the all-too-familiar story began to shift. Rather than sailing away in a state of powerlessness and despair, watching my mother recede further and further into the distance, a new figure approached. It was the tiger from my dream. He was huge and majestic, and

invited me to jump onto his back. Straddling this fearsome beast, my fingers clutching his thick coat, I held on with amazement as we bounded back down the gangplank, leaping over the many officials trying to block our progress. With one final spring he vaulted the fence and set me down on the dock, directly into the arms of my mother.

Reimagining the Story

The particularly healing element of this active imagination is that, in a sense, it rewrote the story of a painful, recurring episode in my childhood. Through joining with this powerful animal, I shifted from a state of incapacitation into a sense of being able to take decisive actions to determine my fate. As Levine (1997) showed, overwhelming experiences leave long-lasting scars when we are unable to act on our body's fight or flight response, by kicking, punching, or fleeing the perceived danger (pp. 95-97). In these cases, the brain continues to excrete stress chemicals long after the threat has passed (p. 150). On the other hand, if the body is allowed to exercise its natural self-defense system, major ordeals can be survived without long-lasting effects. As an example, only 5% of those who survived the 9/11 attacks in New York City went on to experience PTSD symptoms (Babbel, 2011, para. 1). Trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk (2014) suggested this was due to the fact that the survivors had been able to discharge the stress hormones in their bodies by running from the disaster, an act that simultaneously provided them with a powerful sense of self-efficacy (p. 54).

My experience is that during active imagination the psyche can guide us to those dissociated neural nets holding memories of moments when we were powerless to fight or flee from painful events. However, rather than simply reexperiencing these split-off memories in their original overwhelming form, provided we keep the nervous system in a

regulated state, our imaginative, embodied mind can, seemingly of its own volition, rewrite the ending. This allows us to come out of the experience in a stronger position, be it through successfully fighting, fleeing or, as in my case, calling in the assistance of a powerful other.

To me, this speaks to the inherent wisdom of the psyche—it knows what to do if we can provide it with the right healing space. When we take a cosmological perspective, is this really any wonder? After all, as Swimme and Berry (1992) argued, we are part of an astonishingly intelligent universe that emerges according to its own self-organizing principles, producing ever greater variety and intensity in its modes of psychic expression (p. 336). The incredible fact of the matter is that “if you let hydrogen gas alone for 13 billion years it will become giraffes, rose bushes and human beings” (Swimme, as cited in Fox, 2004, p. 40). Therefore, does it not make sense that our unconscious, our dreams, and our imagination, all of which emerged, like everything else in the universe, from a “single multiform energetic unfolding of matter, mind, intelligence and life” might have their own type of innate brilliance? (Swimme, 2001, p. 28).

The Sidelining of the Imagination

If active imagination has this powerful capacity not only to put us in touch with the parts of ourselves that need healing, but then to reimagine difficult memories, why does it remain a relatively fringe pursuit within psychology as a whole? My sense is that in a left hemisphere-dominated world, it is feared for its unpredictability, its spontaneity; it is simply too dangerous, wild, and alive, too much like Nature herself. The Irish poet John O'Donohue (2007) reflected that, “The theologians have domesticated God, yet there is a wonderful danger to God that we have totally forgotten . . . one of our major

tasks is to make God dangerous again” (42:00). In a similar vein, I think that much of psychology has been co-opted by the left brain’s determination to eradicate uncertainty. To this goal it has attempted to domesticate the psyche, to rid it of its wildness, yet in so doing has simultaneously fenced in its vitality, dulled its radiant beauty, dammed its emergent poetry. If we need God to be dangerous again, so too we need the psyche to be dangerous, even perilous once more, for therein lies its life force. As the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke reminded us,

Works of art always spring from those who have faced the danger, gone to the very end of an experience, to the point beyond which no human being can go. The further one dares to go, the more decent, the more personal, the more unique a life becomes. (As cited in Fox, 2004, p. 72)

Thus, if we are to create art out of our lives, if we are to fulfill our own unique destinies, we must face the unfamiliar, not flee from it. Active imagination’s stepping into conversation with unexplored inner landscapes becomes a rebellious, even revolutionary move in a society that favors predictability over spontaneity, control over creativity.

Call of the Wild

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (Jung, 1954/1968, pp. 265-266 [*CW* 13, para. 335]). For Jung, an essential component of individuation was the incorporation of the shadow, that part of the unconscious where everything disowned festers. When we deny our shadow, not only does it emerge in our complexes, but it also appears in our dreams, often in the form of nightmare figures.

I recently had just such a visitation. In the dream I was a child and was told that a rat was hiding in the front room. While two men went in to try and kill the rat, I was

handed a gun and told, should the rodent come near me, I must shoot it. To my horror, I heard a scratching under the floorboards and was shocked to glimpse the tail and haunches of the rat as it disappeared behind a box. Emerging from its hiding place, the animal began to morph into a young woman, crawling toward me on her hands and knees. She had a wild look in her eyes, her greasy, long hair dragged on the ground, and she appeared utterly desperate. In a moment of bewildered shock and fear, I raised the gun and shot her. While she crumpled, she did not die, but continued to drag herself towards me.

The Neurobiology of Nightmare Figures

Interestingly, this dream mirrors an episode from my childhood when a rat really was trapped in the front room of our old terraced house. Is it possible that the nightmare figure of the rat/desperate girl represents, in part, the memory of this event which may not have been sufficiently processed? As psychotherapist Bonnie Badenoch (2011) explained,

Our minds can become fragmented along different kinds of fault lines when painful or frightening experiences are not met with repairing attunement and care. These shards of experience remain separate from the flow of integrating energy and information in the brain, and because they are so disconnected from possibly mediating input, they are easily triggered by an internal or external reminder. (p. 48)

However, because our brains also have an inbuilt drive toward integration, such dissociated neural nets will seek opportunities to escape their limbic prison through being re-remembered in warmer, more compassionate environments. Reexperiencing the original memory in a safe space modifies its felt sense, softening its ragged edges as it becomes reintegrated into the mainstream flow of the brain (Badenoch, 2008, pp. 206-218).

This type of knitting together of dissociated neural networks also occurs during sleep and very possibly while we dream (Mason et al., 2007). Could the appearance of the rat/desperate girl in my dream life have been my sleeping brain's own attempt at neural integration? If this dream figure were to be imagined as a dissociated self state, then which aspects of me might she represent? Considering these questions brought to mind Johnson's (1986) statement that "ideas and images should enter into your emotions, your muscle fibers, the cells of your body. It takes a physical act. When it registers physically it also registers at the deepest levels of your psyche" (pp. 100-101).

Living the Image

Seeking to enter into a flesh-and-blood relationship with the mysterious visitor, I decided to embody the rat-girl during a series of authentic movement classes. As I crawled along the floor, hair kissing the ground and wild eyes burning, waves of emotion, intuitions, and insights tumbled into consciousness. Initially, she seemed to be a desperate spokeswoman for my anima or feminine side, an abandoned, emaciated figure starved of nurturance, understanding, and love. She appeared to be calling attention to those feminine aspects of myself which I had cut off, namely my deep feeling and intuitive sides, and she was crying out for help.

Considering the dream figure from an archetypal perspective, I wondered whether, having morphed out of a rat, that most earthy of creatures, she was also somehow speaking on behalf of the planet? Could her cries have originated not only from my own feminine, animal body, but also from the body of the Earth, which is under such a terrible assault in our modern world? According to ecopsychologists Joanna Macy and Molly Brown (2014),

We are not closed off from the world, but are integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When that body is traumatized, we sense that trauma, too. When it falters and sickens, we feel its pain, whether we pay attention to it or not. (p. 27)

It seems that acknowledging the suffering of my feminine, feeling side actually allowed me to sense my deep dismay at the manner in which we are currently abusing the planet. For when we are cut off from our own emotional, animal body, we will be separated from that larger container in which we are housed, namely the Earth itself. Yet, my experience is that once we begin to welcome back, feel, and even bring love to our own dissociated selves, it becomes impossible for us to ignore any longer the suffering of the greater planetary body of which we are a part.

From Desperation to a Wild, Grounded Strength

Over the course of several months, as I invited the rat-girl dream image into an embrace with the nurturing figures of my inner world, I felt her gradually calm and shift into a more regulated neurobiological state. After taking in sufficient nourishment from this warm atmosphere she rose up once more, wild and fierce, yet also beautiful, infused with a new, grounded strength. Embodying this more powerful version of the dream figure, I began to tap into the positive aspects of her raw, spontaneous, Earth-bound energy. No longer the bedraggled, anorexic girl, she had become a force of nature, a wild, untamed source of original energy.

Joining forces with the tiger of my childhood dreams, she is heralding a new life force within me, a vitality that refuses to be shackled by the past, is not afraid to break the rules, and is determined to step fully into the generative matrix. This new current inside needs the tiger's fangs and supple, rippling strength; it also requires the wild woman's ability to crawl close to the ground, to flash her dagger eyes, and to snarl her demands.

This movement is aligned with the basic powers of the cosmos, streams of energy which are both destructive as well as life giving, finding their greatest creativity in times of chaos and upheaval.

From Dictatorship to Democracy

Considering my experiences in the authentic movement class from a neurobiological point of view, something quite surprising comes up. The insights and energy that emerged originated from my embodiment of the image, allowing myself to be moved by the dream figure, and listening to what surfaced as my physical being and imagination were guided in novel ways.

This fits with the new picture that is emerging from neuroscience around how the human organism actually functions. Far from the old framework of the ego sitting on high, issuing dictates from the control and command center of the head, the “I think therefore I am model,” according to Levine (2010), our systems actually operate from a bottom-up perspective as messages are sent from the most primitive parts of the brain to the most complex (p. 121). Literally thousands of physical sensations, feelings, and perceptions feed upwards to create our thoughts, the stories we tell ourselves, and the narratives of our lives. In fact, the ratio of communication from the gut brain to the head brain is 7-1 (p. 122). This is a profoundly democratic system in which the masses inform and direct the movement of the larger organism. It also gives credence to the old wisdom of “listening to your gut” or “making a gut decision.” I wonder to what extent we allow our belly brains to inform us about our species’ current relationship to the larger Earth community? Are we permitting the wisdom of our bodies to feed into our decisions

regarding the trajectory of humanity? Or are we running so fast that we cannot even sense the upwellings from these nonverbal parts of ourselves?

Engaging the Right Hemisphere, Embodied Self

The intelligence of my physical self only became available when I consciously shifted into a right brain mode of being through engaging in meditative, imaginative movement. As McGilchrist (2012) emphasized, the right hemisphere is the center of the embodied self: “It is not a representation (as it would be if it were in the left hemisphere) . . . but a living image, intimately linked to activity in the world—an essentially affective experience” (p. 66). As a living image held in the right brain, my body and its associated affects were not static, but rather were allowed to morph and transform, ultimately shifting from a place of grief and desperation, to a new sense of grounded strength and raw energy. Such transmutation was possible because the right hemisphere, unlike the left, does not create static models of the world, but rather allows reality, both inner and outer, to be in a state of ever-changing flux. In addition, the right brain processes newness. It is here that novel experience is tasted, felt, mulled over, and incorporated into the system (p. 164).

Cosmic Sensitivity in a Left-Shifted World

In a society that is becoming increasingly left hemisphere dominated, such embodied, playful, imaginal investigations may be viewed with suspicion, fear, or even scorn. From the left brain’s point of view, the body, far from being a source of wisdom, has become a thing, a mechanism that we possess, a resource for us to use, manipulate, and perfect (McGilchrist, 2012, pp. 438-439). Furthermore, “The left hemisphere’s assault on our embodied nature is not just an assault on our bodies, but on the embodied

nature of the world around us” (p. 440). For many of us, unable to appreciate that our bodies have their own intelligence, we cannot even conceive that the Earth, that greater body of which we are a part, may also house its own type of wisdom. Instead, as we see our piece of nature, our physical selves, as a resource to be shaped and governed, so too we view the natural world that surrounds us as an asset to be exploited.

In this left-shifted state, what chance do we have of embodying the power of cosmic sensitivity, that capacity to absorb the world around us and dissolve it within, allowing us to emerge in a new state of being? (Swimme, 2001, pp. 87-92). In this utilitarian mindset, what is the likelihood that we will be able to overcome our autistic relationship to nature, slowing down enough to hear the guidance of the planet as it arises through the spontaneities within us, through our bodily sensations, intuitions, and dreams? (Berry, 1988, pp. 195-201). Without developing our capacity for right hemisphere, embodied, holistic knowing, we will have great difficulty individuating at either personal or collective levels, and our disconnected, emotionally dissociated destruction of the planet will likely continue. On the other hand, I believe that if we take on practices that value and engage our right hemispheres, bringing our affective, empathetic, and imaginal circuitry online, allowing us to see the whole interconnected, complex big picture, we will be laying the foundations for radical evolution at personal and planetary levels.

Feeling the Pain of the World

While there are many practices that support this right-shift, such as yoga, meditation, martial arts, and relational therapy, to name but a few, the discipline that guided me in this endeavor was active imagination. This practice, by engaging my embodied, intuitive mind, bypassed my left hemisphere's defenses against feeling, enabling old affects that had been festering in my body to come into conscious awareness. The upwelling of new energy was unleashed only after I had allowed myself to deeply experience the pain of my childhood self, the grief of those wilder, feeling parts which I had repressed in order to win the love and approval of others.

Could the same principle apply on a planetary level? Just as the desperate, wild girl of my dream needed soothing and nurturance, in what ways is the greater Earth community calling out for our caring and compassion? Dare we feel the deep well of grief that may arise when we step off the hamster wheel of modern life and open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the thuds of ancient forests as they hit the parched soil below, to the cries of our ancestors, the orangutans, as their homes go up in flames, to the last suffocating gasps of sea life no longer able to withstand the toxification of our oceans?

Contemplating the enormity of this destruction can feel profoundly overwhelming. However, the alternative is that just like trauma survivors who must numb themselves to their bodies in an effort to contain their ever-present fear of annihilation, we must continue to dissociate ourselves from that larger body upon which we live, the Earth. If we are to have any hope of achieving wholeness as individuals, and of redirecting our profoundly damaging planetary course, we must allow ourselves to feel the tremendous grief of the whole situation, for herein lies the creativity that is being

demanded at a scale never before imagined in human history. If we can truly hold the planet's immense suffering in our hearts and minds, we may find, as occurred with the desperate girl from my dream, that humanity becomes infused with a new energy, a novel source of strength, inspiration, and creativity, the very qualities that are required if we are to step into a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship.

Playing God

For the first time in this planet's history, biological evolution is being completely overwhelmed by cultural evolution: "Our mind and hands represent a new source of 'newness,' putting at Nature's disposal a fundamentally new mechanism of evolution" (Russell, as cited in Fox, 2004, p. 29). Our creativity is so powerful and so unprecedented that whether we wish to admit it or not we are literally playing God. Yet, in large part we appear to be operating as the gods of destruction. Humanity's most pressing task right now is to wrestle our creativity back from its current demonic manifestation (Fox, 2004, p. 10).

According to Fox (2004), if used for wise and compassionate purposes, creativity can be our very highest calling; "Creating is our imitating of Divinity. We are here to imitate Divinity. Nothing less. . . . But we do not generate alone, we generate in communion with the Divine who dwells and generates within us" (p. 72). These profound statements feel true to me. In those moments when I sense myself to be engaging with deep streams of creativity, there is an impression of timelessness and spaciousness, a feeling of encountering the sacred.

Yet who or what is this divine force? The 14th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart called God a "nameless nothingness" and a source of "pure generation" (Eckhart,

as cited in Fox, 2004, p. 72). Interestingly, these images of the Divine have an uncanny similarity to our current understanding of the origins of the universe. In the language of physics, quantum fluctuation refers to the manner in which elementary particles fluctuate in and out of existence. “Particles boil into existence out of sheer emptiness . . . there was no fireball, then the fireball erupted . . . all that has existence erupted out of nothing” (Swimme, 2001, p. 37). This seems extraordinary, yet our current scientific story is that the universe surged out of nothingness and then set about the work of creativity in the most spectacular fashion.

So, if in Fox’s (2004) words, we are here to imitate Divinity, then our role could be imagined as one of embodying this empty realm, being the space through which creativity can pour into existence. The processes of clearing the mind and relaxing the ego prior to engaging in active imagination seem to be oriented toward achieving this very sense of emptiness. Thus through active imagination, are we not setting the stage for our imitation of Divinity, clearing the way for our union with the Divine? Via this process of creating a space of pure potentiality, could it be said that we are imitating the birth of the universe? Does not this quivering realm of no-thing-ness from which the flamboyant forms of our imagination burst forth, bear a striking resemblance to the void out of which the first protons boiled into existence? For me, the answer to all three questions is a resounding yes. It appears that our making space for and dialoguing with the imagination is tantamount to both merging with the Divine and joining with the very emergence of the universe itself. If we are, as Swimme (2007) argued, the universe birthing itself in this very moment, then does it not behoove us to model our creating on

that first grand act of creation, the flaring forth of the original fireball out of the primordial void? (57:00).

In my view, engaging with our imagination in the manner of the Big Bang, through a process of emptying, letting go, and allowing an upsurging from the nothingness of our being, is the pathway to wrestling our creativity back from its current demonic manifestations. When we dance with imagination in this primeval way, we are allowing a right brain, holistic, interconnected perspective to emerge; we are looking through a lens that can see our own multifaceted psyche, and the world itself, as animated, interdependent, and even divine. Operating from this “I/thou” position, it becomes near impossible for us to keep our hearts closed to the ongoing destruction of this sacred planet (Buber, 2010).

In the process of engaging the right brain through active imagination, not only does the world show up as one interdependent whole, but we get to join the greater creative matrix, to flow with, rather than against, the cosmic currents of generativity. In this micro-macro alignment, we get to sync up our own imaginations with the vast emergent project of which we are one small element. Moving with the universe, it is as though we ride the wave of evolution, complementing and enhancing the majestic unfolding of which we are a part, rather than exhausting ourselves and everything else in our vain attempts to control it.

The Timeless Flow

In order to truly feel into how the world shows up through the imaginative right brain, it seems important to take into consideration the firsthand experience of neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor (2009). In 1996, she suffered a massive stroke that shut

down her left cortical hemisphere, leaving her to experience herself and the world solely through the lens of her right brain. In the silence that followed the cessation of activity in her left hemisphere's language centers, the dividing, critical internal dialogue that had hitherto been her constant companion evaporated. In its place she was flooded with a deep sense of inner unity, peace, love, joy, and compassion (p. 133). There was an accompanying decrease in activity in the orientation association area, also located on the left side of the brain, which allows us to identify the limits of our physical body.

I no longer perceived myself as a single, a solid, an entity with boundaries that separated me from the entities around me. I understood that at the most elementary level I am fluid. Of course I am a fluid! Everything around us, about us, among us, within us, is made up of molecules and atoms vibrating in space. . . . My left hemisphere had been trained to perceive myself as a solid, separate from others. Now released from that restrictive circuitry, my right hemisphere relished in its attachment to the eternal flow. (p. 69)

Taylor's uninhibited right hemisphere allowed her to sense her very real energetic oneness with everything in the universe (p. 69). This seems to bear significant similarity to Jung's (1961/1963) experience of the Self:

At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the plashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. (pp. 225-226)

It appears likely that in such moments Jung was seeing the world primarily through his right cortical hemisphere, that portal through which we can recognize the vast web of interconnections linking us to every other element of the universe.

Cultivating this holistic lens seems to me an absolute prerequisite to our individuation at planetary levels, to our global transition to a life-sustaining society. Through developing right-brain modes of perception, we begin to see through the Western myth that we are a collection of separate selves, encased in isolated brains,

wandering about in discrete bodies, in competition with one another, and at war with other species and the planet. Instead, we perceive the reality that we are neither separate from nor transcendent to nature, but rather, not only are we a part of nature, we are nature. Therefore, what we do to the natural world, we do to ourselves. We are simply another bud on a branch of the tree that is this Earth, and as we devastate the biosphere without, so too we maul the ecosystem within. Conversely, by taking steps to reclaim the soils of the Earth, we begin to reconstitute the ground of our being; as we learn to cherish the forests without, so too we nourish the tender shoots within; and as we undam the mighty rivers, we unleash the psychic vitality we so desperately seek.

Yet, for all its wonderful capacities, the right brain cannot go it alone. What is called for is integration, with the powerful left hemisphere operating in service of the wisdom of the right (McGilchrist, 2012, pp. 428-460). As the side capable of manipulation, it is the left that can take the holistic vision of the right and break it down, allowing for its practical execution out there in the world. Yet what vision exactly are we executing? What is our purpose here on the planet?

Our Role as Human Beings

Humans are in a unique position for purpose is not given to us; it is not encoded in our genes as is the case with other animals. While everything else in the universe has its own task to perform, from the phytoplankton of the oceans providing the oxygen we breathe, to the bees pollinating flowering plants worldwide, only human beings have to create their sense of purpose. This calling takes a particular form in each individual, but Swimme (2001) argued that as the self-reflexive awareness of the cosmos, our species has one overarching role:

The human provides the space in which the universe feels its stupendous beauty. . . . Think of what it would be like if there were no humans on the planet: the mountains and the primeval fireball would be magnificent, but the Earth would not feel any of this. Can you see the sadness of such a state? The incompleteness? Humans can house the tremendous beauty of Earth, of life, of the universe. We can value it, feel its grandeur. (pp. 32-33)

As the heart and mind of the universe, we are here to appreciate the magnificence of all creation, to stand awestruck beneath a blanket of shimmering stars, to have our breath taken away by a flock of wild geese soaring in symmetry. Yet, we can only perform this role of holding the splendor of the cosmos if we are capable of developing awe, if we are able to drop our “sleek certainties” (Heschel, 1976, p. 58):

To a mind unwarped by intellectual habit, unbiased by what it already knows; to unmitigated innate surprise there are no axioms, dogmas; there is only wonder. The realization is that the world is too incredible, too meaningful for us. The existence of the world is the most unlikely, the most unbelievable fact. . . . Who could believe it, who could conceive it? (p. 58)

This awestruck perspective depends upon our being present and embodied enough to see life afresh, as though for the very first time, in each moment. It requires that we periodically step out of the left hemisphere, which delivers only representations of the world, and into the right brain which is directly in touch with here-and-now felt experience (McGilchrist, 2012, p. 70). It necessitates engaging our imaginative faculties, for it requires a leap of the imagination to really see ourselves from a cosmological dimension; to deeply feel ourselves as the direct descendants of the stars above, as the atoms and energy from the beginning of time, all here right now speaking, thinking, and feeling (Swimme, 2007). What would it be like to view ourselves as channels through which this prolific universe gets to express itself? This explodes apart our normal ways of seeing ourselves here in the West, requiring a radical reimagining of human identity.

Clinical Applications

At this moment in time, I sense that we are being called to stand in wonder not only in the face of the miracles of the universe, but in the presence of one another. As psychotherapists, what would it be like to take in our clients from a cosmological perspective? Could we see the person before us as not only an individual, not simply part of a family, community, or culture, but as “15 billion years of creativity in the form of one particular human body” (Swimme, 2002, p. 13)? Standing in this space, it feels like the only appropriate response is reverence, a sense of awe in the face of this unique opportunity to engage with the culmination of eons of evolution condensed into one living being.

How would it affect our interactions with our clients to hear their hopes and dreams as both manifestations of their own innate desires, *and* as expressions of the fundamental alluring activity of the universe? This allurement permeates the cosmos on all levels of being, attracting the Earth to the sun, holding the Milky Way together, and preventing our planet from dissolving into a huge dark cloud (Swimme, 2001, p. 48). In the human form, allurement shows up in those deep desires that draw us toward our own unique attractions. By supporting our clients to pursue their most fundamental allurements, not only are their individual lives impacted, but on a cosmic level, “we help bind the universe together. The unity of the world rests on the pursuit of passion” (p. 48).

What would it be like to imagine that the therapeutic process in which we are engaged is directly involved in binding the cosmos together? The idea that our work may support not only the integration of our clients’ brains, but that it might facilitate the cohesion of the universe, in Hillman’s words, takes the top off my head (Hillman &

Ventura, 1992, p. 69). In my opinion, this type of profound revisioning could infuse the therapeutic endeavor with a new source of energy, bringing purpose and meaning in those moments when we feel lost in the woods of an individual's life. It could fortify us against the burnout involved in conceiving of what we are up to in far too limited a manner.

What might it be like for our clients to be held in the awe they deserve as unique expressions of a continuously unfolding universe? Accustomed to being defined by their dysfunctions, those who sit before us may never have been seen in this way before. As plants flourish in the light of the exuberantly generous sun, might not our clients have a similar chance to thrive when beheld in the infinite wonder they truly merit?

Chapter IV

Summary and Conclusions

As the 13th-century Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi wrote, “We come spinning out of nothingness, scattering stars like dust, the stars form a circle . . . and in the center we dance” (as cited in Liebert, 1981, p. 13). The idea, celebrated by poets and sages throughout history, that everything emerges from emptiness is now being confirmed by modern science with the discovery that elementary particles do just that, they literally leap out of the nothingness (Swimme, 2001, p. 36). Through the process of active imagination, we allow images to spring out of that very same void, giving them space to grow, share their wisdom, and work their magic in the broken, desolate corners of our psyches. Not only do imaginal flows heal in this interior way, their blessing also extends outwards as they re-engage us with the sacred dimension of our fellow human beings, the greater Earth community, and the planet itself.

By learning to inhabit this highest of human faculties, the imagination, we open the portal to glimpsing ourselves in our cosmic context. As ideas of inside and out, I and other, my body and the Earth’s terrain dissolve in the sea of the imaginative right cortical hemisphere, our sense of physical and temporal separation evaporates. In an instant, our union with everything that exists through our common origin in the original fireball rushes into consciousness. From this unitary perspective it becomes near impossible for us to view the hardwood forest or leaping salmon as simply resources for our

consumption. Instead, they become extensions of ourselves as they, like us, are unique, exquisite expressions of the boundless creativity of the cosmos.

From the epicenter of our imagination we feel the shockwave of realization that we are indeed one center in this omniscient universe, a unique generative point with a wild potential for self-expression. Are we willing to see ourselves in this way? It would impel us to truly engage with the deep currents of creativity that pulse through our beings, recognizing them, and giving them form. It would mean opening ourselves up to the most unbelievable fact of the very existence of the universe. We would be left with few other options but to feel and to house the magnificence of this planet. As we truly absorb this ingenious Earth, which has provided the exact conditions necessary for the flourishing of life for over 3.5 billion years, it becomes near impossible for us not to align ourselves with her protection.

Contribution to Marriage and Family Therapy and Depth Psychology

I hope that the reflections in this thesis contribute in some small way to a reimagining of the fields of marriage and family therapy, professional clinical counseling, and depth psychology. While on one level these endeavors are centered around exploring relational patterns within families, inside individuals, and between consciousness and the unconscious, this thesis suggests that we are simultaneously engaged in something far vaster. As we support families in moving from a place of disengagement to one of connection, we are assisting the cohering activity of the universe. While providing a space for individuals to find their unique expression, we are collaborating in the flourishing of this planet. In facilitating the communications of the unconscious, we are creating a forum in which the dreams of the Earth may find their voice.

Through its emphasis on the value of right brain modes of perception, this thesis is attempting to defend a shrinking space in the psychotherapeutic world for the wisdom of imaginal and embodied ways of knowing. As our field, in conjunction with the world itself, becomes ever more left-brain, logically and linearly invested, speaking up on behalf of the relational circuitry of the right hemisphere, with its capacity to connect us with one another and the planet, takes on an even greater importance. Faced with a paucity of imagination regarding the task of humanity, this right shift is a critical move if we wish to become a mutually enhancing presence within Earth's complex systems of life.

Clinical Implications

If we, as psychotherapists, were to hear our clients' dreams and imaginations as streams of cosmic creativity, how might this affect the manner in which we hold them? An appropriate stance in my mind would be one of reverence, awe, and the deepest gratitude. This is not to say that we as therapists have to remain in unwavering support of all that our clients bring. However, it does demand that we welcome these sacred flows of information in a receptive, nonjudgmental right hemisphere space, rather than prematurely turning the material over to our left prefrontal cortex for logical, linear evaluation and dissection.

What of the clinical implications of my personal journeys of active imagination and authentic movement? It was my experience that these embodied, imaginal modes of being allowed the opening of old dissociated neural nets. In the process, long repressed experiences, emotions, and aspects of self were made available for reintegration with the mainstream flow of my brain. No longer held out of consciousness, these memories are

now less prone to being triggered by current-day events. The result of this journey has been a widening of my range of emotional tolerance and capacity to stay regulated in the face of a variety of experiences. It is allowing me to begin to absorb, rather than defend myself against all that is beautiful and sacred in others and the world.

It is my impression that engaging our clients' imaginative faculties through active imagination and embodied movement puts the power of healing back into their hands. Our role as therapists then becomes one of creating a sacred environment, maintaining a safe relational space, and monitoring our clients' levels of sympathetic nervous system arousal as they begin to slowly re-engage with dissociated shards of experience, creating a pathway to their eventual reintegration within the central currents of their psyches. This way of working implies a profound trust in our clients' natural movement toward wholeness, held as they are in the creativity of the cosmos, as manifested through the wisdom of their embodied imaginations.

Avenues for Further Research

Taking active imagination out of the therapy room and into the natural world could be a fascinating avenue for further research. What might arise were one to walk through the redwoods in an open, receptive space, allowing the presence of these majestic beings to infuse one's body and mind with a more ancient, deeply rooted way of knowing? Who might speak and what might be heard, were one to slow down enough to feel the wisdom of the thundering Pacific waves, a movement of energy that has been recycling itself for 3.8 billion years? As Swimme (2001) argued, learning to absorb the world is a crucial step to our becoming a beneficial presence on this planet. Engaging the

larger Earth community in active imagination may be a way of stepping into a truly empathic relationship with the rest of life.

Dancing Where Psyche and Cosmos Meet

We are here to get lost, get high, fall in love, go mad with the wonder of it all . . . to live and dance on the edge of life where psyche and cosmos meet, where Spirit flows into the human, where only the angels have surefootedness to tread lightly.

Fox, 2004, p. 148

Can we learn to tread lightly upon this Earth, walking gently with our joys and pains, our triumphs and frustrations? This thesis explored the possibility that the imagination is the portal to our dancing in this numinous space between psyche and cosmos, spirit and human, spinning in wonder at the majesty of it all. What could be more sacred, more meaningful, more healing for humanity and the Earth than our learning to whirl like dervishes in the very same streams of creativity that fuel the unfolding universe itself?

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Autobiographical Sketch

Ciúin Doherty lives in Venice Beach, California where he works as a television producer and interns as a psychotherapist. Having grown up in the wild, expansive landscapes of Ireland, this enchanting terrain provides the backdrop to his fascination with the dance between psyche and nature, soul and cosmos.