

Reflections on Working with Youth
Moving from 'Making a Difference' to 'Tending the Soul'

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Depth psychology has much to teach us about how we as a society might understand and work with youth. Building on Jung's invitation to acknowledge the unconscious dimension, Hillman beckons us to understand our pathologies as expressions of the soul, and Guggenbühl-Craig challenges us to examine the unconscious dimension of power as it is exercised in the helping professions. Working with youth following the insights of depth psychology has invited me to turn my attention away from the solving of problems and towards the honoring of soul and the imaginal realm. Ultimately these insights prompt me to re-examine the overall mission of social work. Maintaining and finding creative expression for the tension that comes from standing between a depth psychological perspective and the attitudes and strategies dominant in the field is the central challenge of my work. Finding a path to action is at the heart of my challenge.

To put it crudely much of our work with youth is essentially a numbers game. This is not a comment on the intentions of those involved. Our understanding and treatment of social problems focuses on the quantitative incidence and reduction of these problems. The programs and strategies that address our social ills, including the problems associated with youth, are based on essentially the same model. The problem is defined, the causes and consequences identified, and the desired outcomes of the social programs specified and imposed. A program receives funding based on its promise to make a significant statistical impact on the incidence of the particular problem. The political

interests that allocate and administer the funds are counting on favorable statistics to justify the expenditures as well as promote their political careers. This model is a natural expression of the reductionist paradigm that currently dominates our thinking. It makes a number of faulty assumptions about the definition and meaning of the problem, about its causes, about what a “healthy” society is, and especially about the people involved, the “helper” and those “in need of help.”

The ultimate objective of our current social programs is to make people better, relieve their suffering, and bring them back to “normal”. Transforming “at-risk” youth into normal, productive citizens is the objective of most programs targeting these youth. The model proposed by Burt et. al. in their recent book, Building Supportive Communities for At-Risk Adolescents clearly places the attention on becoming “normal”, useful and productive citizens. Their objective is to help the youth find “success as a fully *integrated member of society*, which means being *productive in work*, meeting commitments to family and friends, and assuming the *responsibilities of citizenship*.

(Burt et. al., p. 27, italics added)

From a depth psychological perspective the desire to make people normal reflects the agenda of the collective ego. The collective ego contains those aspects of the society that the society itself considers reasonable and acceptable. It drives the socializing process which insures that those characteristics that are dangerous to the smooth functioning of the ideals of a society are repressed. The normative function of the collective ego is manifest in its laws, institutions, practices, and beliefs. These cultural components both form and uphold the norms of the culture. Simply put, they are designed to protect and defend the image the collective has of itself.

While ego consciousness strives to maintain the “normal”, the shadow, which contains the aspects of the society that are rejected and denied, strives to disrupt the normal, and to undermine the claims of the ego. As Guggenbühl-Craig makes clear, “The personal shadow works destructively against ego-ideals; the collective shadow tries to demolish collective ideals. Both ego and collective ideals must be repeatedly subjected to attack, since they are false and one-sided.” (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971, p. 104) A basic concept of depth psychology holds that growth comes from acknowledging and integrating shadow elements of the personality into ego consciousness. The shadow elements that erupt in the life of a person or collective are necessarily drawing attention to those aspects of the personality that the ego needs to integrate into consciousness.

The ego, however, has a tendency to disregard and even disdain the shadow. Yet, no matter how clever or aggressive the personal or collective ego may be the shadow will always be an even more powerful force. It is a force greater than any institution, ideology, or well-intentioned program or individual will. As long as we refuse to acknowledge the shadow, the intensity of its energy builds. Johnson makes this point in his book, Owning Your Own Shadow,

To refuse the dark side of one’s nature is to store up or accumulate the darkness... We are presently dealing with the accumulation of a whole society that has worshipped its light side and refused the dark, and this residue appears as war, economic chaos, strikes, racial intolerance... We must be whole whether we like it or not; the only choice is whether we will incorporate the shadow consciously and with some dignity or do it through some neurotic behavior. (Johnson, 1973, p. 26)

It has become obvious to me that the troubled behavior of our youth similarly represents the work of the unconscious to thwart the plans and intentions of the collective ego of our society. At-risk youth are certainly carriers of the shadow in our society. In

their destructive actions we face the shadow of our culture. The marginalized, rejected and oppressed of any society are always the carriers of the collective shadow. Johnson would certainly agree that the residue of the accumulated darkness of our society also includes the behavior of troubled youth.

If we focus our social programs and individual efforts, as we currently do, on bringing these youth back to “normal” we become, in a sense, agents for the collective ego, helping to defend it against the incursions of the unconscious, propping it up, indeed, insuring that the ego is able to continue denying that the troubled behavior has any deeper significance for the collective. From this perspective, social work becomes the front line of defense against the stirrings of the unconscious in our society. Social workers are often, in fact, unwitting apologists for the system.

But what would it mean for social workers to move away from defending the collective ego and begin honoring soul in their work? First it would require a profound transformation in the way we perceive the troubled behavior itself. We might begin, as Hillman suggests, by acknowledging that pathology (the troubled behavior of youth in this case) is a way the soul is experienced and makes itself known.

I am introducing the term pathologizing to mean the psyche’s autonomous ability to create illness, morbidity, disorder, abnormality, and suffering in any aspect of its behavior and to experience and imagine life through this deformed and afflicted perspective... We want to know what it might be saying about the soul and what the soul might be saying be means of it. (Hillman, 1974, p. 57)

The challenge to the social worker then is to *pathologize* the risk behavior of the youth. That is, to begin to see it as expressing soul and not solely evil intentions and senselessly destructive habits. In my work this means acknowledging behaviors such as daily marijuana smoking and other drug use, dropping out of school, listening to violent

rap music, stealing, living on the streets, bragging about being violent, or being reckless with sex, as all giving voice to the soul. In therapy we learn to engage in a dialogue with the shadow in order to enter into relationship with the soul or self. We are asked to tolerate the ugly, the perverse, and even the destructive in ourselves enough to glimpse what the soul might be saying. We know that the psychological work cannot be done without it. As Hillman claims, “The study of lives and the care of souls means above all a prolonged encounter with what destroys and is destroyed, with what is broken and hurts—that is, with psychopathology.” (Hillman, 1974, p. 56)

This is precisely what is called for in social work. But not just a prolonged encounter with the intolerable, for much of social work is already that. What is called for is an encounter that initially suspends the intention to change the pathological behavior. This perspective calls for sitting with the troubled behavior without immediately judging or moralizing, or jumping to respond to it. Taking this step may represent the biggest challenge for a profession that, as I have stated, is about ‘making a difference’, and about alleviating struggle and suffering. We need to beware, as Thomas Moore suggests, that our intent to heal does not obscure our ability to listen to what the soul is saying. “In relation to the symptom itself, observance means first of all listening and looking carefully at what is being revealed in the suffering. *An intent to heal can get in the way of seeing.* By doing less, more is accomplished.” (Moore, 1992, p. 10, italics added)

This attitude is admittedly deeply challenging. It is not easy to sit and discuss, for example, with a vocal and forceful teenage white supremacist or with a gang member who boasts of his attacks against enemies from a rival town, situations in which I recently found myself, without instinctively wanting to reason with them. My attention naturally

wanted to focus on the (self and other directed) destructiveness of their attitudes and behavior, and to weave a response and strategy that would help them get back on the “right path”. But an approach that begins to honor soul asks us to pause and suspend our automatic, judgmental and programmatic response. This requires that we tolerate the angst and tension that their comments and actions evoke. Holding this tension, without moralizing, creates the setting for the beginning of a dialogue with the shadow elements that are alive in these destructive attitudes and behaviors.

As Jung insistently reminds us in his writings, as long as the ego does not allow the shadow elements into consciousness, the unconscious will persist in and intensify its efforts to be acknowledged. This may explain the feeling in our society that “things are just getting worse.” We have yet to sincerely begin the process of integrating the collective shadow. The strategies our society employs to deny the shadow and silence any collective dialogue with it are phenomenal, one example being the incredible expansion of our prison system. As I sit with the white supremacist or the gang member my challenge is to bring the ego into dialogue with the aspects of the collective shadow that this particular behavior speaks for. When I am able to do this, I am no longer blindly participating in protecting the collective ego. I am no longer only focused on blaming the youth. I am engaged in honoring soul.

As vital as it is that the social worker become aware of the role he or she can play in confronting our collective shadow, and thus in honoring soul in our society, tending to the soul of the client, although still formidable, is the primary concern. Allowing for soul as part of our engagement with a youth involves becoming sensitive to the presence of psyche within the relationship itself. Guggenbühl-Craig explains that when two people

meet, the shadow-side as well as the ego of each enter into relationship. He writes, “But it can be observed time and again that one person’s psyche has its effect upon the other, with all its desires, fantasies, feelings, and emotions, its consciousness and unconsciousness—even if much of what happens in the psyche in neither stated or directly expressed. (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1972, p. 39)

From the perspective of honoring soul, the social worker has the burden of becoming aware of the psychic elements he or she brings to the encounter. This implies uncovering his or her own shadow or unconscious dimension. We might claim to ourselves that our prime motivation is to help others, but then often find ourselves gripped by the need to direct and even dominate a client’s life. My experience confirms Guggenbühl-Craig’s observation that people in the helping professions “have highly ambiguous psychological motives for their actions.” A desire to ‘make a difference’ can easily slip into expecting a difference. Efforts made on behalf of a client turn into psychological claims on the client. The greater the effort, the more desperate the claim. I have certainly sensed the impulse in myself to hold a person accountable to living up to my expectations of them. This impulse triggers an emotional response that can easily become manipulative if the social worker is not vigilant.

This attitude is, in a sense, not only built into the structure of the profession it is actually reinforced by it. The social worker, because he or she is virtually always hired to address a particular problem, and usually with a pre-set strategy, generally assumes that the program and strategy are valid and will necessarily help the clients. This unquestioning of the system makes it less likely that the social worker will question his or her own motives. Moreover, this type of attitude tends to produce a relationship between

the social worker and client where all knowledge, discernment, and authority lie in the hands of the social worker. In such a relationship it is a given that the social worker use his or her position to implement the program intended to transform the client's behavior.

Honoring soul, on the other hand, involves pursuing a relationship that is based on respect, a sense of equality, and dare we say it, on love. Referring to the relationship between the social worker and client Guggenbühl-Craig stresses this point, "True eros does not involve wanting to impose our own plan, or our own ideas, on others."

(Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971, p. 12) I am finding that a first step into making room for soul in the relationship is to shift the direction of the exchange. Instead of being primarily, if not exclusively, focused on helping or providing, it is vital that the social worker consciously be on the receiving side. In a way, as social workers we might imagine entering into the relationship as an 'antenna, receiver, and amplifier' for whatever needs to be heard. In depth psychological terms, this sensitivity asks the social worker to serve as a "container" able to tolerate the expression of the full nature of the troubled youth.

Shifting into a receptive mode of exchange with the client allows the social worker to pay attention to the fantasies, or images and thoughts that arise about the person. According to Guggenbühl-Craig, these fantasies participate in, or even constellate, a field of energy that can seriously affect the client. For example, he suggests paying particular attention to the creative fantasies that come up around the person. "To encounter a person creatively means to weave fantasies around him, to circle around his potential." (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1972, p. 39) These creative fantasies provide hints as to the person's potential. They might reveal some hidden potential in the person that the

social worker could then begin to nurture. From these hopeful fantasies also come energy that helps move client into the future.

On the other hand, fantasies also come up around a client's destructive side. The social worker may then fixate on these negative fantasies which then can stimulate the destructive side of the client. This attitude may be prompted or aggravated when the social worker's efforts are not producing the expected response from the client. Because of the great impact these fantasies have on the client, Guggenbühl-Craig suggests that "One of the [social worker's] first tasks is to examine his own fantasies." (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971, p. 42)

As we examine our fantasies regarding our clients we must be mindful that we do not necessarily know what is "right" for him or her from the perspective of psyche. Forcing cultural norms onto a client places us at odds with the demands of the soul. The social worker must be daring enough to acknowledge that the wisdom upheld by the culture is itself often narrow and misguided. As Guggenbühl-Craig writes, "Awareness of the questionableness of our value system should make us cautious about forcing those values on others." (Guggenbühl-Craig, p. 6) One particular challenge for the social worker, in this regard, may be to accept, as Guggenbühl-Craig and others suggest, that destructiveness may be part of the development process of youth. "It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to explain by rational psychological means why a youngster must enter into a relationship with the archetypal shadow in order to further his own development. A youth making the transition from childhood to adulthood must make contact with the Devil, with destructiveness." (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971, pp. 106-107)

The social pressure to combat any expression of negative aggression or destructiveness is extremely high in our society. Anti-gang task forces abound. Even a common boyhood fight at school automatically leads to suspension. Our society celebrates any individual or collective victory over the destructive shadow. I experienced a prime example of this recently at the graduation of a group of 100 or so at-risk young men and women from a boot camp type school run by the National Guard. (As a mentor of one of the youth I acknowledge the benefit this experience can bring to the lives of troubled youth. My reflections here refer to the ceremony and not to the school itself.) More community resources, public officials, law enforcement, and media were mobilized for this graduation of 100 youth than for the graduations of thousands of others graduating in the county. The young men and women received their diplomas, but the real intent of the ceremony, with the speeches and all, was to celebrate another victory over the collective shadow. Once again we, as Johnson puts it, “worship our light-side and refused the darkness”.

Ultimately, the focus of the work with at-risk youth must evolve so as to allow that the real meaning of an individual lies in the realm of soul and psyche and not in returning to “normal”. It is clear that our current approach can be blind to the workings of the soul, blind to the meaning that soul threads into the events of a life. It invests essentially all of our money, resources, attention and hopes in the battle to improve conditions that it feels are inherently bad for people. As a profession we do not recognize that our involvement in the lives of our clients may turn out to be less about helping them and more about blocking out the shadow from our awareness, and about interfering with the stirrings of the soul. As Guggenbühl-Craig expresses it, “My point is that disposing of

our fellow man [sic] against his will, even when this appears to us as the only proper course, can be highly problematical. We can never know wherein lies the real meaning of an individual human life.” (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1972, pp. 5-6)

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