

December 1962 Issue


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## Jung on Life After Death

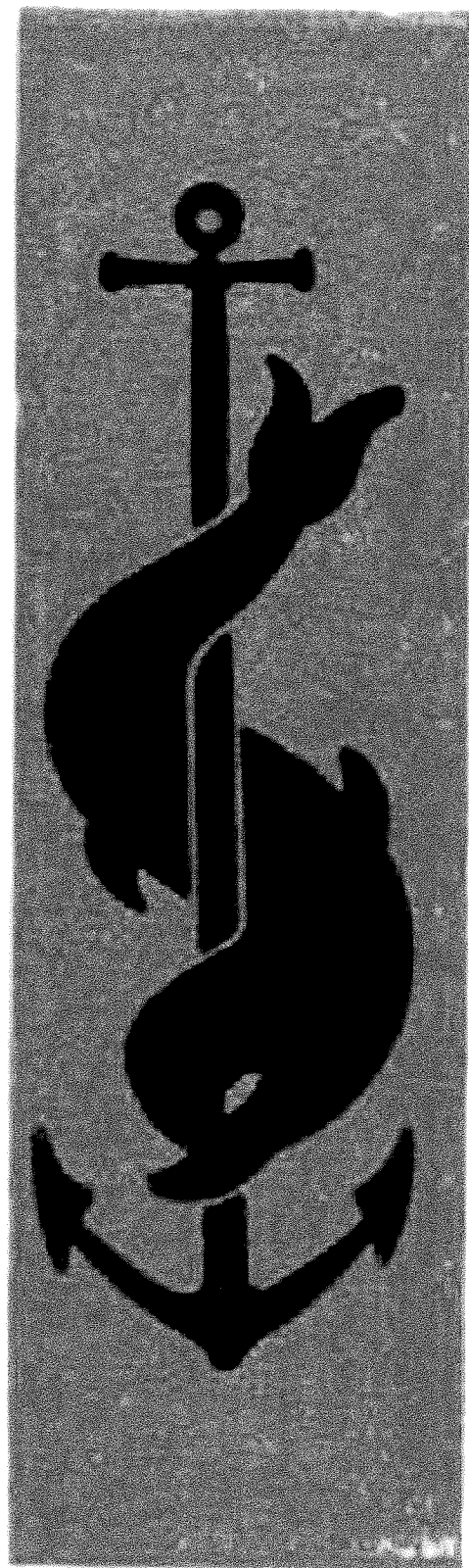
*The refreshingly open and always surprising manner in which C. G. JUNG discusses the possibility of life after death reflects his personal vision and intense concern with religion. In this extraordinary testimony to his faith in man's relation to the infinite, he says. "Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon futilities and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance."*

By C. G. Jung

DECEMBER 1962 ISSUE

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FROM *MEMORIES, DREAMS, REFLECTIONS* BY C. G. JUNG RECORDED  
AND EDITED BY ANIELA JAFFÉ

WHAT I have to tell about the hereafter, and about life after death, consists entirely of memories, of images in which I have lived and of thoughts which have buffeted me. These memories in a way also underlie my works; for the latter are fundamentally nothing but attempts, ever renewed, to give an answer to the question of the interplay between the here and the hereafter. Yet I have never written expressly about a life after death; for then I would have had to document my ideas, and I have no way of doing that. Be that as it may, I should like to state my ideas now.

Even now I can do no more than tell stories — “mythologize.” Perhaps one has to be close to death to acquire the necessary freedom to talk about it. It is not that I wish we had a life after death. In fact, I should prefer not to foster such ideas. Still, I must state, to give reality its due, that, without my wishing and without my doing anything about it, thoughts of this nature move about within me. I can’t say whether these thoughts are true or false, but I do know they are there, and can be given utterance, if I do not repress them out of some prejudice. Prejudice cripples and injures the full phenomenon of psychic life. And I know too little about psychic life to feel that I can set it right out of superior knowledge. Critical rationalism has apparently eliminated, along with so many other mythic conceptions, the idea of life after death. This could only have happened because nowadays most people identify themselves almost exclusively with their consciousness and imagine that they are only what they know about themselves. Yet anyone with even a smattering of psychology can see how limited this knowledge is. Rationalism and doctrinairism are the diseases of our time;

they pretend to have all the answers. But a great deal will yet be discovered which our present limited view would have ruled out as impossible. Our concepts of space and time have only approximate validity, and there is therefore a wide field for minor and major deviations. In view of all this, I lend an attentive ear to the strange myths of the psyche, and take a careful look at the varied events that come my way, regardless of whether or not they fit in with my theoretical postulates.



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Unfortunately, the mythic side of man is given short shrift nowadays. He can no longer create fables. As a result, a great deal escapes him; for it is important and salutary to speak also of incomprehensible things. Such talk is like the telling of a good ghost story, as we sit by the fireside and smoke a pipe.

What the myths or stories about a life after death really mean, or what kind of reality lies behind them, we certainly do not know. We cannot tell whether they possess any

validity beyond their indubitable value as anthropomorphic projections. Rather, we must hold clearly in mind that there is no possible way for us to attain certainty concerning things which pass our understanding.

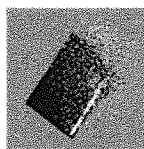
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We cannot visualize another world ruled by quite other laws, the reason being that we live in a specific world which has helped to shape our minds and establish our basic psychic conditions. We are strictly limited by our innate structure and therefore bound by our whole being and thinking to this world of ours. Mythic man, to be sure, demands a “going beyond all that,” but scientific man cannot permit this. To the intellect, all my mythologizing is futile speculation. To the emotions, however, it is a healing and valid activity; it gives existence a glamour which we would not like to do without. Nor is there any good reason why we should.

Parapsychology holds it to be a scientifically valid proof of an afterlife that the dead manifest themselves, either as ghosts or through a medium, and communicate things which they alone could possibly know. But even though there do exist such well-documented cases, the question remains whether the ghost or the voice is identical with the dead person or is a psychic projection, and whether the things said really derive from the deceased or from knowledge which may be present in the unconscious.

Leaving aside the rational arguments against any certainty in these matters, we

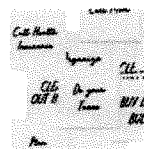
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JOE PINSKER



must not forget that for most people it means a great deal to assume that their lives will have an indefinite continuity beyond their present existence. They live more sensibly, feel better, and are more at peace. One has centuries, one has an inconceivable period of time at one's disposal. What, then, is the point of this senseless mad rush?

Naturally, such reasoning does not apply to everyone. There are people who feel no craving for immortality, and who shudder at the thought of sitting on a cloud and playing the harp for ten thousand years! There are also quite a few who have been so buffeted by life, or who feel such disgust for their own existence, that they far prefer absolute cessation to continuance. But in the majority of cases the question of immortality is so urgent, so immediate, and also so ineradicable that we must make an effort to form some sort of view about it. But how?

My hypothesis is that we can do so with the aid of hints sent to us from the unconscious — in dreams, for example. Usually we dismiss these hints because we are convinced that the question is not susceptible to answer. In response to this understandable skepticism, I suggest the following considerations. If there is something we cannot know, we must necessarily abandon it as an intellectual problem. For example, I do not know for what reason the universe has come into being, and shall never know. Therefore, I must drop this question as a scientific or intellectual problem. But if an idea about it is offered to me —in dreams or in mythic

traditions — I ought to take note of it. I even ought to build up a conception on the basis of such hints, even though it will forever remain a hypothesis which I know cannot be proved.



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A man should be able to say he has done his best to form a conception of life after death, or to create some image of it — even if he must confess his failure. Not to have done so is a vital loss. For the question that is posed to him is the age-old heritage of humanity: an archetype, rich in secret life, which seeks to add itself to our own individual life in order to make it whole. Reason sets the boundaries far too narrowly for us, and would have us accept only the known — and that, too, with limitations — and live in a known framework, just as if we were sure how far life actually extends. As a matter of fact, day after day we live far beyond the bounds of our consciousness; without our knowledge, the life of the unconscious is also going on within us. The more the critical reason dominates, the more impoverished life becomes; but the more of the unconscious and the more of myth we are capable of making conscious, the more of life we integrate. Overvalued reason has this in common with political absolutism: under its dominion the individual is pauperized.

THE unconscious helps by communicating things to us or making figurative allusions. It has other ways, too, of informing us of things which by all logic we could not possibly know. Consider synchronistic phenomena, premonitions, and dreams that come true. I recall one time during World War II when I was returning home from Bollingen. I had a book with me, but could not read, for the moment the train started to move I was overpowered by the image of someone drowning. This was a memory of an accident that had happened while I was on military service. During the entire journey I could not rid myself of it. It struck me as uncanny, and I thought, "What has happened? Can there have been an accident?"

I got out at Erlenbach and walked home, still troubled by this memory. My second daughter's children were in the garden. The family was living with us, having returned to Switzerland from Paris because of the war. The children stood looking rather upset, and when I asked, "Why, what is the matter?" they told me that Adrian, then the youngest of the boys, had fallen into the water in the boathouse. It is quite deep there, and since he could not really swim he had almost drowned. His older brother had fished him out. This had taken place at exactly the time I had been assailed by that memory in the train. The unconscious had given me a hint. Why should it not be able to inform me of other things also?

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



Frequently foreknowledge is there, but not recognition. Thus, I once had a dream in which I was attending a garden party. I saw my sister there, and that greatly surprised me, for she had died some years before. A deceased friend of mine was also present. The rest were people who were still alive. Presently I saw that my sister was accompanied by a lady I knew well. Even in the dream I had drawn the conclusion that the lady was going to die. "She is already marked," I thought. In the dream I knew exactly who she was. I knew also that she lived in Basel. But as soon as I woke up I could no longer, with the best will in the world, recall who she was, although the whole dream was still vivid in my mind. I pictured all my acquaintances in Basel to see whether the memory images would ring a bell. Nothing!

A few weeks later I received news that a friend of mine had had a fatal accident. I knew at once that she was the person I had seen in the dream but had been unable to identify. My recollection of her was perfectly clear and richly detailed, since she had been my patient for a considerable time up to a year before her death. In my attempt to recall the person in my dream, however, hers was the one picture which did not appear in my portrait gallery of Basel acquaintances, although by rights it should have been one of the first.

When one has such experiences — and I will tell of others like them — one acquires a certain respect for the potentialities and arts of the unconscious. Only, one must remain critical and be aware that such communications may have a subjective meaning as well. They may be in accord with reality, and then again they may not. I

have, however, learned that the views I have been able to form on the basis of such hints from the unconscious have been most rewarding. Naturally, I am not going to write a book of revelations about them, but I will acknowledge that I have a “myth” which encourages me to look deeper into this whole realm. Myths are the earliest form of science. When I speak of things after death, I am speaking out of inner prompting, and can go no further than to tell you dreams and myths that relate to this.

Naturally, one can contend from the start that myths and dreams concerning continuity of life after death are merely compensating fantasies which are inherent in our natures — all life desires eternity. The only argument I can adduce in answer to this is the myth itself.

However, there are indications that at least a part of the psyche is not subject to the laws of space and time. Scientific proof of that has been provided by the well-known J. B. Rhine experiments recounted in *Extra-sensory Perception* and *The Reach of the Mind*. Along with numerous cases of spontaneous foreknowledge, nonspatial perceptions, and so on, of which I have given a number of examples from my own life, these experiments prove that the psyche at times functions outside the spatio-temporal law of causality. This indicates that our conceptions of space and time, and therefore of causality also, are incomplete. A complete picture of the world would require the addition of still another dimension; only then could the totality of

phenomena be given a unified explanation. Hence it is that the rationalists insist to this day that parapsychological experiences do not really exist; for their world view stands or falls by this question. If such phenomena occur at all, the rationalistic picture of the universe is invalid, because incomplete. Then the possibility of an other-valued reality behind the phenomenal world becomes an inescapable problem, and we must face the fact that our world, with its time, space, and causality, relates to another order of things lying behind or beneath it, in which neither “here and there” nor “earlier and later” are of importance. I have been convinced that at least a part of our psychic existence is characterized by a relativity of space and time. This relativity seems to increase, in proportion to the distance from consciousness, to an absolute condition of timelessness and spacelessness.

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

them, just as if the acts and experiences taking place in earthly life, in space and time, were the decisive ones.

In any case, the dream describes a most unusual audience whose like could scarcely be found on earth: people burningly interested in the final psychological results of a human life that was in no way remarkable, any more than were the conclusions that could be drawn from it — to our way of thinking. If, however, the audience existed in a state of relative non-time, where “termination,” “event,” and “development” had become questionable concepts, they might very well be most interested precisely in what was lacking in their own condition.

At the time of this dream the lady was afraid of death and did her best to fend off any thoughts about it. Yet death is an important interest, especially to an aging person. A categorical question is being put to him, and he is under an obligation to answer it. To this end he ought to have a myth about death, for reason shows him nothing but the dark pit into which he is descending. Myth, however, can conjure up other images for him, helpful and enriching pictures of life in the land of the dead. If he believes in them, or greets them with some measure of credence, he is being just as right or just as wrong as someone who does not believe in them. But while the man who despairs marches toward nothingness, the one who has placed his faith in the archetype follows the tracks of life and lives right into his death. Both, to be sure, remain in uncertainty, but the one lives against his instincts, the other with them. The difference is considerable, and gives the latter an advantage.

FROM the psychological point of view, life in the hereafter would seem to be a logical continuation of the psychic life of old age. With increasing age, contemplation, reflection, and inner images naturally play an ever greater part in man's life: "Your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28). That, to be sure, presupposes that the psyches of the old men have not become wooden, or entirely petrified. In old age one begins to let memories unroll before the mind's eye and, musing, to recognize oneself in the inner and outer images of the past. This is like a preparation for an existence in the hereafter, just as, in Plato's view, philosophy is a preparation for death.

The inner images keep me from getting lost in personal retrospection. Many old people become too involved in their reconstruction of past events. They remain imprisoned in these memories. But if it is reflective and is translated into images, retrospection can be a *reculer pour mieux sauter*. I try to see the line which leads through my life into the world and out of the world again.

In general, the conception people form of the hereafter is largely made up of wishful thinking and prejudices. Thus, in most conceptions the hereafter is pictured as a pleasant place. That does not seem so obvious to me. I hardly think that after death we shall be spirited to some lovely flowering meadow. If everything were pleasant and good in the hereafter, surely there would be some friendly communication between us and the blessed spirits, and an outpouring upon us of goodness and beauty from the prenatal state. But there is nothing of the sort. Why is there this insurmountable barrier between the departed and the living? At least half the reports of encounters with the dead tell of terrifying experiences with dark spirits; and it is the rule that the land of the dead observes icy silence, unperturbed by the grief of the bereaved.

To follow out the thought that involuntarily comes to me: the world, I feel, is far too unitary for there to be a hereafter in which the rule of opposites is completely absent. There, too, is nature, which after its fashion is also God's. The world into which we enter after death will be grand and terrible, like God and like all of nature that we know. Nor can I conceive that suffering should entirely cease.

It seems probable to me that in the hereafter, too, there exist certain limitations, but that the souls of the dead only gradually find out where the limits of the liberated state lie. Somewhere out there there must be a determinant, a necessity conditioning the world, which seeks to put an end to the after-death state. This creative determinant — so I imagine it — must decide what souls will plunge again into birth. Certain souls, I imagine, feel the state of three-dimensional existence to be more blissful than that of eternity. But perhaps that depends upon how much of completeness or incompleteness they have taken across with them from their human existence.

It is possible that any further spell of threedimensional life would have no more meaning once the soul had reached a certain stage of understanding; it would then no longer have to return fuller understanding having put to rout the desire for re-embodiment. Then the soul would vanish from the three-dimensional world and attain what the Buddhists call Nirvana. But if a Karma still remains to be disposed of, then the soul relapses again into desires and returns to life once more, perhaps even doing so out of the realization that something remains to be completed.

In my case it must have been primarily a passionate urge toward understanding which brought about my birth. For that is the strongest element in my nature. This insatiable drive toward understanding has, as it were, created a consciousness in order to know what is and what happens, and in order to piece together mythic conceptions from the slender hints of the unknowable.

We lack concrete proof that anything of us is preserved for eternity. At most we can say that there is some probability that something of our psyche continues beyond physical death. Whether what continues to exist is conscious of itself, we do not know either. If we feel the need to form some opinion on this question, we might possibly consider what has been learned from the phenomena of psychic dissociation. In most cases where a split-off complex manifests itself, it does so in the form of a personality, as if the complex had a consciousness of itself. Thus, the voices heard by the insane are personified. I dealt long ago with this phenomenon of personified complexes in my doctoral dissertation. We might, if we wish, adduce these complexes as evidence for a continuity of consciousness. Likewise in favor of such an assumption are certain astonishing observations in cases of profound syncope after acute injuries to the brain and in severe states of collapse. In both situations, total loss of consciousness can be accompanied by perceptions of the outside world and vivid dream experiences. Since the cerebral cortex, the seat of consciousness, is not functioning at these times, there is as yet no explanation for such phenomena. They may be evidence for at least a subjective persistence of the capacity for consciousness, even in a state of apparent unconsciousness.

THE thorny problem of the relationship between eternal man, the self, and earthly man in time and space was illuminated by two dreams of mine.

In one dream which I had in October, 1958, I caught sight from my house of two lens-shaped metallicly gleaming disks, which hurtled in a narrow arc over the house and down to the lake. They were two UFOs (unidentified flying objects). Then another body came flying directly toward me. It was a perfectly circular lens, like the objective of a telescope. At a distance of four or five hundred yards it stood still for a moment, and then flew off. Immediately afterward, another came speeding through the air: a lens with a metallic extension which led to a box — a magic lantern. At a distance of sixty or seventy yards it stood still in the air, pointing straight at me. I awoke with a feeling of astonishment. Still half in the dream, the thought passed through my head: “We always think that the UFOs are projections of ours. Now it turns out that we are their projections. I am projected by the magic lantern as C. G. Jung. But who manipulates the apparatus?”

I had dreamed once before of the problem of the self and the ego. In that earlier dream I was on a hiking trip. I was walking along a little road through a hilly landscape; the sun was shining, and I had a wide view in all directions. Then I came to a small wayside chapel. The door was ajar, and I went in. To my surprise there was no image of the Virgin on the altar, and no crucifix either, but only a wonderful flower arrangement. But then I saw that on the floor in front of the altar, facing me, sat a yogi — in lotus posture, in deep meditation. When I looked at him more closely, I realized that he had my face. I started in profound fright, and awoke with the



thought: "Aha, so he is the one who is meditating me. He has a dream, and I am it." I knew that when he awakened, I would no longer be.

I had this dream after my illness in 1944. It is a parable: my self retires into meditation and meditates my earthly form. To put it another way: it assumes human shape in order to enter three-dimensional existence, as if someone were putting on a diver's suit in order to dive into the sea. When it renounces existence in the hereafter, the self assumes a religious posture, as the chapel in the dream shows. In earthly form it can pass through the experiences of the three-dimensional world, and by greater awareness take a further step toward realization.

The figure of the yogi would more or less represent my unconscious prenatal wholeness, and the Far East, as is often the case in dreams, a psychic state alien and opposed to our own. Like the magic lantern, the yogi's meditation projects my empirical reality. As a rule, we see this causal relationship in reverse: we discover in the products of the unconscious mandala symbols — that is, circular and quaternary figures which express wholeness — and whenever we wish to express wholeness, we employ just such figures. Our basis is ego-consciousness; our world the field of light centered upon the focal point of the ego. From that point we look out upon an enigmatic world of obscurity, never knowing to what extent the shadowy forms we see are caused by our consciousness or possess a reality of their own. The superficial observer is content with the first assumption. But closer study shows that as a rule the

images of the unconscious are not produced by consciousness, but have a reality and spontaneity of their own. Nevertheless, we regard them as mere marginal phenomena.

The aim of both these dreams is to effect a reversal of the relationship between ego-consciousness and the unconscious, and to represent the unconscious as the generator of the empirical personality. This reversal suggests that in the opinion of the “other side,” our unconscious existence is the real one and our conscious world a kind of illusion, an apparent reality constructed for a specific purpose, like a dream which seems a reality as long as we are in it. It is clear that this state of affairs resembles very closely the Oriental conception of maya.

Unconscious wholeness therefore seems to me the true *spiritus rector* of all biological and psychic events. Here is a principle which strives for total realization — which in man’s case signifies the attainment of total consciousness. Attainment of consciousness is culture in the broadest sense, and self-knowledge is therefore the heart and essence of this process. The Oriental attributes unquestionably divine significance to the self, and according to the ancient Christian view, self-knowledge is the road to knowledge of God.

**T**HE decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest upon futilities and

upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance. Thus, we demand that the world grant us recognition for qualities which we regard as personal possessions — our talent or our beauty. The more a man lays stress on false possessions, and the less sensitivity he has for what is essential, the less satisfying is his life. He feels limited because he has limited aims, and the result is envy and jealousy. If we understand and feel that here in this life we already have a link with the infinite, desires and attitudes change. In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted. In our relationships to other men, too, the crucial question is whether an element of boundlessness is expressed.

The feeling for the infinite, however, can be attained only if we are bounded to the utmost. The greatest limitation for man is the self; it is manifested in the experience: "I am *only* that!" Only consciousness of our narrow confinement in the self forms the link to the limitlessness of the unconscious. In such awareness we experience ourselves concurrently as limited and eternal, as both the one and the other. In knowing ourselves to be unique in our personal combination — that is, ultimately limited — we possess also the capacity for becoming conscious of the infinite. But only then!

In an era which has concentrated exclusively upon extension of living space and increase of rational knowledge at all costs, it is a supreme challenge to ask man to become conscious of his uniqueness and his limitation. Uniqueness and limitation are synonymous. Without them, no perception of the unlimited is possible — and, consequently, no coming to consciousness either — merely a delusory identity with it which takes the form of intoxication with large numbers and an avidity for political power.

Our age has shifted all emphasis to the here and now, and thus brought about a daemonization of man and his world. The phenomenon of dictators and all the misery they have wrought springs from the fact that man has been robbed of transcendence by the shortsightedness of the superintellectuals. Like them, he has fallen a victim to unconsciousness. But man's task is the exact opposite: to become conscious of the contents that press upward from the unconscious. Neither should he persist in his unconsciousness, nor remain identical with the unconscious elements of his being, thus evading his destiny, which is to create more and more consciousness. As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being. It may even be assumed that just as the unconscious affects us, increase in our consciousness likewise affects the unconscious.

*Translated by Richard and Clara Winston.*

*"Jung's View of Christianity" will appear in the January ATLANTIC.*



