

Living with the incomprehensible: The case of a woman with a son with schizophrenia

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Presupposition

Jung was a psychologist who continued to engage with things he could not understand. He accepted his own inability to understand these phenomena and lowered his own value from a conscious perspective. In this way, he can be said to be a psychologist who took a certain kind of incomprehensibility as the starting point for psychotherapy. In other words, Jung conceived his psychology based on the unconscious, which cannot be grasped by consciousness.

1. Case Summary

1.The beginning of counseling

The client is a woman in her fifties. She came to consult about her son's withdrawal from society and the possible schizophrenia he may be suffering from. In other words, she did not initially seek psychotherapy, but rather came out of practical concerns about her son's condition, wanting to understand him and find an appropriate treatment for his illness. However, as the counseling sessions progressed and I listened to her story, it became clear that the issue was not limited to her son's social withdrawal. Rather, his social withdrawal was rooted in the family's complex and puzzling history.

2.Family History

The client was born as the fifth child of a family, but when she was seven months old in her mother's womb, it was decided that she would be given up for adoption. Furthermore, her household registration was altered, and she was registered as the child of the couple who adopted her. The family she was raised in was a traditional merchant family with a long history, and she was welcomed as a descendant who would carry on the family's traditions. However, the family faced issues beyond the continuation of the family line. The head of the household, who served as the client's foster father, had already been married twice, and both of his previous wives had left the household due to their inability to endure the family's customs. The third woman he married was the same woman who had been adopted into the family as a young girl before the client. In other words, the head of the household had married his adopted daughter as his third wife. The client grew up with the elderly head of the household as her father and his young third wife as her mother. Moreover, by the time she was 10 years old, she was told about her adoption and the fact that her mother had been taken in as an adopted daughter but later became the wife of the head of the household. From that point onward, she began to fear that she herself, as the adopted daughter, might one day have to become the wife of her foster father. During adolescence and young adulthood, the client is exposed to her father's sexual gaze and grows up in fear. Fortunately, her foster mother never left the house. However, the mother had numerous affairs with various men outside the home, hidden from her father. She was sexually very promiscuous. Because the mother did not leave the house, the client did not become the father's fourth wife, but the home lacked any sense of stability. The client was forced into an arranged marriage and married at the age of 23. Soon after, she gave birth to a child, but around that time, her family business became very busy, and she was unable to devote sufficient time to raising her child. As a result, her child was cared for by her foster mother, and the client felt as though her child had been taken away from her. Despite her feelings, she reluctantly continued to work hard at the family business. Amidst this turmoil, she was informed of her biological mother's suicide and attended the funeral in a state of confusion. From then on, both her work and daily life began to unravel. When her son turned 15, he stopped going to school, locked himself in his room, and became socially withdrawn.

At the beginning of the sessions, the client simply talked about her son and gradually revealed the family history mentioned above. Her son's withdrawal and suspected schizophrenia were incomprehensible to her. Similarly, her own birth, the family system, her father's behavior, and her mother's behavior were all incomprehensible and impossible to understand based on common sense. For about a year and a half, she continued to talk about such things, but at the beginning of each session, her habitual phrase was, "Nothing has changed" or "It's always the same." In other words, she was simply being overwhelmed by something incomprehensible, unable to understand it, and unable to do anything about it, almost giving up, and simply drifting through her daily life.

2. Dreams and their symbols = Child, Dog, Mirror =

At such times, she begins to share her dreams with me. Here, I would like to examine three of those dreams. I believe that through these three dreams, we can see how this "incomprehensible thing" is accepted, cared for, and unfolded.

[Dream 1: Two years after counseling began]

My foster mother has rejuvenated and is now 62 years old, and she says she is going to have a baby. I am 44 years old, and even I can't have children anymore, so I wonder what she is talking about. But I am just surprised and wondering if she really can still have children.

Realistically speaking, it is impossible for a woman to give birth at the age of 62. Therefore, it is only natural for the client to feel puzzled and ask, "What are you talking about?" when told that a woman of that age can give birth. However, the words of the mother in the dream, who is the non-ego, are a declaration that resonates from the unconscious. Even if something is impossible in a scientific and rational world, in the non-ego world, it is possible to give birth at 62. However, consciousness cannot understand this. In some cases, consciousness may outright reject such an incomprehensible declaration. Yet, in the dream, the client is surprised by the mother's incomprehensible words but simply listens. In other words, even though she knows it is impossible, her consciousness accepts it by listening to it.

[Dream 2: Three years after counseling began]

My son, who had been staying indoors, tries to go outside. As he steps out the front door, there is a large dog barking. It looks like it's crying. Faced with the dog, my son cannot go outside and asks me to do something for him. So, I pick up the dog and take it to the rooftop. For some reason, it's a very tall building, like a skyscraper, and I climb the stairs with the dog in my arms until we reach the rooftop. On the rooftop, I wipe the dog's entire body clean. Finally, I lick the dog's face gently. Then, I wake up.

In the dream, the fact that the son, who is actually withdrawn in reality, tries to go outside should be understood at the subjective level. In other words, the client's heart, which has been closed for a long time, is now trying to open, and the childlike part of her that has been locked away is trying to be released. However, there is still an issue remaining. That is, there is a dog barking in front of the house. The dog may be trying to scare the child away from going outside. However, it is said that the dog also seems to be crying. Either way, it seems that feelings of anxiety and sadness are pouring out. And in the dream, her son does not ask the dog to stop barking, but asks her to "do something." If she wants to stop the dog from barking, she could scold it or put a leash on it and take it somewhere else. However, when the client is told, "Please do something," she picks up the dog and takes it to the top of a tall building. It is a place close to the sky, open toward the heavens. This client has been troubled by family and ancestral relationships for a long time, meaning she has been tossed about by horizontal phenomena. However, here, the vertical direction opens up, and a door opens toward something not horizontal or self-centered. Wiping the dog's entire body clean is like wiping the body of a newborn baby and freeing it from the amniotic fluid. And this reaches its climax when the client licks the dog's face. Just as a dog licks a newborn baby to welcome it into the world, she is welcoming her newly born infantile self.

By the way, dogs are considered divine animals that help children come into the world in Japan. On a day called "Inu no Hi" (Dog Day), which is believed to be a day when dogs have strong spiritual power, people visit certain shrines to receive a red belly band, which they then wrap around their stomachs in the belief that it will help them give birth to a healthy baby. This red band is imbued with the spiritual motherhood of dogs. In other words, the folklore surrounding dogs is maternal and nurturing. Furthermore, dogs stand at the entrance of many shrines, watching over those who pass through and welcoming them into the divine realm. The dog that appears in this dream celebrates the birth of the child into the world, welcomes it, and nurtures it with maternal care.

[Dream 3: Four years after counseling began, two months before it ends]

I stand with a three-panel mirror behind me, holding a hand mirror, looking at my back. I check my hairstyle and clothing to make sure they're not odd, then look at my back and my entire body. Then, I see in the hand mirror a small child walking unsteadily. Startled, I turn around and see my one-year-old son. I beckon him with my hand, saying, "Come here," and he walks toward me and comes out of the mirror. When I hold him, I feel his weight. I smell his milky scent, which makes me cry and I can't stop.

This dream deeply shook the therapist's heart. A three-mirrored mirror reflects one's image from various angles. In other words, it allows one to see one's existence and state of mind from every angle. The client stands before the three-panel mirror, reflecting her back, while holding a hand mirror. She then reflects the image of her back from the three-panel mirror into the hand mirror, examining it in detail. This creates a double reflection. She is checking her hairstyle, probably because she is wearing a traditional Japanese hairstyle and a kimono. In traditional Japanese attire, it is important to neatly arrange the hair at the back and the obi sash at the back of the kimono. In other words, she is embodying the acceptance of the traditions of Japanese culture that have tormented and manipulated her. And she is arranging the back side of herself—the unconscious side—that she cannot directly see. What is striking is that she captures her back only after reflecting her image in the three-panel mirror and then in the hand mirror, that is, through two reflections. Although she cannot see it directly, indirectly, through non-direct means, she is able to look back on her life and accept herself as someone who has been tormented by her family, traditions, and the family system. First, she consulted about her son's withdrawal, and then, by looking back on her own life, she was finally able to accept her entire self as a "homo totus".

Furthermore, surprisingly, once she was able to accept her entire self, a small child appeared. In the mirror, a real entity appeared, not a reflection. Of course, this was not a physical entity of this world, but a spiritual entity of the other world, something like the essence that transcends this world. In other words, the function of the mirror at work here is its second function, which could also be called the original function of the mirror. Normally, a mirror is considered a tool for reflecting something and understanding oneself through that reflection. However, a mirror is not merely a tool for reflecting; it also functions as a door to another world, to the world beyond. **"In a mirror, a person sees the whole world. Those who look into a mirror can see the three realms of the world's wisdom as a whole and understand them"** (GW14/I, § 133, n.107). This child is a very real manifestation of wisdom and the otherworld. As evidence of this, when the client holds this child, she feels its weight and even smells the milk of a breastfeeding baby. The client was able to once again embrace her relationship with her child, which she had given up on, as her own childhood, that is, her own vibrant future, potential, and possibilities.

As an additional note, in the Grimm fairy tale "Snow White," there is a version where Snow White has a dog named "Mirror." The "dog" and "mirror" that breathe life into this client's soul are present in the dream mentioned here, supporting the client's essence and unfolding it anew.



3. Japanese mythology and Jungian Basic Stance

C.G. Jung encountered the incomprehensible throughout his life, whether it was during his early years at the Burghölzli psychiatric hospital, the various imagery experiences depicted in The Red Book, his travels to America and Africa in search of the origins of the world, his experiences during World War II, or his studies of alchemy. His approach to phenomena was not a rational attempt to grasp and understand them in a linear manner, but rather one that culminated in the concept of "circumambulation," meaning to simply circle around the unknown, engage with it carefully, gradually become familiar with it, and understand it indirectly.

Interestingly, this phenomenon of indirect understanding of the incomprehensible is also typified in the myth of Amaterasu's hiding in the cave in Japanese mythology. It is also considered to be deeply related to the examples discussed here. It is well known that Amaterasu Omikami, unable to bear her brother's destructive behavior, which she found utterly incomprehensible, turned away and withdrew into a rock. Then, in front of the large rock where she had withdrawn, Ame-no-Uzume danced a sacred dance, and chickens began to crow. Seeing this amusing dance, the gods burst into laughter. Hearing the commotion, Amaterasu Omikami opened the rock slightly. At that moment, Amaterasu saw the Eight-Span Mirror that was there. Thinking that the figure reflected in the mirror was a noble deity, Amaterasu, the Great Deity, stepped out of the rock cave to see it more clearly.

What was reflected in the mirror may have been the form of a god I had never seen before. Perhaps it was the god of a newborn child. While there are no direct parallels between the client's dream and this scene from Japanese mythology, what they suggest is that when engaging with something withdrawn or something that emerges from beyond the mirror, it may be necessary to abandon all preconceptions and engage with the incomprehensible. Jung recommended the attitude of **"ignotum per ignotum,"** that is, explaining the unknown with the more unknown, when faced with the unknown. He stated, **"This is an admission of one's inferiority, incompleteness, and dependence, and a proof of the freedom to choose between truth and error"** (Erinnerungen, S.356, my translation).

The psychological transformation that arises through engaging with the incomprehensible can be thought of as Jung's concept of beginning to experiment with one's own essence. **"My aim is to bring about a psychic state in which my patient begins to experiment with his own nature—a state of fluidity, change, and growth where nothing is eternally fixed and hopelessly petrified"** (CW 16 § 99). It is also said that **"man is completely human only when he is at play"** (CW 16 § 98), or, as **"he is only wholly man when he is playing"** (CW 6 § 171).

Literature

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Japanese mythology "Ama no Iwa-to," and folktales "Inu Muko-iri," Grimm's fairy tale "Snow White"