



# 1

## The Divine

This book is about dreams about the divine. However, thus far, I have discussed only the importance of our experience of depth, the areas of life that offer us particular challenges, and some theories of human nature offered by Jung, Jaspers, and Heidegger that describe the complexity of human beings and our tendency to stay on the surface of life rather than living deeply. I haven't yet talked about what seems the central concept in a book about dreams about the divine: what is meant here by "the divine"?

The short answer to this question is "whatever you think it means." When I collected material for the book I asked people to contribute dreams that they believed were about the divine. The result was material in two basic categories: dreams that had a special "feel," what Jung would call numinous dreams, and dreams whose subject matter was identified by the dreamers as having to do with the divine. Thus dreams in the former category are identified by a certain quality of experience, while dreams in the latter are identified by subject matter. Some dreams combine these qualities, for example, numinous dreams about recognizable religious figures such as Jesus. From my point of view as a therapist and spiritual director, many of these dreams also marked important changes in the points of view or lives of the dreamers. In some instances, they provided insight, healing, and hope. In others, they were deeply disturbing and frightening, leaving the dreamers with a sense of contact with a threatening otherness.

After a famous interview on the BBC in which he said he did not *believe* in God, but rather *knew*, Jung replied to the many letters received by the BBC in a letter to *The Listener* on January 21, 1960. In his letter, he describes God in the following way: "This is the name by which I designate all things

which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse. In accordance with tradition I call the power of fate in this positive as well as negative aspect, and inasmuch as its origin is beyond my control, 'god', a 'personal god', since my fate means very much myself, particularly when it approaches me in the form of conscience as a *vox Dei*, with which I can even converse and argue. (We do and, at the same time, we know that we do. One is subject as well as object.)"<sup>1</sup> One way and another, all these dreams crossed the paths of and changed the dreamers: dreamers who were deeply unhappy felt healed and comforted, dreamers who were complacent or stuck were disturbed, dreamers who were searching and wondering about meaning were illuminated. Contact with the divine changes people, and perhaps this is one of most reliable indicators of the presence of the divine: something comes into consciousness and makes a change that is not driven by will, that is unexpected and spontaneous. This leaves aside questions about the nature of the divine. Dreamers have experienced the divine as the Christian God, as a Canadian mountie, as a terrifying force, as a magical animal. Traditional concepts of the divine in all the major religious traditions allow for the possibility of many representations of the divine, including radical nonrepresentation, such as the Buddhist notion of the divine as nothing, no-thing, or the experience of the divine as overwhelming noncognitive affect, such the experience of Bruder Klaus as discussed by Jung.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary psychoanalysts such as Bion and Lacan talk about "O" and "jouissance".<sup>3</sup> Nothing can be excluded. Jaspers sees all ways of envisioning the divine as incomplete; in his view, Transcendence is ultimately indefinable, and what we envision and experience is a representation of Transcendence that points to the transcendent realm but is by no means complete or absolute. Each way of experiencing and/or conceiving of the divine is what he calls a cipher, and our relation to these ciphers is an aspect of the elucidation of *Existenz*, which he sees as a gift from the Transcendent. This is a particularly important point, since virtually all the dreamers represented here experience these images as important factors in their own relation to the divine, whether the divine is experienced in a person-to-person relationship or as a more overwhelming and impersonal presence. The possibility of spiritual depth seems to depend to a great extent on the ability of individuals to have and accept what they would identify as living, personal spiritual experience, which can and indeed ought to be quite idiosyncratic. This means that we must include all sorts of experiences of the divine, not just the familiar or the pleasant.

This also leaves aside the question of actions on the basis of experiences of the divine. It is not, unfortunately, unfamiliar to hear of people who murder others because "God told them to." Are these people having experi-

ences of the divine? From a Jungian standpoint, these experiences are genuinely archetypal, but they are unassimilable because they are not mediated by the ego. From a traditional Christian standpoint, they would be seen as experiences of the demonic, which is in its own way transcendent, though not ultimate. However, in both instances there is a sense of consciousness being overwhelmed by the negative divine, with no apparent possibility for conscious choice or reflection. For the divine to work constructively in our lives, we need to be able to come into conscious relation with it in some way other than being driven by it. And again, this is furthered by our accepting our own experiences as genuine rather than denying them, no matter how unlikely they may seem. Accepting them as genuine can include finding them repellent and frightening, and refusing to act on them, as well as being inspired and delighted.

### Why This, Why Here, Why Now?

So far, I have presented dreams about the divine in both a Jungian and a more generally spiritual framework. From these points of view, we could say that dreams about the divine have their origins in the Self and the tendency of archetypes to incarnate. From the spiritual standpoint, we can talk about the longing for the divine, the sense that there is a spark of the divine in ourselves that calls out to the transpersonal divine, or we could say the divine seeks us through the unconscious. A sense of its presence in waking life is often considerably enhanced by dreams about the divine. Dreams about the divine often occur when we are in life situations that we want to change but can't see any way to change, the kind of situation that often involves suffering, frustration, grief, severe disappointment, and/or loss. These are the existential conditions that characterize both life and ourselves, conditions that we experience as limitations, but that could also be described as structuring our possibilities.

I have arranged the dreams we will examine in two ways. First, I have created three categories: dreams of comfort, healing, and renewal, dreams of energy, and "bad" dreams. These categories are not exhaustive, but they represent three fundamental ways in which we can experience the divine in the psyche. Dreams of comfort, healing, and renewal are generally related to situations in which there has been psychic wounding of various kinds; the wound in the psyche is not just soothed but to some degree healed through the dream. Dreams of energy often occur in situations in which severe limitation is experienced and there is apparently unresolvable conflict about what to do: they contain unexpected, often frightening, inrushes of numinous psychic energy. "Bad" dreams can also be related to limitation, unresolved conflict,

and dangerous unconsciousness: these are dreams that are frightening, disturbing, and often painful, but at the same time seem to concern one's life beyond the purely personal.

Second, I will offer two case studies, work with clients in which dreams about the divine were especially important. One of these case studies is an illustration of the extraordinary part played by changing relations with the divine through a client's lifetime.

I will also discuss the presence of dreams about the divine in transference and countertransference, and the role they can play for both client and therapist/spiritual director.

All of these dreams can be seen as responses to what Jaspers refers to as boundary situations.<sup>4</sup> In Jaspers's view, human life contains kinds of situations that are inevitable, in that, whatever the content of our experience, it will be structured in these ways. One of the tasks of the authentic human being is to come into relation with these situations in some way other than experiencing them unreflectively (which often leads to feeling victimized by them) or knowing about them theoretically. For Jaspers it is important for us to confront them, to come into some kind of conscious relation to them as structuring the possibilities of our lives. Boundary situations are both limiting and delineate possibilities: we cannot avoid them, but they create occasions for consciousness, choice, and possible increase of depth. Jaspers's boundary situations are both general and particular. There is the historicity of existential existence and the dubiousness of existential existence. In particular, there are death, suffering, struggle, and guilt. In my own view, we can add to these particular boundary situations two more, which are related: disappointment and loss.

Describing boundary situations briefly we can say the following. In general, we cannot avoid living in a particular time in history with particular parents in a particular place. We also cannot avoid the contingency of human existence, the fact that any resolution we might find to a particular problem of existence is finite, and that this situation is unchangeable. These are conditions of our existence in the world. In particular, we cannot avoid either death or the knowledge of our own deaths. We cannot avoid suffering: we inevitably experience suffering, and we cannot avoid seeing the universality of human suffering, often great human suffering. Struggle too is a basic feature of human existence, since resources are limited. As well, we struggle for understanding with other human minds, and we struggle through love to truly understand another human being, thereby understanding ourselves as well. Guilt is inevitable because we have both possibilities and are required to choose among them. We are responsible for both what we choose and what is rejected, and this responsibility is cumulative in that we create ourselves through a lifetime of choice, and are responsible for this creation: the choices

define us and limit us, and our guilt is a result of this responsibility and these choices. Finally, no matter how successful we are, no matter how our lives flourish, we cannot help experiencing disappointment and loss. We have dreams and fantasies that are never fulfilled, often dreams and fantasies that are crucially important to the meaning of our lives. Our personal relations invariably involve some degree of disappointment, sometimes quite severe disappointment. Things often, perhaps always, turn out much differently than we thought or hoped they were going to. Loss too is a basic feature of human life: as the Roman Stoics point out, ultimately everything is lost, and in the meantime, everything is contingent and fragile. People and other beings we love age and die, we lose sources of emotional security through social change and displacement, we lose money and resources.

We can relate to all these situations in a number of ways: resentment, avoidance, knowledge without application to ourselves, and entering into them as belonging to us and generating possibilities for authenticity. This last way leads us to consciousness and authentic actions through which we bring more of our being into the world and live from our depths. Jaspers distinguishes between the aspects of human being that can be described empirically and objectively through the sciences, and that which is essentially subjective and indescribable. "Jaspers calls this non-empirical dimension of humanity 'Existenz,' that is the nonobjective actuality of self-being, true self-hood, existential freedom, undetermined moral decision, or the genuine and authentic self."<sup>5</sup> Our central task, which goes beyond empirical understanding and intellectual activity, is the continuous, self-aware, and creative living out of Existenz which Jaspers calls "the elucidation of Existenz."

One of the main challenges of the elucidation of Existenz is the challenge of self-knowledge. Not theoretical self-knowledge, but intimate self-knowledge. Jaspers believes this is achieved to a great extent through the communication that goes on in authentic relationships. Jaspers envisions some of the most important self-knowledge as emerging from "the loving struggle for Existenz," a way of living out the boundary situation of struggle that can be creative for both people involved. Both people are committed to speaking the truth as each knows it and being willing to challenge and be challenged undensively in their common commitment to the development of Existenz in each. This image of the struggle to manifest as yet unknown depths is highly relevant to both inner work and work with dreams.

Deep inner work, whether through spiritual direction or therapy/analysis, can be seen as a version of the loving struggle for Existenz. Both people involved are committed to self-knowledge, both want to speak the truth, to challenge, and be challenged. It differs from Jaspers's description in that the relation is not a relation between equals in the sense that the spiritual director or therapist/analyst is sought out because the client believes she or he can

help. Thus there is the issue of transference and countertransference, based on the asymmetries of experienced authority or power. Nevertheless, the experience of spiritual direction or therapy/analysis that enables one to discover oneself at a deep level looks and feels very much like the struggle described by Jaspers.

Self-knowledge can also result from the struggle with Existenz in which one struggles with oneself. Jaspers describes this as the part of the process of self-becoming. "But struggle is not just an interrelation of human beings; it goes on in the individual as well. Existenz is the process of *self-becoming*, which is a *struggle with myself*. I stunt possibilities that are inherent in me and coerce my impulses; I shape my given propensities, question what I have become, and am aware of being only when I do not recognize my being as something I own."<sup>6</sup>

Jaspers's paradigm seems to be the struggle of two individuals. It is the fearless communication elicited in this struggle that helps us discover ourselves and others, the challenge to our persistent tendency to self-deception and avoidance that loving struggle helps overcome. His discussion of the inner struggle is extremely brief. However, thinking in terms of depth psychology, we can see how this sort of challenge and struggle between conscious and unconscious, and between ego and Self can apply to the inner life. These struggles require the same self-respect and compassion for one's own suffering that the person-to-person struggle requires of one for another.

One of the most compelling reasons for my connecting Jaspers with Jung is the part that communication plays in the elucidation of Existenz. The point of work with dreams is communication between the conscious and the unconscious and in dreams about the divine, between the Self and the ego. This relationship is ongoing and never ending in both the Jungian process of individuation and in Jaspers's picture of the elucidation of Existenz. We speak to ourselves, we speak to others, and others speak to us as truthfully as possible, and through this discourse we achieve depth of understanding, an expanded sense of ourselves, more intimate relations with ourselves, others, and the divine. Jung's unconscious enriches Jaspers's picture of the elucidation of Existenz, and Jaspers's concept of boundary situations and his detailed analyses of our existential situation enriches Jung's notion of the structure of the psyche.<sup>7</sup>

One reason the image of struggle is both appealing and helpful for inner work is phenomenological. We have all read case studies of people who do deep and painful work. Often the pain is well described, but the ongoing sense of struggle is not. To commit oneself to inner work is to commit oneself to a great deal of uncertainty and turbulence, living in conflict without forcing resolution, and experiencing profound ambivalence about what is emerging before, during, and after. Freud's essay "The Uncanny"<sup>8</sup> gives us a

sense of how difficult it often is to tolerate the feelings that surround the emergence of distressing repressed material. This leads inevitably to a great deal of ambivalence about the process itself. I have often had clients who were in the midst of painful work say, “I didn’t want to come today,” and mean it. Clients forget, are late, get lost on the way, have to cancel because of suddenly arising work commitments. All this can be connected with this ambivalence. The more powerful and significant the material that is trying to emerge, the greater the ambivalence and anxiety. Given these difficulties, the tenacity of clients is surprising. What helps them persist in the struggle?

One of the chief factors is a growing sense of connection with one’s deeper self. There is something indescribably satisfying about the sense of discovery and recognition of our own inner depths, the recovery of parts of ourselves that have been split off and abandoned. We can find that we know ourselves for the first time, and at the same time that we knew all along we were there, but had lost ourselves. There is also the extraordinary satisfaction of inner contact with the divine. It brings spirituality inside and gives a sense of the personal nature of spiritual work as opposed to the institutional quality of spiritual life that so many have grown up with. I use the term “satisfaction” rather than “pleasure,” because satisfaction of desire differs in quality from pleasure. There are many opportunities for pleasure in life, and they often give rise to many others. Experiencing pleasure is not the end of anything. But the satisfaction of desire puts an end to the desire because the longing or yearning has been fulfilled. Desire is replaced not by satiation but by satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> One way we can come to discover what our deepest needs are is through the sometimes unlooked for sense of satisfaction. It seems odd to talk about discovering our deepest needs; surely if they are so deep, we should know what they are. However, as Heidegger has pointed out, we have a propensity to forget ourselves, to forget, as he would say, Being. We need to be reminded. Heidegger thought angst would remind us of our most pressing possibility, death. But there are other possibilities and other reminders. A deep and sometimes unlooked for sense of satisfaction can be one of them. The deeper the satisfaction, the more important the desire. Doing inner work, people often experience the deepest satisfaction of their lives, a level of satisfaction they hadn’t thought possible. Satisfaction, relief, insight, are all marks of satisfying our deepest desires.

As we will see, a great deal of the dream activity in each chapter is engendered by our relation to boundary situations. Boundary situations combine with the demands of the psyche for development to produce situations in which the boundaries are sharply experienced. This is often frustrating and conflictual. It can also be stimulating and fruitful. One of the main difficulties of boundary situations is that they require us to understand them in a new way, and doing that requires the release of unconscious energy. In the most

radical instances of increased understanding, the energy that comes from the unconscious is divine energy, potentially bringing healing and a new point of view. Dreams about the divine offer us access to the energy in one of the least threatening ways possible. Dreams about the divine feel far less frightening than, for example, the appearance of a strange figure at the foot of one's bed at 5:00 A.M.. Dreams about the divine are often transitional: they assist in a change of viewpoint in a way that may be disturbing, but is also satisfying. They can be disturbing because they are a particularly intense version of the dream world as the world of the other in which we need to be open to meaning being given in an entirely different way, satisfying because they speak to our deep desire, often forgotten, to be in relation to our whole beings and to Being itself.