

## The Spiritual Foundations of Madness

An Interview with John Weir Perry, M.D.

Janis & Robert Henderson

**I**n his foreword to John Weir Perry's first book, *The Self in Psychotic Process*, C. G. Jung said, "I welcome Dr. Perry's book as a messenger of a time when the psyche of the mental patient will receive the interest it deserves." Perhaps more than any other Jungian, Dr. Perry has focused much of his professional career on understanding the psychotic process. He has published five books (the best known being *The Far Side of Madness*) and twenty-two articles.

After receiving his undergraduate degree in history and literature at Harvard, John completed his M.D. degree at Harvard Medical School in 1941. He served as a member of the Friends Ambulance Unit in China during World War II. He received a Rockefeller Fellowship to train at the C.G. Jung Institute of Zürich and was a member of its first class. One of his most memorable contributions to the mental health field was *Diabasis*, a residential facility for young adults with acute psychosis, where medication was not used. John has five children, five grandchildren, and one great-grandchild from his two marriages. He, Jo Wheelwright, and Joe Henderson were regarded as the triumvirate of the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco when it was founded in the 1950s.

We spoke with Dr. Perry at our kitchen table late one winter evening, as the New England snow glistened in the moonlight. He was spending the night with us after arriving from his home near San Francisco on route to workshops in New Hampshire and Vermont. At age eighty-two, Dr. Perry impressed us as a man with a very active mind, sound health, and a passion for appreciating the natural ways of the psyche.

**Hendersons:** When did your interest in Jung's work begin?

**John Perry:** It first began on the occasion of my meeting him in 1936. My father, who was the Presiding Bishop in the Episcopal Church, was visiting a friend in Switzerland. As they began talking about their sons, Father told him of my interest in going into a career involving psychology and religion. His friend exclaimed, "Then I know just the man to talk with him about that—Dr. Jung, who lives nearby in Küsnacht. I know him well and can arrange for you to meet him." He did just that, and the two men took to each other well. Later that same year, Jung attended Harvard's 300th anniversary celebration to receive an honorary degree, along with a number



JOHN WEIR PERRY, M.D.

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of top scholars, and he and Mrs. Jung spent two days with us at our home in Providence.

*Hendersons:* That was your first contact?

*Perry:* Yes. Jung was quite voluble and talked a blue streak about everything that interested him. I was still young (twenty-two) and green, just out of college, and deeply impressed. I had a hard time believing what I was hearing from him, though I made myself a promise that, later on, when I had taken up my career in psychotherapy, I would see for myself if what he was saying is the way it actually works in people.

*Hendersons:* What was Jung like?

*Perry:* He was very good company, lively, hardy, boisterous. It was a lovely two days. He could pull things together from mythology and religion in a meaningful way that related to actual life. He was not overpowering and he did not try to put on any type of imposing presence. His mind was very active. He had lots of energy and was keenly interested in whomever he was talking with. He was appallingly open and could come out with observations of the moment that were frank and perceptive. He was spicy, you know, in a good sort of way.

I even had a dream during his visit, which I shared with him when I came to the breakfast table. In it, I was standing by the mantelpiece, and at the opposite end was a Native-American warrior with a tomahawk in his hand. Suddenly he threw the tomahawk at me to catch. Dr. Jung pointed out, with intense emphasis, "Ah-ha, that's your own archaic man trying to get in touch with you and get your attention!" He was right on, as I soon found out.

*Hendersons:* Had you been in the habit of remembering your dreams before that?

*Perry:* Not really, but for Jung's visit I was ready! You know how it is—the psyche's wake-up call for such an occasion.

*Hendersons:* That's really neat. Did you have any contact with Jung after that?

*Perry:* He came to the Terry Lectures at Yale two years later. I was in the medical school at the time. I only had a chance to say hello, because he had to be protected from the mob of people who wanted to shake his hand.

*Hendersons:* Did meeting him change your plans at the time?

*Perry:* I was thinking of medical school but didn't know if I could make it, as I hadn't taken any pre-med and I didn't know how my father would take the news. I hadn't said anything to Father about it; I wanted to see if I could handle the sciences. While he was in Switzerland, I was taking physics in summer semester so I could apply to medical school. When my father

returned home, I was prepared to tell him. Jung had told him to tell me that he would suggest I go to medical school. So my father was preparing himself to break that news to me, and I was preparing to tell him of my plans.

*Hendersons:* Amazing. You were both going to tell each other the same thing. Your father had a nice contact with Jung.

*Perry:* He did, but he didn't sustain it.

*Hendersons:* Did you meet Emma Jung?

*Perry:* She came to our home in Providence with her husband. She was sterling—reserved, genuine. People respected her.

*Hendersons:* Did you meet Toni Wolff?

*Perry:* I worked with her—her and C.A. Meier. Jung referred me to both of them soon after I arrived in Zürich. I had never heard of such a thing but I thought to myself, *Well, coming from Jung, I'll go along with it.*

*Hendersons:* Did you see them at the same time?

*Perry:* Not in the same session but in the same week. It was intense! I was dealing with a lot of opposites, being in the midst of a culture clash upon returning from some years in China—so the experience of working with the two of them fit right in.

*Hendersons:* What was your impression of Toni Wolff?

*Perry:* In her younger years she was quite mysterious, having quite an allure of her own, distinctive, reserved, a little formal. She wasn't free and open when she spoke. When I worked with her, she was in her sixties. I liked her. She was good to work with. She really paid attention to the personal aspect of things. Freddy (C.A.) Meier was inclined the other way, to let the psyche do what it had to do, which I do a lot myself now. At the time I felt he would abstain from analyzing too much but just stoke up the process and let it be, going on its own. I do a lot of that with people who are disturbed—just let it alone and relate to it. I don't interpret very much.

*Hendersons:* Is there something different because of the personal contact with Jung? We have a sense that you have a different connection to the whole school of thought because you personally knew Jung and came into his ideas through actual contact with him. One of the reasons we've interviewed others who knew Jung is that we have sensed that these people feel something about the psychology that is not just heady.

*Perry:* It's all there in his writing, but what you take away from just reading it in the book is different from what you take away from the actual contact with him. His vitality was always operating and it was characteristic of his group in Zürich. They were all "live wires." Maybe we have made it our own more. We got the spirit from Jung and we have created our version of it, but nowadays people in the various institutes can only take the courses

and try to apply the ideas. Often their writings are more like a cookie-cutter application. For me, writing about it is not so much applying theory as *discovering* it. I think some of us who were with Jung felt freer than graduates today to rethink, reapply, and reexperience the theory in a different way—and not to have to ask anybody about it. At some institutes people read the works of Heinz Kohut and other object relations theorists as well as those of a number of approaches, and then they argue about it, each one feeling he or she has got it right. Maybe it has to do with a misguided sense of orthodoxy: that if you are a Jungian, then there is a certain way to think. I don't think that attitude is what Jung intended as a legacy!

*Hendersons:* It is as if Jung's ideas have become a doctrine, as occurs in formal religions. If you are going to be part of a particular church, you learn the doctrine and accept it without question.

*Perry:* Maybe that is the fate of all institutions—which is why the Gnostics did not allow that to happen.

*Hendersons:* Where do you see the Jungian movement going these days?

*Perry:* I think it has to pick up some new emphasis, to reinvigorate itself. Many of the Jungian institutes get so wrapped up in politics and infighting that they tend to self-destruct. I've often thought that would be a good way to enable them to start over again and gain back their original purpose—it would be a good thing to self-destruct by *intention* about every twenty-five years!

*Hendersons:* Probably the beginning is the most creative time.

*Perry:* It is the best phase for any institution or movement. I was very lucky to be at the Zürich institute in its very first year. Everybody was very excited and, of course, they fought a lot!

*Hendersons:* Were you one of the first graduates?

*Perry:* No, I had only the first two years of my training in Zürich and then came back to this country, where the training would have more clinical and therapeutic applications.

*Hendersons:* When did you study analytical psychology?

*Perry:* I was a conscientious objector and went to China as a physician. I did my residency at McClean Hospital in Massachusetts after I got back from China. After a year I figured I'd better take care of the interest in Jung, so I decided to go to Zürich. The institute was just beginning and Jung took hardly any part in it—he didn't really want the institute, he only allowed it, provided that they made it a place of scholarship and invited scholars to present and do research. He was not interested in having a place for only *Jungian* training. Jung was caught in a paradox that has no resolution. On

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one hand, he wanted people to understand that he had a truth or a system (the discovery of archetypes, how the psyche works, how the therapeutic process proceeds), and he was thoroughly convinced that people should learn about this. On the other hand, he was just as thoroughly convinced that in their training, people should find their own way and come up with their own conclusions. That's a head-on conflict I think the whole Jungian training has been stuck with ever since.

*Hendersons:* Did you have any sessions with Jung when you were in Zürich?

*Perry:* I did, but they were not so much therapy as "didactic interviews," sort of rap sessions once every two weeks.

*Hendersons:* You would go to his house?

*Perry:* Yes. These sessions were unique. Conversing with Jung was an experience. It was like stepping into a spacious consciousness, all with a high energy. We would just start with any topic and he would run with it. Each one was an eye-opener. I think I learned more from these sessions over a year and a half than anywhere else.

*Hendersons:* What were these sessions for? They were didactic, so you didn't bring in dreams. They were mainly intellectual discussions?

*Perry:* Intellectual doesn't quite say it. They were more visionary and highly stimulating, yet at the same time somewhat conceptual.

*Hendersons:* Do you think he was working out his ideas by talking with

various people?

*Perry:* He did a lot of that with the women around him. He made a joke of it himself—that he surrounded himself with intelligent women who did scholarly work with him and stimulated his own efforts to open up some new vistas. There was a kind of dynamo of creative energy going on between them.

*Hendersons:* Do you think that Jung was seeing things differently, that he had the kind of mind that could pull little pieces together and come up with something big?

*Perry:* I think it was more than that. He had an immense curiosity. He would get on a line of investigation and would just pursue and pursue it, going into ancient books, into Latin and Greek times, medieval times. Marie-Louise von Franz would research things and find source material for him. It was very stimulating for all of them and highly productive. After all, their efforts resulted in twenty volumes of writings! Today it would be like being a research assistant to a professor.

Marie-Louise von Franz had the same kind of fine mind that Jung had. I wanted to learn German at that time so I could read some of the untranslated writings. She needed a little money and I needed the education, so I paid her for some hours of language instruction. We would read the new books together in German. I got something from the text of these books and a whole lot from her in conversation. She would make all kinds of comments about what was said in German and what the words had meant over the years.

*Hendersons:* Did you feel at that time that you were working with some really strange stuff? That the outside world regarded Jung and his ideas as very unorthodox and unconventional? That you were working with a strange and far-out kind of guy? And that something was wrong with you for taking this guy seriously?

*Perry:* Around Boston they all thought I was crazy. "You won't get anything from Jung," they'd say.

*Hendersons:* Especially coming from Harvard. Some people at Harvard still think Jung is kind of crazy!

*Perry:* I know they do. But at the time, Harry Murray was a professor at Harvard. He had the Chair that William James had held. He had spent some time in Zürich working with Jung, and through him I had that secondary connection with Jung.

*Hendersons:* Jung is more widely accepted and credible now than back then.

*Perry:* You're right. People thought I was off then—more than far out.

But I was pretty sure what I was after. It didn't set me apart from people very much, though. They let me have my interest without getting antagonistic about it.

#### AGAPE LOVE

*Hendersons:* Did you know what you needed to learn from Jung or wanted to learn and how it would fit in with the rest of your studies?

*Perry:* I was on a special quest that had started much earlier; my interest in schizophrenia came later. Originally I was interested in the evolutionary aspects of psychic development. In that perspective, I was curious about the source of "agape love" or universal love—where in the psyche does that experience come from? There was no way of accounting for it with the psychology at that time. It wasn't sublimated Eros; it wasn't something you learned intellectually, like the Greek notion of Eros. I went into psychology to find that out.

*Hendersons:* So you had a big interest in religion?

*Perry:* I did, and specifically agape love. I was quite religious. That's what took me to China with the Quakers working on medical teams as a civilian physician. Like I said, I was a conscientious objector, and my convictions were more religious than political.

*Hendersons:* What is agape love?

*Perry:* Universal love or the brotherhood of humankind. There is no way of accounting for it in the old psychology. It is a very strong dynamic and an emotion with powerful effects. It is not like ordinary love. So where does it come from?

*Hendersons:* In theology it is love of God or God's love for us.

*Perry:* It is said to be given by grace, not earned by effort.

*Hendersons:* So the source of agape love has been a guiding direction for all your work?

*Perry:* Yes, it seems as if all my other interests since age twenty have been spin-offs from this overall quest. I have come to understand that God, like love, operates at the biological level and the physical level, and that in that sense, God is an organizing, cohesive principle acting through all of evolution and, at the human level, is experienced as love.

*Hendersons:* You know the famous quote by Jung in which he said he didn't need to believe in God because he knew God. What do you make of it?

*Perry:* I think I know what he meant. God is an experience, not a definition or thought or an object. People who touch that inner dimension, that center, are changed by it, and it affects the way they relate to people. I

like the expression, "God is the Beyond in the midst." For me, God is not at all theoretical but can be found in the interchange.

*Hendersons:* You had this interest in agape love before you met Jung and you felt Jung was someone who could help you in your search?

*Perry:* Yes. I was fascinated by the psychology of religion and Jung seemed to me to know some important things about it. Harry Murray at Harvard wouldn't let me drop this pursuit. I would tell him that I was going to "let it ride" for a while, but he warned me not to let that happen. He reminded me that many would "give their right arm to have two days with Dr. Jung, as you did." I am glad he gave me the help he did, as I was inclined to let it go for the meantime and get back to it someday when I could see for myself in working with people.

*Hendersons:* Did you ever find your answer?

*Perry:* Nowadays it's no secret. When people have experiences of enlightenment or near-death, the psychic center makes itself known and they come back with wisdom and compassion. They have a new understanding of life; they feel on fire with it after that. And it doesn't go away. It is unlike the usual love experience.

*Hendersons:* Did you ever find what you felt was the source of agape love?

*Perry:* I think it is the archetype of the center.

*Hendersons:* The Self?

*Perry:* Yes. The Self represents itself as the center. In each of the major religions you find this represented in connection with enlightenment.

*Hendersons:* Is this how you refer to God?

*Perry:* Yes. Saying that God is love begins to make sense, not just a bit of sentimental poetry. God really is love.

*Hendersons:* Do you think your father, the bishop, would have said, "Gee, John, you did not have to go to all that trouble. I could have told you that?" [Laughter]

*Perry:* That would have been quite a meeting! He was okay with things like that. I was rebelling against my education. I wanted to bring the formulations up to date, but more particularly, I was not content with metaphysical statements. I was on a hunt for the psychological sources in a scientific framework. He was always very accepting and encouraging of anything I felt drawn to—he would say, "Go with it."

*Hendersons:* I can imagine, John, for a minister's son to ask, "What is the source of agape love?"—the son would have received at least a sermon and perhaps several books thrown at him! But your father didn't do that. He encouraged you to follow your own path.

*Perry:* More than that—he opened up the way for me by connecting me to Jung.

*Hendersons:* This is an interesting parallel you have with Jung: both of your fathers were ministers.

*Perry:* Yes, and Jung felt restless, not hearing what he wanted to hear.

*Hendersons:* Did you feel that identification when you learned who Jung was?

*Perry:* I did. I felt a tremendous affinity with Jung, especially after I was in China. He had a lot of Taoist in him. Taoism in China is not just a school of thought; it is a whole way of culture. I had absorbed a lot of it when I was there and loved it, and when I perceived it in Jung, I felt a lot of affinity with him.

*Hendersons:* If you had one more time with Jung, what would you ask him or want to talk about?

*Perry:* Frankly, by this time I no longer have the feeling I had in the fifties that I wanted his opinion on certain issues. I've done just what he hoped of all of us—that we would find our own views and methods as a result of our analytical experience. I would value and enjoy such an exchange with him, but no longer as one needing his guiding comments on certain issues.

#### PSYCHOSIS AND DIABASIS

*Perry:* Working with psychosis as I have, I've sometimes felt that I might be veering off the path of my original quest. But I kept finding that what the experience of psychosis produces as its goal is the same as the experience of agape love. In psychosis it is all idealized and symbolized as only the potential to love, but it is there for sure.

*Hendersons:* Psychosis has a connection with that kind of love?

*Perry:* Yes, and often put into religious terms. But the psyche is doing the work regardless of the religious language. It is trying to get the person's affect mobilized to connect with people in a deep way that it never had before.

*Hendersons:* So the outward quest you were on parallels the inward quest of all people in the development of the personality, even those who are psychotic.

*Perry:* And the things I was learning from patients were the same as those I was learning in my quest to find the source of agape love. All my work converged, in spite of my expectations, and I realized that I was not on a detour anymore.

*Hendersons:* What got you interested in working with the psychotic process?

*Perry:* When I got back from Zürich, I thought I was going to work with psychosomatic syndromes and their archetypal underpinnings. I went to McClean Hospital to continue my residency and was assigned a case of a young, married, very psychotic woman. She started drawing pictures of being at the center of the world, and they were perfect mandalas! I asked her if she had seen these anywhere and she said no. I asked if she knew what they were, and she said no, that they had come spontaneously. Her process revealed themes of death and rebirth, the clash of the opposites at the center, and coming out with a harmonized, quadrated world emphasizing the center. She came out of the psychosis in about six weeks.

*Hendersons:* Wow!

*Perry:* She was very schizophrenic, presumably. It seems that she was engaged in a self-healing process, not a disease or a sickness.

*Hendersons:* So that is where you got your original idea, from the patient at McClean Hospital, just after returning from Zürich?

*Perry:* It was some sort of a guardian angel that set that up, I am sure! I could have missed it easily.

*Hendersons:* You were fresh in from Zürich, with all the Jungian ideas spinning around . . .

*Perry:* . . . which could even have come off on her, you know, in some subterranean, psychic way I don't know about. I didn't "put my oar" in very much. All I did was ask her for more and we kept going.

*Hendersons:* Undirected drawings?

*Perry:* Yes, they were wholly spontaneous.

*Hendersons:* Do you know what happened to her?

*Perry:* She had a brief relapse when I left, which was considered normal. She went home then and a year or two later had a baby. I heard indirectly that she never had another relapse. I didn't want her to feel I was using her experience, even though I was! I didn't want to put that on her. It is a hard thing, using people in this kind of work. You discover these fascinating things, and in order to explain what you have discovered, you have to give an account of the case. She gave me a whole different impression of the psyche, which even Jung hadn't given me—that psychosis was a self-healing process in the midst of all the turmoil. It raised the question in my mind whether this was really a psychosis or a spiritual upheaval.

*Hendersons:* Did you meet with her daily?

*Perry:* I met with her three times a week.

*Hendersons:* Was the aim to help her talk about the experiences she was

having through the drawings? What we would call "exploring the psychotic content"?

*Perry:* It was like dreamwork, like someone bringing in a dream or a painting from a dream. I usually let patients do most of the talking. I didn't understand for awhile, even after Zürich, that the personal issues run hand in hand with the symbolic issues, so that these would weave back and forth with each other.

*Hendersons:* How did you go from there to Diabasis?

*Perry:* I volunteered time at the university hospital in San Francisco and later at the county hospital, where I thought I would have a freer hand. I did this for a decade; three times a week I would see two or three patients, selecting them on the basis of this kind of content. I wanted to know, was this experience in Boston unique or typical of psychotic patients? Are they really not crazy, after all?

*Hendersons:* Did you limit your work to young people who were having their first psychotic break?

*Perry:* Yes. Typically I selected patients who were in their twenties, having their first break, and actively producing content. They all had ideas of having died and being reborn. Each had the same program of imagery. After a decade I had about a dozen cases and I was invited to present my findings on psychosis as a self-healing process to the New York Academy of Sciences.

*Hendersons:* Amazing!

*Perry:* I thought I had done my bit and I was ready to let someone else carry on the work. But then, about six years later, Julian Silverman, a good friend of mine, asked me to join him on a research project weaving together our findings. I was interested in identifying what kind of patients do well without medication. We set up this design—double blind, as they call it—at the state hospital, with cases randomly assigned, each regularly getting a similar capsule of either thiorazine or a placebo. Half the patients on the unit would be on medication and half wouldn't, and no one knew which was which.

*Hendersons:* Same program for both?

*Perry:* Everything was the same for both groups. The staff didn't know, only the research people knew.

*Hendersons:* Was there an effort to encourage the staff to deal with the images?

*Perry:* Everybody was encouraged and everyone was treated the same way. Guess what? The patients on placebo did far better in the long-term follow-up. Those on medication had about the same rate of relapse and

return to the hospital as is reported by most hospitals in the country—73 percent. The ones who received no medication had a return of 8 percent.

*Hendersons:* That's amazing!

*Perry:* Silverman was concerned about attention styles, and he found that the patients who were the most inwardly directed—or introverted—turned out the best. They knew what to do with whatever came up from inside and so they could rock along with it and benefit by it. The most outwardly directed or extraverted tended to try to get rid of what came up via projection.

*Hendersons:* When did you begin Diabasis?

*Perry:* After my work with Julian and the Agnew Project, I concluded that this work couldn't be done in a hospital. Everything is stacked against you: the administration is always coming down on you, and the whole atmosphere is focused on sickness: "You are here because you are sick with a brain disorder." Then there is rigorous pharmacological treatment to squash the process. I decided that the only way to do this kind of work is to have a place that is a home—there is nothing "clinical" about it—to have a staff of paraprofessionals—not professionals—and I and another Jungian psychiatrist, Howard Levene, would educate, supervise, and coach the staff. Before we got started, we met with the staff often and told them that they were not working for us, that it was *their* show. There was a very unique feeling that lasted for a couple of years, until we were closed down for an interval of another couple of years before reopening. The staff was enthusiastic and had a lot of energy for this approach. They made all the decisions and took responsibility for the home and the residents. It went better than we'd expected. We would tell the patients, "What you are experiencing is neither a sickness nor a disorder. It might be nightmarish at times or beautiful at times, but just stick with it and we will help you with it." Essentially, we treated them like normal people. What we found was that by the second or third day, they weren't crazy anymore. They came in very psychotic, clearly mixed up, with "delusions" and "hallucinations," and by the second or third day they would be talking the way you and I are talking.

*Hendersons:* They had a period of time when they talked about their delusions?

*Perry:* A staff member would sit down with a client and say, "Tell me what is going on." Each would have one or two clients with whom they would talk. The classical view is that such people do not relate or have any affect, but what we found is that they are dying to relate and they want to tell you about everything they are experiencing. The psychiatric habit is not to let people talk about that stuff because it is too confusing and irrational.

*Hendersons:* How long did your home stay afloat?

*Perry:* Two periods of two years with the two-year interval between. It was part of the mental health system, but the funding was cut from all special services in the county in one fell swoop. We were invited to continue as a six-day "hospital divergence facility" using medications, but we had to say no to that.

*Hendersons:* What was the average length of stay for a patient in your facility?

*Perry:* We had a ceiling on it. In the first two-year period it was three months and in the second, we kept it to two months.

*Hendersons:* Did your work with the psychotic process make you more of a Jungian?

*Perry:* It gave me a real confirmation of what Jung was talking about but also opened me to things beyond what he had a chance to see himself—I wish he had a chance to see what we saw. He had already died by the time we'd conceived of Diabasis in 1968.

*Hendersons:* Where did the name *Diabasis* come from?

*Perry:* It is a Greek word that means "a crossing over."

*Hendersons:* Have you come to any other ideas about the psychotic process?

*Perry:* I have found that when third-world countries or preurban societies are in cultural crisis and are going through changes they can't handle, either they fall apart or they "discover" a prophet, according to whom they reorganize and come to life again along new lines. Usually the prophet is someone who is spaced out and pretty crazy for about six weeks and often goes through the same process that the people did at Diabasis. Six weeks is forty days. Psychotic people often have delusions that they are on a messianic mission. They may even believe they are "the Messiah." They are sort of failed or potential prophets who lack the charisma or the capacity to actually bring it off! But what they are going through is what prophets go through.

*Hendersons:* Prophets go through a psychotic process? Who would be an example?

*Perry:* In Native-American history there is the story of Handsome Lake of Seneca (Iroquois) in the eighteenth century. The culture had fallen apart, essentially becoming a dispirited slum. Handsome Lake, it is told, became upset when he was found guilty of stealing one of the sacred songs. He was getting sick at the same time. He went into a stupor for six weeks and it was assumed that he was dying. When he awoke again, he said that he had been traveling into the heavens. His experience was like any other psychosis. Eventually, he did revive the culture in a very vigorous way.

"[Psychosis] disappears when you change the reception of it.

*What patients say repeatedly is that they felt fine*

*with what was happening until someone*

*came along and made the pronouncement,*

*"We have to send you to the hospital.*

*You shouldn't be like this.' Then they started to feel crazy.*

*Putting all those things together convinces me*

*that the craziness is not in the head*

*but in the interaction between the inside and outside."*

We are in a culture that has no room for the natural process of visionary experience, calling it a *psychosis* because we don't know what to do with it but to put an end to it as fast as we can.

*Hendersons:* That is such a different view of psychosis. Are you anti-medication?

*Perry:* I certainly am against medication for the early episodes.

*Hendersons:* If this is a natural process, then is it going on in all of us in some form? And those who become psychotic do so because the process hasn't been allowed its due course. Is that how you'd describe it?

*Perry:* Yes, the process overwhelms the person; the ego isn't strong enough. Jung said there are two kinds of psychosis: one that occurs when the ego is too weak for the active psyche, and the other when the ego is strong but overwhelmed, barely able to process what is happening. This is what happened to Jung himself. He went off the edge during those years after he separated from Freud, but he managed to do so in a very creative way; he had rich experiences due to his enormous energy and his ego strength.

I recall a patient at McClean Hospital who was a deeply depressive and psychotic woman. The staff wanted to do electric shock on her, but I convinced them to give me three weeks with her. A nurse told the patient what I had said and that turned the corner for the woman. She began to open up with me, she came alive, her unconscious started producing vivid imagery.

She had a very rich unconscious process, which manifested in her dreams.

*Hendersons:* You were just there to appreciate her process. You "had an ear" for her experiences.

*Perry:* I have my own theory of psychosis. It is not in the head.

*Hendersons:* Where is it?

*Perry:* Essentially, it disappears when you change the reception of it. What patients say repeatedly is that they felt fine with what was happening until someone came along and made the pronouncement, "We have to send you to the hospital. You shouldn't be like this." Then they started to feel crazy. Putting all those things together convinces me that the craziness is not in the head but in the interaction between the inside and outside.

*Hendersons:* Where the person's process meets the consensual views of society?

*Perry:* Yes.

*Hendersons:* So you found that if you provide a safe container for the psychotic experience, it changes the whole thing.

*Perry:* Right away. It is surprising. And it makes it all the more distressing when you see severe prohibitions against allowing psychotic processes to surface.

#### MEDICATION AND THE PSYCHE

*Hendersons:* Nowadays, with more and more psychiatrists prescribing medication rather than doing psychotherapy, where does that leave you, Dr. Perry?

*Perry:* Feeling alienated! I did a lot of teaching in the fifties and sixties in this country and Europe and was well received. Then when the "medication only" trend came along, that changed. In *Toxic Psychiatry*, Peter Breggen traces the history of this change. I believe that the American Psychiatric Association was seduced by the drug companies and convinced to medicate everyone.

*Hendersons:* With all the focus on medication today, what do you think is happening to the psyche?

*Perry:* I think what is happening is tragic and frightening. There is a very cautious attitude toward experimental investigation unless it is scientifically accountable. All the experimental work is being done outside the profession, in graduate schools and various institutes, so that while the investigation is growing, it is all unofficial as far as psychiatry is concerned. We now have two or three generations of psychiatrists who have never seen clients going through a whole psychosis beyond the initial interviews.



*Hendersons:* Do you feel that the mental health community has been seduced by greed?

*Perry:* Not just greed. They are caught by an ever-tighter budget, which they can't do much about. There is a lot of politics involved.

*Hendersons:* And the psyche is being sacrificed with most of this?

*Perry:* Very much.

*Hendersons:* So you feel that to "medicate only" stops the natural process. The symptoms are squashed and you end up with a functioning person who has not completed the reorganization.

*Perry:* Yes. Medication aborts the process. It is incomplete and the person is discouraged by the prevailing view that this is something that should not have happened.

*Hendersons:* Is this negative attitude what creates a chronic schizophrenic?

*Perry:* Yes.

*Hendersons:* At some point, the psyche just gives up.

*Perry:* Yes. I saw a beautiful film last year in Vienna that documented several people who'd been through a psychosis and who had received the regular treatment. Their spirit had been crushed when they were told that they would have to live with their sickness the rest of their lives. It was very bleak. When they were led to realize that they did not have to take it that way, their vital though hidden lives became evident—each very talented, coming to life that way.

*Hendersons:* Do you feel at the age of eighty-two that you have discovered something in your work that is valuable and important but has not caught on and been appreciated?

*Perry:* In the 1970s my work was given that kind of recognition . . . but now in the 1990s . . . I do feel that way. I know someone will pick it up again, though. My function at this point is to lend a hand if someone does get a program going. A young woman in New Hampshire wants to get something started for postpartum psychosis and I have offered to lend a hand.

#### WORKING ON ONESELF

*Hendersons:* How do you work with your dreams?

*Perry:* I record them. There are times of active dreaming and then times of few dreams, depending. I have found, on how caught up in external demands I am.

*Hendersons:* So when you don't have any, you don't worry too much.

*Perry:* I always worry a little bit . . . I say, *Come on, psyche!* [laughs heartily].

When I was in Zürich, I used to paint them. Then when I got into writing, I didn't have time to do both things so I gave up the painting. I miss it. I find that painting stimulates the theme of the dream and makes it come around again in a new light. The therapeutic process is a three-way one: the dreamer tells the dream to the therapist; the therapist responds; the dreamer paints the picture, which then comes back into the therapy. And all that interaction stimulates the next dream. It goes around the triangle.

*Hendersons:* You must have recorded a lot of dreams by this point. Have you kept them all?

*Perry:* I have, but not in any organized manner. I write them on index cards—I have stacks and stacks of them!

*Hendersons:* Why do you use cards and not a journal?

*Perry:* I guess my method began in Zürich. I would hand a card over to the therapist. It is hard to hand a journal over. I would have the dream on one side and the associations on the other. I had about eighty paintings that came out in Zürich.

*Hendersons:* Watercolors?

*Perry:* Yes.

*Hendersons:* Nowadays what do you do with your dreams?

*Perry:* In the morning I think about them a bit after I write them down. Then they spin around in the back of my mind a bit. Connections come up during the day.

*Hendersons:* Do you have other ways that you try to make room for the unconscious in your life?

*Perry:* I meditate.

*Hendersons:* How do you meditate?

*Perry:* Sometimes I meditate on my feet [he stands to demonstrate] in the Ch'i Kung way, but more often I use the usual lotus position.

#### THE SHADOW

*Hendersons:* What have you learned about the shadow in your life?

*Perry:* It comes in the context of relationship mainly. In the therapy in Zürich, shadow figures would appear and we would find what was in them. In China the contrast between good and evil, morality and immorality, is blurred, much less distinct, all in one piece—with the light and the dark, yin and yang, all circling around each other. For me, and I'm sure for many others, China presents many features that are opposite to our Western cultural preferences; China gives a well filled out cultural expression of the shadow. Christianity has been obsessed with purity and supreme goodness,

which in turn has created a darker principle of evil. I prefer the Oriental view that is more balanced. I am much more Taoist in my feeling about things.

There is also another aspect to this question. When we speak of the shadow, we need to differentiate its two levels: there is the cultural, collective shadow, made up of all the things that are consensually disapproved of; and there is the personal shadow, made up of things opposite to the ego and felt as one's inner contradictions. What is shadow for one person may not be identical with the cultural consensus, and vice versa: what the culture disapproves of may not be a shadow content for such a person. That is one of the difficulties encountered on the way to real individuality. I ran into this difference between collective and personal shadow issues when I had to take a stand about being a conscientious objector in World War II—many people came down on me with harsh criticism, seeing it as sinful, while I felt I was acting according to my highest values.

*Hendersons:* So living in China allowed you to be more comfortable with the shadow, to expect to see it as a normal part of life.

*Perry:* Normal in that it's a matter of one's values, which may increasingly diverge from the collective norm as the individuality differentiates. Also, many of the opposites being experienced may not necessarily be occasions for constant adversarial conflict.

#### INSPIRATION FROM JUNG

*Hendersons:* Whom do you find inspiring these days? Do you go back to Jung for inspiration, or are there others since him?

*Perry:* Sessions with Jung spoke to me not only in a general way but in a very specific way and changed my way of doing things in therapy—for instance, the relation of images to their emotional setting of the time. It's not so much a "going back" as a being grateful for the impact my exchange with Jung had at the time. Six months into my work with Jung, I complained that all the symbolism and the imagery of dreamwork was interesting, and I could see the process moving, but I couldn't see how it fit into everyday life experience. He said that, to get the direction for understanding a particular dream, look for where it relates to your life. For example, if you dream of wrestling with a dragon, look around and see what relationship fits the feeling in the dream. That view of the unconscious as not only being in the head but out in the emotional field has become a major perspective for me when I do therapy. When I work with an image, I don't feel I have really touched it until I find out where it is located. Every archetype is both an image and an emotion, and the emotional part of it is being felt and

experienced somewhere. It makes therapy different when you work in that context. I was very grateful for that particular interchange with Jung.

#### ELDERHOOD AND DEATH

*Hendersons:* How would you like to be remembered as a Jungian?  
*Perry:* I think I would like to be remembered as one who dealt with some of the severest of mental crises and discovered some of the laws of how those crises are processed by the visionary mind—laws that operate at both the individual and the societal levels and ultimately affect our human evolutionary development.

*Hendersons:* What is your sense of life after death?

*Perry:* I'm not afraid of death. I resigned myself to the possibility of it in one stressful occasion in World War II and have had no dread of it ever since. However, I would be distinctly put out if death came too soon, before I had brought to conclusion undertakings and involvements. I've even made a request from Those Up There to please let me be around until the year 2012, so I can play some part in the critical changes on the way toward cultural transformation. As for what to expect of the Other Side, I like William James' quote, "I can deal with only one universe at a time!" I hope it is the way it's glimpsed in people's near-death experiences; I'm not 100 percent convinced, but I'm quite open to that possibility. I do expect a next life there—no Last Judgment or hell fire in my cosmos, though!

#### THE FUTURE

*Hendersons:* What are some of the issues facing us at the end of this century?

*Perry:* I think the year 2012 will be the important turning point. Many cultural traditions contain the prophecy about 2012—the Native Americans, the Tibetans, the Mayans, and others. There will be a lot of turmoil between now and then, culminating in a dramatic societal and cultural shift. I want to be around when it happens!

*Hendersons:* It will be a turning point in the whole organization of the world?

*Perry:* I think the whole power-driven, adversarial way of handling almost everything we do will finally collapse. We have been running on a power principle for 5,000 years now. It is well spelled out in the mythology and in ceremony. Kingship has lasted right up to the twentieth century. I think another principle will move in as a global directive, and it is the principle best expressed by Gandhi. When there is conflict of adversarial

confrontation, there is a whole other way of handling it that can be creative rather than destructive. Relational values will guide people, and conflict will be worked out in a dialectical process. If conflict is worked out by genuine relating between, say, two people, the third truth—which has been unconscious to both parties up to that point—emerges.

*Hendersons:* The power principle does not incorporate the third truth; it is about polarization, about winning versus losing. Do you feel Gandhi was looking for the third truth?

*Perry:* Yes. His vision and implementation of nonviolence as a policy involved far more than the *absence* of violence; it was a whole way of handling confrontation beyond the power principle. It was essentially creative. It didn't last too long in India after Gandhi's death, but as long as he was living, millions of people were thinking his thoughts with him. It was quite remarkable . . . almost like an organism. I would like to be part of a cultural transformation that would activate this relationship principle over the power principle.

*Hendersons:* As we close, I wonder if you have a favorite story about Jung to share?

*Perry:* There was always a little something magical about the way Jung's mind worked. He said that he felt himself to be more shaman than psychiatrist. One incident wowed some of us in Zürich. A young British woman, a physician taking some seminars, was having to take up life in South Africa, where her husband was being sent for his work. Wanting to know how to prepare herself for this upcoming experience in South Africa, she asked to meet with Jung about it (he had been there himself), and she had written out a list of things to ask him. Now, when Jung was fatigued or his energy was low, he preferred just to talk rather than interact in a dialogue. He was feeling that way when he was introduced to this woman, and so he did just that: without hearing or seeing her questions, he methodically addressed each item on her list. She was completely taken aback!

*Janis Henderson is a psychotherapist and Robert Henderson is a pastoral psychotherapist living in Glastonbury, Connecticut. Previous interviews with Janis and Jo Wheelwright and Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig have appeared in Psychological Perspectives.*

## Darkness

David Kherdian

The stillness of the night  
when you are alone,  
can anyone say it. The dark  
breathing, the dark crackling  
silence, the dark death of night.

And where am I in myself.  
And what after all these years do I know  
and what have I become.  
To sit here like this is to be  
reminded of one's life,  
the strangeness of being who  
I am, and all that I am not.

The day picks you up and takes you  
but always it leaves you here,  
here where you remember yourself  
and see again the same desperate life.

We are not big enough for the dark  
we do not know enough for the light.  
Something else must enter here before  
death does, death that cracks  
us open, dispersing all color and sound.

*David Kherdian has published many books of poetry, novels, children's books, and memoirs, including On a Spaceship with Beelzebub. By a Grandson of Gurdjieff. Most Recently he was the editor of Forkroads: A Journal of Ethnic-American Literature.*