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Writing in Training

A presentation by Don Williams (Boulder) at the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts fall 2006 conference. A panel on writing and training with Wynette Word Barton and Lyn Cowan also presenting.

Writing in Training

by Don Williams

Panel on Writing - IRSJA Fall Conference 2006 - Santa Fe

I think "writing-in-training" is best when it stays personal and close to experience, so I'll draw here on personal stories. I'll also say a few things about the relationship I see between good-enough writing and good-enough training, about Jung's early work with language, about signs and symbols, and about what I see as Jung's four styles of writing.

First I want to assert my conviction about the relationship between writing, experience, and training: I believe that if we think and feel clearly, we can write and speak clearly, even persuasively, memorably -- at least with practice and training such writing is possible. This relationship is reciprocal: if we work at writing vividly and clearly, this practice will enrich our psychological experience. Good writing prepares us to make vivid, intelligent interpretations to our patients, interpretations that hold, deepen or cast light on our patients' experience.

I think the corollary conviction holds true: if we cannot think and feel clearly, we cannot write and speak clearly -- even with practice. Training then is far from over.

In the IRSJA, the Local Seminars and the Review Committees take the first measure of the correspondence between clear thinking and feeling and clear writing and speaking. The Propaedeutic examiners make the next evaluation with oral exams and one written exam. If the candidate does well here, then the pace of training is handed over to the case and dissertation committees. Members of the final examination committees are the ones to say, "Think about what you have written. Listen to your own voice." Sometimes we do say "stop" or "wait" in response to the written cases and or to a thesis--this is function of the exam process. Our colleagues depend on us for this--and so do our candidates. It is my conviction that examination committees are being asked to evaluate a candidate's psychological writing with the same standards used to assess the candidate's verbal competence in oral exams.

Personally, I have a low tolerance for language that suggests depth when it is as abstract and dry as an algebraic equation ($ax + bx + c = 0$). Someone dreams of being touched by a snake while asleep in a cave: snakes shed their skins, snakes are transformative; at the temple of Asclepius in ancient Greece the sick and wounded participated in purification and incubation rituals in caves; if the god, Asclepius, in the form of a snake touched the patient in a dream, the patient was cured. Our dreamer therefore is cured spontaneously.

I invariably resist once reputable but now stereotyped words and phrases such as "the feminine," "the masculine," "father complex," "negative mother complex." After all, the only prerequisite for a "mother complex" or "father complex" is breathing. We've all got them, negative and positive. When I hear such phrases in supervision, I declare my ignorance and ask for specifics--what exactly do you mean? What was it like for this person to grow up in this family? Tell me a story about this mother, for example, so that I can feel and see this child and this mother together. Or in the absence of stories, do you have an image that captures what you mean?

Jung insisted that we treat our patients as unique individuals, that we attune our theories always to the individual, and that we avoid diagnostic generalizations. However, when he gave us the phrase, "negative mother complex," he ignored the details of unique mothers with unique children. He generalized about women with a "negative mother complex": they repudiate "all that is [maternal and obscure, instinctive, ambiguous, and unconscious] in their own nature. ("Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype," *CW* 9.1, para. 186.) Such women possess a masculine understanding that reassures men who are threatened by the "uncanny dark world" of Eros. From here, of course, we can easily imagine echos of Sabina Spielrein, Toni Wolff, Christiana Morgan, Mary Mellon, Marie-Louise von Franz and others--though no two are alike. No matter how insightful Jung was about ambivalent relationships between mothers and daughters—in general--his writing failed to embody the power of unique experience, of a singular daughter with her only mother.

When I was looking for a more personal example of speech as "bad writing", I remembered a few of my own early experiences of analysis in Zurich. The first analyst I saw was a candidate who was extraverted, multilingual, very intelligent, and very articulate. Unfortunately, he was fresh from the Propaedeuticum and used the language he had been examined for.

Within the first weeks, I told him this dream: I was in the home of an 80 year old psychic woman I had seen once in Berkeley. A brilliant flash of light from the eye of her cat momentarily blinded me. Next I saw my father, as in a vision, standing on the stairs to the apartment in Baltimore where we lived until I was 15. I was looking up to my father on the steps and he said something about some people unjustly feeling "shortchanged" by him. End of dream.

The dream recalled the years when my father worked long hours and my mother talked to me about her life and conflicts, about my father and about their relationship. My father was very introverted and most of what I knew about him, I knew from my mother. She interpreted him to me. Unfortunately, I didn't pursue him to find out for myself who he was and what relationship we might have.

During the next session my analyst said he'd talked to his control analyst about the dream and told me that she'd said, "He's blinded by the anima." Since I was new to the Zurich institute and had not learned the esoteric language, I probably didn't say, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

It's easy to guess now what he meant—I suppose he thought, classically, that I was mother-bound and blinded by my moods. It was true in a generalized way but the interpretation sounds--to use a "bad" word in Jungian circles--awfully "reductive." Only Freudians are supposed to be "reductive."

What my analyst could have said that would have been more useful might be :

As you were growing up you saw your father through your mother's eyes. She was powerful in your eyes, so much so that it was hard for you to know--much less trust--your own thoughts and feelings. She told you who your father was.... It's understandable now, here in Zurich, that you want a relationship to adults, to men and to the world; it's understandable that you look back on your father as a man in the world but, unfortunately, it is still through someone else's eyes.

And if we include the transference, he could have said.

Perhaps it's distressing to you that here I am, like you, listening to my supervisory "mother" as she tells me who you are and what your "shortcomings" are. You may feel like you and I can't know each other on our own. By reporting my supervisor's words, I have confirmed your basic conviction about the power of women to define men.

Here you are struggling to adapt to a new culture, to a new psychological orientation, and to social isolation in an highly introverted culture where you do not know the language. And, of course, you are trying to figure out how to relate to me and to analysis. Your instinct is to protect your vulnerability by withdrawing. But I hope we can find ways to talk about your experience that are secure, direct, and open-ended, to converse in ways that don't leave you feeling short-changed.

In a sketchy way, something like the above would have interpreted the past, my current emotional life in the new circumstances of training in Zurich, and the face to face relationship in analysis.

I didn't last too long with this analyst—I must have experienced the unexpected emergence of a healthy instinct. I began work with another candidate who had been recommended by friends. He was more connected to his feelings and I found it easier to connect to him but he too was ... unemancipated. During one session he suggested that I rent a rowboat and spend an afternoon on the Lake of Zurich

with my anima. Again I didn't say, "you'll have to speak in plain words that I understand." I didn't know what I was supposed to do in that boat and it sure didn't sound appealing--I was alone almost all the time and I didn't want to spend money to be alone in a boat on some impossible quest.

I had to learn to use this Jungian language and to know what it meant before I could pass the propaedeuticum. I learned the language and graduated. I later recovered my mother tongue and in analysis I learned to rely on the language of my patients--and, at times, to analyze their wish for me to speak "Jungian." Fortunately, I also had a very close friend who kept insisting that I speak plain English

The Conditions for Clarity ... or my conditions for clarity

I like listening and talking with one or two people in a quiet pleasing room. It suits my introverted nature, my emotional and intellectual interests, and my hearing limitations...being deaf in one ear. I like this arrangement that restricts intrusions, provides me a natural focus, and allows me the time to reflect on what I want to say and how I will say it. In a busy environment like this IRSJA conference, I am too easily overwhelmed and then embarrassingly unclear with thoughts and feelings I try awkward to communicate. Of course, the attractive but limiting condition of private practice resembles my family of origin.

I grew up knowing that my parents loved me but not feeling like they knew me--a familiar experience. My mother, in fact, told me she didn't know where I came from, I was so different. My father didn't say—he kept his feelings to himself and worked hard; he didn't talk comfortably and often kept his hand in front of his mouth when he spoke. My mother had time on her hands, and she felt better when she could talk with me. I don't remember the experience of becoming excited thinking my own thoughts... don't remember communicating my thoughts with excitement and seeing others get excited. Later, when I began serious reading and when I found new unusual friends far from home, I found secure occasions to experience this excitement. And as I grew up I increasingly made choices that put me on the edge, often alone; and for better or worse, the isolation became a condition for intellectual aliveness, for social conscience, for deep friendships and intimate relationships.

It's curious as I reflect on this talk that writing is one of those things we do alone. Writing evokes new insights and ideas that can be experienced with excitement. But the bulk of writing-work occurs alone, and there's that damned boat on the Lake of Zurich. I hope, however, that I have been able to share some of the writing-excitement I experience.

Exploring-in-writing is something we do physically alone but the "other" as friend or audience can't be too far away. Writing is much like the exploring in the midst of silence that is characteristic of analysis

As analysts we practice listening, feeling, imagining in attentive silence. Was it Winnicott or Schafer perhaps who said that analysts go on formulating interpretations as they listen, and the most frequent interpretation is, "At this moment it is better to say nothing and to continue listening." This silence, however, lends itself to good speech, the speech that follows when people drop down into themselves and come home.

Listen to Susan Sontag's description of speech in the midst of silence :

Everyone has experienced how, when punctuated by long silences, words weigh more; they become almost palpable. Or how, when one talks less one begins feeling more fully one's physical presence in a given space. Silence undermines "bad speech", by which I mean dissociated speech.... Unmoored from the body, speech deteriorates. It becomes false, inane, ignoble, weightless. Silence can inhibit and counteract this tendency, providing a kind of ballast, monitoring and even correcting language when it becomes inauthentic. (*Styles of Radical Will*, p. 20)

The Word Association Experiment

When we think about what we or our candidates write, we are in step with our analytic origins. The emphasis is on "think about what we write." Psychoanalysis began with language--with disturbances of language. Anna O. could not speak her native language but had to communicate in English or French with Josef Breuer.

And Jung began his still profound early work by studying word associations. His major discoveries about the psyche arose from studying disturbances in language – idiosyncratic words, delayed verbal responses, failures to remember words, perseveration, physical reactions to words (the galvanic skin response, for instance, or physical restlessness, anxiety, vocalizations, etc.).

I'll summarize what Jung accomplished with the Word Association Test:

Jung empirically confirmed Freud's theory of the unconscious and his understanding of repression, psychological defenses, psychopathology (hysteria, etc.) through the analysis of unconscious factors that demonstrably influence thinking, memory, and attention.

He provided us with a comprehensive theory of dissociation based on research methods that we can use today.

He conceived a theory of psychological, feeling-toned, complexes—how they are formed, how they influence experience and behavior, and how they structure the psyche.

Jung gave us the first "object relations" theory when he showed how trauma, repeated experience with others, and ongoing family dynamics establish childhood complexes that organize our lives for decades. When he administered the word association test to families, there was a striking congruence between the test results of parents and children.

Jung's "complex psychology," as he first called it, is a natural fit with object relations psychology, self psychology, attachment theory, and the neurobiology of attachment.

All of Jung's early discoveries provide scientific confirmation for the most contemporary developments psychoanalytic theory. And, to return to our theme of writing and training, Jung made his discoveries with painstaking attention to the details of language and the disturbances of attention in our response to language.

Signs and Symbols

The following is the first paragraph of "Approaching the Unconscious" in *Man and His Symbols* :

As analysts, we favor symbolic language over signs. We hold the conviction that unconscious feelings, impulses, and images profoundly affect our everyday lives--how we speak, perceive, act, think, write....

We are Jungians because symbolic language fascinates us and because this language inspires hope and confidence in our human experience. We are forever thinking of symbolic language as it appears in dreams, emotions, images, and spontaneous metaphors, in what we remember and fail to remember, and in all disturbances to consciousness.

The word, "anima," as I used it earlier is a specialized sign that points to symbolic experience, just as the other abstractions we are familiar with in our tradition – Self, ego-Self axis, complex, individuation archetype, numinosum, etc. These words have their place and our candidates learn them and are examined on their grasp of these concepts.

However, our passion is for symbols and for language that best expresses who we are, that strikes up resonances in those who hear us.

I typically don't have the confidence that I can use emotionally or intellectually stirring language, though at times I have done so in writing. However, whether or not I succeed in the use of words, I've developed a good ear for both the written and spoken language of others. This feeling for language is integral, certainly, to our analytic work and to the training we conduct. The writing that our candidates submit in training may be one of the best indications of how candidates feel, think, and communicate with their patients. With everything we write we reveal and conceal ourselves—this is where, as analysts, we must feel right at home.

Jung's Writing

Jung exercised at least four very different ways of writing. One style is primarily scientific as in *Experimental Researches* while another is scientific but more clinical—this is the language of "The Psychology of Dementia Praecox." At times his clinical writing is more vivid and gripping than scientific in tone—for instance, in the "Tavistock Lectures." Jung's writing that most people find compelling is symbolic, evocative, emotional and highly personal. Most readers encounter Jung's symbolic style through *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Jung's fourth style of writing is scholastic, encyclopedic, esoteric, and far from experience. His first foray into such language occurred in *Symbols of Transformation*, the book where Jung mounted evidence for his theory of archetypes and initiated the break with Freud. Jung's scholastic, esoteric writing reached its apogee in his alchemical essays and in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, a book whose title will leave most readers in the dust. And yet, much of Jungian literature draws upon this esoteric tradition. As a reminder for this style, consider the third paragraph of *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, a paragraph chosen somewhat arbitrarily while saving the hard stuff for later:

Another favourite theriomorphic image is that of the two birds or two dragons, one of them winged, the other wingless.... The wingless bird or dragon prevents the other from flying. They stand for Sol and Luna, brother and sister, who are united by means of the art. In Lamspringk's "Symbols" they appear as the astrological Fishes which, swimming in opposite directions, symbolize the spirit/soul polarity. The water they swim in is *mare nostrum* (our sea) and is interpreted as the body. The fishes are "without bones and cortex." From them is produced a *mare immensum*, which is the *aqua permanens* (permanent water).

If we follow in the Jungian tradition, we may find ourselves slipping into Latin (or Greek) and using words like *numinous*, *frigidum* and *calidum*, *coniunctio*, *heirosamos*, *coincidentia oppositorum*. Or, as Jo Wheelwright used to say in humor, we may suddenly feel compelled to talk about "cross-cousin marriages" and "exogamos vs. endogamos libido."

By contrast to the classical scholastic and esoteric style of Jungian writing, I will leave you with a selection from *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, one that is not so famous but that moves us with the darkness that sometimes haunted Jung. This passage from the period of his parents' separation marks the beginning of Jung's childhood encounter with death and with the Lord Jesus:

At that time I also had vague fears at night. I would hear things walking about in the house. The muted roar of the Rhine Falls was always inaudible, and all around lay a danger zone. People drowned, bodies were swept over the rocks. In the cemetery nearby, the sexton would dig a hole—heaps of brown, upturned earth. Black, solemn men in long frock coats with unusually tall hats and shiny black books would bring a black box. My father would be there in his clerical gown, speaking in a resounding voice. Women wept. I was told that someone was being buried in this hole in the ground. Certain persons who had been around previously would suddenly no longer be there. Then I would hear that they had been buried, and that Lord Jesus had taken them to himself.

My mother had taught me a prayer which I had to say every evening. I gladly did so because it gave me a sense of comfort in face of the vague uncertainties of the night:

Spread out thy wings, Lord Jesus mild,
And take to thee thy chick, thy child.
"If Satan would devour it,
No harm shall overpower it,"
So let the angels sing!

...Why he [Lord Jesus] should be winged like a bird was a conundrum that did not worry me.... Far more significant...was the fact that little children were compared to chicks which Lord Jesus evidently "took" reluctantly, like bitter medicine. This was difficult to understand. But I understood at once that Satan liked chicks and had to be prevented from eating them. So, although Lord Jesus did not like the taste, he ate them anyway, so that Satan would not get them.... But now I was hearing that Lord Jesus "took" other people to himself as well, and that this "taking" was the same as putting them in a hole in the ground.... I began to distrust Lord Jesus.

I'd like to stop here and turn the microphone over to the other members of the panel, Lyn Cowan and Wynette Barton.

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