Feminine Initiation, Training and the Pregnant Woman
Nora Swan-Foster
Jungian Analyst

“Evaluation in the Light of Eros”
A Panel Presentation with
David Schoen and Marilyn Marshall

Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts
Spring Society Meeting
April 2013

Atalanta Fugiens Emblem XXII.
Having acquired White Lead, do the work of women, that is: Cook.

* Titles of images not included are in red.
There are few things in life that really and truly macerate and cook us so that we are transformed. For me training is definitely one process while the other is the subject of pregnancy. The pregnant woman is a topic that has deeply informed me over the years on many levels. I’m please to have the opportunity today to show some of how training and the pregnant woman may be related.

I have been sitting with the pregnant woman for many years if not most of my career as a psychotherapist. My curiosity in her began in 1984 when I was a graduate art therapy student in Boston working with emotionally disturbed children and their parents. The pregnant woman has offered me multiple ways of considering and approaching psyche and human relationships that I would like to share with you, particularly when we consider initiation as a model for training.

**Initiation model**

Initiation carries with it a sadomasochistic shadow that rightly concerns and confuses most of us. So much so, we might not even be able to consider an alternative view about initiation. The pregnant woman offers us a substantial metaphor and image for the initiatory process as we consider today the role of the training analyst, the candidate experience and our rules, regulations, ethics and values for our IRSJA training program.

The pregnant woman arouses a curiosity in me because of what is unseen. While she is highly visible, her interior physical and emotional world is primarily hidden. One of my questions many years ago was focused on the wordless unconscious experiences she held within her, like the fetus, and how finding form through images might transform her psyche and her relationship to the fetus. Some of the drawings you see today are from these pregnant
women while others are taken from my sketchbook during training, which was similar to a long gestational process. The remaining images come from professional artists.

*(Selected images of pregnant women drawn by pregnant women)*

Just as people have strong opinions about pregnancy, we know people have strong opinions about training, what it should be like and how it should and should not be done. Both health professionals and analysts have their experiences, knowledge and strong well-founded opinions. Because of her pronounced visibility, the pregnant woman is susceptible to all sorts of projections, both idealized and negative such as unbidden traumatic stories about prenatal life, childbirth and postpartum. Just as often, candidates are faced with unbidden stories that may be positive and encouraging, but there are also those of warning and advice, perhaps even tales of what some call training trauma. And yet, as much as these stories are told, each person's process is uniquely their own. Each have an individuation story, a *telos* that cannot be so simply managed and directed by the ego. *(Moab, Colorado Rock Art)*

As we know, initiations have a three-part structure that begins with the call, followed by the journey and the return: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Masculine initiation is traditionally a call for departure from the familiar and often includes the rejection of the mother’s home and territory. The hero is concerned with dangerous tasks, trials and sacrifices that risk his life. Eventually, when he has obtained the hard-won prize, upon his return he receives a title of powerful recognition and increased status, often within a new community. *(Masculine initiation picture)*

The anthropologist, Bruce Lincoln (1981/1991) noticed that feminine initiations differ in that the call arises from within her body, a process that is rarely known or seen, particularly by male researchers. Her daily mundane tasks begin to serve as the rituals of the initiation journey so that her change of consciousness is typically deeply private and goes unnoticed. He
also noted that in patriarchal cultures, feminine initiation is easily overlooked as it is considered less powerful, less socially meaningful and not containing symbolic depth because of its origination in the concrete world. Most important is when Lincoln refutes these assumptions by stating that feminine initiation is actually concerned with her deeply personal connection to creativity combined with her expanded personal relationship with the cosmos or the divine in ways that may not be visible to the world. (Picture of Stick Circle) Creativity and a relationship with the cosmos or the divine are the two primary aspects of feminine initiation. (Swan-Foster, “Gold”)

During the liminal phase of pregnancy, the woman confronts internal demons and physical challenges that are hidden behind her persona. What normally would be considered psychotic or at the very least an extreme state of mind, is a psychological state that D.W. Winnicott called “maternal preoccupation.” In this state she confronts the very real possibilities of failure and death of herself or her fetus (Savage, 1989), risking her financial security and her own life to bring about new life. If all goes well, she returns with the gift of the baby, an image that symbolizes her own psychological transformation. Her name is changed to mother.

A training candidate will have similar experiences—of facing internal demons, feeling confused and even marginally psychotic, gaining weight, periods of exhaustion and illness, stretching into a new attitude, expanding inner consciousness, of risking personal finances and facing failure and death. Even more poignant is that despite the joyful and arduous work of deepening one’s relationship with the unconscious, the return to the community can be unpredictable. While the internal satisfaction contains depths of meaning that had not previously been plumbed, the life-changing analytic training journey and title are rarely
understood or recognized. This loss of libidinal kinship found during training results in a state of mourning and depression that is much like post-partum. (*Swan-Foster, Snake Mandala*)

So why does pregnancy as a feminine initiation matter for us here today? In my mind, the pregnant woman is an image for both training candidate and training analyst—a metaphor that emphasizes our inter-relatedness as a training community while at the same time honoring the depth of the personal psychological tasks that are inspired from the deeply personal inner callings that bring us to this analytic work. Training from the perspective of the hero might initially bring the candidate into training, but if this continues as the primary attitude, it may look like an aggressive confrontation of committees as if they are objects to slay or overcome. There may be a lack of relatedness. The candidate may consider the exams as something to “get through,” the emphasis being placed on passing rather than giving adequate respect to the creative processes and potential failures that arise. (*Pregnancy*)

But the pregnant woman and her feminine initiation remind us to be in the moment by moment process, to value day-to-day mundane tasks of training that serve as rituals, marking a space for the symbolic. What hopefully happens for the candidate is a deepening of the relationship to the unconscious. While the pregnant woman is not who she was and not yet who she will become, the candidates are also living in a transitional space: not who they were professionally, but not yet who they will become as analysts. The true initiator for the pregnant woman is her body and her new awareness of interiority in all its many facets; for the training candidate, the most impactful personal initiation experiences arise from within, from the deep inward searching and stretching, the soulful moments, meaningful interactions with others, moments of pure authenticity, creativity, and a whiff of the numinous.
As we know, the archetype of initiation cannot be laid over the candidate’s training process. It emerges organically and naturally from the depths as a call towards a purposeful endeavor, an enterprise of tremendous uncertainty, insight and meaning within the psychoanalytic work. However, the power of the initiation archetype can disorient and confuse us all. When the candidate is pulled into the archetypal field of initiation, how do we as a training organization wish to consider our work; how do we hold and value the initiation without becoming identified with it? In other words, how do we participate and when do we consciously NOT participate? Sometimes those who care for the pregnant woman are induced into telling her what to do, how to think and feel and to dissuade her from her soul’s path. They wrongly claim the prenatal and birthing process as their own.

Equally, analysts may become unconsciously induced to become the initiators, to step into the role of the initiator, purposefully giving tasks, stimulating additional anxiety, stress, and conflict so as to test the candidate, to see if they are worthy of the role. But what if we recognize that anxiety, stress and conflict are already inherent in training, inherent in the initiation process? If the analyst recognized the presence of the initiation archetype in the field, would unhooking from the induction even be possible? Would it be seen as irresponsible
to trust the archetypal process alone as a worthy enough structure to facilitate the individual’s training? If we do this, can we be curious about how the various levels of relationships shift? While the analyst works to engage authentically with the emergent material, modeling their own analytic attitude, they also lean on the inherent structure of a well-worn and developed training program. Perhaps a good enough training program can hold the candidate/analyst dyad as they are dipped into the baths and undergo a process of mutual transformation?

*A Gate with a View*

**Gateway Phase**

I have named the pre-liminal phase of pregnancy *Gateway*. When the woman hears the urgent call to become pregnant, she may idealize the expectant experience at the same time her desires frighten her as she ponders the future possibilities. She begins to have what I call a *pregnant imagination* about her future.

The admissions process is a Gateway phase; the individual has an imagination about how they will get through the gates into training. Neither pregnant woman nor candidate are guaranteed success. The threshold into Jungian training is ripe for exploring the expectations of training and the ability for symbolic thinking and self-reflection. There is an investigation into the person’s relationship to the creative and symbolic world, to unpack the imagination about the future and identifications with status and financial stability. With the pregnant woman, I am curious if she has a longing or a desire or does she simply have a goal to complete? Is she capable of symbolically surrendering to a process that will bring a death of her old life? I imagine this is some of what we’re looking for in a candidate.
Attending Phase

Once a woman learns she is pregnant she has entered what I call the phase of

\textit{Attending}. The word “attend” means to stretch, listen, or direct the mind toward something (Ayto, 1990), originally the word comes from the Latin “attendere,” a compound verb meaning “to stretch” that eventually led to the Latin verb “tenere” which means to hold and contain (p. 42). The word attend took on the meaning of caring for and finally to be present with something or someone, suggesting a more feminine and religious quality.

During the Attending phase a woman undergoes several specific psychological tasks that I will address here as they apply to training. There are also archetypal patterns that I have noticed emerging for some pregnant women, but I will only address these indirectly. They have to do with the themes of wandering, containing, conquering, and relatedness (Swan-Foster 2012).

I have envisioned three primary tasks of the Attending phase: 1) Internal opposites, 2) the Shadow, and 3) Simultaneity. These tasks become recognizable through her many relationships, unconscious material such as dreams, images, and visions as well as physical challenges, and medical conditions. These tasks can be translated to training.

\textit{(Rocks and Stones/Squares and Circles)}
**Tension of the Opposites**

A pregnant woman is in a continuous psychological state of working with the tension of internal opposites as she works towards finding a new sense of self. She contains new life while at the same time she feels contained or constrained herself. Death is always in the back of her mind. She feels lost while at the same time she belongs to a new group. She softens and stretches, drifts and wanders, searching for something familiar when she can no longer wear the same clothes, eat the same food, or move through the same tight spaces. While the pregnant woman may experience a new level of intimacy with herself and others, she is acutely aware of her state of aloneness and isolation.

*(Maternal Man by Louise Bourgeois)*

These descriptors could be referring to the training candidate. Certainly training is a combination of both logos and Eros, encouraging the candidate to integrate the differences and to know when to use either or both. One side of training is logos with learning key concepts and historical material. On the other side is the un-worded and ineffable knowledge that candidates are unknowingly examined on. Rooted in an energetic field, Eros makes itself known through the imagination, the symbol, and the image as well as inter-subjective field experiences that require a creative and agile mind. Unlike the traditional university education that promotes competition and logical, linear thinking, Jungian training is unique in its binocular view of valuing both Eros and logos. While this gives us a unique perspective within the psychotherapy field, it also places us on the edge of society, holding the knowledge that has been simplified and appropriated.

*(Family by Louise Bourgeois)*

Opposites are revealed within a group through different typologies. Obviously, it is unreasonable to expect a thinking type to respond as a feeling type while the tension between
introversion and extroversion can constellate misunderstandings and confusing power dynamics. Honoring our differences models respect and understanding for one another. Openly exploring this diversity can enhance the training experience.

**Shadow**

*(A strapped hand drawn in black and purple)* The task of working with shadow is immediate with both the pregnant woman and the training candidate. When the pregnant woman explores the shadow, she can begin to feel a sense of wholeness. Perhaps she is told her needs or wishes are silly or misinformed, that she is too anxious or not anxious enough. She may be given advice from those who “know better.” If she asks questions or openly challenges the testing protocol or birthing standards, her noncompliance within a medical setting may unwittingly result in ultimatums and Eros being extinguished. This may result in a rupture, between herself and her medical support that silences her into fear, anxiety, and shame. As Jung reminded us, where there is power there is no Eros. The pregnant woman will psychologically disconnect from her personal process so as to acquiesce or she may suddenly just leave a relationship with a professional in search of someone who can better listen. If she remains silent, she betrays herself; if she speaks up she risks rejection and the life of herself or her baby. Such double binds are an integral part of training. This leads to the acute awareness of anxious shame that is wrapped up and stored away in service of survival. In the best of times, there may be the space to consciously accept these conflicts as opportunities for self-reflection and personal transformation.

I have heard some say that the candidates carry the shadow of the society. If it is the analysts who survived their training initiations, perhaps it’s the candidates who serve as the heated alchemical furnaces, containing, metabolizing disavowed material from individuals within the society, the collective, and our history as Jungians. While there may be some truths
here, becoming caught on either side is polarizing and that does not engender relatedness and empathy. In stead we benefit from remembering the common ground on which we as analysts and candidates stand, both carrying the shadow of Jungian history.

*(A winged figure in black and white)*

Medora Woods, in her recent article “Voices from the Shadows” (2013) highlights the tension between the conscious and unconscious as an extermination of what she calls: “indigenous consciousness.” This, she says, arises from what she imagines as

“cultural ancestors act[ing] out their unconscious inherited trauma, inflicted both by Western consciousness and their unintegrated immigrant experience of rupture...” (pg 431)

As I understand her, this indigenous consciousness places value on building trust and open-heartedness that supports our inter-relatedness and unconditional support between individuals, and within communities. Rather than competitive selfishness, power, coercion, conquering, and hostile attacks, value is placed on sharing of resources, ideas, and carrying together the successes as well as the defeats.

If we value human-relatedness and take this view towards training analysts then it challenges each of us to consider the candidate from a different lens that may not always appear logical. We may need to challenge our conceptions and enter into conversations that we normally might not want to have. At the same time the candidate is encouraged to demonstrate an increased level of responsibility and self-agency that is not victim oriented. Holding an abiding respect for the unconscious unearths what is indigenous within them, through resourcing the creative and numinous as well as being curious about the personal vulnerability, invisibility, and shame that comes with candidacy. If a training program makes space for this approach through a certain amount of structure and expectation as well as
curiosity, respect and relatedness, then the feminine initiation model might be more palatable for us to consider. To integrate this model, the often unspoken topic of shame needs to be further considered.

For the pregnant woman, shadow often constellates feelings of shame, originating with her changing body, which is perhaps why women are so easily drawn into anxious shame cycles. For our purposes today, shame can be defined as a differentiated aspect of the shadow. It is widely discussed in the psychoanalytic literature but curiously not named in Jung’s index of the Collected Works. More recently, a handful of Jungian analysts have explored shame, including Jacoby, Knox, Sidoli, and Wharton. Our own Everett McClaren and Sandra Miller also wrote their dissertations on aspects of shame.

Shame is an emotional experience that arises within relationships, where we are seen or not seen, thus rooted in the early infant and childhood experiences. Shame is expressed through highly sensitive and attuned neural pathways that detect rejection, criticism, and/or contempt. In adulthood, this implicit memory or early archetypal warning system of distrust and danger can close the door to spontaneous relatedness. One retreats so as to protect. In this moment, there is little room for imagination, creativity or a connection to the cosmos.
Feminine initiation reminds us that shame is deeply intertwined with body image, literally and metaphorically expressed through bodily fluids, and our relationship to these fluids. While these are concrete examples, many women feel the significance of such deeply intimate and personal expressions because they contain greater meaning and purpose for her. The pregnant woman's body softens and expands as it produces, contains and excretes certain fluids. Certainly, she is at risk of becoming simply a container, a vessel that is measured, examined and probed by medical people; her relationship to her inner world, to the fetus, can be undervalued, disregarded or overlooked. Appointments are measured as time can be of the essence. At the very worst, she may be questioned, seen as naïve, not taken seriously as having knowledge, her body may be doubted by herself and others, and she may experience being talked about behind her back. She may even collude through dissociative defenses when undergoing such treatment so as to survive, knowing it “won't last forever.” Shame experiences like these often leave an indelible mark, reenacting a feeling of irreparable brokenness or an unwanted persistent ugly emotional stain. Both the pregnant woman and the training candidate undergo times of feeling emotionally vulnerable and messy, unpredictable, and uncontained.

Unwrapping shame during training can be torturous, yet, in the best of times, when investigated with a heartfelt curiosity the process touches the analyst as much as the candidate. Or the vulnerability may be defended against by both candidate and training analyst, pushed underground, or, in the worst of times, the material is used as an exciting feeding frenzy to probe and uncover the shadow. These excursions may constellate analysts to become unconsciously competitive with each other. In the process their own shame and
trauma experiences are disavowed or reenacted as the candidate emotionally takes cover and retreats for safety. The induction for shadow reactions happen quickly, like a fire that takes light and is typically not easily extinguished.

*(Fire picture)*

The psychoanalyst, Sandra Buechler, speaks of the role of shame in her article entitled “The Legacies of Shaming Psychoanalytic Candidates” (2008). While she points out that shame is inherent and unavoidable within any emotional relationship, it is particularly present within psychoanalytic training programs and Buechler advocates for making shame more conscious, not just for candidates but also for the training analysts. I quote: “Given that analytic training involves profound self-examination, self exposure, and personal and professional assessment, it should come as no surprise that candidates often suffer from anxious shame” (pg 56). During training, she says, one is expected, even challenged, to soften defenses so as to expose authentic self-reflections and to integrate one’s personal shame. What she speaks of as detrimental and destructive within training is the unconscious reinforcement, scrutiny, and probing of a candidate’s shame about their shame. In other words, we do not need to deliberately create anxiety and shame for pregnant women or for training candidates; it is already inherently present in the structure of the feminine initiation and certainly present in the process of training, which is unlike any other training program. For instance, engineers go through scrutiny and testing, but they do not go through deep self-examination of who they are as individuals.

Phrases such as “you need to control your feelings” “you failed; get over it” or “I’m here to examine you and that’s all” are statements that induce anxiety, constellate shame, foreclose on Eros and lock away the ability and desire for self-reflection and reverie. Fear and judgment predominate. The first step towards bringing shame to consciousness is to normalize the
existence of it’s presence so that an authentic and trusting investigation can unfold, one that humanizes the interaction by cultivating a respectful and relational container, both inter- and intra-psychically.

The pregnant woman is a visual reminder of that particular agile state of feeling full, absolutely stretched to the max, but sitting with complete emptiness in the moment of uncertainty and death. Likewise, the candidate stretches into the analytic attitude, learning to sit with and accept their own emptiness, their own not knowing and the potential for failure, annihilation and death.

At some point the pregnant woman, as well as the candidate, come to accept that an overly abundance of logos may be a hindrance. It may be known intellectually, but the felt sense of this can drop the candidate into new psychological territory. Patience, resiliency, acceptance and grace offer the ideal guidance, particularly when confronted with shame experiences, our own or others. Because of its complexity and it’s ability to cause serious ruptures in relationships, I agree with Buechler: we benefit from becoming more conscious about the presence of shame in the training process, both the candidates shame as well as the analysts shame. If we can pull shame from the shadows and accept that it is a natural part of our development as humans finding “right relationship” with ourselves and others, then there
is no shame in having shame and a greater more creative space to acknowledge the shame we do have.

I imagine that Jung experienced shame that we have now inherited as analysts who live in the shadow of the Freudian psychoanalytic discussions. Perhaps it is time we reconsider our history and what we wish to carry forward. Perhaps we can continue to bring shame out of the darkness by sharing our inner failings and inadequacies, our frustrations and longings, all of which may encourage an open discourse on the purpose of training and training values.

(Prenatal fear of chaos/death picture in watercolor)

Other aspects of the shadow and shame are the death of the fetus or the pregnant woman becoming compromised or dying. Since the death archetype lingers in the shadows of all initiations, it’s crucial to remember that grief and loss are tremendously important faces of hidden shame. Symbolically, the analysts may fear that the candidate will give birth prematurely, overlook some of these shame states, and will try to become an analyst before they are ready, bringing with them all the cumbersome and concerning details that come with a premature baby.

This brings us to the topic of readiness for exams and the questions that come with moving forward. The pregnant woman often knows when she is ready or has an innate sense if something is wrong with her pregnancy. Her expressed concerns are often telling. Research shows that if levels of fear and stress are too high, a pregnant woman will not put herself or her baby at risk by going into labor. If training is viewed as a feminine initiation, then this readiness needs to be first rooted within the candidate’s psyche through dreams or other material. Just as the doctors and midwives know to cultivate a trusting relationship of collaboration for labor, training analysts also cultivate and support, but not always agree with, a candidate’s thoughts, choices and inner-directed purpose. Like the pregnant woman who is
reminded that she makes sacrifices to birth a healthy baby, there is value in reflecting on the candidate’s original desire to enter training by asking questions such as what brought you to training? And, why do you continue in training? What do you value about your training process now?

*(Blue cell on slide)*

**Simultaneity**

Simultaneity is the third task. The pregnant woman is *being* in the moment at the same time that she is becoming who she is not yet become. Nothing is certain and everything is possible. There is an acceptance of confused clarity. Simultaneity acknowledges what the psychoanalyst Phillip Bromberg calls “the intersubjective field as a process in which ambiguity, paradox, and sometimes even chaos are felt to be relationally valid elements in the growth of the self” (Bromberg, pg. 28). Accepting the uncertainty of the unknowable is a demanding task of the pregnant woman and is at the very core of the training experience. These layers of consciousness are illustrated by the image of the Russian nesting dolls. *(Russian Dolls)*

Not unlike the pregnant woman, training cultivates the capacity to observe oneself as a candidate. This is reflected in the ability to hold an analytic space within the consulting room. The hard work of maintaining a deep state of listening begins to grow for the pregnant woman as well as the candidate. Simultaneity describes the internal analytic space, the curiosity of the interior world where both analyst and analysand are being together while they also know there is a process of becoming together, similar to the woman and the baby. Simultaneity reminds us to hold a curiosity about who the candidate is stretching into becoming as a young analyst.
Passage Phase

Finally, I return to my own experience of training. Hours before my final exams, I was sitting on my couch looking out into the open space of bare trees where the buds were just beginning to make themselves known. It was nearly spring and the wind was blowing hard. Suddenly, the wind chimes went silent, the wind stopped blowing. All the voices in my head that I had been living with during training went quiet. In that moment I knew to my bones that the exams were not what truly mattered to me in the large picture. Failure, stillness, emptiness became oddly acceptable and inevitable. I felt a sudden sense of freedom with this uncertainty. I knew I had done all that I could do and if not enough, then something else would need to make itself known in the exams. Surrendering to an unknown outcome released me from the very walls of training. I had entered the post-liminal stage, which I have named the Passage phase, marking when the pregnant woman knows that pregnancy has come to an end, giving way to the birthing process.

Like the pregnant woman who enters the work of childbirth to finally meet her baby, I realized that there was nothing more that I could do but enter the examination process, accepting that the final outcome would finally become known to me.
References


