



CPSYC 2014

Symbols of healing and transformation in psychotherapy: The Bridge

Mihaela Minulescu*

*National School of Administrative and Political Studies, Strada Povernei nr. 6, Sector 1, București, 010643, România

Abstract

Problem statement: In association with C. G. Jung constructive and synthetic approach of the psychic dynamics in psychotherapy, there is the need to identify vivid symbols of actual transformation process. *Research questions:* How, when and in which form such a symbol appears in the analytical process? *Purpose of the study:* Jung considers transcendent function the connecting principle of the psyche; we concentrate on the significance of The Bridge as a symbolic carrier of the mediation. We want to learn if the Bridge symbol, in the healing process, dream/drawing/sandplay images, appears in the transition periods announcing the healing. Jung considers transcendent function the connecting principle of the psyche; we concentrate on the significance of The Bridge as a symbolic carrier of the mediation. We want to learn if the Bridge symbol, gradually visible in the the healing process, by dream/drawing/sandplay images, appears in the transition periods announcing the healing *Methods:* The preliminary step: An inquiry on the appearance of The Bridge symbol and its actual meaning in the practice of 40 psychotherapists. The 4 case studies developed in the paper are focused on the gradual introduction and development of “The Bridges” in traumatized children and adults patients. These cases are interpreted in detail, regarding the announcement of the healing process. *Findings and results:* The Bridge conveys multifaceted meanings: Connectedness, orienting towards, crossings over, the danger of falling down, the possible assimilation of the trauma by recognition and tolerance of the opposites which may be followed by a transformation in the psyche. It acts as a potential for realizing a connection and a virtual integration. Sometimes, announces the impossibility to attain the integration. *Conclusion:* The value of using the bridge as a tool metaphor and the bridge role of the analytical psychotherapist psyche are the major conclusions discussed in the paper.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of CPSYC 2014.

Keywords: Bridge symbol, Transcendent function, Healing trauma

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40724013534; fax: +40212551341.
E-mail address: mihaelaminulescu@yahoo.com

1. Introduction: Transcendent function & transformative processes

C. G. Jung's constructive and synthetic approach to psychic dynamics does not reduce the unconscious to what was repressed in early life, as: "*The unconscious is continually active, combining its material in ways which serve the future. It produces... subliminal combinations that are prospective... For these reasons, the unconscious could serve man as a unique guide*" (Jung, 1943/1945, p. 116). In the interplay between the one-sided, rigid defenses of a traumatized self and the compensatory contents of the unconscious, the transcendent function in a normal process in the life of the psyche naturally/organically mediates opposing contents. Bearing in mind the Jungian emphasis on the transcendent function and the importance of purpose and meaning in working with unconscious content as revealed/expressed in dreams, drawings and sandplay images, we concentrate on the significance of the bridge as a symbolic carrier of mediation. The bridge symbol gradually became visible in the metaphors used in interpretations of actual facts or states, and appears more and more in the transition periods in counseling and therapy, announcing healing.

In the Jungian analytical process, changes and transformations are viewed differently in terms of how they involve the deep psychic levels; changes involve much more the conscious level, but transformation involves the entire psychic structure, a new order or a new way of functioning between different levels of the psyche. Differentiating it from changes, Jung speaks about transformation as a spiritual process: "There are spiritual processes of transformation in the psyche" (Jung, 1978, p. 8). Murray Stein emphasizes: "Transformation is realization, revelation, and emergence, not self-improvement, change for the better, or becoming a more ideal person. The transforming person is someone who realizes the inherent self to the maximum extent possible and in turn influences others to do the same" (Stein, p. 137).

Jung's concept of the transcendent function clarifies the gradual changes and the final transformation process that take place in counseling and therapy when the healing aims at unifying the disconnected parts of the psyche. These are experienced consciously as a new perspective upon life, a stable and surprising new view that does not deny the old opposed perspectives, but opens a new light, a meaningful one in which love and hate, dependence and independence, biological and spiritual needs are re-connected. The transcendent is the transition from one attitude to another as the conflicts are outgrown (Bradway, 1983), and the reconciling symbol is the materialization of the work of the psyche. Jung refers to the impact value of expressing the process in the real world by drawing or painting, active imagination or working with materials in which the reconciling symbols may appear and be visualized. Dora Kalf was the first Jungian analyst to introduce the creation of a soul-image with the help of sand and miniatures in the "free and protected space" of the sandtray and analyst (Kalf, 1980, p. 30).

Bridges actually connect parts which have previously been separated, and enable the collaboration between both conscious and unconscious, providing for "the presentation of, confrontation between, and uniting the opposites" (Bradway, p.85). Circumambulating the meanings of the bridge metaphor in the course of the therapeutic process, we can find in the literature that the bridge is used to make connections; when in the center, it may connect symmetric/asymmetric areas, or it may express steps toward the assimilation of trauma as a bridge between animals and humans, enabling the person to overcome inner feeling of disruption, of disunion with him/herself, a self-regulation mechanism that naturally bridges an inner conflict (Pattis Zoja E., 2011). Chiaia M. speaks of the way sandplay engages the vivid unconscious energies and of the bridge that can emerge between the unconscious and the ego as a not consciously intended result (Chiaia, 2005). Sometimes even the bridge appears in a special form; it is broken or the bridge conceals something as yet unseen under it (Steihardt, 2000).

2. Cases in which the bridge is a healing mediator

The preliminary step was an inquiry made on the appearance of the bridge symbol and its actual meaning in the practice of 43 counselors and psychotherapists. Among the respondents, 77,5% reported the appearance in patients' discourse and/or dreams/drawings/sand play images of the bridge symbol, announcing change. As if the unifying symbol appears before the actual change. The more substantial the presence of the bridge in the images, the fewer

the symbols of wounds, and the more balanced the emotions in real life experiences. When it finally disappears as such, the transforming ego-attitude is acting in real life. The results were such as substantially to sustain the symbolism/meaning of the bridge pertaining to the healing process.

The four case studies are focused on the gradual inclusion in the symbolic materials of bridges and the ways in which the metaphor develops through sessions with traumatized children and adult clients.

In the case of Sandy, a girl of eight years old with a traumatic mother-complex that does not permit her to differentiate her identity and develops, over eight months the images in the sandtray carry the opposition between the overwhelming character of this fusion condition, and the mother-daughter destructivity. Until one session in which the girl for the first time constructs the bridge as a defensive barrier but also as a prison which is supposed to be broken in order to liberate her instincts. One week later, real fences are already being used as protective barriers between different aspects. The protective symbols diminish at the end of another month, announcing her new capacity to differentiate. For the last time, the bridge appears with nobody on it; it is a bridge between Evil and Death; in the next step, instincts are liberated and she can face them. Then she finds the possibility of using her energies/horse to jump over the fences/bridges.

In the next wonderfully rich scene, she has free access to “the in-between”, as she, like the therapist (the veterinary) is in the middle connected with her instincts (the dog) and three precious stones. It is a transference scene in which healing is announced by this and by the bridge that permits connection with the other sandtray where the animals have been waiting; actually all kinds of possible connection are to be seen in the tray. Two weeks later, the bridge is again present and a golden carriage brings masculinity/the animus into the story. In the next session and image, the gate is opened and the bridge gives free access inside. In the next scene, it is she who, with the help of the masculine and of her instincts, actually finds a way to construct a bridge over the river to connect the sea world with new life.

Andrew is a seven-year-old boy with an autistic two-year-old old brother, who has entered counseling because of aggressive-compulsive behavior. His mother was an absent figure and he was raised and moved from one kindergarten to another. He came in a state of disorientation and fragmentation. In the second year of sandplay working, there appears the first possibility of a bridge over a river connecting parts of his soul. Only after that openness can he face his inner life flooded with uncontrolled emotions; but in the image there is also the bridge toward a more stable land. Two months later a more peaceful image emerges with birds representing instincts and maleness represented by dwarfs; it is his first attempt to socialize, which matches his openness towards his peers at school. After six month there is already a scene with the energies which are to be mastered, expressed by regulating the movement of cars and the possibility of actually connecting the two parts through his energies: the bridge in the middle.

In her mid thirties, Marylou is a lady dominated by her mother’s inner drama. Her mother is more connected with death than with life, and Marylou has all her life been in the perpetual position of a savior and life provider for her mother. She has tormented and exhausted herself between her talents as a gifted actress and the sedentary administrative work in a stable job which has supported her mother, between creative and intuitive writing and financial reports at her office. In connection with a sand image she says: “Here there is a separation. On the left side there is my life as it was... until now. On the right side I am going ahead but I do not know... the connection between the two parts, the channel... I am not able yet to build a bridge.” She reports a dream in which she is dreaming about herself: “I dreamt that I was split in half. I was with the shadow, a point on the left, and on the right side... I don’t know... I was climbing a spiral staircase... beyond it there has to be a meeting with the other side... In the dream I was splitting in two over and over again... But last night I dreamt myself whole again.” These tensions are expressed by another sandplay image that bridges the many wounded parts of her psyche. A month later, a deep transformation is announced by a dream in which she has to go through three tests, in the last and most frightening of which she has to swallow a flying bird. Actually, in the dream the bird appears, but as it flies to enter the dreamers’ mouth its body is dissipated into invisible particles in the dreamer’s body, not causing any damage. It

is a symbol of the spiritual entering her life. In the end, the dreamer embarks by herself on a personal journey carrying a ticket with her name on it. The way of individuation, as Jung conceived it.

At the other end of the span of life, Mina is a 66-year-old lady, trying to disentangle herself from a life in the service of power (as a top manager in an international company) in order to find her “true meaning”.

In the second year of working together, a dream is followed by a drawing in which she tries to re-connect harmoniously with what is for her one-sided functioning. She dreams that the new manager of the company she used to work in is helpless and asks her to write a speech for him. But as she starts to do this (to use again her same logical side), she finds it impossible as the papers she writes on mix with one other and there is no possible way to arrive at a coherent meaning (something she always used to be able to do). She commented: “An impossible puzzle”. But the self-regulation dynamics of the psyche are expressed through a drawing with the inner double-bridged mandala. That drawing enables her to find the emotional equilibrium that she is searching for, by uniting her many opposed and conflicting sides. The process orients her towards the values of the feminine and feelings. In one subsequent sandplay, there appears the image of the bridge that connects land masses as well as water masses; it may therefore symbolize a critical juncture in her life when she becomes able to go through/navigate with a new insight—from living by the prevalent male attitudes towards a more feminine condition. In the healing process over the following year, the contrast between dreams that compensate her rigid conscious attitudes, and images in drawing and sand providing a space to heal gradually diminishes, as she finally changes toward self-centered and nurturing openness in connecting with people around her.

3. Conclusion

In these cases, the appearance of a bridge announces the start/ the possibility of the healing process. The bridge appears in different forms, and in all ages. It conveys a multi-faceted meaning: connectedness, orientation towards, transitions and crossings over, the possible assimilation of trauma by recognition and tolerance of the opposites which may be followed by a resolution and transformation in the life of the psyche.

The bridge acts in all these cases as a potential for realizing a connection and a virtual integration. Of course, the actual meaning varies depending on how the bridge is presented, and connected with the rest of the elements in the dream, drawing, and sand image. In all cases, bridges announce the process in which the changes in consciousness will start, but the actual healing, as a complete transforming process, is not yet accomplished. There is still a long way ahead to work out the many facets of fear, shame, guilt, anger, or depression, so that the separated and opposed inner things may find a safe way to be faced and accepted. The four cases represent only a brief summary of how the creative, transcendent function works, bringing into the therapeutic relationship meaningful materials to be viewed and clarified.

The bridges do not appear all the time during counseling and therapy, and they appear in so many forms that the moment marks a transition toward some new possibility, unknown until then. We can anticipate that inner healing forces are entering and are working from the inside. We have to be attentive to what the symbolic message hints at and work in that direction to help the person consciously to integrate the transformation, to be in the center of his/her life, no matter the direction he/she takes (Stein, 2005, Kindle Location 167). Once the bridges appear, hope energizes the person to live and there is a solid step out of depression, isolation, and stagnation. Actually, the counselor’s role may be compared with a bridge between the person’s unconscious and the person’s ego-consciousness actualized inside the patient’s psyche, which activates a new source of energy, a new wholeness.

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