



#75 Carl Jung and The Achievement of Personality

In a chapter titled The Development of Personality contained in Volume 17 of his Collected Works, Carl Jung provides a fascinating account of what he called the achievement of personality, which he described as “the prototype of the only meaningful life, that is, of a life that strives for the individual realization of its own law.”

Jung’s insights in this chapter, as we will see, are very pertinent in the modern world where many people are falling under the spell of divisive collective ideologies, and in the process, devaluing themselves as individuals.

While the term personality is commonly used to describe the set of qualities and traits which form an individual’s character, Jung had a more specific meaning in mind when he wrote this chapter. As he explained:

“The achievement of personality means nothing less than the best possible development of all that lies in a particular, single being...Personality is the highest realization of the inborn distinctiveness of the particular living being. Personality is an act of the greatest courage in the face of life, and means unconditional affirmation of all that constitutes the individual, the most successful adaptation to the universal conditions of human existence, with the greatest possible freedom of personal decision.” (Carl Jung)

Personality, in this sense, is achieved by a very select few. So long as one lives a life more concerned with conformity than individual development and authenticity, the seeds of personality will obviously remain dormant:

“Only the sharpest need is able to rouse it. The development of personality obeys no wish, no command, and no insight, but only need; it wants the motivating coercion of inner or outer necessities.” (Carl Jung)

In other words, the impetus to achieve personality is some form of severe adversity which awakens one to the existence of previously unrealized potentials, and forces one to realize that the way they had been living is no longer adequate. Not everyone reaches such a point in their life, for as long as one’s suffering and



circumstances remain bearable, the individual will do all he can to avoid the often burdensome and lonely process of developing personality.

As Jung explained:

“The saying, “For many are called, but few are chosen,” applies here as nowhere else; for the development of personality from its germinal state to full consciousness is at once a charism and a curse. Its first result is the conscious and unavoidable separation of the single being from the undifferentiated and unconscious herd. This means isolation, and there is no more comforting word for it. Neither family, nor society, nor position can save him from it...The development of personality is a favor that must be paid for dearly.” (Carl Jung)
The development of personality is initiated when the individual, with conviction, decides to go his own way.

“With the very decision to put his own way above all other ways he has already in large part fulfilled his liberating vocation. He has cancelled the validity of all other ways for himself. He has placed his law above all conventions.” (Carl Jung)
This decision is not met with an encouraging attitude from others, but ridicule and reproach. Following one’s own path instead of the well-trodden path will in many cases make one’s behavior appear foolish to the more mediocre. Describing the ridicule and resultant internal conflict which manifests in the early stages of achieving personality, Jung noted:

“If he listens to the voice, then he is different and isolated, for he has decided to follow the law that confronts him from within. His “own” law, everyone will cry. He alone knows better – has to know better: it is the law, the vocation, as little his “own” as the lion that fells him, although it is undoubtedly this particular lion that kills him, and not any other lion. Only in this sense can you speak of “his” vocation, “his” law.” (Carl Jung)

In following his own law, even in the presence of constant derision from others, the individual both frees and isolates himself from the masses, whose behavior is instinctively fashioned and dictated by the social conventions of the day. Some may wonder why anyone would want to go their own way, for social conventions, especially in more morally developed societies can help maintain order.



Jung, however, believed it is not social convention in and of itself that is the problem, but the tendency of people to follow it unconsciously. For when a society faces unexpected disruptions, as they inevitably do, a population composed of too few individuals capable of autonomous thought and action will find itself in a position similar to a herd of wild animals seized by panic and terror.

As Jung warned:

“The fact is that the group, because of its unconsciousness, has no freedom of choice, so that, within it, psychic life works itself out like an uncontrolled law of nature. There is set going a causally connected process that comes to rest only in catastrophe...For when new conditions not provided for by the old conventions arise, then panic seizes the human being who has been held unconscious by routine, much as it seizes an animal, and with equally unpredictable results.” (Carl Jung)

It is individuals who have achieved personality and “thrust themselves up like mountain peaks out of the mass” (Jung), who act as the much needed antidote to the hysteria that can so easily possess and overtake the unconscious herd.

“...personality does not allow itself to be seized by panic...for it already has terror behind it. It is equal to the changing conditions brought by time, and is unknowingly and unwillingly a leader.” (Carl Jung)

While it is easy to look at the great personalities, past and present, with a sense of awe, it is crucial to realize that the potential for achieving personality is not limited to a select few. The inner voice which calls one to personality may be less audible in some than others, but it exists in all nonetheless:

“In so far as every individual has his own inborn law of life, it is theoretically possible for every man to follow this law before all others and so to become a personality – that is, to achieve completeness.” (Carl Jung)



In concluding his profound exposition on the nature of personality, Jung admitted that ultimately “what is called personality is a great and mysterious question”, and acknowledged that while he has made a preliminary attempt at describing its nature, there is still much to be discovered.

Although the mystery of personality still remains with us today, we do know that the achievement of personality has a liberating effect on both the life of the individual, and the society in which such people are embedded. Therefore, in our tumultuous times, we can, with Jung, put forth a cry for the rise of personality.

“Not for nothing is it just our own epoch that calls for the liberating personality, for the one who distinguishes himself from the inescapable power of collectivity, thus freeing himself at least in a psychic way, and who lights a hopeful watchfire announcing to others that at least one man has succeeded in escaping from the fateful identity with the group soul.” (Carl Jung)

“...just as great personality acts upon society to alleviate, liberate, transform, and heal, so the birth of personality has a restoring effect upon the individual. It is as if a stream that was losing itself in marshy tributaries suddenly discovered its proper bed, or as if a stone that lay upon a germinating seed were lifted away so that the sprout could begin its natural growth.” (Carl Jung)