From Illusion to Meaning: A Transpersonal Model of Symbolic Construction

What Freud and Jung saw — and what they haven't yet said

There is a fact that neither theology nor science can dissolve: we are born, we live, we suffer, and we die. This condition carries no given meaning — at its core, it is absurd. And yet no human culture, in any era, has ever inhabited that absurdity in its raw form. Everywhere, human beings construct, fabricate, and shape meaning in order to stand upright in the face of their own finitude.

This is where I begin. It is also, in a way, where Freud and Jung began — each in his own manner, and each, I believe, stopping a little too soon.

What Freud Saw, and What He Missed

In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud proposes a radical thesis: religious beliefs are not the product of a rational discovery of reality, but illusions produced by human desire — specifically, the desire for protection in the face of distress and helplessness. The child depends on the father for survival; the adult, still confronted by forces beyond his control — illness, death, chance, what Freud calls *Fate* — projects that same need onto a paternal figure enlarged to the scale of the universe. In a well-known letter to Jung, Freud states his position with almost blunt clarity: the need for religion has its ultimate root in infantile helplessness that persists after childhood.

Freud goes further still. In an earlier essay, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," he compares religion to a universal obsessional neurosis: prohibitions, ritualized behavior, guilt, anxiety — the psychic structure of the individual neurotic and that of religious civilization mirror one another point for point. His conclusion calls for an "education to reality": humanity should outgrow religion the way a child outgrows dependence on its parents, learning to face the world through reason and science rather than through transcendent consolation.

This reading has a real merit: it names an authentic function of belief. Yes, belief consoles. Yes, it answers a need for protection. But it commits, in my view, an error of perspective by reducing the mechanism to its psychobiographical origin — the father, childhood, the Oedipus complex — rather than to its ontological function. It is not primarily the absence of a father that drives human beings to believe; it is anguish in the face of the absurd and of death. The father is only one of the historical and cultural forms this anguish takes — not its first cause.

This is why I propose replacing the word *illusion* with **construction**. An illusion implies a distorted relationship to reality; a construction is a necessary act, a functional response to a question that existence poses without ever answering it itself. And this construction is not confined to the religious: money, social success, family, or national belonging can play

exactly the same role as protective architecture against the void. Some of these constructions heal; others kill — the history of religious wars, no less than that of the secular fanaticisms of the twentieth century, testifies to that clearly enough that the diagnosis should not be reserved for religion alone.

On this point, Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), meets and extends my intuition better than Freud himself: what matters is not the objective truth of a belief, but its capacity to give existence a direction strong enough to survive the trial — including the extreme trial of the concentration camp, from which Frankl drew this very conviction. The risk, of course, is the same one Freud identified: a construction of meaning can save just as easily as it can justify the worst.

What Jung Opened

Jung refuses the Freudian reduction. In the lectures he gave at Yale in 1937, published as *Psychology and Religion* (1938), he offers an entirely different point of entry: religion has its source in a **numinous experience** — a psychic experience that imposes itself on the subject, exceeds him, and transforms his state of consciousness. The subject is not the creator of this experience: he undergoes it, encounters it, and must learn to respond to it.

Jung carefully distinguishes lived religion — the direct experience of the numinous — from its institutional deposit: creed, dogma, ritual, which are, in his own words, merely historically fixed forms of an original experience. He goes so far as to compare dogma to a collective dream: the dual human and divine nature of Christ, for instance, is not primarily a metaphysical statement, but a statement about the psyche itself — fully human and fully bearer of transcendence. This conviction leads him to his method of **amplification**: comparing symbols spontaneously produced by his patients — mandalas, quaternity figures, alchemical motifs — with those of ancient religious traditions, in order to draw out a shared psychic structure, which he would name the **collective unconscious**.

Jung thus opens a door that Freud had closed: that of an unconscious not limited to a reservoir of personal repressions, but one that spontaneously produces images exceeding the subject's individual history. The modern world, he notes, has lost its traditional religious representations without having lost the psychic need they once answered — a diagnosis that anticipates, by nearly a century, today's *spiritual but not religious* movement.

It is this intuition that I extend, reformulating it through a language I believe better accounts for clinical experience.

A Two-Layer Model

I propose distinguishing two levels that Freud and Jung each explored separately, without ever explicitly articulating one to the other.

The **unconscious** is made up of the individual's psychic and cultural history: everything that has not reached consciousness, everything that upbringing, environment, and personal

biography have repressed or simply not yet processed. This is the territory Freud explored with the greatest rigor.

The **subconscious**, as I conceive it, is of a different nature. It constitutes a raw source, **outside space and time** — a field of information shared by humanity as a whole, whose circulation would follow laws closer to certain readings of quantum physics than to historical or hereditary transmission in the classical sense. This is the level Jung sensed without fully theorizing it, through his notion of the collective unconscious and through the strange recurrence, in patients who had no knowledge of their historical origin, of Gnostic, alchemical, or mythological symbols. The physicist and systems theorist Ervin Laszlo proposed, in *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything* (2004), a contemporary formulation of this same intuition: that of a cosmic informational field, prior to and underlying matter, in which past, present, and future would coexist — a hypothesis that remains debated and marginal within academic physics, but one that offers a useful language for clinically naming what Jung had already, without naming it as such, called the numinous.

The essential point of my model is this: the subconscious is never given in raw form to consciousness. It is **shaped by the individual unconscious**, which acts as a filter, an interface — what Jung called the **persona**. It is the persona that adapts this timeless, transcendent material to the individual's own coordinates: language, era, culture, personal history. The same source can thus manifest, depending on the subject and the era, as a deity, a mandala, a dream, a political ideal, or a personal quest for success. The form changes; the function — giving a livable shape to the absurd — remains the same.

The Clinical Corollary

This theoretical model would remain mere speculation if it did not lead to a practice. This is where, I believe, it takes on its full meaning for a therapist.

If symbolic construction is necessary — and not pathological in itself — then therapeutic work consists neither in validating it as truth nor in unmasking it as an illusion to be dissolved by reason alone, as Freud proposed. It consists in **transmuting** it.

Concretely, this means taking up the symbols the patient has themselves produced — those their persona has already shaped, often without their full awareness — and opening them, through metaphor, to a broader meaning than the one originally assigned by their upbringing or environment. This is precisely the gesture I practice in a hypnosis session: I never replace the patient's image with an external one; I work within their own symbolism to allow them to find an expanded meaning — less constrained, more liberating. It is also, in an entirely different register, the approach Stanislav Grof developed in transpersonal psychology: accompanying the emergence of psychic contents that exceed the individual biographical frame, without ever interpreting them in the patient's place.

Healing, in this perspective, is therefore not the disappearance of a belief or its replacement by another. It is the passage from a rigid construction, inherited and largely unconscious, to a consciously chosen construction, flexible enough to keep evolving with the person.

Conclusion

Freud was right to see belief as a response to a need; he was wrong to reduce it to a single, biographically dated need. Jung was right to restore to the unconscious its transpersonal dimension; he sometimes stopped at the threshold of a more explicit theorization of what that dimension could be.

What I am proposing here is neither a refutation nor an academic synthesis of these two positions, but a working model, born as much from reading as from clinical practice: a timeless, shared source of meaning, shaped by each individual's own history through their persona, and one which therapeutic work is not meant to judge, but to transmute.

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