



Photo by Susan Supak

Psychology and the Spiritual Journey

by Thomas Keating

When I first entered the monastery, the role of psychology was not addressed in helping one to understand human nature or its interaction with spiritual formation. Of course I had heard of Freud and Jung for some time before actually encountering their works but it was when I was a young monk that a member of our monastic community, Fr. Raphael Simon, who was a psychoanalyst, offered a course in some of the basic teaching of Freud. Apart from that course, I read books about Freud, Adler, Jung, and others and learned a lot more from people who had studied them closely. Perhaps I learned the most from working with Fr.

Raphael in the screening of candidates for the monastery and in spiritual companioning with nuns, priests, and retreatants.

The field of psychology as an experiential science has to be taken into account by the world's religions and by those who are seeking personal transformation. To take an example from Roman Catholic theology, the consequences of original sin are believed to be three: illusion, concupiscence, and weakness of will. Illusion means that we do not know where true happiness lies and seek it in the wrong places. Concupiscence means that we pursue alternate means of happiness as far as they can be found in our environment. Finally, weakness of will means that if we ever discover where true happiness lies, the will is too weak to pursue it.

The science of psychology has given us a more thorough diagnosis of the human condition. Besides the consequences of original sin on the conscious level, we now know from the findings of psychology that the unconscious contains all kinds of damaging tendencies—repression of traumatic events and feelings, compensatory activity for the privation of instinctual needs, and many other consequences—that obviously bear on the development of the spiritual life and on one's ability to practice one's beliefs.

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The spiritual journey presumes a certain ego strength and hence any movement toward genuine human development is growth in the spiritual life. The healing of compulsions and addictions is conducive if not necessary for sustained spiritual growth. Thus, the treatment for various forms of neurosis must go hand in hand with the effort to practice the Christian virtues.

The gulf that has existed historically between psychology and spirituality is slowly closing. The contribution of transpersonal psychology with its acceptance of the spiritual nature of human beings has certainly helped, even though many schools of contemporary psychology do not yet accept this dimension. Transpersonal psychology tries to take the whole human potential into account and not simply part of it as in the case of certain behavioral sciences. It is a deliberate effort to bridge the gap between spirituality and psychology. The psychological disciplines need to address the whole of human nature with its spiritual dimension. Fortunately, there seems to be a recognition on the part of religion, at least the main line Christian denominations, that psychological counseling is often a necessary ingredient in spiritual guidance and is especially important in cases of mental illness.

The spiritual journey aims at ever deeper levels of healing because it has as its goal the transformation of the faculties of intellect and will by grace in such a way that we can truly share the divine life and love. Psychological counseling and treat-

ment, on the other hand, is aimed primarily at helping the person lead a normal human life and to relate well in society. These goals are not contradictory. The spiritual journey under the influence of the Spirit simply has higher objectives and hence, the healing of the unconscious is effected at ever deepening levels through the so-called Dark Nights of St. John of the Cross.

I understand the psychological

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unconscious to contain all the events of one's life, especially repressed emotional experiences that were never dealt with or resolved. These hidden and negative emotional energies constitute what Jung called the shadow side of our personality. The ontological unconscious contains all the human potential for growth communicated by the grace of Baptism that remains untapped. This includes the awareness of our spiritual nature with its faculties of intellect and will, the Divine Indwelling and the supernatural organism, as well as the creative energies which sustains our life at all levels. The true self might be described as the presence of God within us manifesting in our uniqueness. As the spiritual life unfolds we make contact with vari-

ous levels of consciousness, each one more integrated than the previous one. All of this human potential remains unconscious until we deliberately begin the spiritual journey. In some cases, God's presence may impose itself on us whether we like it or not, but we cannot count on this happening and hence need to take steps such as the practice of regular periods of interior silence, to prepare ourselves for the gift of contemplative prayer.

The best way I know of testing the theory of the Divine Therapy is by observing and reflecting on one's own experience. This reflection would probably be superficial unless one is sincerely committed to spiritual growth. My ideas about the emotional programs for happiness is a combination of the traditional Christian

teachings regarding the capital sins, especially the handling of thoughts and emotions as taught by Evagrius who sums up the experience of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth century, and the new science of developmental psychology. For example, the term "emotional programs for happiness" is a psychological way of explaining concupiscent as it breaks down into the first three energy centers which later develops into the seven capital sins. The capital sins are not actual sins but tendencies to sin. When the frustration of these instinctual needs becomes acute, there is a tendency to trample on the needs and rights of others, as well as our own true good, in order to get what we want or get away from what we don't want.



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The moderating of the emotional programs for happiness in the Christian tradition is called the practice of virtue. This consists of the four moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and divine love. The practice of these virtues moderate the excesses of the drive for gratification based on the instinctual needs which developed at a time when reason had not yet awakened and hence there was no moderating force for these drives in the face of difficult or unbearable situations. There are a number of hallowed practices for addressing the exaggerations of the emotional programs for happiness, several of which are taught as part of the Contemplative Outreach training. Not all spiritual disciplines in the various world religions address this problem.

One other aspect of the false self system that is very important is over-identification with one's group whether it be family, tribe, ethnic group, nation, peer group, or religion. By over-identification I mean the unquestioning acceptance of the values of the above mentioned groups from which we tend to construct our identity during the age from roughly four to eight. On the social level, naive loyalties may give rise to violence, war, and all kinds of social injustice. Part of growing up is to question the validity of those values, and the work of conversion is to evaluate them in the light of the gospel, or whatever the moral principles of one's particular religion might be.

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