Jungian Analysis and Nondual Wisdom

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This chapter is about the journey in Jungian analysis of a spiritual seeker named "Jenna," who longed to know God. It is also about a defensive process I call "psychospiritual splitting," which nearly derailed Jenna's journey. Finally, it is about our analytic relationship and a nondual understanding of spirituality, both of which were central to her journey.

On the surface of things, Jenna began analysis because dysfunctional patterns in love and work remained unresolved despite years of practicing meditation. What is more, subtle feelings of being flawed and unacceptable seeped into her awareness whenever her defenses were down.

Unknowingly, however, Jenna was compounding her problems by her faulty use of spiritual exercises. In her eagerness to see into the depths of the divine, she was splitting between "higher Self" and "lower self" needs. In many ways she used spiritual ambition to compensate for her insecurity and to circumvent the difficult task of individuation, which Jung defined as the process of developing to the fullest possible extent who and what we are as unique individuals.

In order to heal this split, Jenna needed an approach to psychotherapy that addressed two paths of development: the vertical path of spiritual transcendence and the horizontal path of individuation. The first is directed toward awakening to the Self, or the timeless, formless ground of pure being/awareness. The latter involves illuminating and transforming the shadow, or the wounded, lost, and disowned parts of the personality. It also involves actualizing the unique gifts and talents of our individual selfhood. A nondual understanding of spirituality encompasses both paths.

As I see it, our individual psyche and physical body are sacred manifestations of our essential Self, Spirit, or Being. They are centers of expression for our greater transpersonal awareness. Ultimately, nonduality is abidance in and as the Self, from which wisdom, compassion, and power spontaneously arise and flow forth through the unique qualities and capacities of our individual self.

Although the body and psyche are distinct from the Self, they are not separate from the Self. Being out of touch with the Self leaves us feeling unstable, empty, and ontologically insecure. By contrast, if we neglect our sacred manifestation we might rest in deep and timeless being/awareness, but there is no development of the unique gifts and talents by which it might potentially contribute to our loved ones and community. To ignore the path of individuation, then, means the Self or Spirit might end up expressing through an inadequate vehicle, a vehicle moved about by powerful, immature, unconscious forces, which not only short-circuit our potential for love and creativity but also distort and derail our quest for stable spiritual realization. Anything less than realization of the seamless totality of essential being and sacred individuality is not nondual. Nondual awareness, as I define it, is virtually impossible unless we develop accordingly on both paths.

If we are like Jenna, we face certain problems by trying to develop exclusively along the path of transcendence. We might believe that if we awaken to God or the Self, our personal difficulties will
magically disappear. Work and relationship problems, conflicts concerning self-esteem, anxiety, and depression will automatically take care of themselves if we meditate, pray, and transcend our ego-personalities. Although it is possible to have many meaningful spiritual experiences as we journey along the path of transcendence, the downside is that we might simply dissociate from our psychological conflicts and emotional problems. Moreover, if we exclusively cultivate our innermost spiritual awareness, the shadow side of our personality will usually find some way to become known. Sooner or later whatever is split off is likely to come to the foreground, perhaps through a traumatic breakdown of mind or body or through painful difficulties in love and work. Sometimes it is not until we “fall from grace” that we finally come down to earth and become aware of the split-off parts of our personality.

In this chapter I highlight a few of the difficulties associated with psychospiritual splitting. First is the tendency to use images of God to compensate for unmet childhood needs; second is the potential for ego-inflation if we identify with these images. When our use of God-images is compensatory and we identify with them, we inevitably inflate and drive our traumatized and lost parts further into the unconscious. Often it is only by suffering a profound dark night of the ego that we let go of our inflated self-images, reclaim our wounded parts, and begin to realize our true identity as the formless Self beyond all images of God. The formless Self might then use our illumined and individuated personality as a vessel through which to radiate the love, wisdom, and power of our true nature out into the world, into all the activities of our daily life.

The Self
Before describing Jenna’s journey in analysis, I shall discuss my understanding of Jung’s (1961; 1971) notion of the Self, which is central to this case. This aspect of Jung’s psychology is perhaps the most confusing of his corpus because he used the term in several different ways. He used it to refer to a primary cosmic unity analogous to Asian concepts of unity consciousness, to the totality of a human being including both conscious and unconscious, to a transpersonal power that transcends the ego, and to the spark of divinity at the core of the soul.

I base my understanding on his initial intuitions and later alchemical writings. Henderson (1986) says Jung’s concept of the Self first took shape in response to his fascination with the Atman of Indian philosophy. Further, Corbett (1996) believes “Jung’s theory [of the Self] is best understood as a psychological restatement of the ancient Vedantic notion of the Atman” (p. 41). If this is true, then we need to understand what the word Atman refers to.

Atman is Sanskrit for “self” and refers to the divine Self in the human being, the “God within” (Tylberg, 1976). According to Indian Vedanta, this Self is our true “I,” our ground of pure being/awareness, which is identical to the universal Ground from which all creation proceeds (Brahman).

If the Self is our ground of being, it is also the matrix of transpersonal awareness within which all personal experience occurs. The Self is therefore the larger field that encompasses the smaller. Moreover, it is also the source of all forms, including the body and personal psyche. Swami Abhayananda (1991, p. 13), a Western Vedantist, tells us the Self is the inconspicuous Witness behind all our states of mind. It is this Witness that is our true Self and not merely the various states of mind with which we ordinarily identify. Because we identify exclusively with the transient body, emotions, and mind, we lose sight of our true nature as pure being/awareness, the Knower in all states of consciousness.

Vedantic seers also say our ego-consciousness is a fragment of the Self’s consciousness. While we are identified with the ego-fragment, the Self might sometimes appear in our dreams and visions as one of any number of possible Self-images: a center of great luminosity and radiance; God as Father, Mother, or Beloved (with the “I” as the child or lover); a wise man or woman; a divine
child; a goddess; Christ; the Virgin Mary; the Holy Spirit; angels, deities, buddhas, bodhisattvas; shamanic power animals; and images of the natural world, such as a mountain, star, ocean, or infinite space. Many people experience these images as preternatural presences that reside within the psyche, as living aspects of their own minds.

Apparently the Self-as-ground can communicate its intentions to the ego-fragment by way of these preternatural presences. We can regard the manifestation of a spirit, a deity, or a power animal in dreams and visions in at least three ways: first, as an invitation from the Self to the ego to inquire more deeply into the meaning of life and the nature of reality. In this way the Self is the source of inspiration that sets into motion our paths of individuation and transcendence. Second, whatever the medium by which we encounter them, we can regard God-images as sources of guidance on how to conduct our lives. We will see this illustrated in a dream Jenna presented, in which the Self appeared to communicate something necessary for her personal and spiritual growth.

Third, images of the Self might be regarded as symbolic representations of attributes of the Self, analogous to the Sufi view (Almaas, 1986) that the ninety-nine names of God—representing such attributes as mercy, compassion, strength, peace, love, and wisdom—are manifestations of the Divine in the human psyche. When these images arise, they might point to emergent attributes that are part and parcel of our essential Self. In this way we have an opportunity to consciously meet and realize one or another attribute of our true nature.

It seems to me that in keeping with Jung’s original intuition we must regard these images (and the attributes they represent) as subtle manifestations of the Self, which is the source of all forms. None of them, however, should be taken to be the essence of the Self, which is formless and infinite. The Self is the deep, formless, infinite being/awareness from which all manifestations arise. Self- or deity-images, by contrast, are subtle manifestations of the Self.

If we surrender to the Self and accept Its guidance, it is possible that our journey will gradually move beyond a dualistic relationship with the Self as “Other” to a more fundamental nondual realization: we are both the fragment and the totality of being/awareness. There is a seamless continuity between ego and Self. The paths of transcendence and individuation come together as we realize the Self in its formless radiance, prior to and beyond all images, expressed as and through our sacred individuality, which becomes the lens through which compassion, wisdom, and power pour forth into our relationships and the world.

Jenna

When I first met Jenna, she seemed ethereal and composed. She held her head high and spoke softly, as if we were in church. Her softness, however, seemed strained and marked by a subtle air of superiority. “How long have you meditated?” she questioned, her tone slightly imperious. “Are you familiar with esoteric teachings? I might be better off with a Zen master.”

An assistant professor of literature at a nearby college, Jenna lived alone. In addition to her academic duties, she led groups in which people meditated, told dreams, and read sacred texts.

She became aware of her spirituality as a child. Because she suffered from bronchial asthma, she couldn’t play with other children and so spent many hours alone. She imagined angels and other beings from myths and fairy tales and talked with them on a regular basis. “They were very real to me,” she said.

In her early twenties a frightening asthma attack landed her in the hospital, at which point she learned some metaphysical healing techniques and used them unfailingly for two years. She claims she was healed as a result of using these techniques and became an avid student of metaphysical spirituality.

Over the years Jenna developed an interest in goddess spirituality and developed skill for visualizing and meditating on deities from various ages and cultures. For example, her daily meditation
was to visualize “a goddess radiating wisdom and compassion” who became her “inner guru.” She imagined herself sitting before this resplendent figure dressed in blue and repeated the affirmation, “I rest in the heart of the goddess. She is all around me, holding and protecting me. I rest in the heart of the goddess.”

Over time the goddess seemed to develop an independent existence in Jenna’s mind. Conversations occurred between them. For example, one time when she gazed into the deity’s eyes, the goddess sent special beams of loving light and communicated a message: “You are a special person, a wise and beneficent ‘daughter of the universe.’”

An important visionary experience occurred one evening while Jenna practiced yogic breathing techniques. She saw herself as the high priestess of the Tarot—a cool, detached feminine figure dressed in blue robes with a moon-crown on her head and a scroll on her lap. “As I concentrated on it,” she said, “the vision absorbed me. I was pulled into a surreal world of unearthly beauty that had a shimmering radiance, like that of moonlight on water. I found myself in an ancient temple, smelling the incense and hearing the chanting of monks. Then I saw myself seated on a throne, like the oracle of Delphi. At first I was looking at myself. Then I became the high priestess. My whole life unfolded before my eyes as well as my past and future lives. I realized it was my destiny to disseminate to a suffering humanity the wisdom of the ages recorded in the universal memory.”

This and other visions convinced Jenna to blend visualization techniques with her knowledge of myth and literature and become a teacher of metaphysical spirituality. “I developed a small following,” she said. “I began to think I was one of two or three hundred people chosen to bring in the highest teachings of the Aquarian Age. I thought I was destined for high sainthood.”

I felt conflicting emotions as I listened to her. At first I felt inadequate and wondered why she was coming to me. After all, she was so spiritual, and I felt less than ordinary in her presence. Then I started to feel competitive. I wanted to “burst her bubble” and tell her she wasn’t exceptional. I realized, however, that my feelings might be clues to Jenna’s shadow-self. A sense of the dramatic pervaded her story, but underneath she might be feeling insecure.

She paused in telling her story. I waited a moment and said softly, “These are interesting experiences, Jenna. But you’re experienced enough to know that visions such as these don’t mean you’re special. How is the rest of your life going—your relationships, your work?”

I saw Jenna wince in shame. Slowly, apprehensively, she told me she had recently separated from her partner of five years, a passive man for whom she had little respect. The breakup occurred when she spiraled through a confused and chaotic love affair with a married man who was also her student. No one had understood her so deeply as this student. She really wanted him, wanted to make him love her, and would stop at nothing to get him. She was so consumed by desire that she hadn’t stopped to think of the consequences of their passion for his wife and child.

The affair became a scandal. Students and colleagues discovered the liaison, accused her of sexual misconduct, and judged her severely. Many abandoned her. The lover accused Jenna of being too controlling and returned to his wife, and Jenna’s partner wanted nothing more to do with her. Alone and rejected, she was plunged into a deep depression as she faced a huge split between her spiritual ideals and uncontainable desires. “How could someone who felt such love and was so dedicated to spiritual life make such a mess?” she moaned. Her visionary experiences stopped, esoteric teachings lost their meaning, and she began to question everything.

Jenna’s History

Jenna’s mother was a very beautiful woman with frustrated desires for social status. She wanted to appear as though she and Jenna lived at a higher socioeconomic level than they actually did. Everything about her mother—clothes, house, interests, even religion—
reflected a need to appear socially upper crust. She groomed Jenna to look the part.

Jenna never knew her father and saw him only once. According to her mother, he was a rough, immature man who had multiple affairs and deserted the family shortly after Jenna's birth, finally dying when Jenna was six. The mother pined away for her missing husband, never remarried, and withdrew into alcohol to ease her depression. She blamed Jenna for the breakup. Jenna retreated into a vivid fantasy life, spending hours reading fairy tales and myths and imagining herself in the stories. She privately talked to spirits who soothed her and gave her the love she needed and never got from her mother. One of these spirits, she imagined, was her lost father.

Commentary
I now wish to comment on the case as I've presented it thus far. I believe that Jenna's spirituality arises from authentic longings to know God. Prior to her “fall from grace” she cured herself of debilitating asthma by using metaphysical healing techniques, which required intense concentration, and she practiced meditation on a daily basis, which took self-discipline. That she teaches literature at a university suggests she is competent and intelligent.

However, I also believe she was using goddess-images in her meditations to fill in holes in her psyche that formed as a result of childhood needs inconsistently met due to her mother's narcissistic and depressed personality and the early abandonment by her father.

According to contemporary psychoanalytic theory (Summers, 1994; 1999), for us to evolve and maintain a vital, mature personal self out of our inborn potentials, we need caregivers who facilitate our individuation by meeting certain developmental needs. Winnicott (1960) said we have a “holding need,” a need for caregivers who suspend the expression of their own subjectivity and are “present” simply as loving onlookers who give us room to discover our own subjective reality. Kohut (1971; 1984) said we also have a “mirroring need,” or a need to be affirmed by our caregivers for our value and creative spirit. He also said we have an “idealizing need,” or a need to experience ourselves as part of calm, wise, loving authorities who possess qualities we admire and are latent within us. Finally, he said we have a “twinship need,” in the sense of needing relationships with others who are very much like ourselves and who therefore give us the feeling that we are members of the greater human family.

Our caregivers facilitate the emergence of our authentic individual selfhood when they optimally respond to these needs. By contrast, when they neglect to meet them, most often because of their own unmet developmental needs, they derail our individuation. If individuation is derailed we might dissociate from our emotional life (holding wounds), experience ourselves as defective (mirroring wounds), feel unable to be true to guiding ideals (idealizing wounds), and feel deeply estranged from others (twinship wounds). Moreover, when our needs are unmet, they remain unconsciously active but archaic and immature. There is then a lifelong need to find others to fulfill them.

In Jenna’s case, I recognized deep, unfulfilled longings for holding and mirroring stemming from her frustrating relationship with her invalidating mother. An inquisitive, imaginative child, Jenna needed a caregiver who joyously welcomed her into existence, recognized the uniqueness of her subjective life, and affirmed her special talents. Instead, as she put it, “My mother wanted a classically pretty daughter who dressed impeccably, attracted men, and married into money, and she groomed me to look the part. She also disapproved of my artistic and intellectual pursuits, ostensibly because they would drive men away and limit my chances for marriage and social position.”

“I never matched my mother’s image of me,” she continued.

“Now that I’m no longer a priestess to my students, I feel inadequate. I’m nothing underneath it all. No matter what or how much
I accomplish, mother's never happy. She said I was disappointing as a person.”

There are at least two ways in which Jenna unconsciously used visualizations to meet these needs and compensate for feeling defective. First, she regularly visualized being held within the heart of the goddess. Her history coupled with her use of the affirmation “I am in the heart of the goddess” suggest she was attempting to invoke in her psyche the nurturing qualities of a stable, accepting, holding presence who cherished her and protected her from harm. Similarly, when the goddess radiated beams of loving light and told her she was a special “daughter of the universe,” Jenna was probably attempting to provide for herself some semblance of mirroring. It is possible that through these visualizations she was attempting to activate in her psyche the positive Great Mother archetype—an image of the divine as a loving, sheltering, affirming power, a wholly accepting presence who in effect says, “Yes, you exist, and I love you just the way you are.”

Then, too, Jenna tried to compensate for her feelings of defectiveness by identifying with another archetypal image, the high priestess, which resulted in an inflated ego. If we adopt Stolorow and Lachmann’s (1980) definition of narcissism—that “mental activity is narcissistic to the degree that its function is to maintain the structural cohesion, temporal stability, and positive affective coloring” of the personal self (p. 10)—then it is possible that at least some of Jenna’s spiritual activities supported an inflated sense of herself and compensated for her feelings of worthlessness.

If as spiritual seekers we are plagued by feelings of inadequacy from childhood mirror wounds and deficits in early parenting, we might compensate by constructing grandiose images of ourselves, such as Jenna’s high priestess and “daughter of the universe,” which become part of our persona when feelings of deficiency are too painful to confront in their rawness. We might also fashion ourselves as spiritual teachers long before we have the stable realization to actually perform this function. In short, Jenna attributed to the ego what belongs to the Self. Ultimately, however, the Self is the spiritual teacher, not the ego.

A Dream to Guide the Analysis

At the start of her analytic journey, I asked Jenna to begin using a technique known as “inner searching” (Bugental, 1976), a developed form of free association. I asked Jenna to (a) center her attention on a genuine life concern, (b) open her awareness as fully as possible to whatever she found, and (c) freely express whatever she experienced—physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, dreams, fantasies, hopes, wishes, and so on. When she immersed herself as fully as possible in her stream of awareness and gave simple, unbiased descriptions of whatever she found, she made many new discoveries, some of them life-changing. During the third month of our work together, for example, she had the following dream:

I am flying in outer space. I see ahead of me the City of God, all golden and shimmering in the distance. I am so excited. I want it so much. Then I discover that, despite its beauty, it is an uninhabited golden shell. God doesn’t live in this shell. I think, “I have to keep going this isn’t it!” Then in the distance I see the Milky Way galaxy with the Eye of God enclosed in a triangle at its center. I gently enter the Eye and dissolve into boundless emptiness, absolute love, and perfect peace. I’m finally home! Then I hear a stern but loving voice that says, “You can’t stay here. It isn’t time yet. You have to go back.” I’m sad and start to leave, but on the way out I find a spirit-man, a being of light who tells me I’m an orphan and he is adopting me. He takes me in his arms and gently brings me back to earth. But getting back into my body is difficult.

As her analyst, my first task was to help Jenna use the dream as a trigger for her inner searching. In the dream, she is flying to
higher realms and encounters the empty city of God. When I asked her for associations, she said that the empty city reminded her of the poverty of her inner life. “Once God dwelled within me,” she said. “I had so many wonderful feelings of love and joy. But now, because of my indiscretions, God has abandoned me, and I’m nothing but an empty shell.”

Then she added, “Maybe it’s not a big loss. All of these images are giving me a headache anyway. You’d think with all my study I’d have known that images of God are not the real thing. They’re empty shells, obscuring rather than revealing God. There’s no real value in them!”

“So, I have to keep going, far beyond the empty city, straight to the Eye of God. But, hell! Just as I enter the Eye and melt into God’s love, He tells me I can’t stay, at least not now! I’ve got to go back.” She paused, and then said angrily, “I’m being rejected by God Himself, just like I was rejected by my mother. Once again, I’m not good enough!

“No, that’s not it,” she continued. “It’s not that I’m not good enough. I’m just not ready, not acceptable yet, to live in blissful union with Him.” Then she said with quiet resignation, “But I can’t stand this world. I want out!”

As Jenna associated to the dream, I had my own intuitions about its meaning. I thought the dream might contain a message from the Self that spoke of the change of attitude that Jenna needed for therapy to work and individuation to proceed. One of my favorite quotations from a Kabbalistic text (Matt, 1995) reads, “Before descending to this world the soul is imperfect; she is lacking something. By descending to this world, she is perfected in every dimension” (p. 148).

When I quoted this to her she replied, “Descending to this world is so painful. It’s also humiliating. I assumed I was an initiate on the spiritual path, an advanced soul, but now I’m in the dark. I feel rejected, abandoned, and alone. I don’t know what’s real anymore. I’m questioning everything I took for granted.”

“But, Jenna,” I argued, “maybe ‘descending’ is positive. Maybe God is saying to you, ‘Integrate your whole self—body, emotions, mind, desires, sexuality, creativity. Bring all of yourself to Me, not just your spiritual part.’ Maybe we should think of your dream as a message to stop striving so hard to know God and see what happens when you join us regular human beings.”

Indeed, the dream suggests it is futile for Jenna to strive for spiritual transcendence by bypassing her human needs. Authentic spiritual growth involves holding and containing all experiences, not just lofty spiritual insights and feelings. She must include in her experience everything she wants to avoid. In this sense, spiritual life involves bearing pain and suffering, holding darkness with a compassionate heart, and realizing our full humanity while simultaneously resting in the stillness and emptiness of the Self. It seems to me that we gradually develop our capacity to do this when our emotional life is met by the holding and mirroring ministrations of responsive caregivers, which Jenna did not have.

The Transference Relationship

Another important symbol in Jenna’s dream is the spirit-man, a preternatural presence who adopts her, carries her back to earth, and helps her return to her body. I believe it will be useful to examine this image as it relates to the transferences that unfolded between us.

As an analyst, I find it useful to distinguish between two types of transference. In the first, the “repetitive transference,” analyst and client unconsciously repeat dysfunctional patterns in the early relationship between child and caregivers. In the second, which I call the “development-enhancing” transference, archaic developmental needs from childhood are reactivated, and the analyst responds optimally to those needs. Bacal (1998), a psychoanalytic self-psychotherapist, defines “optimal responsiveness” as “the responsivity of the analyst that is therapeutically most relevant at any
particular moment in the context of a particular patient and his illness." (p. 5). As I see it then, the development-enhancing transference requires that the analyst empathically attune himself to the patient’s inner world in order to deeply understand the patient’s authentic developmental needs, and then to communicate verbally or nonverbally his understanding, which encourages the process of individuation to get back on course. This could mean that the analyst must embody Self-qualities that are latent within the patient and are needed by her for her own individuation. Analytic treatment consists of a shifting figure/ground relationship between these two types of transference.

There were many times over the course of treatment when I confronted Jenna and activated the dysfunctional relationship between her and her mother. This is partly what happened when I suggested that her visions don’t make her special. I also confronted other maladaptive behavior patterns: her use of her students to supply the mirroring she didn’t get from her mother, her tendency to treat others as if they were inferior, her refusal to accept her ordinariness. When I confronted her along these lines she said I reminded her of her invalidating mother. She said I was criticizing her, telling her she wasn’t perfect just the way she was. She often reacted by getting angry and withdrawing. Sometimes I argued back, “Quite frankly, I don’t see you as perfect. I see you as human, with authentic human needs. I think your needs scare you because to your mind they imply you are defective, neither good enough in your mother’s eyes nor good enough to the God you imagine inside your head. I think we need to welcome all of who you are, human needs and all.”

The image of the spirit-man, however, seemed to suggest development-enhancing possibilities in our relationship. I told Jenna I thought the spirit-man might be a symbol for her animus, for the archetypal masculine aspect of her psyche that functioned as a wise, calm, holding presence. I said I thought that these were her own qualities, but they were latent within her and might become manifest through our relationship. On more than one occasion Jenna told me that I embodied these qualities and recognized her need to discover them more fully within herself.

I asked Jenna to associate to the spirit-man’s action of helping her come back to earth and return to her body. She said that coming down to earth meant many things: becoming grounded in a practical sense; opening to her sensuality and her sexual feelings toward men; understanding in a deep way that she is not special but a part of the human race. Coming down to earth also meant developing a “grounded spirituality,” the word “ground” referring to the Self not in its transcendence but in its immanence as her own ground of being/awareness and her essential attributes of basic goodness, confidence, wisdom, and strength.

In terms of the development-enhancing transference then, the spirit-man is an image of grounded, quiet, holding strength, qualities she needed from me to work through her feelings of defectiveness and relax into the basic ground of her own true Self. If I could embody these qualities to some degree, our relationship might help her realize the spirit-man within herself, a calm, holding presence that supports the unfolding of the whole of her individual being as well as her true nature.

Within the milieu formed by the development-enhancing transference, Jenna continued to inwardly search. Gradually she opened to and talked about her developmental needs. First, she focused on the degree to which she had internalized and identified with her critical, invalidating mother and the various ways in which this internalization became part of her personality (a “complex” or “subpersonality” in the Jungian sense). That she held unquestioned beliefs far more pernicious than her mother’s is evidence for this unconscious identification. For example, Jenna tended to find fault with people who displayed emotional weakness and felt subtle contempt for men. She also had all kinds of ambivalent feelings about love and sexuality. Further, she had a variety of harmful spiritual beliefs devaluing of her body and the
world; for example, “The spirit is real, my body is unreal” and “This world is a dream, a mere illusion; only the world of spirit exists.” Whether or not these beliefs are objectively true is a matter of philosophical debate; clinically Jenna used them defensively, to ward off the endless despair of a deep vulnerable core, a “hungry child” subpersonality.

Identified with the invalidating mother, Jenna was full of contempt for the hungry child—part. This fragile self-sense was dependent on others and on me for holding and mirroring, but the influence of the invalidating mother left her hating these needs. Not only had her mother cruelly disapproved of them, they were also the source of trauma. Having them at all put her in harm’s way and left her vulnerable to the whims of others whom she needed to fulfill the child’s needs. Consequently, these longings had to be rooted out and expunged. She banished them into the unconscious, where they took on a life of their own. Her defenses against them permeated most of her relationships, but her hunger to be admired and her longing to be comforted, protected, and held burst forth into her relationship with her lover. He rejected her when she tried to control him to get these needs met. Gradually, the child’s needs came to the surface in her relationship with me.

A Dark Night of the Ego and a Change in Spiritual Orientation

As Jenna reconnected with her lonely, rejected child, she entered the most difficult period of her therapy. Disillusioned from the defensive aspects of her spirituality and disidentified from her invalidating mother, she began to feel all the loneliness, powerlessness, and rage of a little girl who just wanted to be loved. She faced into the heart of dependency and felt the awful pain of a frightened, barely-affirmed-and-nurtured infant-self. During this period she spent many hours walking on local hiking trails and sitting at the ocean weeping for the childhood she never had. Many times she thought of suicide.

For several months she saw me four times a week. She told me that she simply wanted to be with me and to feel my holding presence. Sometimes we sat together in complete silence, she lying on the analytic couch, me in my chair by her side. Sometimes I imagined I was a concerned parent sitting at the bedside of a seriously ill child.

In the quiet we could hear the sounds of traffic, the ticking of the clock, the muffled voices from the office downstairs. These noises seemed to arise and dissolve against the backdrop of quiet and stillness in the room. Gradually we both let go into a warm feeling of expanded being. I made very few active interventions, but stood by mostly as a silent background presence that watched over and cared for her while remaining curious about what might come from her next.

It gradually occurred to me that in the silence Jenna was opening to subtle realms that lay beyond thoughts and words. One day she spoke extensively of this. She told me that she was beginning to see her fragile little girl and invalidating mother not as intrinsic realities but as constructions within consciousness, as movements set against a vaster field of identity. The little girl and the invalidating mother were appearances—ghosts, phantoms—within her deep and formless being. One day she said, “I feel like a huge open space in which things long gone set up housekeeping and remained half alive. My mother, my father, and this little girl I once was: I think I’m liberating them. They’re memories, only memories. I think I understand what therapy is now, Bryan. It’s about opening up all the doors and windows in my mind and liberating the ghosts to evaporate into the Heart of God.”

An important benchmark of this period occurred when she asked me what kind of meditation practice might suit her now that she had no interest in visualizations. I replied that I had recently been studying the writings of the revered Indian sage Sri Ramana
Maharshi (1959), who taught a method of self-inquiry that makes use of the simple question “Who am I?” She procured a copy of his collected works, containing instructions for contemplation, brought it to a session, and read passages to me. As she lay on the couch she sometimes followed his instructions and posed to herself the question “Who am I?” The upshot of this was simple and direct. Jenna became more fully aware of awareness itself as the pure presence that witnessed whatever arose in her mind. This left her feeling far more at peace with her child-self and forgiving of her disapproving mother, abandoning father, lover, and students. She also found forgiveness for herself for acting out her shadow-needs with her lover. Finally, Jenna realized that peace and forgiveness were actually attributes of her essential Self.

As I reflect back on this period in her analysis, I am struck by her complete lack of drama. High visions, lights, sounds, and colorful mythological imagery no longer captivated Jenna. She began to “just sit” every morning with a cup of tea close by. She gardened and took long hikes on quiet country trails. She also began to exude gentle warmth in place of superiority and aloofness. Friends appreciated this change and remarked on it.

Toward the end of her therapy, Jenna assumed the position of chair of her college’s department of literature and decided not to resume teaching classes in meditation and spirituality. She feels she can serve more fully by concentrating her energies in academia. Her creativity, however, has blossomed. She has published poems and short stories in national magazines and has become involved in community support groups.

This is not to say that she has reached the end of her individuation, nor do her experiences in analysis constitute full Self-realization. But she continues to practice meditation on a daily basis and finds much that is affirming in spiritual literature. What is different now, however, is that she no longer tries to live according to a grandiose spiritual vision constructed to compensate for emotional and relationship needs. By accepting and embracing these needs, she has also developed a more openhearted quality toward others.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that there are many of us who unknowingly develop a profound psychospiritual split. In our naiveté we approach spiritual practice longing to attain liberation, but in doing so we neglect to care for our sacred manifestation, the conscious and unconscious aspects of our physical bodies and personal psyches. This leaves us practicing a dualistic spirituality that perpetuates the split and leaves us feeling enfeebled and adrift, lacking creative energy, and hiding our shadow behind inflated spiritual feelings and beliefs.

This is a far cry from a nondual understanding of spirituality. As I see it, a nondual understanding means holding and containing all parts of ourselves, both conscious and unconscious, not just our lofty spiritual insights and feelings. A nondual spirituality, then, must help us hold our darkness with a compassionate heart; it must also help us actualize our potential as mature human beings, which means our talents and abilities to contribute to our loved ones and our community. It must do so, however, while simultaneously helping us contact the deep Self and all its essential attributes: love, compassion, peace, joy, strength, and so on.

If we practice a dualistic spirituality, our immaturity is likely to show up somewhere, perhaps in our earthly naiveté, in a physical or emotional breakdown, or in problems in love and work. This is what happened to Jenna, who was motivated not only by authentic longings for union with God, but also by profound feelings of not being good enough, which she sought to split off and bury. These feelings were associated with an unconscious “needy child,” which developed in response to her judging, invalidating mother. As I have shown, Jenna internalized and identified with her mother, transforming her into a second subpersonality. These
two subpersonalities—the needy child and the invalidating mother—were parts of Jenna's shadow. They behaved in Jenna's psyche like independent beings with lives of their own. To compensate for the painful emotions engendered by this pair, Jenna combined authentic spiritual gifts with rigidly held beliefs to construct a "high priestess" persona. She tried to live in that split state, which nearly proved disastrous.

Psychospiritual splitting might be resolved through an approach to inner work that honors both transcendence and individuation. When practiced with a nondual understanding, Jungian analysis might contribute to such an approach. From this perspective, images of the Self may be used as guides on how to conduct our lives and as symbols of essential attributes that are ready to manifest in the psyche of the person.

The process of healing in Jungian analysis, however, involves a painful disillusionment from our grandiosity and a willingness to engage the disowned aspects of our personality. As we have seen, Jenna endured an awful, excruciating dark night in which she let go of the high priestess and became unflinchingly aware of her invalidating mother and needy child. It gradually became clear that these subpersonalities were not constitutional givens, but constructions of identity based on the past. Only as she brought to the light of awareness the memories, emotions, and beliefs associated with these subpersonalities, thoroughly experienced them, and penetrated beneath them to the Self otherwise obscured by them could she discover how relative they were. Then her feeling of being worthless dissolved into the Self as the matrix of being/awareness, which became for Jenna a holding environment of forgiveness, stillness, and peace. From the deep and formless Self there finally emerged a new sense of wholeness, which encompassed both the mystery of being and the outer world of relationships and work.

The full transformation—for all of us—is, of course, the work of a lifetime.

Endnotes

1. I am indebted to psychosynthesis therapists John Firman and James Vargiu (1980) for this helpful conception.

2. I am indebted to intersubjective psychoanalyst Robert D. Stolorow (1994) for this conception.