

The Feminine

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Abstract

This paper attempts to introduce a concept very rarely, if at all, mentioned in psychotherapy: “the feminine”. It proposes that psychotherapy would benefit from better understanding masculine and feminine principles, particularly the latter one, in view of the neglect they have suffered over the years. Finally, it also suggests that psychotherapists could collude with an over-masculine culture if not careful. Awareness comes primarily from a personal encounter with the feminine. Jungian and Post-Jungian psychoanalysts add some light to this issue.

Historical framework

Whenever I refer to the masculine or the feminine principles, I am not implying gender. I am not exploring differences between men and women. In this article, I focus on the feminine and I mention the masculine only in passing when it seems necessary.

The slow change from polytheism to monotheism contributed to the loss of the goddesses which kept alive the feminine principle. The original pagan Germanic and Celtic religions had many cults of Mother Earth and other nature goddesses. Ancient cultures, ruled by feminine archetypes, lasted about 25,000 years as compared with 3,000-4,000 years of later masculine sovereignty (Meador: 1992). Many other events in the history of humanity added to the progressive suppression of the feminine:

Widespread hopelessness and alienation marked the onset of the witch persecution in a Europe decimated by the Black Death and disappointed by the failure of its Crusades in the Holy Land. As a result women were cut off from their own spiritual experience. Barbara G. Walker (1985) says that about nine million persons were executed after 1484 by the Inquisition, and uncounted numbers before that date, mostly women.

The birth of Science in Western culture emphasised the predominance of masculine thought processes. Science set out to look at the world in terms of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ to gain some mastery over our surroundings. It appeared to

make the world safer and at the same time it turned away from the complexities of life and other forms of thinking.

As psychotherapists, we need to be very aware of the value system in the culture we live in and reflect on the subtle ways we might collude with the predominant value system.

Defining the feminine

Masculine and feminine principles are two different ways of being. This is reflected in a different way of thinking, feeling and behaving. Jung referred to animus and anima to make a differentiation. Post-Jungian analysts developed his ideas further. Unfortunately, Freudian Psychoanalysis has not added any depth to this subject. Marie-Louise Von Franz points this out by saying that “Freud had very little recognition of the feminine element and therefore always explained it as sex” (1996:85).

The progressive burial of the feminine and its intrinsic nature have left us with few words to express this principle. As a consequence there is a gap, a missing link in our psyche. This is why I believe it is important to make the effort to find the words that might come close to defining the feminine even at the risk of not getting it totally right.

In Chinese tradition the parity and complementarity of female and male concepts are clearly expressed by the *yin-yang* symbols. *Yin*, being the feminine, was associated with the qualities of darkness and coolness. *Yin* was also described as hidden, recondite and unseen. The moonlight (in contrast to the sunlight) was one of the images to represent it. The light of the sun strikes in a cutting and direct way, the moonlight blurs the outlines and collects all in a tenuous and diffuse way. Therefore *yin* came to represent secrecy, mystery and abstraction. In psychological terms it is used to symbolize docility, humility, openness, receptivity, detachment, restraint and self-mastery (Cleary & Aziz :2002:65). Jung understands the anima as the personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man’s psyche, such as vague feelings and moods, prophetic hunches, receptiveness to the irrational, capacity for personal love, feeling for nature, and his relation to the unconscious. Talking about anima he says:

. . . I have noticed that people usually have not much difficulty in picturing to themselves what is meant by the shadow...But it costs them enormous difficulties to understand what the anima is. They accept her easily enough when she appears in novels or as a film star, but she is not understood at all

when it comes to seeing the role it plays in their own lives, because she sums up everything that a man can never get the better of and never finishes coping with. Therefore it remains in a perpetual state of emotionality which must not be touched. The degree of consciousness one meets with this connection is, to put it mildly, astounding. (Jung:1953:para 485)

Post-Jungians have developed the term further. Marina Valcarenghi (1997) talks about the masculine and feminine principles as two different and complementary ways of expressing the activity of instinct, feeling, and thought.

Feminine thought

Feminine thought does not start with the examination of a detail, but with contemplation of the whole, and it is not oriented toward penetrating, but toward absorbing the object of knowledge: thus it is a process which tends to develop toward the inside, at times seeming covered with sand, not existing, like an underground river, until it springs all of a sudden, with its conclusions, after having followed an invisible course. (Valcarenghi: 1997:3) It makes connections in a symbolic and inductive manner. Unlike the masculine which is more interested in analyzing and classifying in a more logical and deductive fashion, feminine thought creates connections that are not so clear to the logical mind. For this reason it has often been judged too close to the magical realm and dismissed.

Logos and gnosis are two concepts that help us see the difference between masculine and feminine thought. Logos is rational, objective, logical, expressible in words or numbers - while gnosis is subjective, non-rational, nonverbal, feeling-tinged, expressible through poetry, images, metaphor, and music, and is often unprovable by its very nature. Paradox as a way of encompassing two aspects with an apparently opposing nature sits well with this attitude. Metaphor and images also get closer to the feminine ways i.e. the realm of the symbolic. When thought becomes too masculine the balance is lost and thinking turns too rigid with a lot of "shoulds" and "oughts" and a lack of flexibility.

Feminine feeling

The feminine remains centred and still around feelings. It witnesses them and tries to reveal its deepest meaning. Unlike the masculine which orients itself toward feeling to reach an end, to make plans, feminine psychic disposition is contemplative. It concentrates more in being than in doing, and it involves

relationships between things and people more than the actions of things and people (Valcarengi:1997:22).

Sometimes as a consequence of the feminine's freer attitude towards feelings, it has been regarded in a sentimental way. Sentimentality does not acknowledge the depth of the feminine. This attitude once more ignores the true validity of this principle.

Feminine instinct

There is an active, dynamic aspect of feminine nature, that which promotes change and transformation, counterbalancing the static and maternal, which, although providing for growth, is essentially conservative and protective. Feminine instinct presents two aspects: the maternal sphere and the feminine sexual sphere.

The *maternal sphere* has a desire to protect, nourish, and nurture. Like other female animals, genetically prepared to be responsible for lives other than their own, women are quick learners and keen observers and can achieve high levels of understanding of the human condition. This is sometimes called "feminine intuition". Suffering is also part of the feminine. In the not so distant past childbirth was followed by death. Aztec women who died in childbirth were equated with warriors who died in battle. Suffering is also necessary for increased awareness and development of personality. The feminine knows how much effort goes into the creation of a life and is therefore less easily persuaded by the we /they dichotomy, and more prone to sympathize with the basic humanness and vulnerability of other human beings.

Finally, the feminine is closer to the natural cycles which are alive in a woman's body on a regular basis.

The other aspect is the *feminine sexual sphere* which has suffered repression over the years.

The harlot archetypal image, a feminine ancient Goddess, was reduced in its entirety by collective Judeo-Christian morality. It was considered an exclusively negative, lowly, and inferior matrix, devoid of spirituality. The Goddess represented by the harlot archetypal image was identified solely with the prostitute polarity. The denial of the Goddess' divinity brought about an annihilation of the sacred priestess polarity(Hillel:1997:112)

Analyst, Dr. Rachel Hillel, expresses this very well: ‘The feminine’s essential meaning to the human psyche is reduced when the sacredness of the vulva is unacknowledged and denied’ (1997:120).

Nancy Qualls-Corbett similarly expresses the same sentiment:

No matter what her name, the love goddess is related to the earth, the body, to passion, sexuality and fertility. She is the moving, transforming, mystical power of love which unites the human element with the divine (1988:16).

Consciousness of feminine nature begins in deep appreciation of, and caring devotion to, the body. Women are closer to the natural rhythms by the fact of their physiological cycles. The attack on the body that we see in the rise of anorexia nervosa in adolescents gives room for thought as to the metaphorical attack of the feminine given that this illness comes so close to the time when a woman has her menstruation. Generally, however, the attack tends to be more subtle and yet not less damaging.

The malaise of our days

Jung writes that “the loss of an archetype gives rise to that frightful discontent in our culture” (1953). This is the case I believe with the feminine. With the burial of the feminine, important values and psychic experiences have been suppressed, leaving dissatisfaction and lack of balance in our lives.

When the divine feminine, the goddess, is no longer revered, social and psychic structures become overmechanized, overpoliticized, overmilitarized. Thinking, judgement and rationality become the ruling factors. The needs of relatedness, feeling, caring or attending to nature go unheeded. There is no balance, no harmony, neither within oneself nor in the external world. With the disregard of the archetypal image so related to passionate love, a splitting off of values, a onesidedness, occurs in the psyche. As a result, we are sadly crippled in our search for wholeness and health. (Qualls-Corbett:1988:16).

Dr Hillel has found in her work with women analysands that repression of the feminine is a central theme they generally need to explore during their work. She says:

Women’s introjected masculine values prevent their true liberation. Women’s psychological work entails becoming aware of this internal possession so that they can free themselves from the identification with the role of the father’s daughter. This is made harder in a culture that promotes masculine principles. (1997:65)

Jung, when talking about the anima, suggested that this kind of work needs to be done by men and women if a development is to be wished for:

After the middle of life, however, permanent loss of the anima means a diminution of vitality, of flexibility, and of human kindness. The result, as a rule, is premature rigidity, crustiness, stereotypy, fanatical one-sidedness, obstinacy, pedantry, or else resignation, weariness, sloppiness, irresponsibility, and finally a childish *ramollissement* with a tendency to alcohol (Jung:1953:para.147).

Psychotherapy and the feminine

I believe that psychotherapy could do with questioning and talking about the masculine and feminine principles. For these principles to be an integral part of the therapy, the psychotherapist needs to experience them in him/herself. Some forms of therapy are by nature less in balance, i.e. cognitive-behavioural therapies would align closer to the masculine.

If the therapy that we practise overvalues the masculine, we need to be aware of the unspoken message that we give to our clients. Lack of the feminine in our work makes us too attached to our theories and too little in contact with “what is”. The feminine helps us receive our clients. In this act of receiving, one needs to be open and have some space to allow the person to show themselves. The feminine principle also helps us walk in darkness and bear the unknown territories which are part and parcel of the journey in therapy.

Practising psychotherapy that gives the same value to masculine and feminine principles in our culture can feel in many instances like being “out of synch”. Whatever type of psychotherapy we practise and whatever our personal style is, the psychotherapist’s values will have an important influence over the therapy even if this effect is hard to measure. If we as psychotherapists are too attached to the masculine principle in our lives, our therapy will be coloured by this. For example we might value “outward achievements” in our clients much more than insights or personal reflections. We might not appreciate small but significant internal experiences and gains in our clients. It is hard indeed to perceive what we do not regard as valuable.

In education, our culture has encouraged science over and above the study of humanities i.e. art, philosophy, mythology, religion, poetry etc. Humanities bring us closer to a person’s internal experiences and closer to the feminine. Why aren’t these subjects part of the training in psychotherapy? James Hillman says that “consciousness arising from anima would therefore look to myth, as it manifests

in the mythologems of dreams and fantasies and the pattern of lives” (1996:95). Marie-Louise Von Franz in a similar vein stresses like Jung did the importance of dreams: “ By attending to one’s dreams for a long time and by really taking them into consideration, the unconscious of modern man can rebuild a symbolic life”(1996:96). It is not just a question of attending to dreams, images, subtle moods or paradoxes, of course. It is a certain attitude and a particular value system which is in the present day not the predominant one.

A psychotherapist will do well to keep these questions in mind:

How does one integrate the feminine principle?

How do we make a synthesis of what appear to be opposite principles, the feminine and masculine?

The tension that will surely occur between the two principles can also be a creative, dynamic force.

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