



## Numinous



True understanding comes from a lived encounter.

### *“On the Importance of Numinous Experience in the Alchemy of Individuation”*

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In a letter to P.W. Martin (20 August 1945), the founder of the International Study Center of Applied Psychology in Oxted, England, C.G. Jung confirmed the centrality of numinous experience in his life and work: “It always seemed to me as if the real milestones were certain symbolic events characterized by a strong emotional tone. You are quite right, the main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neuroses but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact is that the approach to the numinous is the



real therapy and in as much as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology. Even the very disease takes on a numinous character” (Jung 1973, 1: 377). If one holds the classical Jungian view that **the only genuine cure for neurosis is to grow out of it through pursuing individuation**, then treatment based on this model would seem necessarily to include “the approach to the numinous,” as Jung states so firmly in this letter. The individuation process, as proposed by Jung and his followers, typically includes experiences of a numinous nature.

The question is: How are such momentous experiences related to and used within the context of analysis and the individuation journey, and how do they contribute to the overall process of individuation? On the answer to this complex question rests the difference between psychological individuation and the development of spirituality. While the psychological hero(ine) of the individuation journey is by no means identical to the spiritual hero(ine) of the journey to God (however this term may be defined), it is not always easy to tell where their paths diverge, precisely because Jung placed such central importance on numinous experience for individuation. And yet they do diverge, and decisively.

## Qualities and Features of the Numinous

Otto and Jung provide a wealth of explicit qualities people are likely to feel when in the presence of the holy. First, it must be noted that the numinosum is a paradox,<sup>[15]</sup> containing both positive and negative, both of which we may experience simultaneously in any encounter with the Divine.

Some of the positive qualities of the numinosum include: sublimity, awe, excitement, bliss, rapture, exaltation, entrancement, fascination, attraction, allure<sup>[16]</sup> and what Otto called an “impelling motive power.”<sup>[17]</sup> Not so pleasant are other qualities like: overwhelm, fear, trembling, weirdness, eeriness, humility (an acute sense of unworthiness), urgency, stupor (blank wonder), bewilderment, horror, mental agitation, repulsion, and haunting, daunting, monstrous feelings<sup>[18]</sup> that “overbrim the heart.”<sup>[19]</sup> Otto speaks at length of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the fascinating mystery that makes us tremble (in awe). Because it “grips or stirs the mind,”<sup>[20]</sup> such an experience is not one we forget.

But, while it is memorable, the numinous is not easily put into words. “Ineffable” is another of its features.<sup>[21]</sup> The numinous “eludes apprehension in terms of



concepts.”[22] Being bigger and beyond oneself, it induces speechlessness.[23] Being a mystery, it bewilders the rational mind.[24] Being divine, it links us to the “ground of the soul.”[25] Being “unevolvable,” it is not to be derived from any other feeling.[26]

More frequently found in Jung’s works is “numinosity.”[27] He used this term to refer to a quality inherent in archetypes, in complexes,[28] in “curiosities which the logical mind cannot explain.”[29] Found in Western alchemy,[30] and in cultural symbols,[31] numinosity is that quality that gives religious ideas their “thrilling power.”[32] Much as with archetypes, we can’t grasp the meaning of the word without personal experience.[33] **True understanding here comes from a lived encounter.**

This is very consistent with Jung’s empiricism: what is real is what one experiences. Rudolf Otto’s study of the concept of holiness appealed to Jung because Otto took it out of the realm of theory and brought it into the realm of feelings, sensory experience and personal events in individual lives. Otto gave Jung both the vocabulary to discuss this aspect of psychology and confirmation of Jung’s own personal experience when he had encountered the Divine. What was this experience? What might we expect to experience when we contact the numinous?

## Quote

‘Dreams during the liminal phase of midlife transitions “inspire awe and leave a deep impression on the dreamer; they have a religious, symbolic, or mythic quality; they are impersonal and not easy to relate to everyday life. Liminality . . . takes place in seclusion, out of the structures of ordinary life. In liminality a person is incubating the future, and these dreams are representations of the psychic structures and contents that will eventually coalesce to form a new foundation for the conscious personality. But during this phase they are still latent, deeply unconscious, and in flux.” (Mahdi. p.295)

## References

Mahdi, L.C., Foster, S. Little, M. (Eds.). (1987). *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of masculine and feminine initiation*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

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<http://jungiancenter.org/essay/jung-and-numinosum>



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