

Care and Nurturing of the Human Psyche
Basic Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

It has been said by many people and in many ways that to change the world, each individual person must change first. The focus then, should not be primarily on greater military might, economic power, or technology, but on the care and nurturing of each human soul. This necessitates a greater understanding of the human psyche – that place where mankind’s physical world collides with the human spirit in a tension of realms.

This short paper offers a very basic model to help understand the nature and functioning of the human psyche, the challenges it faces, and a menu of remedies to acquire and maintain good mental health. It is not all-inclusive by any means, and should not replace professional care when, and if, it is needed. This paper covers the fundamental structure and dynamics of the human psyche, the worldly pressures that shape the psyche, and the basic components of personal mental health care.

INTRODUCTION

It can be easily observed that our world is in a state of chaos. One of history's largest mass migrations is now occurring in mid-east nations following political turmoil and military aggression. Climate change, primarily as a result of human activities, is creating weather patterns that haven't been seen in recorded history. Lopsided economic distribution of goods and services have further separated the wealthy from the poor. Tainted food, air, soil and water have contributed to a rise in cancer and other diseases. More people are using prescription medications and taking illegal drugs than ever before. Many more things could be added to this list, all pointing to the need for the people of this world to awaken to new possibilities.

The awakening is happening at a "grass roots" level. Spirituality is on the rise everywhere. People are seeking what is true and right, and exploring many avenues in search of it. The development of the Internet, and along with it social media, has provided a platform to interconnect millions of people, bringing new awareness about local and world situations where action can be taken to make things better. The validity of information available, however, is not always factual, and much of it is uninformed opinions. But it does nevertheless motivate people to further investigate and act on many fronts.

Fueling this movement toward greater awareness and understanding is a basic instinct that drives us toward completeness and a desire to be whole. It is a natural part of our psyche, and has appeared in every civilization in one form or another down through the ages. We *do* want to reach our full potential, and we *do* want the world to be a good place to live.

The model presented in this paper is just one idea among many for a starting point. The hope, however, is to get people thinking about and looking into their inner selves. World society is merely the collection of all the individual people, so it is true that changing the world has to be done from the inside out – changing the world starts with changing each person, and that means dealing with the psyche.

So, some understanding of what we're out to change is needed. We begin with a simple model of how the human psyche can be understood.

STRUCTURE OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE

The human psyche could be depicted as shown in Figure 1. “Psyche” is a term that describes the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual interplay within the human being as it interacts with the external world. This model suggests that the psyche consists of four main components that are highly interactive with each other.

True Self. At the core of the psyche we find what can be called the “True Self.” Also known as the soul, this is the breath of life that God breathed into each person as he or she was being formed in the womb. The soul contains a unique and special person, having a set of talents, gifts, or skills that will in some unique way contribute to the improvement of this world.

These gifts are not to be evaluated based on mankind’s standards, but on God’s. These gifts may not save nations, cure diseases, or thwart famines. But they will contribute to making some person’s life better, even if in a small way. For it’s the little things that become huge in the eyes of God. What courage and fortitude it sometimes takes to reach out to another person, even in a small act of kindness! The world continues to improve on such acts as these.

The True Self is “supra-ordinate” to all other components of the psyche. That means it has the free will choice to decide what should be happening in the psyche under normal conditions. It works toward integrating the other components of the psyche into a single unity. Its goal is wholeness and spiritual expression.

In a later section of this paper we’ll discuss the challenges that sometimes impinge on the ability of the True Self to function, but for now, let’s remember that the True self is meant to be in charge.

At the end of our physical life, it’s the True self that returns to God who gave it. The physical body is shed, and the spiritual essence returns from whence it came to be further developed, healed and loved. Service under a loving God will continue, and we will move toward wholeness and perfection.

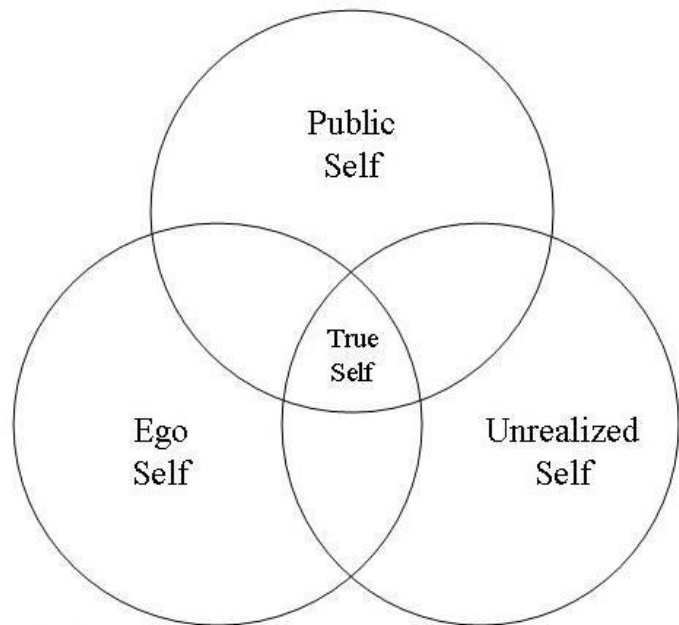


Figure 1

The Ego Self. The word *ego* has often been used to connote something negative (such as, “Wow, does that guy have an *ego*!”). But it’s actually something that helps us a great deal in life. A *healthy* ego is a good thing. A dysfunctional ego is not. So, what’s a healthy ego?

The purpose of the ego is to monitor sensory input from the outside world and assimilate that information within the human mind. There are numerous functions that take place in this process, including selective perception, categorizing, determining danger and threats, evaluating, and so on. To survive and relate to others in the world that mankind has created, people have to develop healthy egos so that they can function properly and secure a place for themselves.

The Ego Self is what we are aware about ourselves. It is our conscious self. The further it gets from the True Self, the more dysfunctional it becomes, living primarily in the past (regrets, shame, or past injury) or the future (fear and worry about what I am, what *may* happen, or what I still want).

Dysfunction arises when the selective processes of the ego become inflated (or excessively deflated) and begin to take over decision-making if the True Self acquiesces. The focus of identity shifts from the True Self to the ego-centric self, and significant personality changes occur. Symptoms of this happening could include arrogance or prejudice on the one hand, or loss of self-esteem on the other. In either case, a distortion has occurred that adversely impacts other components of the psyche. In severe cases, this may be considered a “loss of soul” (although the soul is never really lost, it is merely buried under an oppressive ego). A dysfunctional ego is sometimes called a “False Self.”

The Public Self. Commonly referred to as the “Persona” or mask – that which we wish others to see and know about us. The Public Self is used to codify ourselves in a form we hope is acceptable to others. This is largely a façade, influenced by the True Self, Ego Self, and the Unrealized Self. It is how we dress, speak, and behave in the presence of others.

The further the Public Self is from the True Self, the more energy we expend in producing and maintaining this image. Some public images are “plastic,” that is, they are fragile and can more easily be recognized as false by others. When the True Self and the Public Self overlap to a large extent, the person can be recognized as genuine, and heart-to-heart relationships are more easily established.

The Unrealized Self. The name itself implies that there is much to learn about ourselves that is unknown. The Unrealized Self is our “Unconscious” Self, not because it’s asleep on its own account, but because we, ourselves, are not aware of it, or because we have pushed information into it by our own choice (repression or denial).

The Unrealized Self has two main parts: one is a Personal Unconscious which is used to repress or store information and experiences we don’t wish to remember, and the second is a much broader

area of shared experiences and behavioral inclinations that have come down to us through the ages. The more we know about the Unrealized Self, the more complete we become as people.

When we consider the amazing human body, we now know that it is really the product of many millions of years of life on this planet. The strands of DNA within our cells contain thousands and thousands of genes that direct what color eyes we have, how tall we are, our gender, the propensities toward certain types of diseases, and on and on and on. Some genes are turned on and off by epigenetic influences – things in our environment or our minds. The entire genome structure of the human body has now been mapped. It is truly an amazing thing!

What we're beginning to realize as well is that the human mind has followed a similar pattern. We are not born with blank minds, but also come with predetermined propensities that come down to us through millions of years of experiences of our ancestors. What the gene is to the physical body, the "archetype" is to the mind.

Archetypes are the fundamental units of the Unrealized Self; they are psychic structures common to all people, just like genes, but express themselves in unique ways in each person, also just like genes. Archetypes are generally associated with one of three basic instincts: survival, procreation, or wholeness. They regulate the human life cycle to a great degree.

Names are sometimes assigned to a particular archetype to help describe its function. For example, one of the survival archetypes is called *enemy*. For this archetype, it's obviously important to be able to distinguish between those people and creatures that are friendly, and those who may be foes. Therefore, this archetypal function developed over the millennia that enables a person to quickly evaluate specific criteria in a worldly encounter.

There are hundreds of other archetypes available to us, perhaps thousands. Some are more common to everyone than others, such as the *mother* archetype, *father* archetype, *sage*, *child*, *hunter*, *gatherer*, and so on. Archetypes are autonomous expressions that seek actualization within our personalities. Depending upon our True Self design, some archetypes will be more prominent in our lives than others. They are goal-seekers, either pushing us toward survival, procreation, or wholeness (self-realization). To recognize these archetypes within ourselves and understand their role to our lives is key to fully becoming human. More on this later – but first, a few more words about the importance of the psyche.

Why is the Psyche Important?

The psyche is the spiritual essence of our human nature. Without the psyche, we would be nothing more than a lump of inanimate clay. The psyche is what brings us life and connects body to mind and to the world around us. It's what brings consciousness to our being, and enables us to become complete human beings.

The psyche serves as a self-regulating system, always striving for balance between the forces of the physical world, and the needs of our spiritual nature. Ultimately, it's the source of our very being, and determines how we think, feel and act. As mentioned in the introduction, if we want to improve the world, it must be done on an individual basis. As Carl Jung, the famed Swiss psychologist advised us many years ago, "There is no cure and no improving of the world that does not begin with the individual him or herself."¹

Like the physical genes we've inherited from our ancestors, we are not responsible for the psychological archetypes that we've been given. The responsibility lies, however, in how we manage them. Instinctual urges, thoughts, or even voices may sometimes be heard within our being. Without understanding what's happening, we may feel confused, guilty, worried or shamed. But it's our True Self that needs to sort through these things, and decide what to do with them. That's why we need to understand as much as we can about the dynamics of the psyche. Let's take a look at that now.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE PSYCHE

As mentioned earlier, the components of the psyche are constantly interacting with each other as shown in Figure 2. Remember that the True Self, at the heart of the psyche, is normally in charge of things. This is depicted by the three arrows emanating out from the True Self toward the other three main components. The True Self is supra-ordinate, and under normal conditions has the power to sort through the interactions between the components.

The Public Self, shown at the top of Figure 2, is formed and shaped by all of the other three parts of the psyche. The Ego Self has the greatest desire to shape the Public Image, and occasionally the Unrealized Self will pop up to contribute to it, too. The True self, if alert enough, can serve as a gateway to what goes out.

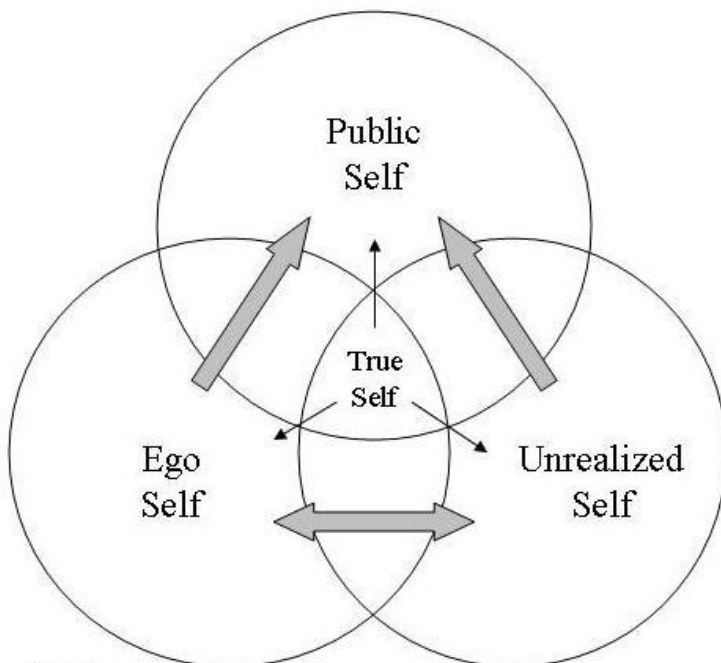


Figure 2

¹ Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Bollingen Series, Vol. 7, p.226.

The Ego Self and the Unrealized self are constantly influencing each other as well. Our Ego Self will occasionally push unpleasant experiences or unwanted information into the personal arena of the Unrealized Self, in an area known as the Shadow. As we grow to become fully human, we will gradually bring these experiences and information back into our field of awareness, and integrate them into our understanding of life.

So to become truly mentally healthy, we must learn how to bring all these circles closer together. We learn how to integrate the Ego Self, the Unrealized Self and the Public Self into the True self so as much of the circles overlap as possible. The more that these three circles overlap, the greater the influence of the True self in our lives, and that's what we need to be whole.

BABIES AND BUDDHAS

Figure 3 shows the three circles overlapping each other to a great extent, thereby revealing a greater True Self. It's not that the True Self is larger than it was before, it's just that more of it is revealed, and the pathways to the kingdom of God are expanded.

Recall Matthew 18:3, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never be able to see the kingdom of God." It's usually thought that there are two types of people who experience the greatest achievement of this psychic integration – babies and Buddhas.

Newborn babies seem to have a special knowledge and insight that we don't. Looking into their newly opened eyes seems to be looking directly into the kingdom of God. Innocence, love,

acceptance, gentleness, and kindness all seem to be there. But then, as they enter mankind's world, their circles are slowly separated as they strive to make their way through life. Sometime later, perhaps in the second half of their lives, they begin again to integrate the psyche, gradually strengthening their True Selves. Buddhas, Saints, and other mystics are often thought to have achieved this to a great degree. (But I've known individuals of lesser worldly stature who have reached these great spiritual heights, as well.)

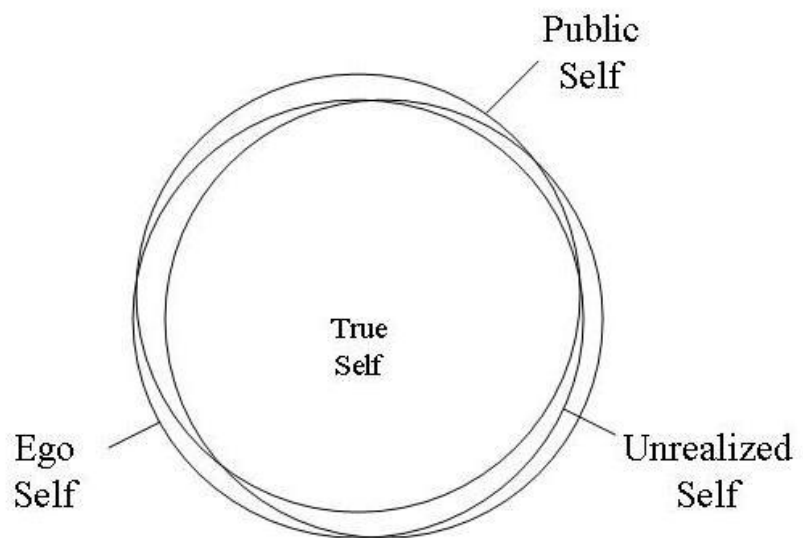
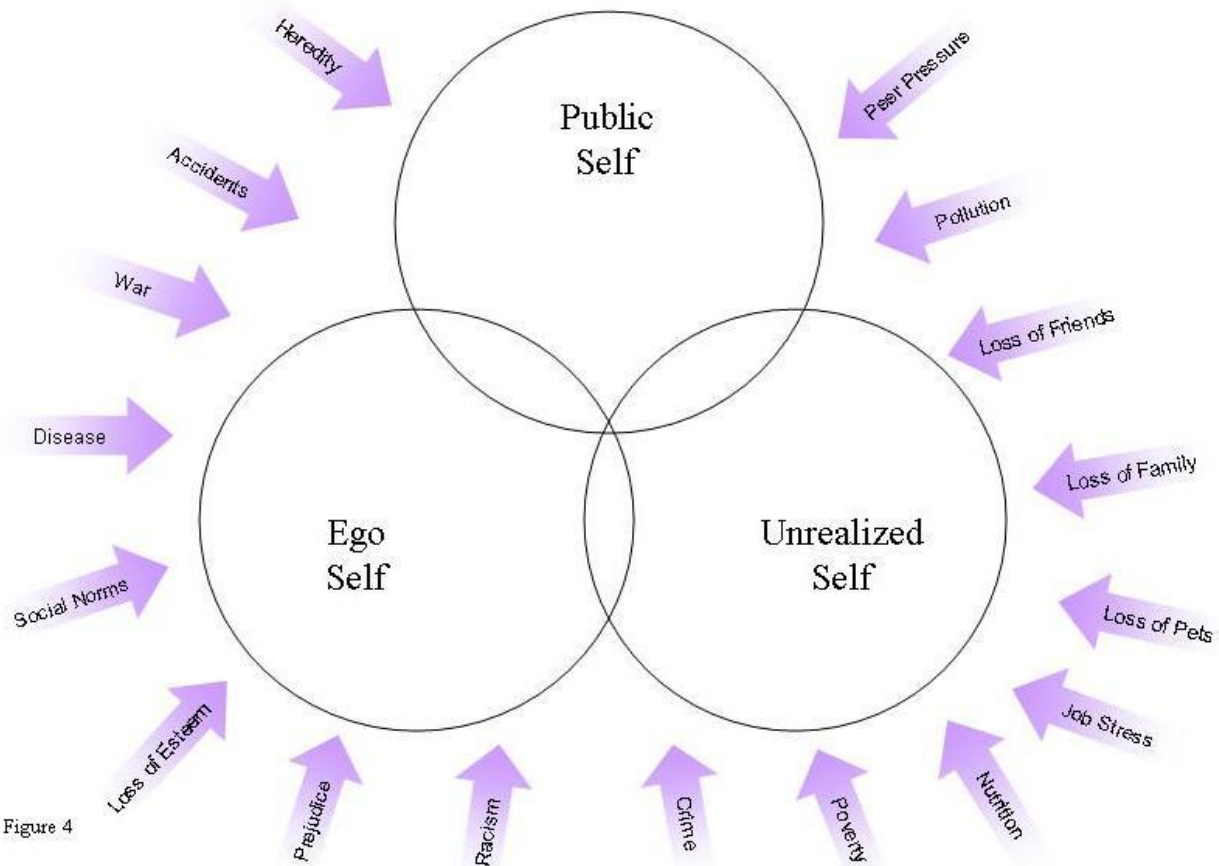


Figure 3

PSYCHIC DISORDERS

Of course, achieving this total integration of the psyche is not easy, as there are numerous forces working against it. Figure 4 shows many of things people are up against.



As these forces exert pressure on the person, the three circles tend to separate further. See what happens to the influence of the True Self when the pressures become too great? It shrinks to almost nothing, and the person begins to lose control. If the True Self, under pressure, seeks resolution, escape, or compensation through the Ego Self, various types of neuroses may develop: anxieties, depression, compulsive disorders, etc. If the true Self seeks resolution, escape, or compensation through the Unrealized Self, loss of touch with reality can be severe, and psychoses may develop.

But the True Self is always there, however smothered, and is never totally lost – so there’s always hope for it to regain its position within the psyche. It is often said that God doesn’t give us more than we can handle. This may be true, but life itself is sometimes overwhelming. It may be better

said that God doesn't give us more than we can handle when we're getting proper support from other resources as well: counselors, friends, pastors, therapists, physicians, and others who are put here on earth to help us. We are designed to go through life with other people at our side!

So, what can we do to balance the negative forces in life that tend to damage our psyche? How can we care and nurture our own psyche and help others with theirs? Let's look at a menu of things we can use under normal situations to strengthen and nurture the human psyche.

THE MENU

Care and nurturing of the human psyche has a two-fold approach. Part of it comes from the inside out, and part of it comes from the outside in. In other words, changing our thinking ultimately helps to change our behavior, but changing our behavior also helps to change the way we think. It is important to remember that this is not a straight-line process, either. The "Menu" below is a collection of items that is not used in any particular order. Some things will appeal to you one day, and others the next. But there should be *some* balance and regularity to your practice so that something is used every day. Seek a balance between *action* with *contemplation*.

List A.

These are activities that help to tame the dysfunctional ego. They will also help to some degree in further understanding and knowing the Unrealized Self (List B).

- Prayer – in many forms should be a part of daily routine. Daily Office, the Jesus Prayer, expressions of gratitude even for the little things in life can help.
- Reflective Study – spend some time learning about life: you, other people, the planet and its creatures. What do these things tell you about you?
- Spiritual Direction network – these are people close to you that can help you with your journey: spiritual directors, therapists, counselors, pastors, friends, and physicians.
- Practicing Spiritual Postures – ego awareness, present moment awareness, acceptance of things that are, detachment from material things, and practicing the presence of God.
- Journaling – capture your thoughts and feelings about your moments in life. Use the Awareness Examen at the end of the day to see how God has played a role in your day. What needs to be worked on tomorrow?
- Silence – spend time alone; talk a walk in nature, or just sit in a chair and listen. To "listen" we need to be "silent" (both words have the same letters!)
- 12-Step Programs – are available for a number of issues. Find a good group and become part of it.
- Community interaction – reality is in the life of people; interact with your religious Community, family community, or neighborhood as you are able.

List B.

These activities are designed to help us know more about our Unrealized Self. They will also help to tame the dysfunctional ego (List A).

- Corporate Worship/Eucharist – there are many transcendent symbols in the church service that help to integrate the psyche. The cross, the altar, the stained glass windows, the pews, the music...all point to the desire to become whole under God's gentle guidance.
- Religious Rites and Liturgy – baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, professions...all represent ancient traditions of stability, structure, commonality, and belonging.
- Meditation, contemplation, lectio divina – are all methods to clear the mind and place oneself in the presence of God's love.
- Yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong, the Labyrinth – can be use effectively to integrate all aspects of the psyche. Where available, it may be best to use qualified instructors.
- DNA analysis – determine where you really came from – what's your story? This will help determine how your Unrealized Self may have been shaped.
- Customs, Myths, and Traditions – Our fables, fairytales, and traditions teach us a lot about ourselves; our values and lessons in living.
- Active Imagination – like daydreaming, it lets the unconscious part of ourselves express what needs to be expressed. Collect these thoughts, perhaps in a journal, and share them with your spiritual direction network.
- Art – almost any form (music, dance, painting, sculpture, etc.) helps to unify parts of the psyche into one whole.
- Dream journaling – dreams are the doorway to the unconscious part of us. Themes and images may be repeated that should be further explored for meaning. May need professional help with this one, too.
- Assessment Tools – Enneagram, MBTI, etc., help to determine what parts of us are like. This, in turn, can lead to a stronger psyche.
- Reflection Tools – like the I Ching or Archetype cards, when used correctly, help us to explore parts of our Unrealized Self.
- “Must Do” Tasks – doing things we have to do just to maintain ourselves (sometimes referred to as “chores”) are quite therapeutic when viewed properly. We can learn to find God in even the simplest tasks, and this can help us grow as people.

List C.

This list contains things that all of us should do on a regular basis. They are very important to maintaining a healthy psyche (as well as a healthy body). Carl Jung points out, “A wrong functioning of the psyche can do much to injure the body, just as conversely a bodily illness can affect the psyche, for psyche and body are not separate entities but one and the same life.”²

- Rest, sleep, vacations, retreats
- Mild exercise, like walking, gardening, biking, etc.
- Social connections – yes, it’s good to be alone sometimes, but it’s also good to be with heart-to-heart friends
- Diet – eat clean, nutrient-dense foods; avoid additives, preservatives and food enhancers whenever possible
- Reduce your input of news and non-social media
- Interact with nature: pets, nature walks, star gazing, etc.

Important note: Items listed in these three lists are for the regular care and nurturing of the psyche. They are no substitute for professional counseling or therapy if a psychic disorder is interfering with your normal life activities.

STRUCTURE OF THE UNREALIZED SELF

For those who are interested in delving deeper into the Unrealized Self, following is a brief glimpse at its structure. Carl Jung suggests, “Failure to adapt to this inner world [the Unrealized Self] is a negligence entailing just as serious consequences as ignorance and ineptitude in the outer world.”³

As mentioned earlier, the Unrealized Self has two main areas: the Personal Unconscious, and the Collective Unconscious. The Personal Unconscious is generally formed during the lifetime of the person, and contains memories, experiences, and repressions that have accumulated since birth.

For a person to approach wholeness, he or she will gradually reclaim the information that has been stored in the Personal Unconscious. Sometimes this takes a long time; sometimes it happens naturally; and in many cases professional help may be needed to aid the process.

² Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Bollingen Series, Vol. 7, p.115.

³ *ibid.*, p.204

The other part, the Collective Unconscious, is huge. It houses all the archetypes (basic units) in three main instincts – procreation, survival, and desire for wholeness (self-realization).

Archetypes have been identified as early as the time of Plato, who referred to them as ideal templates. Other philosophers referred to the archetype concept in passing, but it was eventually Swiss psychologist Carl Jung who further developed the concept of archetypes.

In essence, most archetypes are psychological *patterns of thought and behavior* derived from common historical roles in life such as parenting and survival, or universal events or situations such as birth and death.

Along with our individual personal unconscious, which is unique to each person, Jung believed that “there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature that is identical in all individuals.” Jung called it a “collective unconscious,” and believed that it was inherited rather than developed, and is composed of identifiable archetypes. These archetypes contribute to your personality, drives, feelings, beliefs, motivations, and actions.

All archetypes have positive aspects (the “light” side), but they also have “shadow sides” as well. Shadow sides are not evil; they just are part of who we are. When recognized by us, they can serve to help us understand ourselves and help us to grow as people. While we all share in some way to the many archetypes that exist, the degree and emphasis to these vary with each person depending on the structure of their True Self. In other words, there are different combinations of the hundreds that exist, each combination being unique to the individual.

For example, there are four survival archetypes that are deeply common to everyone: the Victim, the Saboteur, the Prostitute, and the Child. These four survival archetypes are deeply involved in our most pressing challenges related to survival. They represent different issues, fears, and vulnerabilities that you need to confront and overcome as part of living as a human. These archetypes can be your most trusted allies, which can represent spiritual as well as material strengths. They can be your personal guardians and preserve your integrity.

Most of the archetypes are autonomous, and are goal oriented toward helping you become a complete person. We have been given a built-in instinct that urges us to self-realization – that is, to become the person we were made to be based on the structure and content of our True Selves. The types and content of the various archetypes are beyond the scope of this summary, but are readily available through libraries and the Internet.

Determining which archetypes are prevalent in your psyche and what we can learn from them will be the subject of subsequent papers and discussions for those interested.