

Jung on the Provisional Life

"... in the course of the centuries, man has repeatedly experienced that the life which is not lived here, the life which is lived as something provisional, is utterly unsatisfactory, that it leads to neurosis.... As long as it is a case of provisional life your unconscious will be in a state of continuous irritation."^[1]

"... the typical *puer*... leads a 'provisional life.' This means the person harbors a 'strange attitude and feeling' that his job, career, city, car, creative endeavor, or woman is *'not yet'* what is really wanted, and there is always the fantasy that sometime in the future the real thing will come about."^[2]

"Provisional life. A term used to describe an attitude toward life that is more or less imaginary, not rooted in the here and now, commonly associated with *puer* psychology."^[3]

Jung mentioned the "provisional life" repeatedly in his letters and essays. In this blog essay we will define the term and other related terms—*puer* and *senex*^[4]—and then examine how the provisional life gets lived out—in its negative and positive forms—in relation to Jung's idea of the arc of life.

Definitions of Terms

The Provisional Life. The dictionary defines "provisional" as "for the time being; temporary; conditional."^[5] Something "provisional" is not lasting. It depends—on conditions, situations, people doing specific things. It is uncertain, more or less up in the air. Given a particular set of circumstances, a committee makes a "provisional" recommendation, in the understanding that things could change. A man undertakes a course of action, provided certain conditions are met. The essence of the word is transience.

In Jungian psychology the concept of "provisional life" embodies the transient nature of "provisional." The English Jungian analyst H.G. Baynes coined the term "provisional life," and regarded it as a form of neurosis, for its resistance to living responsibly in temporal reality.^[6] The Jungian analyst, James Hollis, described the "provisional life" as an "...assemblage of behaviors, attitudes and reflexive strategies [that] constitutes our 'false self;'"^[7] Jung himself described the provisional life as "... the modern European disease of the merely imaginary life..."^[8] Daryl Sharp provides a succinct definition in his *C.G. Jung Lexicon*: "A term used to describe an attitude toward life that is more or less imaginary, not rooted in the here and now, commonly associated with *puer* psychology."^[9]

Puer. The Latin word for "child," *puer* is often found in Jungian texts associated with the adjective *aeternus*: the eternal child. In Greek mythology it referred to the divinities, like Eros/Cupid, who never grew up. As a child, the *puer* is full of energy, vitality, creativity, spontaneity, imagination, and exuberance—all good qualities that we prize in our culture. But the child can also be immature, lacking in experience, irresponsible, impetuous and reckless. While we want to carry the positive qualities of youth into adulthood, the *puer's* negative side creates problems when found in an adult.

In the context of Jungian psychology the *puer* living provisionally is used to refer "... to an older man whose emotional life has remained at an adolescent level, usually coupled with too great a dependence on the mother."^[10] Our culture is full of colloquial terms for this archetype—Peter Pan,^[11] the man who's never grown up, the binge-drinking frat boy, the eternal youth—and living embodiments of it include James Dean and Elvis Presley.^[12] In literature, Walter Mitty is a classic *puer* living the provisional life, full of fantasies, dreams, and aspirations that come to nothing.^[13] For dreams to come to something we need to bring some *senex* energy to the *puer's* ambitions.

Senex. Latin for "old man," the *senex* is the opposite pole to the *puer*, the two terms existing along an archetypal continuum. We recognize youth by knowing age; we become aware of ageing by remembering how we were when young. The *senex* is the *puer's* shadow:^[14] Where the *puer* is irresponsible, impetuous, reckless and

inexperienced, the *senex* is grounded, deliberate, conscientious, risk-adverse, controlled, rational and wise to the ways of the world.

The *puer* dreams big. The *senex* works hard. The *puer* has great ambitions. The *senex* gets to be the CEO of the company. Both archetypes live within us, and both are necessary for a psychologically healthy life. A one-sided imbalance in either direction is not advisable,[15] but, while the person living too much in *senex* mode may become dour, cynical and hard-bitten as he ages,[16] he has a good chance of achieving material success, while the person living too much in the *puer* has more problems in life.

What Living "Provisionally" Looks Like

The person living "provisionally" is alienated from his own reality,[17] spending his time "vegetating and spinning fantasies"[18] that go nowhere, that achieve nothing. His thinking is full of:

"buts"[19]—reasons why action is not possible, or a slew of choices that paralyze, and

"not yet"[20]—arguments that put off decisions or delay action, and

"fantasies that serve to keep one out of life,"[21] and

illusions[22] that *some* day the great book will be written, or the lottery number will come up.

Such thinking goes nowhere.

The *puer* caught in the provisional life "fears being caught in situations from which it might not be possible to escape." [23] He craves freedom and independence[24] and often regards marriage as a prison: he can be the quintessential "committo-phobe," the "love 'em and leave 'em" Don Juan. Any restriction on his freedom seems intolerable,[25] as he "chafes at boundaries and limits,"[26] and anyone trying to "fence him in" will see him disappear in a flash.

While the *puer* has a vivid imagination and strong intuitions that can give him insights gleaned from the unconscious, he is not "capable of transforming these insights into action." [27] Rather he lives in "an ethereal space with very thin air,"[28] missing "the here and now, the blood and guts of life on earth,"[29] spending his energies on "plans for the future [that] slip away in fantasies of what ... could be, while no decisive action is taken to change." [30]

As a result the *puer* is not very successful in life. Jung was explicit about this: "...a growing youth who tries to carry over his childish egoism into adult life must pay for this mistake with social failure...." [31]. The *puer's* lot in life is not really what he wants.[32] He may know this, or he may just experience a vague discontent, as his "unconscious [is] in a state of continuous irritation." [33] He may feel frustrated, without any sense of why or what to do about it. Which brings us to the next part of this essay: Jung's concept of the arc of life.

The Arc of Life

Jung likened the human life span to the passage of the Sun over the course of 12 hours: the Sun rises and we begin the day (birth); the Sun rises in the sky (we grow from infancy to youth to young adulthood); the Sun comes to the zenith at noontime (mid-life, the peak of our abilities, vigor and, if we have been on the right path, career success); then the Sun begins to lose altitude (we begin to age), until it finally sets (we die). Jung was very clear that these phases of life have different tasks and duties: "... we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie...." [34] Jung spelled out what the young person was to do in the first half of life:

The significance of the morning [of life] undoubtedly lies in the development of the individual, our entrenchment in the outer world, the propagation of our kind, and the care of our children. This is the obvious purpose of nature.... Whoever carries over into the afternoon [of life] the law of the morning, or

the natural aim, must pay for it with damage to his soul, just as surely as a growing youth who tries to carry over his childish egoism into adult life must pay for this mistake with social failure. ...[35]

The *puer* living the provisional life is trying to “carry over his childish” ways into adulthood, due to a neurosis. Jung had a prescription for curing this:

Step 1: Work. Get a job, any job, and be dedicated to it.[36] The *puer* reply to this usually is: “But I don’t know what job is right for me, what I really want to do.” Jung would reply: “No matter. Just pick a line of work and stick with it.” Jung basically is telling the *puer* to grow up, undertake the responsibilities that are part of adult life, stop waffling, and get “entrenched in the outer world.” The discipline, commitment and focus such a step requires do not come easily to the *puer*. No easier is the next step.

Step 2: Recognize and come to terms with the root problem, which, in most cases of the *puer* living the provisional life, goes back to the early childhood relationship with the parents: a parental complex. In some cases Jung identified a relationship with the father that was too good: here the *puer* was what the French call a “*fils à papa*.” His father is still too much the guarantor of his existence,...[37]—e.g. paying his bills, bailing him out of trouble, indulging his hobbies—all actions that allow the son to remain an immature, dependent boy. In one case that Jung describes, the man’s dreams of his father allowed Jung to identify his father complex as the root cause of his provisional life.

In other cases, the *puer* grew up as a “mother’s son,” and in this situation the neurosis can take different forms. If the *puer* had a very close and positive experience of Mother—the all-providing, all-satisfying Good Mother—he may take away the expectation that life should just fall in his lap.[38] No effort necessary. No need to muster initiative and apply himself. In the opposite manifestation of the mother complex, the *puer*’s experience was negative. Mother was neglectful or power-hungry or a “smother mother,” and the young man comes away fearful of getting into any commitment that might replicate the engulfment, pain, neglect or power struggle that he had as a child.[39]

The wealth of books on the *puer* and his provisional life can give an individual lots of insights about his situation, but, as is well known, insights do not bring cure. For that, it is helpful to work with a guide who knows the “lay of the land,” the inner terrain that offers hope of healing.[40]

The Positive Version of the Provisional Life. So far we have described the provisional life in relation to the *puer*, and in that context, it is something negative, something that blocks success, fulfillment and the realization of one’s destiny. But living “provisionally” also has a *positive* form, one that Jung himself lived out.

The positive version of living provisionally shows up in late life, when one comes to feel—as Jung did—a “tremendous freedom to say or write exactly what he wanted.”[41] After his serious heart attack in 1944 Jung noticed that his orientation to life had changed:

After the illness a fruitful period of work began for me.... The insight I had had, or the vision of the end of all things, gave me the courage to undertake new formulations. I no longer attempted to put across my own opinion, but surrendered myself to the current of my thoughts...

Something else, too, came to me from my illness. I might formulate it as an affirmation of things as they are: an unconditional ‘yes’ to that which is, without subjective protests—acceptance of the conditions of existence as I see them and understand them, acceptance of my own nature, as I happen to be. ...It was only after the illness that I understood how important it is to affirm one’s own destiny. In this way we forge an ego that does not break down when incomprehensible things happen; an ego that endures, that endures the truth, and that is capable of coping with the world and with fate....[42]

Having applied himself diligently and devotedly to life for his first 70 years, Jung related in an interview a year before his death how he had moved into living provisionally:

... with the beginning of your life's second part, inexorably a change imposes itself, subtly at first but with ever-increasing weight. Whatever you have acquired hitherto is no longer the same as you regarded it when it still lay before you—it has lost something of its charm, its splendor and its attractiveness. What was once an adventurous effort has become routine.... without your being aware of it your energy is no longer attracted to its former objectives in the way it was before: enthusiasm has become routine and zeal a habit. ... The more your actual life becomes routine and habit, the less it will be satisfactory.

Soon unconscious fantasies begin to play with other possibilities, and these can become quite troublesome unless they are made conscious in time. ... Yet these insipid fantasies may also contain germs of real new possibilities or of new goals worthy of attainment.[43]

Like Jung, after decades of *senex* discipline and hard work, we can recapture some of the provisionality of youth—open to the new, to fantasies, to possibilities we would not have considered years before, and this can be revivifying and life-affirming—quite different from the provisional life of the *puer*.

Conclusion

A woman once wrote to Jung asking him how she should live her life. Jung gave an answer that reflects his understanding of both *senex* and *puer*:

There is no single, definite way for the individual... if you want to go on your individual way, it is the way you make for yourself, which is never prescribed, which you do not know in advance, and which simply comes into being of itself when you put one foot in front of the other. If you always do the next thing that needs to be done, you will go most safely and sure-footedly along the path prescribed by your unconscious. Then it is naturally no help at all to speculate about how you ought to live. ... you cannot know it, but quietly do the next and most necessary thing. So long as you think you don't yet know what this is, you still have too much money to spend in useless speculation. But if you do with conviction the next and most necessary thing, you are always doing something meaningful and intended by fate...."[44]

"Putting one foot in front of the other," "doing the next thing that needs to be done," going "safely and sure-footedly along the path," "doing with conviction the next and most necessary thing"—these are all *senex* ways of living: tending to duty, plodding along, engaging in life with commitment, taking up tasks as they show up on one's path. The *puer* frets over unanswerable questions, indulges in "useless speculation," and in so doing, wastes his energies and resources (including money).

Only when a person has come to the "afternoon of life,"[45] when physical energies are abating and involvement with outer life is lessening, is the provisional life of value. Then it reflects the openness to the new, to curiosity, to fantasy that can revitalize daily existence. In the first half of life the provisional way of living leads to a dead end. As we approach literal death in old age, living provisionally can lead to a new take on life.

Sue Mehrrens is the author of this and all the other blog essays on this site. The opinions expressed in these essays are her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of other Jungian Center faculty or Board members.

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- [1] Jung, quoted by Sharp (1980), 76; the quote is from Jung's *Vision Seminars*.
- [2] Yeoman (1998), p. 17, quoting von Franz who, in return, refers to H.G. Baynes as the source of the term. See von Franz (1970), p. 2.
- [3] Sharp (1991) 107.
- [4] For more on these two terms, see the essay "Puer Play and Senex Play," archived on this blog site.
- [5] *World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary*, II, 1564.
- [6] Quoted in von Franz (2000), 8.
- [7] Hollis (1996), 111.
- [8] "Letter to Count Hermann Keyserling," 30 August 1931; *Letters*, I, 85.
- [9] Sharp (1991), 107.
- [10] *Ibid.*, 109.
- [11] For an in-depth examination of Peter Pan and his puer provisional life, see Yeoman (1998).
- [12] Hillman (1979), 100. While both men and women can be *pueri* living the provisional life, the expectations of our culture tend to discourage the manifestation of the provisional life in women: motherhood, the care of children, the maintenance of a home—all these encourage the development of the *senex* in women. For a vivid description of what family life looks like when both parents are *pueri*, see Jeanette Walls' *The Glass Castle*.
- [13] See the recent (2013) movie, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," starring Ben Stiller, which brought James Thurber's story to celluloid life.
- [14] Sharp (1991), 110.
- [15] *Collected Works* 16, ¶257. Hereafter *Collected Works* will be abbreviated *CW*.
- [16] Hillman (1979), 16-20.
- [17] Jung, "Letter to Anon.," 19 November 1932; *Letters*, I, 105.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] Sharp (1980), 76, quoting Marie-Louise von Franz, with whom he studied.
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] *Ibid.*
- [22] von Franz (2000), 65.
- [23] Sharp (1991), 109.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 109-110.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] Jung, "Letter to Anon.," 19 November 1932; *Letters*, I, 105.
- [28] Sharp (1996), 30-31.

- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Sharp (1991), 109-110.
- [31] *CW* 8, ¶787.
- [32] Sharp (1991), 109-110.
- [33] Jung, quoted in Sharp (1980), 76.
- [34] *CW* 8, ¶785.
- [35] Ibid., ¶787.
- [36] von Franz (2000), 48-49.
- [37] *CW* 16, ¶336.
- [38] von Franz (2000), 7.
- [39] Yeoman (1998), 99.
- [40] Sharp (2013), 33.
- [41] Bair (2003), 500, quoting interviews with some of Jung's closest associates, who recall his descriptions of his late-life shift.
- [42] Jung (1965), 297.
- [43] Jung, quoted by Young (1997), 446-447.
- [44] "Letter to Frau V," 15 December 1933; *Letters*, I, 132-133.
- [45] *CW* 8, ¶785.

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