

**Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:  
*A Journey into the Unconscious, a Shamanic Journey***

**Angela Faranda**

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In a completely different context I heard the expression, "I like to finish before I start."

It somehow popped up when I finished reading the story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and for this reason I decided to start with its end. Alice wakes up and it has all been a dream. Alice's sister pictures herself how Alice will become a grown-up woman and will keep the simple and loving heart of her childhood. She imagines how Alice will pass the strange tale of Wonderland to other eager-looking children. Children with bright eyes full of wonder. Those eyes full of wonder which in many spiritual traditions are to be found again in order to open up to the doors of heaven on earth.

Initiation, magic, the capacity to look beyond the visible reality to connect to the invisible ones. Entering the spirit world of the animals through a hole in the ground and journeying down the hole, different parts of the psyche take the form of animals and other magic beings, which represent foes and friends, and all of them need to be recognised as part of the whole. These are some of the elements which can be found in Alice's story and which can be seen as part of a shamanic initiation journey.

Even in my own personal experience, Alice falling down the rabbit hole has represented a strong spontaneous catalyst about entering the imaginal world of the psyche, which I experienced within the setting of generative trance workshops.

In the trance world the principles of standard reality do not apply, as in Alice's story and in shamanic journeys. The rules of time and space dissolve to enter, in an awoken state, into the world of the unconscious and the infinite possibility of the imaginary world, which then allows to bring back new knowledge and resources in order to answer more creatively to life's requests and challenges. As Stephen Gilligan mentions:

When you attune to trance, the ego box releases. You drop from the disembodied intellect of analytical thinking into the experiential world of unbounded images, feelings, symbols, movements and energies. Like in dreams or play, in trance you can go anywhere from anywhere; the normal classic reality gives way to a more subtle quantum field of creative possibility. All the ordinary structures of identity that are usually fixed – time, embodiment, memory, logic, identity – become variable, free to generate new patterns and identities. (Gilligan 2012: 32)

C. G. Jung described the process developed from his own personal crisis as active imagination. Entering the space of the unconscious is actively used in order to connect to other worlds. I would ask: are those other worlds really *other*? Or are they just part of our own 'normal' reality, but we, as modern, contemporary human beings, have lost the connection to it? We have lost the connection to our own soul consciousness, as much as the connection to the consciousness of the anima mundi, of the spirit(s) world.

Lost in translation, lost in the illusion of being exclusively rational beings.

Are we really so rational, or is the world we live in just a construction of our own fantasy and believe systems as much as in the primitive world? In the so-called "primitive world", the concept of the soul, of being connected to the spirit(s) world, was perceived as natural, not even put in question.

In my own personal journey, I found myself extremely attracted by this question: how to bring such worlds together and live across two worlds characterized by an open communication channel between the conscious and the unconscious mind?

Both the personal unconscious as well as the "universal" are the two parts of a whole human consciousness. As Holger Kalweit outlines and I freely translate here:

The Western man is able to use only a minimal part of his psychic potential, because of his egocentric prejudices and because of his limited and illusory vision of reality. The shaman instead, by living across two worlds, is able to move freely between the "standard" daily consciousness and the altered states of consciousness and therefore transmit an archaic knowledge which he can express in his healing techniques. (Kalweit 1996: preface)

As C. G. Jung wrote,

It is of course ironical that I, a psychiatrist, should at almost every step of my experiment have run into the same psychic material which is the stuff of psychosis and is found in the insane. This is the fund of unconscious images which fatally confuse the mental patient. But it is also the matrix of mythopoeic imagination which has vanished from our rational age. Though such imagination is present everywhere, it is both tabooed and dreaded, so that it even appears to be a risky experiment or a questionable adventure to entrust oneself to the uncertain path that leads into the depths of the unconscious. (Chodorow 1997: 33)

As the same author, C. G. Jung, mentions in another text when describing his own experience:

I was sitting at my desk once more, thinking over my fears. Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as though the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic. But then, abruptly, at not too great a depth, I landed on my feet in a soft, sticky mass. I felt great relief, although I was apparently in complete darkness. After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark cave, in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he were mummified. I squeezed past him through the narrow entrance and waded knee deep through icy water to the other end of the cave where, on a projecting rock, I saw a glowing red crystal. (Jung 1961: 214)

This is a description of Jung's experiment and his own process to voluntarily connect with the unconscious in order to unveil the hidden images behind certain emotions and therefore integrate them in his own consciousness. Doesn't it sound like Alice falling in the rabbit hole? To me the quality of those two inner journeys are very similar, even if the images and the metaphors, which pop up are different, but that is just a detail from my point of view. Each person will connect, when accessing the unconscious, to different images depending on their own personal experiences, cultural and social background, imagination etc.

Another element which can be reported as a typical element in the quest for a personal journey of initiation and growth is the question: Who am I? A much less trivial question than the tone in which Lewis Carroll amusingly describes:

Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle! (Carroll 2015: 16)

“Who am I?” –This is the question introduced again in front of the caterpillar.

Falling into the rabbit hole is said to represent a rich metaphor about the inner journey into adulthood, and so is usually considered to be addressed to children. Yet this story has also attracted at least as much the imaginary world of adults across different ages and countries since when it has been written in 1865.

Salvador Dalí, master of surrealism, was inspired by Alice's story:

Surrealism's initial objective was to make accessible to art the realms of the unconscious, the irrational, and the imaginary and its influence soon went far beyond the visual arts and literature, embracing music, film, theatre, philosophy and popular culture. As have the *Alice* books. (Carroll 2015: IX, X).

I see in this case the inner journey into adulthood not as much as linked to a biological age, but more as the psychic process which allows to open up a door to the realm of the depths, of the own soul, so that healing is possible by recovering parts of the “Self” lost along the way.

The personal growth process is also based on a paradox, on confusion as much as on the chaos and the confusion experienced by Alice in a world in which everybody seems to be mad. As in

the shamanic journey, also for Alice it is not about losing herself in such “alternative realities,” but by facing her fears so as to be able to bring back the gifts and understandings of those experiences, and to integrate them in the standard reality. It is a positive sense of confusion. We lose ourselves into the unconscious; we deconstruct the fixed images we have about ourselves, the others and the world; we face our fears in order to become more ourselves and to have more space for free and conscious choices.

The more we perceive the multitude of meanings we can give to life's experiences depending on which part of the psyche, of our consciousness, is activated, the more it becomes evident that; depending on the part we choose to incarnate in each specific circumstance, we create a different reality. No event has an intrinsic meaning in itself. Even if we have grown up (or better said, I grew up, and I assume I was not the only one to do so) with this illusion: it all depends on the meaning we give to any given experience, on the relationship we have with it and on the story we use to describe it.

From my point of view, any experience which involves connecting to “other worlds” (independently if a shamanic journey, a spiritual / mystic experience, a psychological journey or an artistic expression), it will ideally meet the ultimate goal to allow a person to be more into this world. The purpose is to be able to fully experience and enjoy life in all of its facets, even if not always enjoyable, with a sense of systemic belonging and partnership with all parts, inside and outside of oneself (being it nature, other people and traditions, social, cultural backgrounds, races, religions etc.). We can recognise the intrinsic similarity, the common base of emotional and spiritual expressions beyond the difference of the external forms of those settings (shamanic, mystic, psychological and artistic) and the specialised language they use. We leave the illusion of being fixed identities to melt into the flow of existence, in which we become ourselves an unfolding process, part of the stream of consciousness evolving.

I would like to end with the following thought, which rose up while reading:

*The very dreaded chaos, confusion, even crisis, become allies which allow the reality, as we know it, to melt like ice cubes on the sun. We find a new more authentic form of expression when the fresh breeze of clarity blows on the dust of a deserted heart and fills a pool with our own tears. Tears whose streams can carry us, our heart and spirit, to more adventurous shores.*

*Bon voyage!*

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