

Zoom, embodiment, and the analytic third

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Introduction

We are licensed clinical social workers and certified Jungian analysts in private practice. We became friends while training in the Philadelphia Jung Seminar and Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts. After graduation, we continued our collegial and personal relationship. We began our podcast, This Jungian Life, early in 2018 (see: <https://thisjungianlife.com/>). Our audience's vibrant interest in Jungian ideas inspired us to create Dream School, a self-paced, 12-month online program that teaches people how to work with their dreams.

This article comprises a condensed, edited version of This Jungian Life Episode 110 (Lee, Marchiano & Stewart, 2020) which was broadcast on May 7 2020. In this article, we bring a Jungian lens to questions raised by the rapid expansion on videoconferencing in response to the COVID-19 health crises. Can we experience authentic human connection through virtual technology? Can we date, mourn, or have psychoanalysis on a screen? To explore these questions, we draw on the idea of the *analytic third*. Jung (1969) said the analytic third helps the psyche transition into a new condition through confronting the opposites or inner conflicts. Other psychoanalysts, such as Winnicott (1971) and Ogden (1994), also talked about a reflective imaginal space that opens up, ideally, during analysis, and that has a life of its own.

A Conversation Among Jungian Analysts

Deb: Today we're going to talk about psychotherapy and other relationships using virtual technology. We've moved much of our lives online and are "Zooming" with friends, relatives, and our psychotherapy clients. Will therapy, and the core of our work, be endangered in a culture and circumstances that seem to conspire against it? On the other hand, video technology has saved people time, travel, and automobile emissions. So what we're going to talk about today is the new world of living online.

Lisa: There's been some tension in our professional society, as I'm sure there has been in others, about whether online therapy works, is the same thing, or is comparable to in-person therapy. Are virtual meetings as legitimate as face-to-face treatment? World events have overtaken that discussion, so regardless of the pros and cons, most of us are working primarily or exclusively online. I want to start with Jung's concept of the analytic third, the mysterious new thing constellated between two people. Jung compared

psychoanalysis to two substances in a chemical retort; if they react, both are changed, and a new third substance is created. It enters the room, the interaction, the conversation, and that is “the third”.

Deb: To go straight to Jung, above the door of his home was carved, “Summoned or not, God will be present”. I believe that quotation is attributed to the Oracle of Delphi. But the question is whether the god, the third, or the special “something” can be present, alive, and influential over technology. Are we being Luddites if we resist it? The in-person connection is clearly to be preferred when possible, but is it essential? We are wrestling with all this as events have forced us online.

Joseph: I think Jung’s work on synchronicity makes a very solid case for the validity of working at a distance. Jung discovered a unified energy he called the *collective unconscious*; it traverses rarefied archetypal realms to matter. If we take that idea seriously, there is a way in which our personal unconscious field is connected to all points in space. If we can find a way to land on that idea with some security and navigate those realms, we could believe that as we speak to a client across the world there is a vital, living connection that doesn’t require being in the same room.

Lisa: I like that and want to circle back to it, but I’m going to back up for a minute and add some other thoughts. It’s not just therapy that’s going online, it’s socialising: people are having coffee dates and cocktail parties online. It’s school for kids and all kinds of extracurricular activities. As we become more technological we become somewhat disembodied, because technology is disembodied. I hear reports from parents that preschoolers are being asked to attend on Zoom. That just doesn’t work. A 4-year-old is not compelled by the image of her classmates on the screen. Zoom is not the same thing as being able to play when you’re little. It’s not the same as being able to co-construct a world with a friend. You can’t play soccer on Zoom, and kids in a chorus are having “Zoom choir”. That doesn’t work, and there’s fatigue in trying to pretend that it suffices. We don’t share physical space, we can’t sing together, we can’t dance together, and we can’t touch. There’s so much that gets lost. Also, I’m in the same position as many people with elderly relatives: I’m not going to see them in person because I don’t want to endanger them, so we’re talking over Zoom. It’s wonderful—and it’s not the same thing. I’m glad we can see each other instead of only talking on the phone and it does feel like we’ve connected—and it isn’t the same. So, for kids and elders Zoom is nowhere near the same thing. I’m just wondering about all this.

Deb: I agree that in-person connection has advantages that can never be replaced. Some things are simply impossible online. Nevertheless, I’m going to reach into articulating the other end of this issue. I moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Cape Cod in the middle of 2018, so I’ve had a practice that has been substantially online since then. I made trips back to Brooklyn, and some clients came to Cape Cod, but I’ve been surprised and touched at how much is constellated and alive online. Psychotherapy is not preschool or a family gathering. Zoom seems much more promising, fruitful, and generative than I’d imagined. Feeling truly present for the person on the screen is surprisingly possible, and brings to mind the reality of Jung’s conviction about presence.

Lisa: I agree substantially, Deb, but I don't want to move away from the negative aspects just yet. When we go online we're missing embodiment. When you're in the same room with someone you hear each other's stomachs growl, you notice foot tapping, you see how a person sits or moves. That's a lot of rich communication. And although this is not relevant for therapy, people can hug each other. Having a Zoom coffee date means you don't embrace or kiss on the cheek. These important things get lost on Zoom. There's also something physiologically taxing about sitting in front of a screen all day. It's flat, two-dimensional. Then friends and family want to catch up on Zoom, so we have to focus on the screen again after looking at a screen all day. I think we're missing a lot that is not sufficiently acknowledged in both therapeutic and personal realms.

Deb: Yes, and our sense of time online is very different from having, for example, a family dinner with relatives, or a holiday, or play date with kids. Time seems to slow down when we hang out in person, putter in the kitchen, and interact in all kinds of ways. A screen date of any kind starts and ends at set times. We have to sit still and be in front of our screen. It is a very different experience of time. Or going to see your analyst, you get ready, and have some kind of travel. There's transitional time in all of that: what to focus on and time to rehearse and reflect, versus going to the computer in the other room thinking, "I'll just finish doing the dishes before my appointment".

Lisa: I've had a couple of people comment that they really miss the drive to my office. They could think about what they might want to talk about, and reflect on it while driving home. Also, now that work and play are online, and both are at home for a lot of people, there is less sense of separation of life activities.

Joseph: What this brings up for me is that the journey to any encounter tempers how you arrive. If I'm in the bedroom, four feet away, and I pop into the den for a session, that's a different kind of journey than preparing for my workday at home, driving to my office, and having my set-up ritual: turning the lights on, making my coffee, and reviewing my client schedule. All the ways I enter into the experience affect me. I recently read that even though people are working from home, they are still late getting to their computers for appointments. We experience unconscious habits and resistances as we move toward an encounter. When I think, for example, about going on a first date, all the ways we prepare, imagine and arrive are integral to the experience. Just clicking on the computer sidetracks an important process.

Lisa: Yes, although I find that I have other rituals now. I've long had a good portion of my practice online, so this wasn't a dramatic transition. I've always had a ritual around getting the computer ready, having something to drink, and so on. It helps with entering a virtual session, and I am finding that some of my clients have their rituals, too. They want to do certain things before we speak, like getting tea. It may be important for all of us to have rituals to mark crossing a threshold and transitioning into a liminal space. We don't abruptly jump from Netflix into therapy. There's intentionality around entering a temenos, but it's harder to evoke, isn't it?

Joseph: It also changes what's talked about, which I think is true for both social and psychotherapeutic relationships. Some people hop online and I can see that for five or 10 minutes they're still shuffling papers, or talking to somebody else as the person transitions into being in the room alone. These are things that generally don't apply to office visits, and it's a testimony to how adaptable we are. Some piece of work can still be done, even though the container is radically different. The context affects what happens inside the temenos.

Deb: There are also advantages to creating a container and sacred space online. I'm aware of having some time right at the beginning of a session that allows for a transition from daily life into deeper work through social conversation. Often it's about COVID, or "How are you?" and news of the week, but I consider that a transition into the person's internal world, and often those details turn out to have a lot of relevance. People who have started to do online dating report that now that they don't have to go through so much attention to persona—make-up, hair, dress—they are *talking*. They are able to cut to the chase of who the other person is without so many presentation or performance rituals. Social situations in person, especially in a dating relationship, call for that.

Lisa: Online dating drops you into intimacy very quickly.

Joseph: There are fewer distractions; no ambient noise. All kinds of things are different. Last Friday the New York Times' Daily, a podcast, had an episode called *A New Way to Mourn* (Barbaro, 2020). It was about how funeral services are being held since COVID. It featured a pastor whose spouse, a poet, and had passed away. They did all the traditional parts of a memorial on Zoom. At the end, the 60 or so people who had logged on said it was one of the most moving memorials they'd ever attended because the screen allowed them to focus closely and intimately on the faces of the people who spoke, which is not possible when you're a distance away. People were respectful of taking turns to talk, and when someone spoke, the entire online moment was dedicated to that person's quiet sharing. Also, the mourners were in their home environments and didn't feel overly observed, so people said they were able to be more present to their emotional experience. There was more sense of privacy, and people were more likely to cry, for instance. Altogether, it was an unexpected outcome.

Lisa: Yes, there can be a surprising intimacy online. I have found that, in some cases, eye contact online can be deeply intense, almost overwhelmingly so. For some people I've had to make sure the computer is further away, because of the immediacy.

Joseph: When we're talking to a client or a friend, the whole screen is taken up by that person's face. The ambient environments other settings provide, such as a restaurant or an office, aren't there to titrate the intensity of one-to-one contact. Every little movement is noticeable—sometime eyebrows dance out a whole paragraph's worth of meaning. It can be very intense.

Lisa: Another thing I like about meeting people online is seeing people's personal space. Perhaps I've been hearing for years about a person's art studio, or someone bought a new house a year ago and is excited about decorating it. Those people might have shown me pictures, but now I can say, "Show me around, give me the tour." One person walked me around her house and now I can picture it. I've seen more of her and I really appreciate that.

Deb: Online capabilities provide context we have never been privy to: a person's living situation, pictures on the wall, and pets. I've met the dogs and the cats, and every now and then a child comes in. That really provides the matrix within which that person's life takes place. It's valuable information. It's obviously widened and expanded the frame beyond my office.

Lisa: Now perhaps we can move closer to the central mystery, which we mentioned in our title: is psyche—the god—really present in an online format? I think we know that the analytic third can be present in virtual encounters. At least I know that it is. Some of my most profound experiences in analysis, either my own or as the analyst, have occurred at a distance. We do lose something, there's no question, but psyche shows up. It shows up synchronicities and the deep connections that can be evoked despite great distances. Some of it is the intense privacy and intimacy in being with someone in the safety of our personal spaces. It's intimate to sit with someone in your own home—there's more immediacy. Because I work with people in other countries, there are time zone differences, so I meet with some people very late in their evening. That's also a time when someone may feel more relaxed. All this can make for highly intimate encounters in a way that is different from office meetings.

Deb: What we seem to be saying is there are gains and losses, that working online is simply different. It's not different in degree; it's different in kind. One of the things I appreciate about online work, as we've mentioned, is the eye contact. There are many subtle muscles in the face that cannot be operated consciously—feeling has to be there for those muscles to work. That's what conveys integrity and genuineness, and we "catch" our clients' feelings. That is much more visible up close on a screen, and it helps to constellate intimacy and connection.

Joseph: One of the images I have is the archetype of the witch and Hecate. I just imagined Hecate in a cave, or looking into a pool of water, and seeing things from afar or casting spells from a distance. If an ancient person were to appear today our online communication would seem like witchcraft—the way we can influence each other from great distances in immediate ways.

Lisa: Yes, and it also feels like the Spirit Mercurius, one of the gods of technology. I think we've all had the experience of something happening with our tech' that feels like a field phenomenon. Let's say we're having trouble staying connected with a client around an issue, or the feeling tone in our interaction is off, and then the internet signal breaks. Was that a little synchronicity?

Joseph: Absolutely. I've had people say, "I've been thinking about bringing this up and it's time to tell you..."—and then they're frozen on the screen with their mouth open! A few seconds later, the connection comes back and they say, "Oh, I'm really glad I got that off my chest." It's as if there's a horrible comedy going on. But I want to come back to another component of the idea of the Hecate archetype. I've noticed, particularly now with people in seclusion, that sessions take on a more secretive quality, because people are often in shared space. I have clients with family in the house, and I see that my client is on a balcony, wearing a headset, and pinned into a corner! All the intensity of secrecy is permeating the session, and that heightens what is said.

Deb: People go out to the car because it's private and encapsulated. It's all about how we manage intimacy and distance. When the internet connection cuts off, or someone has to huddle in a balcony or a car, we have to manage the paradox of up-close and further away. It's a relational complexity that's very different from someone showing up at the office.

Lisa: What about people with little kids? There can be the issue of managing the child while trying to have an analytic session: "Oh, hold on a minute, he has to go potty. I'll be right back." Part of me says, "Where's the temenos here?" But another part knows that the work we're doing, even amid toileting toddlers, is solid. Although we're not in my physical office with the door closed, the temenos is held in our relationship. It can add a symbolic dimension to the work.

Deb: That's so important; that relationship has to become even more of the container. Sometimes a furry body walks across the screen as the cat decides to join the session or the dog barks—and barks. A relational container can be full of surprises that can enlarge it. Those disruptions can serve the analytic relationship in a whole new way by proving it sturdy. The relationship does not depend on being sequestered in my office. We have a connection that holds despite pets or kids or the phone that rings in the middle of the session. We are here and we are in sacred space together for this hour.

Joseph: That is the robust heart of the work, yet there are some clients for whom this doesn't constellate online. A few clients have preferred to wait until I'm back in the office to resume sessions; they don't feel their home situations ensure enough privacy. I've also had people doubt the confidentiality of Doxy [a secure online program for clinicians]. Working virtually can evoke tremendous concerns that weren't as clear until COVID kept us sequestered.

Deb: We haven't mentioned that we do our weekly podcast over online video and audio, and every week I feel present and connected with you. We wouldn't be able to do this without technology. We've also made it a point to get together a couple of times a year so we can eat together, take a walk, and be physically present.

Joseph: Our online process is grounded in some face-to-face experience. It occurs to me now that we're baby boomers and GenX. We're talking as if it's a revelation that people have emotional experiences with each other online. I bet Millennials and younger people

are rolling their eyes. My clients in their 20s process deep, painful, and loving relationships with people they've known only from gaming, a rarefied online environment. Those relationships are substantial and soulful, so I think those who've grown up accustomed to this way of communicating expect depth of connection. To them it must seem as if we're talking about the invention of the light bulb: "Just flick the switch—it's unbelievable!"

Lisa: Good point! On the other hand, I know young people who are tired of Zooming everything. They say, "I want to go hang out with my friends." But, to wrap up, there is a mysterious way in which the analytic third gets evoked more readily between some pairs than others. I've wondered if some of that is mediated by being online. It always feels a little more alive when we meet in person, it just does. But I think you're right, Joseph, that besides privacy concerns there are people for whom it's not going to work well online; we're not going to find that right-brain-to-right brain co-regulation over a screen. What's remarkable is that you *can* find it on a screen so much of the time. I also want to revisit the idea of embodiment in our work. We're living in a Cartesian kind of world with a mind-body split. What happens in analysis is a kind of synthesis between left and right brain. We take subtly felt sensations, intuitions, and feelings, translate them into language, and then deliver that back to the client. This process helps the client achieve more integration. So the concern I have about video therapy is that it omits the implicit physiological information we get from being in each other's presence. Nevertheless, it feels surprising and somewhat miraculous to me that sitting with someone over virtual technology can provide such a wealth of image, intuition, bodily sensations, emotional resonance and more. That gives me confidence that "virtual" therapy is, in fact, authentic.

Authors

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