

# **The Bound Cat: Reflections on Meaning in the Afternoon of Life**

by Marjorie Florestal

I began preparing for my mid-life crisis when I was only twenty-eight. I had by then graduated from an elite law school and started the long and arduous process of “making something of myself” that the world demands of us in our twenties. First, a federal court clerkship, then a Fulbright, then the briefest stint at “Big Law,” an institution most of us rejected when we entered law school only to find ourselves shuffling through its gates three years later like wild horses being rustled off the range. Finally, I landed my “Dream Job”: a lawyer in the Clinton White House. It would have been an impressive job for anyone, but for me it was much more. As the child of Haitian immigrants, I had a debt to pay; I *needed* to make my parents proud. I had to ensure their sacrifice had not been made in vain. The White House job was the settlement of a debt. And that is where the story truly begins, for that is when the trouble started. As Marie Louise von Franz fondly noted “some trouble always comes at the beginning of the story because otherwise there would be no story.”

What happens when you finally get the thing you thought you wanted? Invariably, the questions come: Why am I still so unhappy? What is wrong with me? Is this *really* all there is? These questions traditionally plague us in the “afternoon” of life, but I was either lucky or precocious for they never left me. By the time I entered mid-life, I had become adept at listening and following where the questions led. This is how I found Jung on a mountain top in Taos, New Mexico. I had arrived at a conference to explore Stanislav Grof’s Holotropic breathwork technique. Someone had put their copy of *The Red Book* out on a table in the conference room for public viewing, and as soon as I saw the book I was hooked. I like to say that I came for the breathwork and stayed for *The Red Book*.

This chance encounter with Jung and *The Red Book* led me down a path I could not have anticipated. Shortly after, I left my life as a lawyer behind and entered a Masters program in Jungian psychology. On the eve of the program, I had a “big dream,” one that illuminates my path and continues to give shape and meaning as I step more fully into the afternoon of my life.

## **The Dream: The Bound Cat**

I have just moved to a new housing complex full of little white houses scattered around a central commons. I open a door to exit, and there in the stairwell sits a cat. The cat is chained by the neck to the stairs’ railing. I can see the shape of its bones through skin and patchy fur. Its eyes stare out at me with deep sadness. I stare back for a moment mesmerized feeling the tears well up in my own eyes.

I realize I have seen this cat before, but in the past I have simply ignored him. I cannot ignore him again.

I run out into the lawn in search of help. There is a man sitting at a table in the center green. A sign on the table says he is a representative from “Congresswoman Anne’s Office” and he is there to help her constituents.

Choking back tears, I ask the man if he has anything that could help me free the cat. He rifles through some items on the table and pulls out a bolt cutter. “That should work,” he says without emotion.

I grab the bolt cutter and step back into the stairwell. The cat is still there, still chained. It looks better than it had just moments earlier. I can see that someone has given it food. I offer it a bowl of water, which it quickly grabs and gulps down.

I awaken from the dream in tears.

### **Amplifying the Dream Images**

Jungian analyst Robert Johnson’s *Inner Work* provides a simple but powerful technique for engaging with our dreams using Jung’s methods. Johnson’s four step process, strictly speaking, focuses on amplifying rather than interpreting the dream. The amplification process shines a light on the resonant symbols arising from the dream and attaches to them both personal and collective symbolism. In this way, the dream figures begin to speak to the dreamer from beyond the depths. The four stages of the amplification process are: (1) associations, (2) dynamics, (3) interpretations, and (4) rituals. In this essay, I explore the first three steps in an effort to engage with the dream images.

#### *Step One: Associations*

In step one, the dreamer first identifies certain key or numinous characters of the dream. Unlike Freud’s use of association, however, the aim is not to allow the mind complete freedom to wander at will. The key characters stand at the center of a circle, and the dreamer brings the associations back to those characters; associations that might occur between peripheral figures for the most part remain unexplored. For example, if a numinous character of the dream is a key, and the dreamer draws an association between key and lock/key and door, we do not go on to explore the associations between lock and door. In this way, the dreamer remains ever focused

on the centrality of the dream message. In my dream, the two most resonant characters are the cat and the Congresswoman's representative. What associations do these figures raise for me?

*The cat:* My first pet was a cat whom I named Cleopatra. About one year after I adopted her, I decided to move to South Africa. I loved Cleo so much that I could not dream of leaving her. I moved heaven and earth to be able to relocate with her 10,000 miles away from home. In my first month in South Africa, while I was away on business, my landlord allowed Cleo to escape the apartment. She was lost to me forever, and I spent four years mourning that loss.

About a year later, I moved from South Africa to Senegal. While dining with a friend in one of Dakar's best restaurants, a waiter stumbled upon a kitten and kicked the poor thing so hard that I felt the pain reverberate in my own ribs. I demanded he bring the cat to me, and I took her home. I named the kitten "M.E." or ME because at that time I felt about as homeless, unloved and unwanted as the kitten. When I was on yet another business trip, I had a friend babysit ME. The cat escaped never to be heard from again.

*The congresswoman's representative:* Shortly before I had this dream, a friend from law school contacted me after years of silence. She wanted me to know that she was running for a seat in her state's legislature. Her name is Anne. There was a certain amount of rivalry between Anne and I in the early part of our career: We both went to the same prestigious law school. We were both hired by the same judge to complete a prestigious federal district court clerkship. Anne and I both subsequently applied for Fulbright fellowships, I was granted the fellowship while Anne's application was denied. But Anne went on to complete a more prestigious federal appellate court clerkship, while I did not. In the competition (that I had fabricated in my mind), there was no clear winner.

### *Step Two: Dynamics*

In the second step, the dreamer is asked to connect each dream image to a specific dynamic in her life. What inner part of the dreamer has been expressing itself in outer reality?

For me, returning to school was an exercise in dislocation. I was by then a respected and tenured law professor with decades of experience, but in the Jungian world none of that was relevant. I had moved to a new place, a new home and I had no identity. I was as lost as Cleo and as much in danger as ME. When my friend Anne called to say she was running for office, I was forced to confront all that I had left behind in my old life. Was I a failure? Anne and I had started out in the same place, but had she surpassed me now that I have given up my tenured professorship and turned the clock back to a student's life? It did not matter that I had no interest in politics or Anne's life, the sense of failing to live up to my own potential was acute.

### *Step Three: Interpretations*

This dream would prove to have a significant impact on my life. It awakened me to the loss of connection to my deep inner life. The cat was my unconscious, which had been chained up for too long, left hungry and wanting for too long. It was near death. My personal connection to cats are all about loss. Both of my cats were unwanted. I saved them—could I do the same for the dream image?

In the collective unconscious, cats are enigmatic figures. They are often reviled as disobedient and evil, yet they are also said “to have a way of getting to us, of finding us where we live.” Queen Cleopatra is often depicted with a cat by her side representing both feminine grace and masculine power. This interplay between the masculine and feminine would prove significant in the interpretation of my dream. The masculine image in the dream, Congressman Anne’s representative, is out in the world doing things. He represents law, logic, and outward success. He is a problem solver. These were all such significant aspects of my personality as a successful lawyer and professor. But the representative also lacks curiosity; he expresses little interest in knowing why I need the bolt cutter. He shows little emotion. He has no desire to participate in the freeing of psyche (although admittedly he *does* provide the tool to make freedom possible). The cat represents the feminine, a bound and ignored feminine that is hidden from the world—hidden from myself. I recognize in her my whole self, a divine awareness of my place in the scheme of things. When I am forced to look into her eyes and to confront what it is I have done to her, my experience of the world profoundly changes.

### **Confronting the Bound Cat**

As a final step in engaging with the dream images, I spoke directly with the cat in an active imagination. It was a painful experience. I approached the cat with bolt cutters in hand and cut the lock off its neck. The cat reached out and calmly dragged four sharp claws down the side of my right hand. I stare at the blood, not angry but hurt and in pain:

Me: Why did you do that?

Cat: You needed to awaken.

Me: Why hurt me when I am trying to free you? To do good?

Cat: Awakening is painful. Pain is the constant awakener. It allows you to feel what I feel. You hurt me always with your silence and your ignorance. You ignored me. You chained me up!

Me: I didn't!

Cat: Really? Who else could have done that? Who else has the power?

Me: I did not know how to free you.

Cat: It was always so simple. I have no sympathy for you. You've been gone for too long. You've been silent and immersed for too long. Let these four scratches be a lesson to you and a constant reminder. Let the blood that flows out of your veins be a path out of your current predicament—your current ignorance.

The path from where I was to where I needed to be was indeed fraught with pain and not a small bit of bloodletting. I had to leave many of the things of my earlier life behind—the striving, the competition, the endless search for the "dream job." In the process of losing those things, I gained my whole self.

## **Conclusion**

In Jungian Psychology the central task of one's life is to complete the process of individuation, which Jung defined as becoming an undivided and integrated person. The Bound Cat Dream provides me with a personal map to the individuation process. The dream called for me to unite what were then two separate aspects of my psyche—the masculine lawyer, and the bound self. The lawyer, my logical and rational self, was out in the open while the cat stood chained in the dark corner of the stairwell. In the dream, I am asked to do the work of freeing the cat, while in my active imagination the cat warns that the process is not without pain. And yet, the pain must be endured. This is the work in the afternoon of our lives.