

Dr. Carl Gustav Jung reply to Bill W.'s letter

Dear Mr. W.

Your letter has been very welcome indeed.

I had no news from Rowland H. anymore and often wondered what has been his fate. Our conversation which he has adequately reported to you had an aspect of which he did not know. The reason that I could not tell him everything was that those days I had to be exceedingly careful of what I said. I had found out that I was misunderstood in every possible way. Thus I was very careful when I talked to Rowland H. But what I really thought about was the result of many experiences with men of his kind.

His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God.*

How could one formulate such an insight in a language that is not misunderstood in our days? The only right and legitimate way to such an experience is that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path which leads you to higher understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through a personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism. I see from your letter that Rowland H. has chosen the second way, which was, under the circumstances, obviously the best one.

I am strongly convinced that the evil principle prevailing in this world leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition, if it is not counteracted either by real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community. An ordinary man, not protected by an action from above and isolated in society, cannot resist the power of evil, which is called very aptly the Devil. But the use of such words arouses so many mistakes that one can only keep aloof from them as much as possible.

These are the reasons why I could not give a full and sufficient explanation to Rowland H., but I am risking it with you because I conclude from your very decent and honest letter that you have acquired a point of view above the misleading platitudes one usually hears about alcoholism. You see, "alcohol" in Latin is "spiritus" and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum.

Thanking you again for your kind letter.

I remain
Yours sincerely

C. G. Jung*

"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." (Psalms 42:1)

The Mechanism

Carl Jung in his reply to the 1961 letter from Bill Wilson said, “Alcohol in Latin is ‘Spiritus’, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: Spiritus contra spiritum.” Jung may have linked the two words together himself or he may have been displaying a condition he wrote about called ‘cryptomnesia;’ in which unknowingly he was quoting the Roman Caesar, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (120-180 AD) who declared, ‘Espiritum vinci espiritus.’ Irrespective of this, both quotes mean the same, which is, spirit counters spirit.

There are two ways of accessing the spirit; either the illusion of the spirit is invoked by alcohol, drugs, eating, gambling and sex or the authentic spirit is invoked by the collapse of the ego and its surrender to the true self — this is the ‘sense of the sacred.’

This possibility of hope given to alcoholics by Jung in the form of spirituality has probably had more influence on the world in the form of addiction groups than all the rest of Jung’s work. It has probably contributed more to the healing of the sick than any form of psychological therapy.

His contribution to mankind’s spiritual development has not just been significant, it has been colossal and in a very different way to that which he imagined.

January 30, 1961

Mr. William G. Wilson
Alcoholics Anonymous
Box 459 Grand Central Station
New York 17, N.Y.
=====

Dear Mr. Wilson,

your letter has been very welcome indeed.

I had no news from Roland H. anymore and often wondered what has been his fate. Our conversation which he has adequately reported to you had an aspect of which he did not know. The reason ~~was~~, that I could not tell him everything, ~~was that~~ those days I had to be exceedingly careful of what I said. I had found out that I was misunderstood in every possible way. Thus I was very careful when I talked to Roland H. But what I really thought about, was the result of many experiences with men of his kind.

His craving for alcohol was the equivalent on a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in mediaeval language: the union with God.¹⁾

How could one formulate such an insight in a language that is not misunderstood in our days?

The only right and legitimate way to such an experience is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path, which leads you to higher understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through a personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism. I see from your letter that Roland H. has chosen the second way, which was, under the circumstances, obviously the best one.

I am strongly convinced that the evil principle prevailing in this world, leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition, if it is not counteracted either by a real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community. An ordinary man, not protected by an action from above and isolated in society cannot resist the power of evil, which is called very aptly the Devil. But the use of such words arouse so many mistakes that one can only keep aloof from them as much as possible.

These are the reasons why I could not give a full and sufficient explanation to Roland H. but I am risking it with you, because I conclude from your very decent and honest letter, that you have acquired a point of view above the misleading platitudes, one usually hears about alcoholism.

You see, Alcohol in Latin is "spiritus" and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum.

Thanking you again for your kind letter

I remain

yours sincerely

C.G. Jung.

¹⁾ "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." (Psalm 42,1)