

# Marriage and family as a path to individuation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Drawing on concepts from Jung's Analytical Psychology and C. A. Byington's Symbolic Psychology, the author emphasizes the importance of the conjugal relationship and family life as spaces that are richly conducive to individuation. Reflecting on his experience with couples and family therapy, he argues that these two institutions are so frequently chosen as a way of life by the vast majority of people precisely because they offer, for most, stimulating conditions for individuation. ■



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## Marriage and family as a path to individuation

*A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face.  
And when you are near I will tear your eyes out  
and place them instead of mine,  
and you will tear my eyes out  
and place them instead of yours,  
then I will look at you with your eyes  
and you will look at me with mine.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

It seems unnecessary for us to emphasize the importance of marriage and family as objects of concern and reflection. These institutions, almost as old as humankind and such customary ways of life, are the great shapers of the foundations and primary structures of our personality. For the vast majority of humanity, it is a fact that we are born, raised, and formed within families.

What reasons have led, and still lead, most human beings to marry and live in families? Could these reasons be inherent genetic traits of the species? Certainly not, because the minorities who have not lived and do not live this way are surely not abnormal for that reason. What is it, then, that the family structure and marriage so frequently provide to human beings that leads this vast majority to choose this way of life? Surely, they must meet many of humankind's most basic needs, which is why they are so common as a life option.

I have been working for many years as a couples and family therapist. Conjugal, parental, and familial bonds have always been the object of great interest and concern for me, which

have only increased with the years and my clinical experience.

Trying to better understand what drives men and women to commit to marital life, how and why they fall in love, love each other, hate each other, and separate, has always seemed to me of fundamental importance to the psychotherapist's work.

The considerations I present in this study, I hope, will reflect these concerns, stimulate inquiry, and be of some assistance to those who are concerned with the human condition.

### Marriage. Family – crisis and individuation

It has long been said and observed that marriage and family are institutions in crisis. As often happens, in any crisis there are those who wish to reaffirm these institutions in their traditional and orthodox forms, and those who want to abolish them as if they were the causes of nearly all problems. As always, the challenge lies in finding and creating the middle path.

The existence of this crisis highlights the challenges associated with revisions and changes. However, I believe these changes should aim to enrich and make these institutions more flexible, while maintaining the basic structural characteristics that have made them privileged spaces for the development of our personality. Fundamental to our upbringing and development, they provide experiences that are essential for our overall growth and completeness.

The conjugal bond is, by excellence, a paradoxical bond. Human beings rely on others to understand their identity, affirm their existence, and determine the nature of their being. A person who is completely alone and isolated loses their references and goes mad. We depend on others to affirm our existence. But we are also born to become, through our indi-

<sup>1</sup> English translation from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4610845/>

viduation, the unique beings that we have the potential to be. We need to be who we are, independently of others. This paradoxical reality of the human being, which manifests in any relationship, is extremely vibrant and rich within the conjugal bond.

The preestablished models of marriage and family, which have met human needs for centuries, certainly no longer serve many people. There is strong evidence that humanity is increasingly opening up to a world of otherness, respecting the peculiarities of each person. Marriage and family obviously cannot be excluded from this movement. They must also change in order to accommodate these possibilities for the development and enrichment of personalities.

Concern for ecology, our shared future, and the improvement of the “Other”—who is also the “Self”—shows us that our culture is increasingly shifting away from being markedly patriarchal and moving toward a culture of otherness, as described by C. A. Byington (Byington, 1983).

Following World War II, the intense experiences encountered on the battlefield, coupled with women’s emergence into the workforce and social spheres to replace men, precipitated profound transformations that shook the foundations of marriage and family.

The desire to transcend the predetermined roles of wife and mother, or husband and father, in favor of fulfilling these responsibilities within the context of each person’s individuation, has been gaining traction.

Forms of interaction in the contexts of marriage and parenthood that were inconceivable not so long ago are now relatively commonplace. Families formed in the most varied ways, with children from previous marriages of both spouses and from the current one, are no longer astonishing anomalies.

Contemporary individuals possess needs and complexities that must be addressed and experienced in a creative manner. In principle, questioning old formulas, opening up to see things differently, and pursuing changes are both de-

sirable and necessary to bring new life to marriage and family life. However, as with all transformations and transitions, the risk of losing ourselves increases and is always threatening. Exaggeration, an inability to discern appropriate boundaries, and particularly chaotic regression are constant dangers. However, they should not be used as arguments to deny the validity of these transformations.

According to Jung, individuals are not born as a bundle of instincts; rather, they come into existence with archetypes—structural potentials for fundamental behaviors that encompass all polarities and that will be individually and uniquely experienced by each person.

Each ruling archetype, with its structuring symbols, as C. A. Byington calls them, coordinates the structuring of one of the fundamental cycles (matriarchal, patriarchal, otherness, and cosmic) of the development of our personality (Byington, 1987).

As Man is born for his individuation, he will seek, consciously or unconsciously, situations that provide conditions for this development, this “becoming oneself” (Jung, 1978, p. 49, §266).

This quest sometimes reveals situations that stimulate the development of yet unreached potentials; at other times, it shows the need to overcome obstacles that are limiting and hindering a broader and more harmonious development of a personality. It is from this perspective that we try to understand seemingly inappropriate and incomprehensible passions and connections, sometimes even for the passion-filled person themselves, who often struggles to understand their feelings for someone so “complicated and unsuitable.” And it is often along this painful, complicated, and irrational path that a personality has better opportunities to develop.

It is also from this perspective that we understand the clinical observation that the conjugal relationship is so rich in oppositions and, for that very reason, so complicated.

Deep realities are difficult for our ego to grasp, and perhaps that is why paradoxes are one way of trying to express them.

The conjugal bond, so potentially rich in development, can also become a terrible defense mechanism, stagnating the lives of the spouses. The very thing that fosters growth and development has the potential to defensively complement and paralyze the relationship as a creative force. When one spouse expresses themselves solely in relation to the other, explaining themselves as a reaction to the other, it is a sign that the bond has distorted toward definition through the other and become suffocating and paralyzing, rendering the marriage a “non-life.”

Each spouse is an individual before the other, able to be influenced, to take the other into account, but ultimately defined by their own selves. I did something because I did it, not because the other did or failed to do something else. What I do is basically my own concern, although there may be external influences and motivations. It is obvious that my responsibility is relative, and in extreme situations, it can diminish significantly.

### **Experiencing the archetypal polarities in marriage and family life**

Human beings need humanizers to develop and structure their archetypal dynamisms; otherwise, they are not realized. This is always a personal and specific story for each individual, but the need to realize it is collective.

It is difficult to imagine a situation that could better enable humanization for the parental archetypes (Great Mother and Father) than a personal mother and father. Although they are not the only possibilities, they are certainly the best ones. A child who loses one of them prematurely always experiences a tragedy, although this may result in creative or positive aspects. It is always a difficult and complicated substitution, which is why it is so crucial that when a couple separates, they do so as husband and wife and never as father and mother, who must be preserved for the children.

For a richer and more extensive structuring of a dynamism, we must experience it in its most varied polarities. However, it is fundamental to first experience it in its polarities as object and then as subject. First, we experience the matriarchal dynamism as a child of the other who mothers me, and later, as motherer of the other—as the one who will function as a mother to a child. The same applies to the patriarchal dynamism.

The richness and depth with which we can experience these two phases of the parental cycles cannot be replaced advantageously by any other institution, despite all the risks and difficulties that the family may represent due to this very richness.

In the same way, as Iraci Galiás describes in her article “Reflexões sobre o triângulo edípico,” the oedipal triangulation, so fundamental for the structuring of our personality, is experienced in its first phase when we are the child in relation to the father and mother, and in the second, as the one who functions as a mother or father alongside the spouse in relation to the child (Galiás, 1988).

When we have children, family life naturally offers a second possibility for enriching the parental dynamics, while at the same time any unresolved fixations in parental relationships may be revisited or at least better understood and elaborated, thus allowing for better adaptation. Therefore, a person who had difficulty structuring the matriarchal dynamism and who did not manage to overcome them, thus remaining fixated in the child-mother relationship (maternal complex), may experience a remobilization of this dynamism when they have a child. The symbolic structuring through their experience of the mother-pole, with the possible reworking of the mother-child bond, may help them overcome or at least better deal with their matriarchal fixations. The same can be said for the patriarchal dynamism.

The constellation of the anima and animus archetypes in the child usually creates great turbulence within the family due to the opposition

it brings to the parental archetypes (Byington, 1988a). Thus, these archetypes guide the child to adulthood and stimulate the parents (since they also experience this constellation, but in the second phase) toward greater otherness with their children and with life. During this first phase of adolescence on the children's part, adults will be stimulated to experience the second phase of the cycle of otherness. If in the first phase we witness the beginning of the child's transformation into a young adult, in the second, the adult begins to transform into the "elder," and thus to prepare for the search for a deeper, more significant meaning in life, to prepare for the second half of life. This second "adolescent crisis" will be experienced, like any crisis, in a way that can or cannot be creative. It is a second opportunity to experience this dynamism, to reclaim any missed opportunities for openness and creativity from the first phase of adolescence. Like the first, this phase is dangerous, especially when deep repressions and fixations are present, as the risk of enantiodromia is high due to the often intense constellation of the anima and animus archetypes.

As an example, I would like to refer to a case from couples therapy where, in a manner not uncommon today, the constellation of the husband's anima in this second phase triggered intense conjugal conflict by his challenging his wife's significant professional and intellectual creativity. He greatly missed his wife's creativity in cooking, taking care of their house and garden, and being a companion in simple and cozy aspects of domestic life. He felt suffocated by his wife's professional and intellectual success, particularly by her great capacity for initiative and her involvement in various aspects of their shared life. He also felt suffocated by his own successful professional life, which, while economically prosperous, was frustrating in terms of personal fulfillment. The constellation of the anima led him to seek to develop what was stagnant and underdeveloped in his

personality. He manifestly wanted his wife to perform more domestic roles, as he no longer viewed her as the companion she had been until then. The crisis deepened due to his intense passion for another woman who, in contrast to his wife, embodied opposite qualities: she was a simple housewife, deeply maternal with her children, and neither professionally nor intellectually accomplished.

For this marriage to remain alive and valid, both spouses must be able to reformulate themselves in a way that allows them to continue stimulating each other's development. The lack of oppositions paralyzes this development and can reduce the conjugal relationship to its friendship and solidarity component.

Through contact with grandparents or other older relatives, the stimulation for the experience of the archetype of wisdom and maturity is activated in its first phase, as grandchildren before their grandparents, or as adult children before their aging parents.

Through adult children who marry and grandchildren, the second phase of the cosmic cycle is strongly activated, in which, as elder adults, we move toward the transcendence of life, the questioning of absolute values, and a deeper understanding of life.

The richer and more varied a family is in active members—through interactions with ancestors (grandparents and parents), descendants (children and grandchildren), and collateral relatives (aunts/uncles, siblings, cousins, and nieces/nephews)—the more naturally it will foster humanizing, enriching experiences of the basic archetypal dynamisms that structure our personality.

The importance of family in the biological sense is becoming increasingly relative to our individuation. However, it remains fundamental when understood psychologically, as the true family that fulfills its role. The great humanizer of the Father archetype is not always the biological father, but rather the one who effectively

performs that role. He will be, as Jung designated him, the psychological father, corroborating his concept of psychological truth as that which works, which is effective (Jung, 1975).

A family dynamic that is often underemphasized, but in my view greatly beneficial to our individuation, is the one that exists between siblings. The experience of archetypal dynamisms in the different dimensions of our personality (body, society, nature, and ideational-emotional) takes place between siblings in a very different way than between parents and children or between spouses. Thus, two brothers experience the father-son relationship dynamism between themselves in a freer, more relaxed, and not as heavily charged manner. The exchanges tend to be easier and lighter.

The archetype of the hero is constellated in a way that is closer to identity, and not as idealized and distant; therefore, its experience and humanization are easier. The older brother, for instance, is often the father or the closest and friendliest teacher, with whom, in certain situations, there is more ease in opening up and being vulnerable. With whom, also, it is easier to compete, fight, argue, and reconcile. Between brother and sister, important symbols of the mother-son and father-daughter axes, as well as the anima and animus archetypes, are frequently experienced (Vargas, 1986).

In a way, the “romantic” relationship with the mother is far more laden with risks of regression and incest and, consequently, more dangerous—hence, the need for a stronger taboo. With a sister, the relationship is not as charged, and even less so with a cousin. This fact, like every symbol, has two sides: because it is lighter, it facilitates certain experiences but makes others more difficult or even unfeasible for the same reason.

From a psychological perspective, the conjugal relationship is often the most enduring and profound connection we have in life. It is also the relationship that best represents us, resulting from our choices in love and reflecting our Self in both its conscious and unconscious components.

It is often said, sometimes aggressively, that “we don’t choose our mother,” which reveals a hereditary reality in which our participation in a conscious choice is nonexistent.

Of course, psychologically speaking, this is a relative reality, as we can, though belatedly and in a very restricted and limited way, choose “another mother” who we believe better humanizes the matriarchal dynamism.

We cannot say the same about a spouse. In a more or less conscious way, they are our choice. In some manner, they reflect us, express us, and complement us, but they also expose us since one’s conscious aspects expresses much of the other’s unconscious, and vice versa.

The different characteristics of the conjugal bond can bring forth a wide range of symbols to be elaborated, thus fulfilling their role in structuring our consciousness. Hence, the great importance of a well-constituted conjugal vessel (Byington, 1988a).

Perhaps for this reason, we must employ our best qualities, especially our capacity for effort and sacrifice, in the construction of this conjugal container, because it is often in this relationship, in this conjugal Self (Byington, 1985), that the richest and most powerful symbols of our lives emerge, for better or for worse. Thus, the possibilities for creative experiences are as vast as the possibilities for morbid behaviors, complicities, and bonds, which, if not addressed therapeutically, will lead to paralysis and the failure to realize our potential in life.

We could say that, at one extreme, there are very rich, vibrant, and creative marriages, which are, unfortunately, not so common, and at the other extreme, those that are sadly not so rare, which are stagnant and lifeless. Between these extremes, there is a vast array of bonding patterns where we can find the most varied creative and defensive complementarities. Conjugal bonds thus provide an immensely rich “culture medium” for our “germs,” both the pathological kind and the ones that hold the potential for development.

### **Persona and shadow – structuring experiences in marriage and family life**

Marriage and family are also vessels that enable structuring experiences for the shadow and persona archetypes.

Many of our primary social roles and adaptive behaviors, as well as the identification of undesirable ego traits, are initially and basically developed within the family, and later on, within marriage.

Jung defined the shadow as being composed of those contents that, for some reason, are not accepted by consciousness, and therefore are not integrated into the ego (Jung, 1982, p. 6, §14). Since they are unconscious, they manifest in our behavior in ways that we do not recognize—blindly, so to speak—, remaining in the dark, in the shadow. Jung proposed it as an archetype, meaning that it inevitably exists in every human being, but with specific and individual content for each personality (Byington, 1988b, p. 31).

C. A. Byington introduced the idea, which we find clinically useful, that the shadow can be observed in the four structuring dynamisms related to the four ruling archetypes. He also distinguished between normal shadow and pathological shadow, depending on whether the shadow's content is free or surrounded by defenses (Jung, 1978, p. 32, § 244).

Symbols that are entirely or partially within the normal shadow can more easily, with some help, fulfill their role in structuring consciousness. However, the contents that reside in the pathological shadow require significant therapeutic support to gradually become integrated into the ego, as defenses become unnecessary or dispensable.

The persona, as conceptualized by Jung, is that aspect of the personality that acts as a mask or face used to confront the world, and a part of it identifies with the collective psyche (Byington, 1988b, p. 11). Like the shadow, the persona is an archetype, meaning it is collective and present in all personalities, though its content will differ across cultures and individuals.

As with the shadow, C. A. Byington relates the persona to the four dynamisms (matriarchal, patriarchal, otherness, and cosmic), and distinguishes between a pathological persona, which is defended and unconscious, and a normal persona, whose contents can serve as tools for our development or adaptation.

The family as a whole, and the conjugal relationship in particular, provide enriching opportunities for the shadow's integration into the ego and the normal functioning of the persona. These situations are often therapeutic enough to retrieve contents even from the pathological shadow and persona. For instance, when a conjugal relationship provides favorable conditions for trust and surrender to the partner (an adequate conjugal vessel), the spouse, due to intimate cohabitation and a deep understanding of their partner, can often help them become aware of denied contents or recognize stereotypical behaviors.

It is common to hear, when someone compliments a member of a couple or family, another member responds with, "Oh yeah? Try living with them and you'll see how they really are." There is a popular saying that you only truly know someone "when you've eaten a sack of salt together." It reveals how deeper knowledge requires intimate, long-term interaction. Only under these conditions can an individual reveal themselves more fully, as their unconscious emerges, relaxing ego controls and functioning increasingly on "autopilot," i.e., through their unconscious. It is under such circumstances that the contents of the shadow and persona emerge, whether in an attenuated form or not.

Living together as a couple and family can naturally foster deep mutual understanding, thus allowing the unconscious of family members to gradually surface and, when conditions are favorable, to be recognized and integrated. Jokes, nicknames, games, and teasing within the family and conjugal context, besides being revealing, are often symbolic, structuring, and therapeutic experiences for our personality and enriching for our individuation.

A situation that I believe illustrates this was shared by a couple in therapy. Both spouses had an extremely high level of self-demand regarding their own performances—he in his role as provider, she in caring for the children and the home. They often had major arguments over even the smallest criticism, suggestion, or comment one made about the other's performance in these roles. With a little therapeutic support, they realized that their inability to accept suggestions from each other stemmed from excessive self-criticism, which they mutually projected. This realization allowed them to view each other's suggestions as helpful rather than as threats to their individuation. They became aware of how the possibility of relaxation and surrender to enjoy their respective conjugal duties had been shadowed for each of them, and how they had projected this shadow onto the other.

### **Transference. Self and the conjugal and familial vessel**

According to Jung's broader concept of transference, it is present in every human relationship, happens bilaterally, is inevitable, and therefore must be recognized to be better managed, both in its archetypal and personal aspects (Jung, 1987, p. 41, § 358). C. A. Byington describes transference in its creative and defensive aspects, which we find clinically enlightening and useful, and also distinguishes it across the different structuring dynamisms of our personality (matriarchal, patriarchal, alterity, and cosmic), where it takes on different characteristics for each of them (Byington, 1985).

As might be expected, conjugal and familial bonds are highly conducive to transference relationships, which is one reason they are so potentially rich in generating symbolic experiences, both for development and pathology.

In our therapeutic work, reflecting on and analyzing conjugal and familial relationships using these theoretical constructs is extremely helpful. They aid in distinguishing, organizing, and bring-

ing some understanding to the vastness of human experience without violating or diminishing its richness.

Our intention is not to discuss the complex phenomenon of transference, but to emphasize how conjugal and familial relationships facilitate it, and thus constitute an enriching opportunity for our individuation.

Enabling transference experiences in a creative way is perhaps our main task in psychotherapy, which is why it is so fundamental for the analyst to know themselves well and to have a broad and rich dialectical openness with their own unconscious. Only in this way, and not by attempting to escape the inevitable reality of transference, can the therapist increasingly avoid becoming blindly and indiscriminately entangled with their clients, trapped in unrecognized and unaddressed defenses, and oblivious to unidentified and unmet goals.

From the therapist, given their professional role, we should expect a commitment to being of service and prioritizing the client's process.

From spouses and family members, it is desirable to expect that self-knowledge, openness, and reflection will help each of them to handle the intense transference situations that arise in these settings more effectively. However, no family member is a professional therapist for another member. While everyone can act as "natural therapists," they can just as easily—and often do—become "pathogenic agents" to one another.

Family members, particularly spouses, can—this is where the strongest critics of these institutions make their case—be enablers of major problems and pathologies.

The Jungian concepts of Self and vessel, which have greatly enriched our understanding of human beings, also carry certain risks of indiscriminate, to which any broader and richer perspective can lead. The application of these concepts to analysis, families, and marriage, as developed by C. A. Byington within Symbolic Psychology, represents, in our view,



a significant theoretical enrichment of great clinical value. It enhances our understanding and ability to work with relationships in individual analysis, couples therapy, and family therapy in a nuanced and open manner, while maintaining discernment and flexibility, along

with clear theoretical boundaries to guide our clinical practice. ■

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## Resumo

### *O casamento e a família como caminho de individuação*

Utilizando-se de conceitos da Psicologia Analítica de Jung e da Psicologia Simbólica de C. A. Byington, o autor enfatiza a importância da relação conjugal e da vida familiar como locais ricamente propiciadores da individuação. Procura, refletindo sobre sua experiência com terapia de

casais e família, defender a ideia de que essas duas instituições são tão frequentemente escolhidas como maneira de vida pela grande maioria das pessoas justamente por oferecer, para essa maioria, condições estimuladoras para a individuação. ■

Palavras-chave: casamento, família, individuação, humanização dos arquétipos, Self conjugal e familiar.

## Resumen

### *El matrimonio y la familia como camino a la individuación*

Utilizando conceptos de la Psicología Analítica de Jung y de la Psicología Simbólica de C. A. Byington, el autor destaca la importancia de la relación conyugal y de la vida familiar como lugares ricamente propicios para la individuación. Reflexionando sobre su experiencia en te-

rapia de pareja y de familia, intenta defender la idea de que esas dos instituciones son tan frecuentemente elegidas como forma de vida por la gran mayoría de las personas precisamente porque ofrecen condiciones estimulantes para la individuación. ■

Palabras clave: matrimonio, familia, individuación, humanización de los arquetipos, Self conyugal y familiar.

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