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**The Elliptical Dialogue**  
In the Borderland between Analytical Psychology and Systems  
Theory

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT FOR THIS PRESENTATION

Image 1



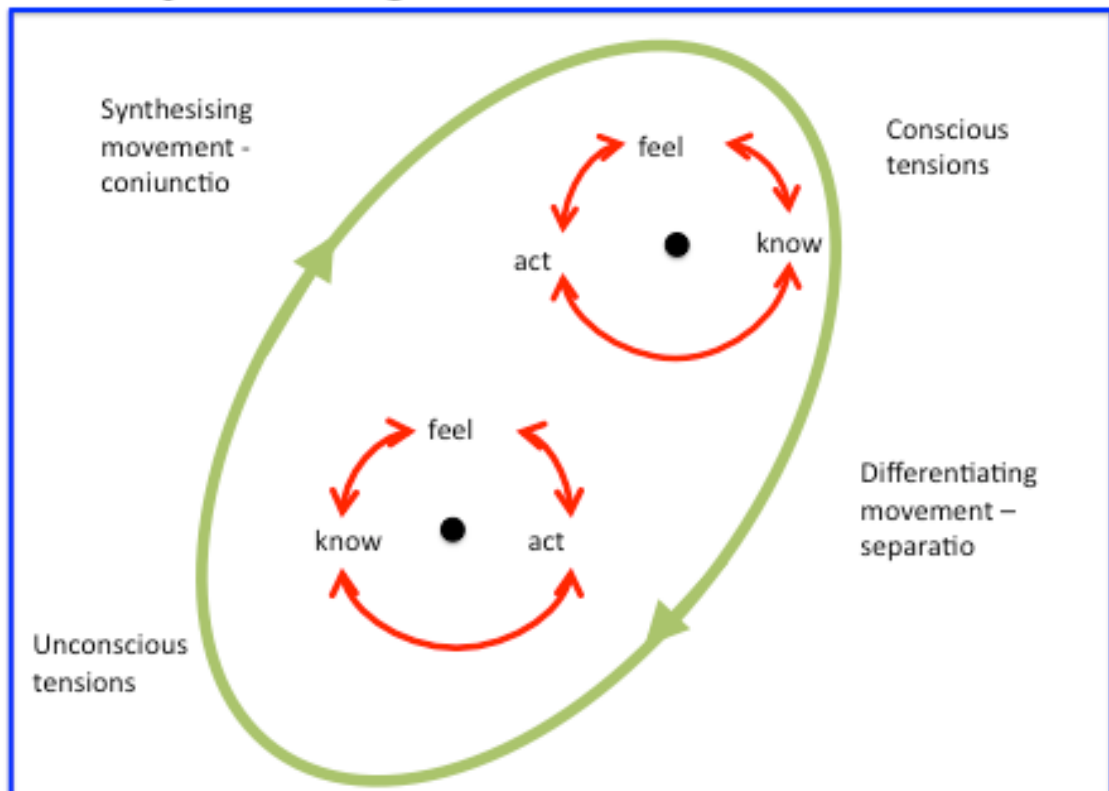
**The Elliptical Dialogue**  
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Psychology and Systems Theory

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In this presentation, my intention is to discuss some of the theoretical aspects that link C.G. Jung to Gregory Bateson, one of the founders of the school of systems thinking, and to pull these interconnected aspects into the web of contemporary analytical psychology, by proposing what I call the Elliptical Dialogue.

Image 2

### The Elliptical Dialogue



The Elliptical Dialogue is a form for analytical clinical interaction and in that context contains both intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences.

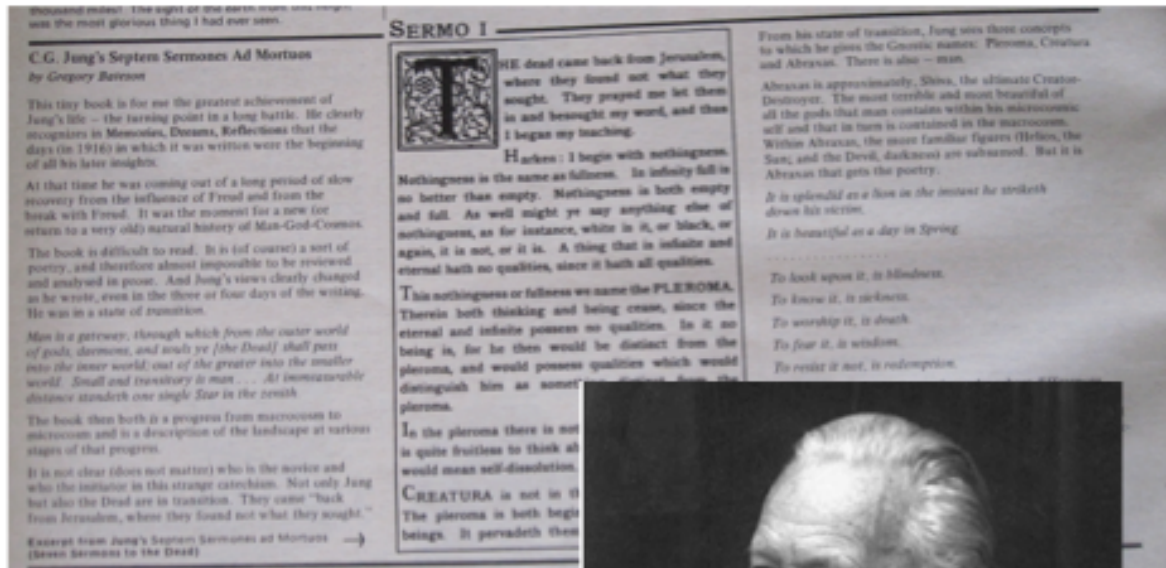
If you look up the word **ellipse** or the word **ellipsis** in a dictionary you will find that it is grounded in different perspectives, including mathematics, geometry and writing. In all three cases the word originates from the Greek *élleipsis*.

I will focus on the ellipse as a geometrical form that is eccentric and has two centres – each at one end of a balanced, rounded oval-shaped form. In the Elliptical Dialogue, each centre, each participating individual, has its own internal (intrapsychic) dialogue and is at the same time in dialogue with the other centre. This means that, in the analytical context, three parallel dialogues are taking place at the same time: two 'internal' ones, coloured red, and an outer or interpersonal one, coloured green. All three must be contained within the wholeness of the analytical process, the blue frame. I will later illustrate the Elliptical Dialogue with the use of two dream images and link these to my own reflections of the psychoanalytical work that my analysand, Björn, and I were engaged in.

In the concluding section I will discuss some of the ways in which Jungian Psychoanalysis could work with the Elliptical Dialogue.

## THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Images 3 a, b, c.



Gregory Bateson  
1904 – 1980

Mind and Nature – a Necessary Unity 1979

Angels Fear – Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred with Mary Catherine Bateson 1987

### Image 3a

Let us now see how this form of the Elliptical Dialogue fits into the Borderland of Jung and Gregory Bateson. When I studied systems theory and family therapy in the 1980s, Bateson was important because of his approach to relationships.

Bateson was born in England in 1904 and died in 1980 in California, which meant that he was a generation younger than Jung. He came from an academic family and his father William Bateson, a famous biologist, was the world's first professor of genetics. Gregory Bateson had an interdisciplinary approach and as an anthropologist he was interested in

how living things were connected. For example, he studied Bali Culture together with his first wife Margaret Mead, communication in families when living in California, how dolphins interacted and how thinking was done (epistemology).

### Image 3b

Bateson believed that we live in a world that is only made up of relationships. 'Patterns that connect' is a key metaphor in Bateson's work. In one of his lectures he says: "You have probably thought that you have five fingers. (...)What is important is not five but four relations between the fingers" ( N. Bateson, 2011).

But for me there was something lacking in this systemic approach – and that was the individual concept of the Unknown, the Unconscious and the territory of dreams, symbols and myths. So I was really thrilled when I discovered that the link between Bateson and Jung was 'Septem Sermones ad Mortuos, or Seven Sermons to The Dead'. This was a turning point both in my professional development and in my personal life.

'Septem Sermones...' was introduced to Bateson by Jungian analyst Jane Wheelwright in the 1960s. Bateson read the text and later reported that he was profoundly influenced by it.

Jung wrote Septem Sermones in January and February of 1916. He was then 40-years-old and felt compelled from within to formulate and express what his inner teacher Philemon might have said. This explains why this peculiar language came into being. The Dead came back from Jerusalem, unable to find what they were looking for. They were the voices of the Unanswered, Unresolved and Unredeemed. One can think of them as Unindividuated souls coming back to the living world for transformation in order to fulfil their individuation journey so that they can finally find peace. Now we can read this text again in *Scrutinies*, in *The Red Book*, where the dialogue between Jung's "I" and Philemon gives it an extra dimension.

Bateson's response to the text was **both aesthetic and theoretical**, and gave him a starting point for his Theory of Mind.

In the review (S. Brand, ed., 1974, 1980), he wrote, and I quote:

“C.G. Jung’s  
SEPTEM SERMONES AD MORTUOS  
by Gregory Bateson

**This tiny book is for me the greatest achievement of Jung’s life---**the turning point in a long battle. He clearly recognises in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* that the days (in 1916) in which it was written were the beginning of all his later insights.

At that time he was coming out of a long period of slow recovery from the influence of Freud and from the break with Freud. It was the moment for a new (or return to a very old) natural history of Man-God-Cosmos.

The book is difficult to read. **It is (of course) a sort of poetry and therefore almost impossible to be reviewed and analysed in prose. And Jung’s views clearly changed as he wrote, even in the three or four days of the writing. He was in a state of *transition*.**

*Man is a gateway, thorough which from the outer world of gods, daemons, and souls ye (the Dead) shall pass into the inner world; out of the greater into the smaller world. Small and transitory is man... At immensurable distance standeth one singel Star at the zenith.*

**The book then both is a progress from macrocosm to microcosm and is a description of the landscape at various stages at that progress.**

It is not clear (does not matter) who is the novice and who the initiator in this strange catechism. **Not only Jung but also the Dead are in transition.** They came “back from Jerusalem, where they found not what they sought.”

**From his state of transition, Jung sees three concepts to which he gives the Gnostic names: Pleroma, Creatura and Abraxas. There is also – man.**

Abraxas is approximately, Shiva, the ultimate Creator – Destroyer. The most terrible and most beautiful of all the gods that man contains within his microcosmic self and that in turn is contained in the macrocosm. Within Abraxas, the more familiar figures (Helios, the Sun; and the Devil, darkness) are subsumed. But it is Abraxas that gets the poetry.

*It is splendid as a lion in the instant he  
strikeeth down his victim*

*It is beautiful as a day in Spring.*

.....

*To look upon it, is blindness.*

*To know it, is sickness.*

*To worship it, is death.*

*To fear it, is wisdom.*

*To resist it not, is redemption.*

All this is within *creatura*, the realm where differences, distinctions, and ideas hold sway. The ground out of which *creatura* looms as figure (in the language of Gestalt theory) is *pleroma*—the totally unconceived and unstructured realm about which nothing can be said or thought because to say anything is to create distinction. Call it "void" or "fullness," it is still older and deeper than that first distinction by which *creatura* comes into recognition and therefore being.

**The book is exasperating, profound and beautiful."**

### Image 3c

The following are the main points and indicate how Bateson used the text in his Theory of Mind, as he presents it in *Mind and Nature* and in *Angels Fear Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*:

- **the pattern that connects is a metapattern.** He connected **epistemology** (how thinking is done, how we know what we know) **and ontology** (our nature of being), which resulted in a starting point for his theory of mind. **The starting point is in the *interface* between Pleroma, the crudely domain governed only by forces and impacts and Creatura, a domain governed by distinctions and differences. This allowed him to step out of the cartesian dichotomy, from either-or to both-and.**
- **the map is not the territory.** The interface between Creatura and Pleroma becomes a pathway and a bridge for messages.
- **a difference that makes a difference is a difference over time and is change.** In Jungian analytical understanding, this condition is needed for *principium individuationis*, the process of individuation.
- relationship is always a product of double description and this **double view is the relationship.** Think of Bateson's hand metaphor.

Both Jung, and towards the end of his life, Bateson, created maps of knowledge that in my view can give meaning to our theoretical and clinical concepts of today. They both did that out of the profound archetypal poetic rhythm of *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*.

I will now illustrate these maps of knowledge by looking at the two dream images that Björn brought into our analytical work. I will connect these dream images and the work that accompanied them with the Elliptical Dialogue.

## THE CLINICAL CONTEXT



Image 4



Rottweiler

When Björn walked to my practice he was not alone, but brought this image with him. He wanted to understand why this dream image kept haunting him. He told me:

"I'm standing in a garden, in the sunlight and it's daytime. I am holding the Rottweiler dog close to me, I can even feel his cheek next to mine and his breath. It's an exhausting **and fearful** position to be in. And the Rottweiler says in a distinct voice: 'If you only stand still, nothing will happen...'"

Björn was terrified and wanted to know the meaning of this dream – Now! But how could I stay close to him and at the same time hold the position of not making a prompt deliverance of **the** interpretation? Or, to put it differently, how could I keep our elliptical dialogue contained and secure our relationship? I think I began by asking him when he had this dream, and I also entered into the dream image by asking him what he could

**see in the words he used** when he related the dream. **'What do you see in the word fearful?'**

He told the story of his childhood and youth. He had been punished by his father and his mother found it difficult to create a stable and secure base for her children. He described her as "a neurotic bundle of nerves" and said that he "grew up without a father or a mother." If Björn became too enthusiastic about something he was put into a dark wardrobe, alone. This was his primal experience of fear. In my inner dialogue I realised that I had to stay close to what 'fearful' meant for Björn, from different perspectives. I also think that I said something about him looking around my practice to see whether this could be a safe place and space for him, where he could share his past and present fear with me.

Language as words, gaze and body expression is the connecting tool that we humans use to try to understand inner and outer reality. Words are emotional and carry feelings that we can experience in our bodies. Language is also the tool for connecting different worlds, different realities and holding the tension between opposites. The act of talking, using words, is something more than giving information; it is the self's way of expressing itself. In other words, through talking, a person searches for the metaphors that best *express* the self.

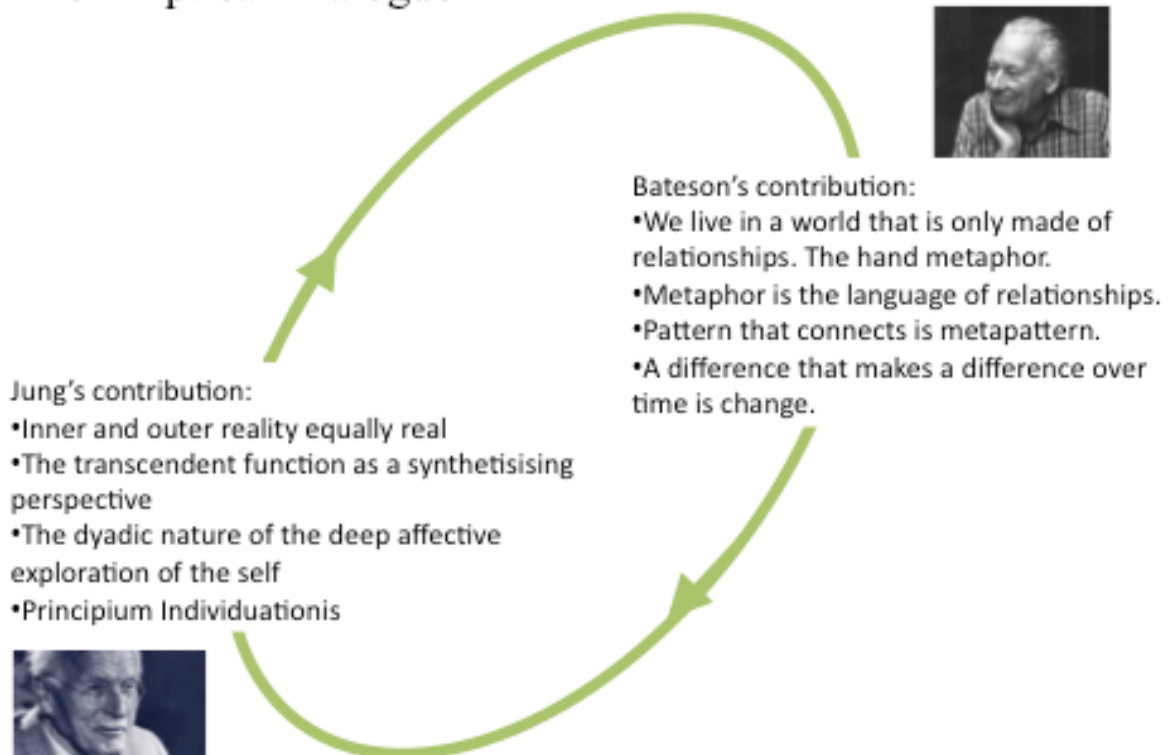
In *Psychological Types* CW 6 § 745, Jung wrote about the inner image: ..."The interpretation of its meaning therefore, can start neither from the conscious alone nor from the unconscious alone, but from their reciprocal relationship."

This borderland is the realm where it is possible to create distinctions within the reciprocal relationship.

So, with this dream image as a starting point, let us now move to a level of the elliptical dialogue where we can reflect on the following question: What do Bateson and Jung contribute to the Elliptical Dialogue?

Image 5

## The Elliptical Dialogue



Translated from the clinical situation from Jung's point of view, inner and outer reality is equally real. I tried to hold the Rottweiler image with its past and present fears and connect it to our analytical relationship, with the image as a key to the process. It is important to see that this image points towards a wider perspective of individuation, and that in a sense the Rottweiler comes from the cosmic soup that is the fullness and the nothingness of the inner Pleroma, from the psychoid realm, and creates the first difference and striving towards distinctiveness, or towards *principium individuationis* in *Creatura*, as it forms itself in Björn's life journey now that he is eighty years of age.

Translated from the clinical situation from Bateson's view, the Rottweiler image can be regarded as a pattern that connects to a metapattern of 'fearful' relationships at all levels, which in my analytical understanding points towards the polarities of fear and security as central themes in our elliptical dialogue. I had to be careful and at the same time create a difference that made a difference. The first step was to stay close to the word 'fearful' in all its dimensions.

Holding the conjunction tension between fear and security was easier said than done in the relationship between Björn and myself. It meant holding different aspects of meaning, different aspects of inner and outer psychic reality and different aspects of seeing in balance. The next clinical image is meant to illustrate a moment when there was too much difference so that our Elliptical Dialogue broke down.

## Image 6



Father Murder or A Fairy Tale, Just A Fairy Tale

When Björn brought me this image he was extremely excited! Like an eight-year-old boy. Our analytical work was also at a vulnerable stage. He was so excited that I felt overwhelmed by his emotional reaction. Physically I pulled back and created a distance between us. But he expected a more joyful, confirming reaction from me than I was capable of providing. He instinctively noticed my cooler response and, for him, this meant rejection, refusal and punishment at a deeper level. I became the punishing father

who threw him into the wardrobe. This became a turning point in our analytical relationship. It is a condensed image of different metaphors that facilitates communication in a spectrum of possibilities. One interpretation is that he liberates himself from the personal father complex to connect with the archetypal dimension that can be symbolised by the title both *Father Murder* and a Fairy Tale, *Just a Fairy Tale*.

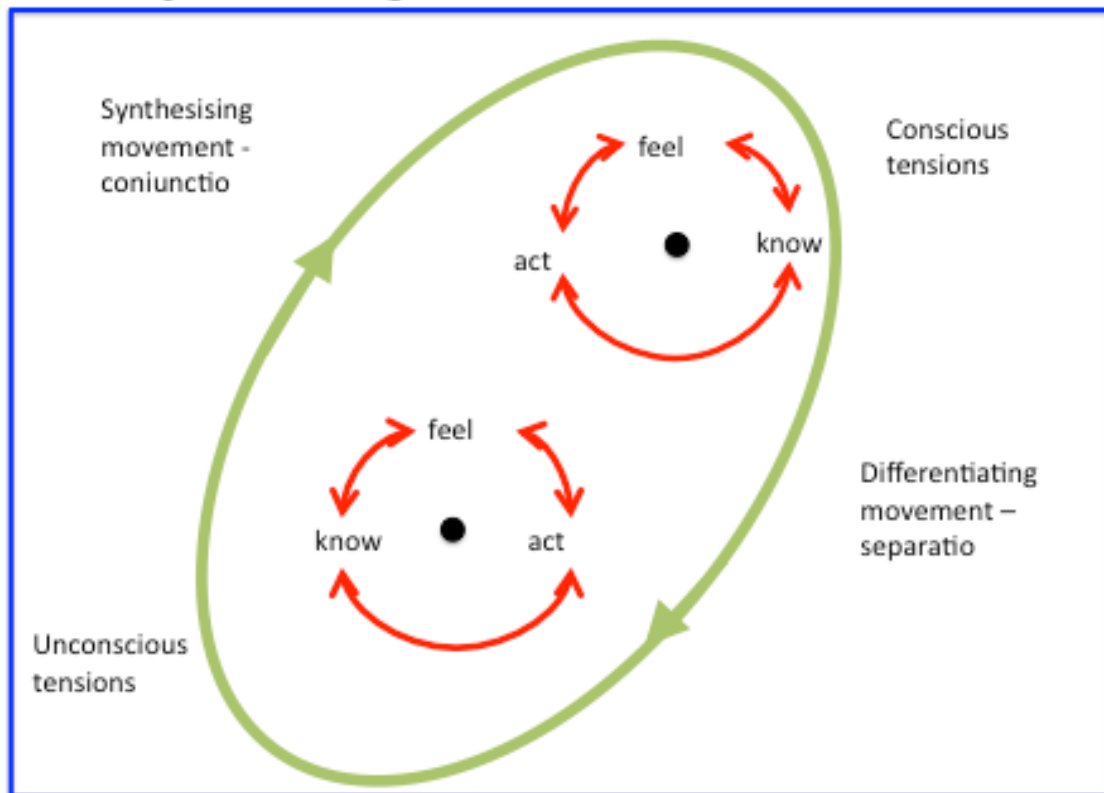
But Björn when showing me the image was an eight-year-old boy and I did not confirm him in the way that his inner making of differences wanted. I think I saw both the eight-year-old boy and the eighty-year-old man before me, which was my own way of making a difference of the situation.

I can imagine that in Björn's own 'inner' circular dialogue he felt rejected and was plummeted back into the pain he so often felt as a child. In other words, the 'outer' elliptical dialogue broke down. I noticed what happened and he could also put his painful experience into words and had to react. He accused me of being cold and too much of an analytical fundamentalist! So during this period we had some intense experiences together where he talked to me as though I was his father. He spoke from his eight-year-old boy. Our internal dialogues was sometimes really Red Hot! When I asked him at the end of such a session how he felt inside, he said that he felt fine and thanked me for being there with him. I remember being quite surprised, but gradually learned to be utterly attentive in an active listening position. I think that this position kept our 'outer' elliptical dialogue going, without the need for words.

The final images that I am going to show you represents the Elliptical Dialogue as it can be assimilated into Analytical Psychology.

## Image 7

## The Elliptical Dialogue



The internal, intrapsychic, red 'inner' process partly **serves to conserve the person's integrity** but also **serves as a basis for the person's meaningful expansion of sensing, understanding and being.**

The condition necessary for this expansion is the connection of the red 'inner' process with an ongoing, intrapersonal, green 'outer' process of exchange which occurs when one takes part in an analytical relationship. All three must be contained within the blue frame of the analytical process.

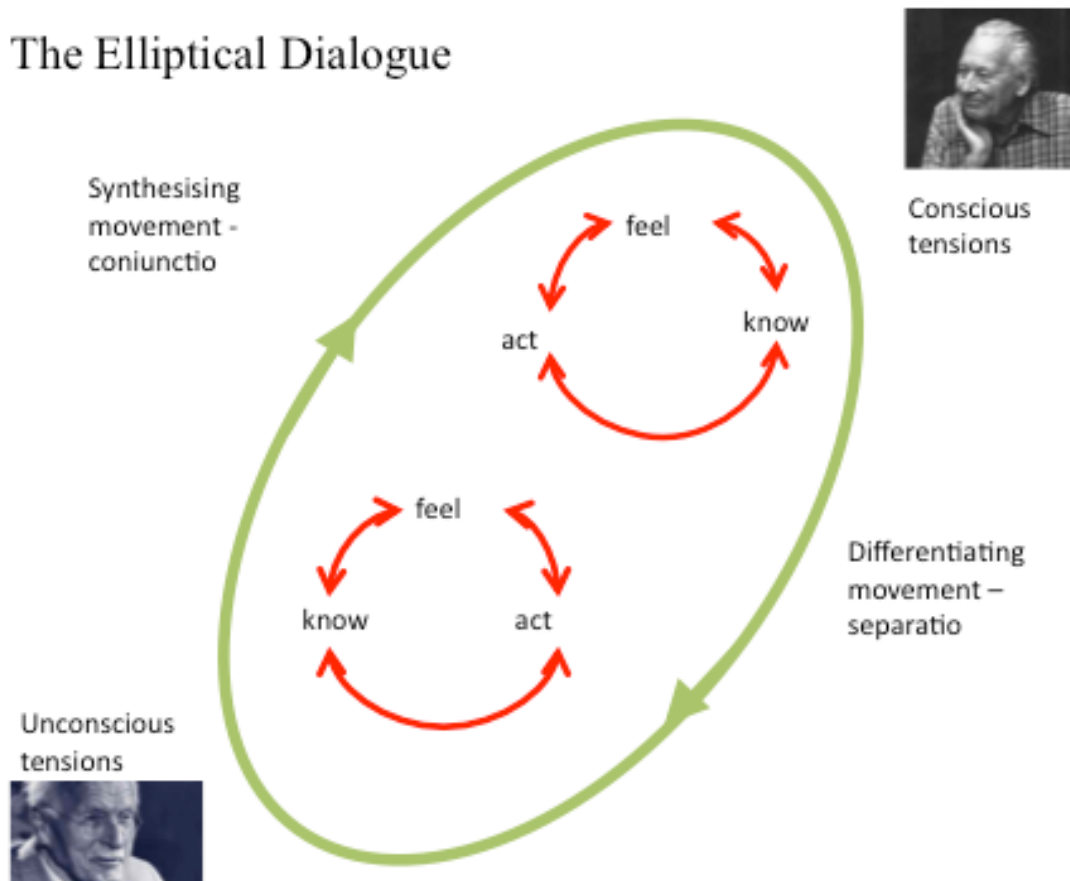
The dyadic nature of this deep affective exploration of the self was noted by Jung's (1946) suggestion that the analyst must go to the limit of his own subjective possibilities, otherwise the patient will be unable to follow suit. Part of the 'inner' talk is about **what** the meaningful content of the 'outer' talk is and **how** this 'outer' talk can best be performed. Here I want to stress the importance **of what words and language to use in order to moderate the space between the red and green processes.**

Analytical dialogue needs pauses so that I as centre can think about my red inner 'talk' and our green outer dialogue. Dialogues then need to be **slow enough** to allow the mind and the psyche to select words that are connected to feelings, and to find the words that can express that attachment. So that an act of recognition and mutual meeting of minds takes place in which **words and thoughts come to symbolize experience** instead of substitute for it. When I talked to Björn I tried to follow his rhythm without losing my own. I used **breathing** as a metaphor so that I could become more aware of following the speed and shifts in his listening, thinking and talking. I think that these ideas are an important basis for clinical analytical work and the way we use our words (come into being) in the elliptical dialogue. So let's shift the word difference to the more everyday word '**unusual**'. If people are exposed to the usual they tend to stay the same. If they meet something unusual, this might induce a change. If the new they meet is very (too) unusual, they close up in order to avoid being inspired and in order to keep and conserve their **integrity**. Therefore, what we analysts should strive for is to provide a language that is unusual but not too unusual in the ongoing elliptical dialogue.

When I stayed attentive and vigilantly listened to Björn's words when he told me about how he experienced his father, as though I was his father, and then towards the end of each session asked about his feelings, at that very moment, and he answered 'good and thank you for listening', I made the understanding in my inner dialogue with myself that we were engaged in an unusual but not too unusual elliptical dialogue.

Image 8

## The Elliptical Dialogue



### CONCLUSION

Jung constantly worked with different aspects of communication and relationship in the borderland of the human soul. From *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos* (1916) at the age of 40, to 'The Transcendent Function' (1916/1958) and his own model of the transference known as *the marriage quarternio* described in 'The Psychology of the Transference', (1945), Jung was then 70-years-old.

In this presentation, I have connected some of the aspects from Jung's *Septem Sermones* and how Gregory Bateson used them in his Theory of Mind.

Also from the writings of Jung, we can think of him as a forerunner to the school of Systems Theory. Relevant for today's research where 'mutual regulation of affect between the patient and the therapist' is stressed. (Fosha 2009, Lech 2012).



I have called the clinical model from the borderland between Analytical Psychology and Systems Theory - the Elliptical Dialogue.

Its main perspectives are that it is eccentric, i.e. it has two centres. The dialogue is intended to address both the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes. It also **underlines the consciousness of language and communication** in different forms within the ellipse. And it takes into account the Jungian psychoanalytical three rhythm movement in the form of the elliptical movement that emerges from the relationship between the two people as two centres.

- the separating and differentiating movement. That is the ground for individuation that was first addressed by Jung in *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*.
- the synthesising assimilating movement when shadow and complexes become more and more assimilated into the new fabric of the personality.
- the connection to the archetypal world of the collective and personal unknown. That third movement points to a spiritual level in the individuation process. Here Jungian psychology offers words and language for numinous, spiritual and mysterious, unknown levels that come into being when the “transcendent function” is constellated.

All these three movements are ongoing in different dimensions of the conscious and unconscious language within ourselves and in our relationships.

If you wish, you can also form an ellipse with the help of the relationship in the Borderland between your five fingers.

Thank you for listening!

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