

Secret Agonies in Analytic Communities: Unbearable Countertransference

Pamela Power

Abstract

Working and living in a closely knit analytic community produces unusual stress, unbearable feeling states, and difficulty finding an analysis not contaminated by lineages and family connections. This paper is a personal story about problems encountered in the search for a "good, clean analysis."

Keywords

Countertransference, analytic community, contaminated analysis, unbearable feelings.

My first Jungian analysis began when I was an undergraduate at UCLA and lasted for about seven years. My second analysis was with one of the founding members of the Los Angeles Jung Society. When my husband was looking for an analyst, I assured him it would not be a problem if he were to see my analyst; furthermore, that analyst did not see it as a problem either. I paid a price for my naiveté when vitality drained out of my analysis shortly after my husband began to see him.

By then I had come to know many analyst members of the LA group from lectures and seminars. When my second analyst became too ill to work, I could not find an analyst who either interested me or who was not part of a contaminated network of loyalties and lineages with which I was by now all too familiar. I felt an urgency to get a "good, clean analysis." I had met an analyst from New York who greatly interested me, and I wrote to him of my desire to find a way to be in analysis with him. He wrote back suggesting instead the names of two analysts in Los Angeles. One analyst he suggested had been the control analyst for my first analyst during his training. The other suggested analyst had been on the certifying board for my first analyst; and to complete the complication, I had been the control case.

I beseeched the New York analyst again with a long letter that included

Pamela J. Power, Ph.D., is a Jungian analyst and clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Monica. She is the past clinic director and current co-director of training at the C. G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles. Her recent articles are: "Death of the Analyst," Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice, 2005, and "A New Dog-Image," Psychological Perspectives, 2004. This is one of four papers presented by a panel held at the North American Conference of Jungian Analysts & Candidates, San Francisco, October 26-29, 2006.

dreams which, I brazenly stated, “only he could understand.” He relented and agreed to see me. For five glorious years I had an analysis with someone who knew little of the LA scene, the history, and the *personae dramatis*. I traveled to New York and otherwise conducted the analysis by phone sessions and correspondence.

Imagine my delight and horror when this New York analyst during one of our weekly phone sessions announced that he had fallen in love with a woman who lived in Los Angeles and was moving to LA that very summer. An initial reaction was: he fell in love with me and I didn’t even know it? I was extremely pleased he was moving close enough for regular face-to-face sessions, especially as I was, at that point, considering applying to the training program. However, friends, colleagues, and relatives were soon at his new house, and once again I was immersed in the contaminated and convoluted network of the LA Jungian community.

I adjusted to the situation following an old pattern of accepting things as they were and minimizing any feelings that would put me into conflict.

An odd footnote to this story is that within two years of when the NY analyst recommended those two LA analysts, both died. Those of you heard my presentation last year in Chicago will appreciate the difficulties I spared myself.

As an advanced candidate in training, I decided to do a portion of my control work with another founding member of the LA group, the only one still alive. As he was now quite old, I wanted to experience his Jungian wisdom before he passed away.

Several sessions into my control work a pattern emerged. During a good portion of each meeting I was subjected to vicious excoriations of my NY analyst, now transplanted to LA. A number of charged issues were brought up on a regular basis. I found his rancor painful, sad, and at times unbearable. Session after session I sat through a diatribe. At times I attempted to steer him away from the topic or break in with a question that would shift him out of his complex. Sometimes my tactics would work, sometimes not. He never referred to him as “your analyst.” I said nothing, but I knew very well that he knew.

One day he worked himself into a frenzy and with great emotion announced: “You know what he is? He is an anchorite!” I stared dumb-faced as he made this dramatic pronouncement. Then I could hardly wait to get home to look up the word in my dictionary.

These disturbing invectives from my control analyst were balanced by grace and depth of feeling he brought to my control case material, so I did my best to tolerate the situation. I would marvel at his understanding and insight into my patient’s dreams. I would ask myself how a man could understand a woman’s psychology so well; it was a real eye-opener. I had a living experience of the anima: her wisdom and grace on the one hand, and her nastiness and bitterness when she feels hurt or shunned. I never told my analyst the terrible things my control analyst was saying about him. When my analyst inquired how things were going, I replied, “Very well, he is quite helpful with my case,” which was the truth.

But I was critical of my control analyst’s behavior. I heard that he was hurt by perceived rejections of friendship by my analyst. But still, I felt disillusioned by his inability to contain what I perceived to be old-age bitterness.

Several years after I was certified, a woman came to see me, referred by her previous analyst, who had retired and moved away from Los Angeles. She had

received only a couple of names, but mine was the one recommended to be the best fit. Still in shock about her analyst leaving, we met a few times before making a decision to work together. When she came for her next session, she began by saying she had mentioned to a friend that she was going into analysis with me, and her friend had responded by saying, "You'll go crazy if you work with her." The friend also said something negative about me of such a nature that my prospective analysand developed serious concerns; but she did not reveal to me what her friend said.

I was stunned by this exchange. Without knowing who or what was said, how could I address her feelings? My emotions were swirling around. My mind searched for sources of gossip and for people who might say something so bad about me that it would interfere with a new analytic relationship. The patient left saying she would think about the matter and see me the following week.

In distress I brought the matter to my own analyst at our session a few days later. I relayed what happened and he responded that this incident occurring at the beginning of an analysis was certainly not an auspicious sign! He said he thought that perhaps in spite of her former analyst's opinion, I might not be the right person for her. He suggested that this might be a kind of outer initial dream indicating that the work, perhaps any depth analysis, might indeed be crazy making for her and perhaps for me as well.

When the woman returned the following week, she was undecided and of mixed feelings. I "helped" her out by telling her that hearing negative information about me at such a tender stage in her decision-making process might not be the best way to begin an analysis, especially as she was dealing with the loss of her former analyst. I encouraged her to go to the other name on her list. She seemed relieved with this suggestion.

That was the end of that, or so I thought, although I remained internally shaken for some time. About a year later, a call came from the same woman saying she wanted a consultation with me. My curiosity and renewed desire to get to the bottom of what had happened and to hear finally what rumors or gossip had been said about me led me to give her an appointment.

When the woman arrived and began to talk, she made no mention of the "bad information" about me or of what had happened a year before, nor did I bring up the subject. Instead she told me how she went to work with the other analyst and it hadn't been satisfactory. Now she was again thinking about working with me. What did this mean, I wondered to myself, and what should I do? How could we engage in analytic work with that material underneath, unexplored, and unassimilated? Would it surface? Or worse, what if it didn't? Once again, I was full of mixed feelings. I did not discuss the matter with anyone. Instead, I decided to work with her and see where it would or wouldn't lead, for better or worse.

The analysis lasted for the next five or so years, and the "bad information" never was mentioned. For a few years, I thought it would eventually surface, but it didn't. The work moved to an issue having to do with a previously untouched mother wound that was preventing progress in relationships and career advancement. Then the analysis came to a natural conclusion and we terminated. I never learned what had been said to her about me those many years ago.

At the beginning of the analysis, the foremost challenge for me was “not knowing,” and holding my frustration and impulses to inquire or confront her. It never felt appropriate and I had to put myself into a state of mind that could tolerate an elephant in the room that wasn’t talked about. At first, it was crazy-making for me and a challenge to bear my countertransference.

At the time I was the clinic director and had regular contact with members of the community, especially the candidates and interns. I was well aware that all sorts of things were being said about me. I remember taking the MMPI. I took it many times; but I took it again during this time when I was studying for my psychology license. I pondered if I agreed or disagreed with the following statement in the test: “I know that people are talking about me.” If I were really truthful, I would have to say yes. But I knew that an affirmative answer would raise my paranoia scale and give me a more disturbed profile.

Before this, I hadn’t given much thought to the fact that analysts often are talked about with others outside the analytic relationship. However, back in the 1960’s I was part of a small group of UCLA undergrads and graduate students in the philosophy department who were all in Jungian analysis. We had individually and on recommendation from each other gone to the clinic at the Jung Institute. We would get together and talk about our analyses and Jungian psychology, along with philosophy, politics, and religion. We would share bits of information we knew about our analysts. It wasn’t malignant, just juicy curiosity. A male friend was seeing my analyst and we would discuss details about what the analyst said and how he interpreted our dreams. We laughed together. It was great fun, and I never thought about what those analysts might feel, knowing what we were doing.

There are many ways to understand my patient who had “secret information” about me: by withholding, was she being sadistic or triumphant over me? I never felt that in the room. I only felt the need of a troubled and confused individual trying desperately to get a “good, clean analysis.”

Initially, I wondered if my patient unconsciously was testing me. By being “helpful” the first time, perhaps I did not pass the test. So she came back for another try. Could I hold the knowledge of darkness, or, perhaps better expressed, could I hold the darkness of not knowing? Could I be abstinent with my curiosity and not gratify my narcissism or my need to know? Could I not ask what was behind the “last door” because in this particular story not asking was the right thing to do? Could I be “crazy” for her so she could find her way to sanity? Could she think the worst about me without activating my defensive narcissism? In short, could I be her analyst?

This question returns us to where I began: the difficulty of getting a good, clean analysis. I know how difficult it is even when you are not or never have been involved with the inner circle of a particular analytic community.

Participating deeply in a Jungian community has many sides: it facilitates kinship connections and creates a community based on values of living a life consciously related to psychic realities. It cultivates deep bonds and opportunities to work on the extraverted aspect of individuation, the relationship to our fellow humans. Another side of this sense of belonging: it is like being married to the mob. One becomes victim of and witness to the darkest aspects of human nature: unholy alliances, misuses of the transference, misuses of power, the conduct of

pseudo-analyses which are used as a defense against growth and development, and rank incompetence; in a word, all the dark sides of the collective unconscious. One is under constant pressure to revert to "basic assumption" functioning as a substitute for "work group" functioning in committees, in friendships, and in the analytic couple.

I do not hold myself as an exception to any of these pitfalls. I have succumbed to one or another and will again, no doubt. I have been close enough to know the shadow of our Jungian community from the inside out. But my empathy and compassion for these difficulties derive from that experience.

On several occasions, I would come to a session with my NY analyst and have my own fit about how this or that group or person was behaving at the institute, and how unbearable it was. He would hear me out completely and then say, "You are cursing what the light reveals." He often spoke of the function of a conscious attitude toward oneself and others. He would say that being an analyst requires an ever-growing objective attitude toward the psyche; for only then does one have a chance of making conscious and ethical decisions without being moralistic.

My critical attitude toward my former control analyst derived from not adequately appreciating the challenges and tasks of the aging analyst. I couldn't see how devastating it might have been for him. He had been instrumental in bringing Jung's psychology to Los Angeles, then felt replaced by this interloper from New York. As I get older, I wonder how I will handle feelings of being overlooked, discarded, or replaced by some "new kid on the block." I don't know how I will handle my emotions or narcissism when I am not chosen, no longer talked about, or considered passé. I hope I can handle it better than my control analyst did, but I don't know. I do know that my feeling about his diatribes finds a different place in my psyche now than many years ago.

Whether I think of my involvement with this community as being married to the mob or living in the "heart of darkness," I also consider it an unparalleled opportunity to experience and relate to the objective psyche in vivo, not as I would have it be, but how it actually is. It is a constant challenge for me to tolerate more than I think I can and certainly more than I want to. I think it should get easier as I develop and as I age; but my experience is that I become more, not less, sensitive to the difficulties and unbearable feeling states stirred up by the institutional life in an analytic community.

