

C. G. JUNG'S RED BOOK: ITS MESSAGE FIVE YEARS LATER



The *Red Book* in its secure traveling crate, moments before beginning its public life.

Photo: Dr. Stephen A. Martin

I am writing this inaugural blog post for the *Philadelphia Association of Jungian Analysts* exactly five years to the day after the publication of C. G. Jung's *Red Book* on October 7, 2009. The Philemon Foundation that I co-founded in 2003 funded its publication. This groundbreaking and legendary chronicle of Jung's inner

journey is the “esoteric”, or inner, substance behind Jung’s “exoteric”, or scientific, model of the psyche that fills over twenty imposing black bound volumes of his *Collected Works*. In contrast to their sober presentation, the *Red Book* is visually stunning; in contrast to their extraordinary word count in eminently readable type separated into sensible volume headings, the *Red Book* is an organic artwork of unsurpassed calligraphic and pictorial beauty. Jung’s many mysterious paintings complement his finely wrought hand written text in a fashion that rivals any manuscript produced by the most gifted of scribes in a medieval monastic scriptorium.

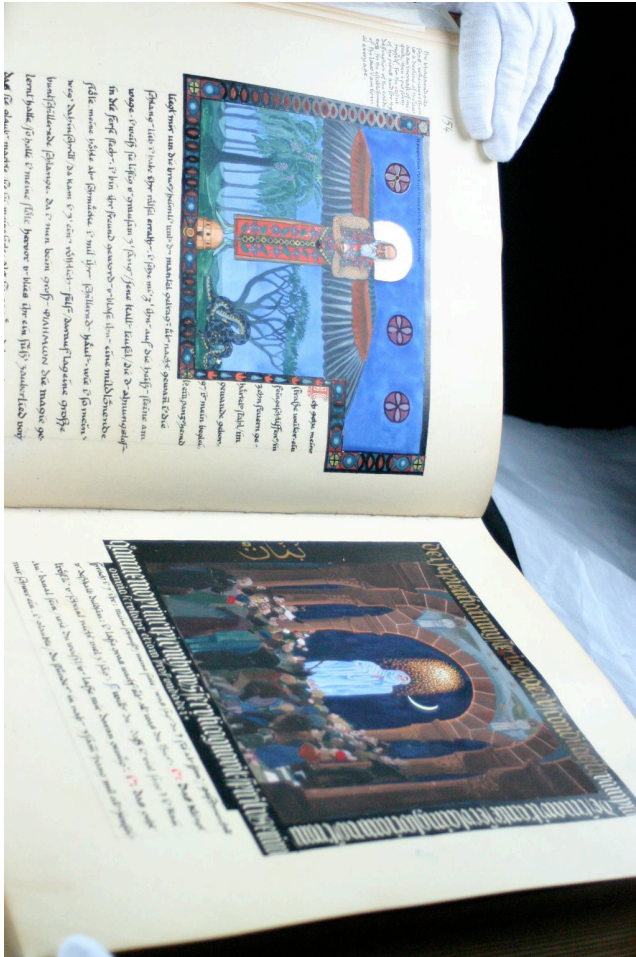


A page from the *Red Book* being scanned in Zurich, November 2007: Photo: Dr. Stephen A. Martin

These works belong together; Jung the physician-scholar and Jung the artist-sage; the black and the red, the *nigredo* and the *rubedo*, like the beginning and end that form the complete alchemical work, Jung's metaphor for individuation, the process of becoming whole.

There is no mistaking that the *Red Book* was welcomed heartily; over 150,000 copies of this expensive, ten pound book have been sold in almost a dozen languages, the most, as might be expected, in English because we Americans have always been Jung's greatest fans. Lauded by press worldwide, the *Red Book* was the cover article for the *Sunday New York Times Magazine* on September 20, 2009, entitled *The Holy Grail of the Unconscious* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/magazine/20jung-t.html?pagewanted=10&r=0>). For a time it was also the focus of erudite exegesis in essay and webinar by some of my Jungian colleagues, who discussed its historical roots, its place in the development of Jungian theory, how it reflected Jung's personal psychology and its possible symbolic meanings.

Given the powerful emotional response to the *Red Book's* publication, it is surprising that not as many colleagues and still fewer lay readers, availed themselves of these printed, posted and videoed forays into the deeper regions of the volume's hidden secrets. Yet the book demands to be owned and I have long lost count of how many tell me with unalloyed pleasure that this fantastic work of art and soul has pride of place in their homes. People seem to need to own it as if it were some kind of psycho-spiritual talisman that bestows deep wellbeing.



Jung's painting of Philemon, his inner guide. Photo: Dr. Stephen A. Martin

With great curiosity I have followed the book and its audience, watching as fewer articles and essays appeared over time and seeing the conversation recede into the background to the point where the following seems to be the case: Although recognized the world over as one of the most significant and beautiful revelations of personal transformation we are fortunate to have, and despite efforts to make it more accessible to everyone, active interest in the *Red Book* and its contents has diminished significantly. What's going on? Why do most people who

proudly own copies admit, somewhat sheepishly, that they have not been able to completely read it let alone grasp its arcane content and fundamental message?

The explanation for this state of affairs seems straightforward: the *Red Book* is a staggeringly difficult book to understand; its psychological and emotional density, its symbolic obscurity and atavistic style, its private passion and coded language and its beautiful but enigmatic illuminations simply overwhelm (many of Jung's paintings are not illustrations of the text but seem to be a kind of deeply meaningful but hidden parallel narrative to the content of the *Red Book*). Perhaps, if we were more classically educated it might be easier, but little help seems to have come from Europe where that is more the case than here in the States. Perhaps headway will be made with the publication of a smaller sized *Reader's Edition* (weighing in at a more manageable one pound ten ounces and having a faux leather cover and feel in the hand not dissimilar to popular copies of the Bible), a text of the *Red Book* that can now at least be read without a lectern. What are we to do with the fact that the book confronts the reader with its daunting opacity? If this is the case, what is its true value to the non-specialist, to the regular reader other than the *Red Book* being extraordinarily beautiful, imaginally impressive, and carrying a kind of scriptural imperative?

The answer is deceptively simple but is actually quite profound. It was wisely given by the *Red Book's* editor and Philemon Foundation co-founder, Sonu Shamdasani, at the end of the article from the *Sunday New York Times Magazine*, an answer worth repeating: Sara Corbett, the article's author, poses the question:

“What about the rest of us, the people who aren’t Jungians, I wondered. Was there something in the Red Book for us? “Absolutely, there is a human story here,” Shamdasani said. “The basic message he’s sending is ‘Value your inner life.’”

Value your inner life. Perhaps, for most of us who might never greatly understand much about the content of the *Red Book*, merely its existence, is tangible reality, its magnificent testimony to one person’s commitment to his inner world, tells us that the inner life is possible, nay, it is essential for us all. *Value your inner life*; stay open to what is within, own it, paint it, imagine it, love it, suffer it through dream, fantasy, relationship, imagination, pain, smiles, tears and sighs; do whatever can be done to partner with it so that life’s depth and radiant fullness can happen. *Value your inner life*; none of us are Jung, most are not even Jungians, but there is a universe in each one of us from which meaning is born as it was for him. Hidden in that very big and imposing universe of a red book by this sage from Switzerland is the most essential, compelling and wondrous of messages: *Value your inner life.*

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A mandala painting from the *Red Book*. Photo: Dr. Stephen A. Martin

Links

The Holy Grail of the Unconscious: Sunday New York Times Magazine, September 20, 2009: <https://www.drstephenmartin.com/pdf/the-holy-grail-of-the-unconscious.pdf>

The Making of the Red Book: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIBQFSwX1UY>