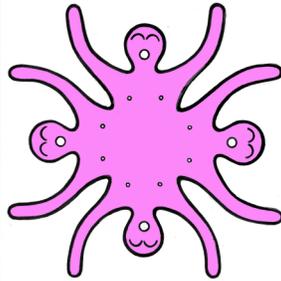




\* Approaches to Presentations and Workshops \*

**This Text Presents a Concept of:**



## **Extra-Ordinary Understanding**

### **Knowing Ordinary Life as Radically Complex**

In the largest sense, the concepts presented on this website are oriented toward enhanced understanding of complexity. The ‘application’ of these notions can be termed ‘practicing extra-ordinary understanding.’ We tend to know our selves and the world through an ordinary set of assumptions about ‘reality.’ Those assumptions necessarily reduce phenomena and feelings to more manageable, if often arbitrary, standards. Thus there is always some realm of unacknowledged, repressed, or vastly more complex potential knowledge about ‘how things are’ and why. Life—being a condition of embodied self-consciousness in mortal, emotionally intelligent, radically social, interminably variable entities—is always more than society can re-present to us. Being human is genuinely, inherently ‘extra-ordinary’ and thus involves an on-going struggle to be ‘fully inhabited.’ We are inevitably always ‘missing out’ on fascinating and meaningful aspects of our existence.

It thereby appears important to consider the practical value of occasionally disrupting our ordinary lives so as to ‘make openings’ for broader perspectives. In doing so, some more inclusive understanding of self, others, and world might result that can enable people to live the intricacies of their lives and relationships more consciously, more complexly, more honestly and meaningfully—in short, to be more ‘present.’ However,

the relations between ordinary attitudes and extra-ordinary ones are necessarily 'troubled.' Some considerations for engaging the potential dialogue between these contrasting contexts for knowing are presented below.

## Why Embrace the Disruptions of Extra-Ordinary Awareness?

Why encourage people to venture beyond familiar identity and reality? Why question one's ordinary assumptions and expectations? Why suspend reflexive references, personal biases, and social standards while analyzing for non-linear causation and multi-faceted meaning? Why go to the trouble of embracing trouble as an important opportunity to know more about self and world?

Considering how much pressure society exerts upon individuals to conform to its standards, motive to seek extra-ordinary awareness is not common. There are times when people are 'called upon' to venture beyond the rules and become more questioning and inventive. This most often occurs in pursuit of a task that requires 'new thought' or new techniques to 'solve a problem.' Thus the questioning of ordinary assumptions that results is in effect sanctioned 'for the purpose of supporting the status quo.' Though invention and ingenuity bring social changes, these tend to support reductive, control-oriented expectations about 'how things are supposed to be.' When there is discomfort and trouble the response tends to focus upon 'fixing it.'

The sort of 'boundary crossing' involved in what is here termed extra-ordinary understanding is thus rather different from 'invention for the sake of more control.' Awareness that 'exceeds' the parameters of more ordinary social attitudes tends to transgress or 'violate' fundamental assumptions about what constitutes personal identity and socially defined reality. The perspectives of extra-ordinary understanding are not 'safe' to those of ordinary continuity. Yet most pre-modern cultures provided occasional contexts for some such 'collective deviance.' Contemporary society has largely dispensed with sanctioned confrontations between ordinary status and perspectives that reveal its limited representation of the complexities of self and world.

Remnants are evident in the eruptions of improper, disorderly or disjunctive behavior associated with events such as some rock concerts and carnival. But in so far as these are confined to the harmless status of 'entertainment' their effect upon ordinary perspectives is effectively nullified. Thus even when people do evade the grip of ordinary status, there is no social affirmation of their 'experience of being other.' There exists then a double conundrum in contemporary culture: the reflexive dominance of socially enforced reduction to ordinary status is not only seldom questioned, experience that exceeds it is 'officially' subordinated to an inferior condition of entertainment or fantasy. There is, in effect, only one 'real world' — that of ordinary reductions.

Nonetheless, a psychological need for a valid sense of self and world not confined by social reductions presumably persists. For individuals, addressing that need involves a move into uncertainty that can be particularly important when one's life seems stuck or insignificant. For societies in crisis because their structures are failing to accommodate to changing conditions, the venture beyond ordinary assumptions can be essential to adaptive survival. Social and political revolutions can be seen thusly as eruptions of chaotic forces that have not been acknowledged and accommodated by habitual social attitudes. Similarly, professions, institutions, and academic disciplines can be 'torn apart' by the emergence of new insights and concerns that the established order has resisted for too long. The restrictions that ordinary assumptions impose on our awareness can be literally disastrous. One such extreme example is pervasive racism and its potential for genocide. Another likely instance is the unchecked burning of fossil fuels and the likely effects of global climate change. Another way to think of this effect is that too much control or continuity for too long actually provokes disjunctive reactions. Ordinary reductions are both necessary and inevitably dangerous.

Thus, the questioning of the adequacy of ordinary attitudes can provide access to wisdom by deliberately attending to exceptional and contradictory aspects of feeling, thought, relationships, and other phenomena—wisdom here being a status of understanding that is 'more than ordinarily complex.' Thereby, to be wise is to be willing and able to 'think and feel beyond normal boundaries.' However difficult and confusing the resulting encounters might be, there are practical motives for transgressing our familiar definitions of self and reality in search of more inclusively reasonable understanding.

Given this seemingly valid motive, it remains reasonable to ask, "How does one apply knowing variously, thinking dialectically, or expressing mythically? Of what practical use in 'The Real World' are the extra-ordinary references of mythical logics and pluralized identities? What possible benefits can there be to revealing that "I" am not how I think I am, nor the world as society defines it? Isn't that just hopelessly confusing?" It seems only fair to respond to that final question affirmatively: To ordinary perspective, extra-ordinary or 'extra-social' perspective *is* 'hopelessly confusing.' Mythical logics and pluralized identities 'overwhelm' familiar references—that, it could be said, is the 'whole point.' Nonetheless, one's ordinary sense of self, one's familiar 'egoic identity' must 'take part' in engaging extra-ordinary perspective. It needs a motive to take such risks.

One such motive concerns the difficulties each of us encounters in attempting to 'become our individualized selves.' Attempts to act *as an individual*, or to be honest with one's self and others about motives, values, and desires, are often frustrated by

how social standards control thoughts and beliefs. To be individualized is to resist social conformity. Thus thinking and acting independently require some understanding of how society's reductions automatically shape our interpretations of phenomena—especially our identities and experience. If we are unaware of how social standards restrict our awareness then we are less able to judge the validity of those standards for our individual selves.

Normative standards are essential for social cohesion. But living only by normally reductive understanding greatly limits the potential complexities of awareness and abilities to adapt creatively to change—for both individuals and groups. When attended to seriously, 'knowing variously' and 'thinking mythically' open up the 'depths' of human experience in the phenomenal world to radically reflective consciousness. It enables us to see and accept our selves as intricately diversified, 'non-linear' entities. Archetypal analysis and symbolic action not only 'add meaning' to life—they can prove surprisingly useful in efforts to become one's complexly individualized self *in communication with* the complexities of others. A genuinely practical approach to 'living fully' involves much more than obsessive concerns with mechanistic efficiency and simply choosing between good or bad, correct or incorrect, real or unreal. Such effort necessarily involves 'embracing radical complexity.' There is an important 'dance' between ordinary reductions and extra-ordinary awareness. However . . .

### Ordinary Status Fears the Extra-Ordinary — Going to the Trouble of Knowing Differently

Moments of extra-ordinary awareness are not exactly uncommon. Experiences of 'altered states' of consciousness, moments of wonder or 'feeling at one with the world,' and a strange sense of 'being differently' occur for many people. These can be pleasant, exciting, or disturbing. People actively seek such experiences in activities like sports, the consumption of alcohol, sexual experience, and encounters with movies or art. However, deliberately engaging radically complex understanding involves more than 'safe entertainments' or even 'perverse indulgence.' Such complexity, taken on its own terms, tends to destabilize ordinary identity and reality by overtly subordinating them to a 'condition of being other.'

Ordinarily reductive attitudes will 'do most anything' to avoid *actually submitting* to a radically complex status of being *as having a pervasive significance*. One tactic engaged by ordinary identity to maintain its grip is to allow moments of asocial behavior, or 'getting into trouble,' that are either immediately regretted, derisively denigrated, quickly forgotten, or incorporated into a reactive 'rebel identity.' The rebel posture tends to assert its own reductive basis for selfhood *in reaction against* what it perceives as the repressive reductions of social standards. Thereby, it is not an extra-ordinary

status but a competing reductive one. ‘Successful’ revolutions tend to institute yet another set of order-obsessed social conditions. Rebel identity thrives on ‘having an enemy’ rather than practicing self-reflection and embracing complexities. This posture is related to a ‘socially heroic’ one in which people seek to ‘perfect’ society by changing its structures so as to be less repressive. Yet again, however, attempts to create utopias tend to do so by ‘eliminating disorder and trouble.’ Plato, after all, banned ‘the poets’ from his ‘Republic.’

Thus, ‘going to the trouble’ of honestly engaging the often-dizzying implications of extra-ordinarily unfamiliar and complex modes of awareness tends to be happen only as a ‘court of last resort.’ So long as ordinarily reductive identity and reality at least appear to be ‘working’ then what need can there be for the often troubling disruptions of mythical knowing and inclusive understanding? Only when ‘the bottom falls out’ or ‘the soul’s longing’ rebels against social convention, are people likely to ‘go to the trouble’ of engaging a ‘radically different view of things.’ Going to see the psychotherapist is one of the few contexts provided by contemporary society to even consider these dilemmas.

Yet even if one gets so far, there is still more trouble to be faced. Insights into the ‘hidden complexities’ of self, society, and world are not only difficult to attain but often seemingly impossible to live with. Trouble, Distress, Complexity, and Great Longing have no simple solutions—but is ‘being solved’ what these aspects of life are really about? Could these ‘disturbances’ be pressuring us because we have a need to embrace them ‘just as they are?’

The incorporation of extra-ordinary insights into the consciousness of more ordinary contexts requires an acceptance of ‘proceeding with out certainty.’ Such a move requires a sort of faith in human consciousness *as being more complex and resilient than ordinary attitudes indicate*. Society, in effect, needs our dependency upon it to exist. Thus it tends to urge us to repress our fears and anxieties, to ‘hold complexity at arm’s length’ and adhere to social reductions rather than our own intelligence and experience. Thereby, our habitual expectations—*which we maintain in order to maintain social order*—become the primary obstacle to expanding awareness. Those wishing to be practical about knowing self and world more complexly do well to contemplate the reported saying of St. Isaac of Syria:

**“Have more fear of habits than of enemies.”**

The perspectives explored on this web site indicate how concern with the multiplicities of mythic meaning and diversified identities are essential to creating genuinely pluralistic societies that foster individuality. Generating such social environments

requires deconstructing the reductive biases of habitual assumptions and behaviors. Repressive factors in social life would prefer we focused our dissatisfactions upon 'enemies' rather than reflect upon how social standards constrict our capacities for egalitarian relationships. And yet 'who' constitutes society? If one requires an enemy, one might as well look within. In the words of the cartoon character Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us"—or, that is, our attachment to the security of our habitual assumptions no matter what the 'cost.'

Methods of analysis from philosophy, psychology, and science, along with representational modes from art and myth are required to foster any effective reflection upon this 'struggle with and in the self.' Whatever the context of one's 'ordinary life,' there must be some potential for engaging in extra-ordinary expression of the underlying complexities of psyche and world. So long, that is, as people are willing to take practical measures to initiate and sustain the effort in the face of their own resistance, impulses to simply, and needs to control outcomes. Admittedly, even if one manifests such determination, it can still require a sort of 'double life.' It is naïve to think that others are necessarily willing to question the social basis of their identities. The pursuit of extra-ordinary understanding is not an ordinary activity.

Despite the rather 'fantastic' aspects of the tactics offered here, the approach can still be described as a pragmatic endeavor at resisting the reductive limitations of ordinary life's *seemingly* practical assumptions. And it can be applied in a variety of contexts. Simply practicing reflection upon how we use language in both reductive and non-reductive ways to express our thoughts and experience can radically enhance awareness. That examination can quickly reveal how much meaning we suppress by automatically privileging one aspect of a word's meanings in common usage. Habitual vocabularies tend to use a fraction of the words people actually know. Amplifying the potential or latent meanings in our language by 'posing different readings' or interpretations of familiar statements can provide actual experience of concurrently diversified extra-ordinary status. Our identities and realities are composed 'in and of language,' after all. Such practices can induce radically complex awareness of self, others, and world by exposing the symbolic actuality of the 'contradictory realities' that are ever-present in language. A summary of types of practices for inducing such consciousness is provided on the **Yogas of Alchemical Knowing** page on this website.

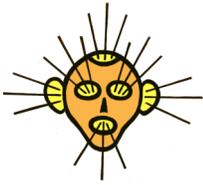
Such efforts involve the following qualities of 'thinking and feeling concurrency.'

## Five aspects of 'Doing Concurrency'



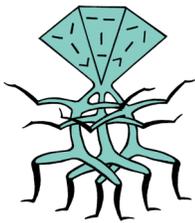
Analyzing without Judging

Thinking Through Multiple Points of Reference  
by Applying Archetypal Analysis to Amplify Rather than Reduce



## Knowing Radical Complexity

Engaging Both the Simple and the Complex  
by Relating Reductive and Non-Reductive Understandings



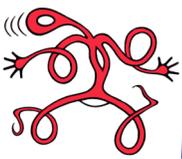
## Diversifying Presence

Paying Radical Attention  
by Experiencing Hidden Complexities Variously



## Enacting the Multiplicities of Meaning

Becoming Metaphorically Metamorphic  
by Making Artful Expressions that Precipitate Experiences of Concurrency



## Living the Extra-Ordinary Ordinary Life

Approaching Self, Relations, and Work as Mysteries to be Lived  
by Embracing Complementarity in Contrast, Contradiction, and Conflict

As noted, complex awareness can destabilize familiar values and beliefs. It is no simple matter to ‘act consciously out of concurrent being and inclusive understanding.’ Non-reductive understanding is not a transcendent solution to contradiction and conflict. It is understood here as ‘of value’ in so far as it is of ‘practical use’ in living more consciously, individually, and ‘thoroughly.’

For Further Comments on Mythical Knowing & Archetypal Analysis See  
Other texts on the **Presentations & Workshops** page

