

“THIS!”:
A Word on Repaying Our
“Debts of the Spirit”

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In 2007, I opened a book that had been recommended to me called *Religion and the Spiritual in Carl Jung* by Ann Belford Ulanov and read the first sentence: “Jung looked for the Spirit in all things, even in neurosis or psychosis.”¹ “What an extraordinary thought,” I said to myself with great curiosity, especially since a common predilection for religious folk is to quickly want to rid God from anything remotely dark or bleak such as we find in the experiences of neurosis and psychosis. I kept reading: numinous, meaning, archetype, psychoanalysis, object relations, Freud, primordial, psyche, the cross, Tillich, God. Though Jung and the basics of psychology were somewhat familiar to me, as was the exploration of religious categories even more so, I quickly noticed that I was not only responding to the ideas being put forth on the page, but I was connecting just as much to *the way* this person was synthesizing and expressing them. It was a fluid back and forth between psyche and spirit, the psychological and the religious, a testimony of faith in the capacities of both mind and God to show us the way forward, a perennial concern for the “so what?” factor of it all. I turned to the back cover: “Ann Belford Ulanov is the Christiane Brooks Johnson Professor of Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She has written extensively on Carl Jung and other issues that arise from the worlds of psychiatry and the spiritual.” From my religious and theological training, I knew well of Union Theological Seminary, but I was less familiar with Ann Ulanov. Who was this person and why had I not previously encountered her work in my graduate studies thus far? Despite this “extensive” writing on Jung and other subjects—a writing corpus which includes monographs, book chapters, and journal articles written over the course of such a distinguished career—why had this material on psyche and spirit not been introduced to me?

As I began making my way through the rest of that book on Jung, “THIS!” was the only thing I seemed to be able to articulate about the delight I took in what I was reading, what I was experiencing. In one of the few instances of stark clarity in my life, I quickly recognized—indeed, felt—that a true spark of sorts had been ignited in me. It was the kind of spark where we sense Something wants to come through, wishing to be heard. The sentiment is one of paradox: “This is entirely me. And it is entirely Other.” Either way, I knew I had been summoned.

The problem for me, at the time, however, was that I had just matriculated into another doctoral program some two thousand miles away from New York

1 Ann Ulanov, *Religion and the Spiritual in Carl Jung* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999), 1.

where Ulanov taught. After reading that initial book on Jung and religion, I continued to make my way through the rest of her books, many of which were written with her husband, Barry. This also proved problematic in that I began neglecting the work in the doctoral program where I was enrolled and it was not long before I dropped out to go do a CPE residency. It was during that time that I made two separate trips to New York to meet with Ulanov. I also applied to study with her at Union but was rejected. Several phone conversations also occurred where it seemed I had nothing more to say other than “*THIS! THIS!*” In short, two years after I read that first sentence, I finally was sitting at a table, taking notes in her class for a course towards my third masters degree. Four years later, I entered the doctoral program as her advisee. Eight years after reading, “Jung looked for the Spirit in all things, even in neurosis and psychosis,” I graduated with my PhD. While the institutional degrees look impressive hanging on the wall, I admit the greater sense of pride and accomplishment, for me, stems from having been a student of Ann Ulanov herself.

In one way or another, the contributors of this volume—all doctoral students of Ulanov—will have their own version of “*THIS!*” They each have their particular reasons, experiences, needs, and paths which led to their wanting to study the contours of both psyche and spirit with Ann Ulanov. Some colleagues, like myself, abandoned other doctoral programs to join Ulanov at Union. Some only applied to do doctoral study at Union because they could not imagine themselves anywhere else nor working with anyone else. Others first encountered Ulanov as part of their masters work at Union and wanted to continue what had also been ignited in them. Her students have become teachers and scholars in some of the most prestigious universities and seminaries across the country and around the world. They have become skilled and competent psychotherapists, chaplains, and ministers. They continue to bring serious consideration to the ways that psychological life and religious life work together and independently of one another. They all have something of Ann Ulanov they carry around inside themselves: a way of existing and being in the world that continually seeks deeper meaning, service, and aliveness inspired by their great teacher.

Though she continues in her work as scholar, writer, and psychotherapist, Ann Ulanov has decided to step away from the classroom lectern, the grading of papers, and the advising of masters and doctoral students after forty seven years of teaching at Union Theological Seminary. On the heels of such a distinguished academic career, it can make it difficult to know exactly what to say in a volume like this, which is dedicated to someone who has changed so many lives, in so many ways, for the better. Language seems to fall short in describing the actual experience of learning from her. Perhaps better to visualize it as the tectonic plates of psyche and spirit being moved, rearranged. One does not come out on the other side of studying with Ann Ulanov the same as one went into it. It is not just a matter of growing in mind but a transformation of heart and soul as well. As a mentor and advisor, she was always wont to say that the mastery of psychological theorists and their theories and theologians and their theologies is only as good as it changes and affects us. I think for all the students and advisees whose lives she has touched,

we could all personally relate how she has been this for us. In some ways, I still believe “*THIS!*” remains closer to the total experience of having crossed paths with Ann Ulanov and her work than other words of elegance I could possibly muster.

Nonetheless, we try. And we try here. Ann Ulanov once wrote, “We are not often given a chance in life to repay debts of the spirit to persons to whom we owe them. It is rare to be able to say, ‘Thank you,’ directly to such a person.”² Fortunately, for us, we have this chance now, and each of us, in our own way, offer our “debts of the spirit” to her.

2 Ibid., 183.