

What would Carl Jung tell you to do with your spreadsheet of life goals? Throw it away and embrace the feminine

January 29 2024, by Alette Lambert and George Ferns



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Current debates about gender have become [polarized](#). These divisive arguments tend to focus on narrowly defining "man" or "woman," rather

than considering archetypal underpinnings of the feminine and masculine. For psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung and post-Jungian thinkers, these concepts are crucial to understanding gender and wider cultural dynamics.

A Jungian perspective considers the feminine and masculine as concepts that are not specific to man or woman but germane to people of all genders. They are embedded in thousands of years of history, folklore and myth and their characteristics are [remarkably similar across time and cultures](#).

Jung's understanding, expanded on by [others](#) relates the feminine to mythical and spiritual dimensions such as the moon, soul, creativity, inwardness, darkness, chaos, intuition and (active) receptivity. A masculine energy is often associated with the sun, spirit, light, (immediate) action, aspiration and outwardness.

The feminine is [neglected](#) in patriarchal, neoliberal cultures that value rationality, action and ambition. We found this to be very much the case in a study of [15 young women starting out in their professional careers](#). These women set out their professional ideals in terms of upward momentum and ascension, speaking negatively of periods of stagnation and inaction. They appeared to apply linear, progressive reasoning to their work, for instance describing [career goals](#) as sequential "boxes to tick."

The women in our study also appeared to shun cyclical, [paradoxical thinking](#), which might entail, for example, embracing periods of slowness during which we experience boredom and ennui. These periods can open us up to spontaneous and unexpected possibilities.

The value of 'nothingness'

Adopting a feminine way of being encourages us to experience and embrace periods of inaction and depression, rather than continuously pursue upward momentum and productivity. This might seem to be the last thing we'd want in professional life, but that is not necessarily the case.

Renowned Jungian analyst Mary Louis von Franz [observes](#) how in many fairy tales there is "a long period of barrenness before the hero child is born." She reflects that in periods of depression and when nothing is happening, "an enormous amount of energy accumulates in the unconscious." But "nothingness" or being "unproductive" is not honored in a society that values action and (quick) results.

The women we spoke with reflected on the difficulty of embracing periods of slowness in discussions of motherhood, for example. When discussing their careers and lives in the longer term, they often spontaneously discussed motherhood as something they desired. One woman described her uterus as making her "baby crazy," explaining the sensation of a ticking clock: "I feel like the alligator in Peter Pan, the clock is in my belly."

But for these women, maternal desire was complicated by career ambitions. Rather than embracing the paradox and value of motherhood as a [meaningful journey with much to offer](#), most participants anxiously anticipated what they would have to "give up" in terms of their career.

The two were seen as in conflict, with early motherhood—an inward [period](#) of deep reflection—understood as undermining professional goals and work productivity. Many felt their employers were implicitly unsupportive of working mothers, not valuing the slow, deep process of intuitive learning that motherhood fosters, and offering little in the way of alternative frameworks to include or support their participation in the workplace.

Life in a spreadsheet

A feminine way of being also encourages "[both/and thinking](#)"—paradox and circularity that spark intuitive creativity. Such feminine energy embraces darkness, chaos, and spontaneous possibility. It seeks, as Jungian analyst Sylvia Perera [explains](#): "the potential of cleansing immersion in the darkness of the unknown." But embracing such darkness may seem out of the question in a society that lauds rationality. We are not, in short, encouraged to let life happen.

Most of us instead adopt linear, rational thinking that hinders feminine creativity. In our study, women used bureaucratic metaphors to describe their existential plans and future life events. They spoke of marriage, careers and having children in terms of "ticking boxes" and "to-do lists." For example, one woman described creating an Excel spreadsheet to organize her career goals, such as promotions and management aspirations, and life goals (detailing by when she needed to get married and buy a house).

Planning life events as though they are "goals" turns them into markers of success or failure on a linear course, rather than [rites of passage](#) in a potentially far more cyclical life. We might, as a result, pursue such "events" at all costs. And if we don't meet these markers, we might perceive that as "failure," missing out on an opportunity to undergo a process of reflection that could provide wisdom and insight into the human condition.

When rejected for a promotion, for example, we could take time to reflect on why the rejection happened and how we can deal with rejection more generally. Which emotions does it provoke in us and where do they originate? The loss of the promotion can, if we allow it, open a different path—and one that is perhaps better aligned with our genuine sense of self.

People of all genders should consider turning toward the feminine by embracing periods of stagnancy and depression as vital to their development. And we could all benefit from valuing cyclical, paradoxical thinking as part of our personal growth. This involves understanding which aspects of ourselves are foregrounded, and which are the "[shadowed](#)", unconscious parts of ourselves that we strongly deny as existing or reject, but that can significantly affect us nonetheless.

Truly asking whether we are rejecting the inner archetypal feminine (or masculine) is a good place to start. Friends are usually better at spotting our shadow characteristics than we are, and often even more effective is a skilled psychoanalyst.

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Citation: What would Carl Jung tell you to do with your spreadsheet of life goals? Throw it away and embrace the feminine (2024, January 29) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-carl-jung-spreadsheet-life-goals.html>

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