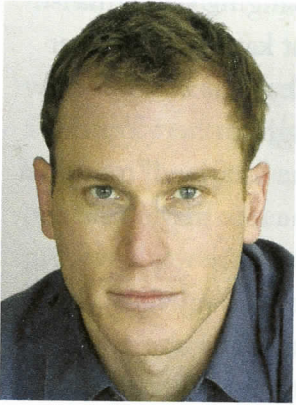


What Do You See When You Look at My facebook?

An essay on projection

Written by Micah Toub

Micah Toub was born in Wyoming, U.S.A., and grew up in Colorado. He attended McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, and graduated with a degree in English Literature. He has worked in New York City as a publicist and an editor. In 2002, he took a three-month road trip around North America and landed in Toronto. Toub is the author of *Growing Up Jung: Coming of Age as the Son of Two Shrinks*, and he writes a biweekly column on relationships from the male perspective for *The Globe and Mail*.



Before

If you knew that the future “love of your life” would decide whether or not to date you based on your current Facebook page, what, if anything, would you change and why? Be honest.

During

As you read, record at least two terms or phrases, attributed to Freud and Jung, that identify the unconscious state of humans. Explain the meaning of these terms or phrases, in your own words, to another student.

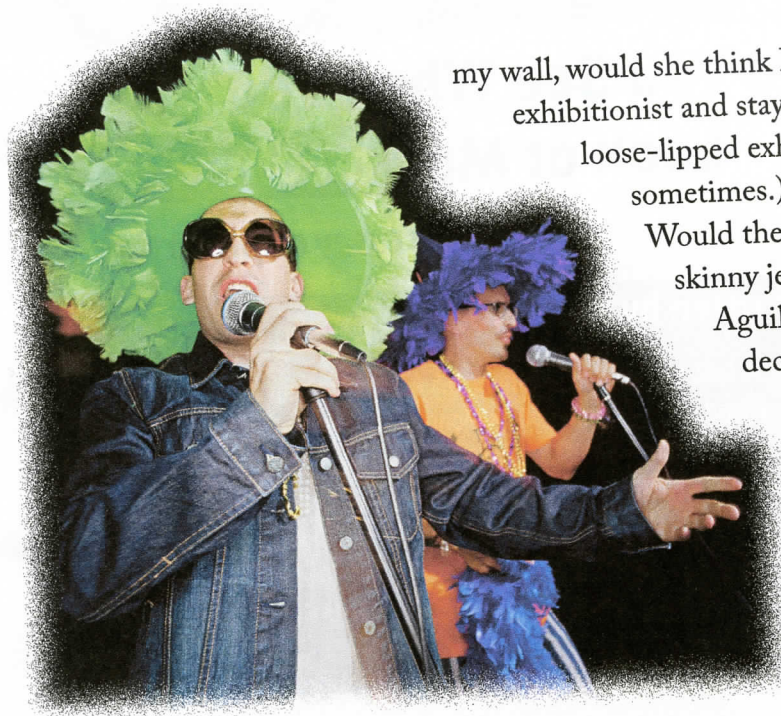
Tips

bête noire: black beast [in French]; the term is used to refer to a person, object, or abstract idea that is particularly disliked or avoided.

projection: the unconscious transfer of one's own desires or emotions to another person

This summer, I met someone at a party whom I liked right away. We just clicked. By the end of the night, we'd chatted a few times but before I could ask her for her phone number, she had left. I kicked myself for not acting faster, but then when I got home I opened up my Facebook and there she was, requesting to be my “friend.”

I was thrilled, of course, but I also started to worry. If I accepted her as a friend, and when she saw that I'd posted about past dating experiences on



my wall, would she think I was a loose-lipped exhibitionist and stay away? Also: *am* I a loose-lipped exhibitionist? (Maybe sometimes.) There was more, too. Would the picture of me wearing skinny jeans singing Christina Aguilera at karaoke make her decide that I'm not "manly" enough for her? Would she "defriend" me when she saw that *Battlestar Galactica* was not only on my favourite television shows list, but also the only one listed? I was nervous,

in short, that she would like me less when she saw the online persona that I'd constructed—some of which, I'll admit, I now regret having made public.

But then, wait, I thought, maybe when she sees all that I've shared she will like me *more*. Maybe she'll relate to my idiosyncrasies and feel like she's met her soul mate. Or a new buddy, at least.

What happens when you expose yourself, whether it's something you write online or even just a bluntly personal thing you say in conversation?

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and his protégé Carl Jung talked a lot about "projection," so much so that it's one of the more recognized concepts in psychology, even among nonpsychology types. Basically, it's the idea that the judgments you make of another person—especially a person you have never met, have just met, or don't know well—can be overwhelmingly coloured by the silent, unconscious judgments that you're making about yourself.

For example, you might be irritated by one of your Facebook acquaintance's regularly goofy wall posts because you yourself are insecure about your intelligence and thus are too embarrassed to take the risk of sounding less than brilliant every now and then. Or maybe you find it annoying when someone posts about all of his or her accomplishments—a trait that you've identified as arrogance—because you're uncomfortable being proud of and promoting your own achievements.

Freud originally came up with the idea of projection while discussing the ways that we protect ourselves from something he called “unpleasure.” When you become distressed because of an event that happens on the outside of you—someone trying to steal your iPhone, for example—you can react by taking direct and physical actions. But when you experience distress from the inside—anxiety—it’s not always clear what can be done about it.

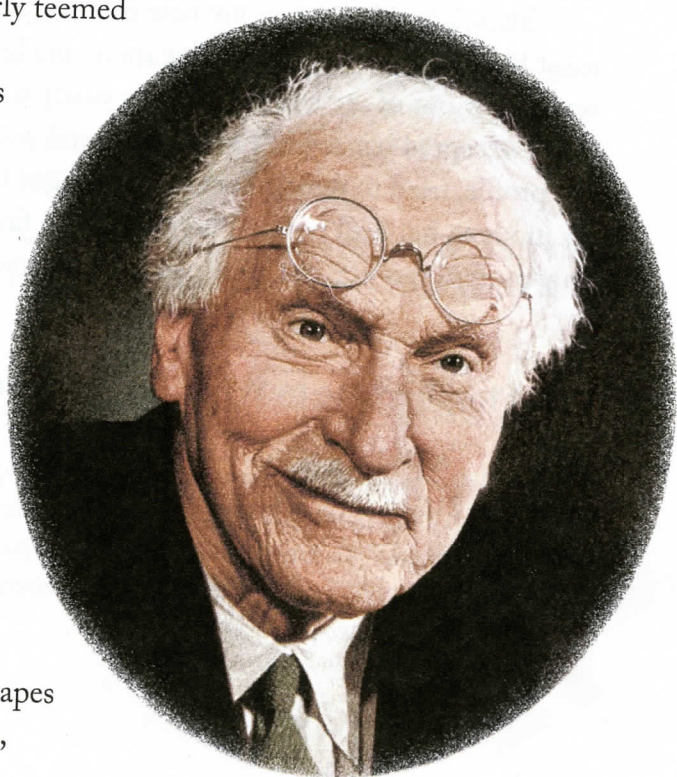
“[A] particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure,” Freud wrote. “There is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside ...” In other words, Freud thought we protect our egos by detesting in other people all the inferior-seeming attributes of our own psyches that we repress.

Jung, who was something of a poet in the way he phrased his psychological ideas, called this version of ourselves that we reject our “shadow.”

“We still attribute to the other fellow all the evil and inferior qualities that we do not like to recognize in ourselves,” Jung wrote, “and therefore have to criticize and attack him, when all that has happened is that an inferior ‘soul’ has emigrated from one person to another. The world is still full of *bêtes noires* and scapegoats, just as it formerly teemed with witches and werewolves.”

One of Jung’s most famous lines on the topic is quite eloquent: “Projections change the world into the replica of one’s own unknown face.”

Whenever I read this, I think of a Tootsie Roll television advertisement that was on in the 1980s when I was a kid: Animated cartoon children roam and play in their neighbourhood, singing, “Whatever it is I think I see becomes a Tootsie Roll to me!” while slowly all the cylindrical shapes of the landscape, passing vehicles,



Carl Gustav Jung

and even their toys turn into Tootsie Rolls. (For a couple of minutes of retro entertainment, YouTube it sometime while procrastinating essay writing.)

In this light, projection doesn't always have to work as a repellent. Certainly, our psyches are more complicated than a chewy, delicious candy but, like kids wearing Tootsie Roll goggles, sometimes we see delicious things about ourselves in other people. A story you hear at a party may bring to light a deep-seated personal fantasy that you realize needs to be fulfilled. Or your friend on Facebook might show a personality trait that you didn't realize that you have—but has been sitting latent inside—and that you are now inspired to expose. To be somewhat reductive, this phenomenon could explain “love at first sight” (or in the online world, love at first tweet.)

A guy I worked with once told me, “As you get to know someone, you either start to like them more and more, or you like them less and less.” I believed that for a long time, but now I'm not sure he was right. It seems to me that as you get to know someone—and while you are still projecting your own personal Tootsie Rolls and shadows onto them—both might happen at the same time, and could go on for quite a while. Isn't this an explanation for all the fights and reconciliations in relationships?

Thus, I decided, when my new friend read everything I'd ever put online, most likely she'd end up liking me more *and* less. And, anyway, in the end, it was totally out of my control. So why worry too much about it?

I accepted her request to be my friend and, then, as I was skimming over her profile, tried to remember that until I got to know her better, my own reactions to her wall posts, silly photos, and favourite films might teach me not only more about her, but a little bit about myself, too.

What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

“As someone who often writes very personally—on Facebook, in the newspaper, and through other nonfiction work—I used to be anxious that I'd be rejected or reviled for opening up. Fortunately, I've managed to push past that, and one of the things that has helped me the most to carry on bravely is having an understanding of the nuances of 'projection.'”