

Why Jung Kept The Red Book Private

A reflection on humility, inflation, and the spirit of the times



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DEC 18, 2025

Carl Jung's *Red Book (Liber Novus)* is one of the most hauntingly beautiful psychological documents of the 20th century — a glowing, red-bound record of visions, dreams, and dialogues with the unconscious. Yet for decades, it was hidden from public view.

Why?

This is not a story of secrecy out of vanity or shame, but of **ethical restraint** — and the fear of being misunderstood in a world that worshipped reason.

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The Hidden Manuscript: Why Jung Chose to Keep The Red Book Private

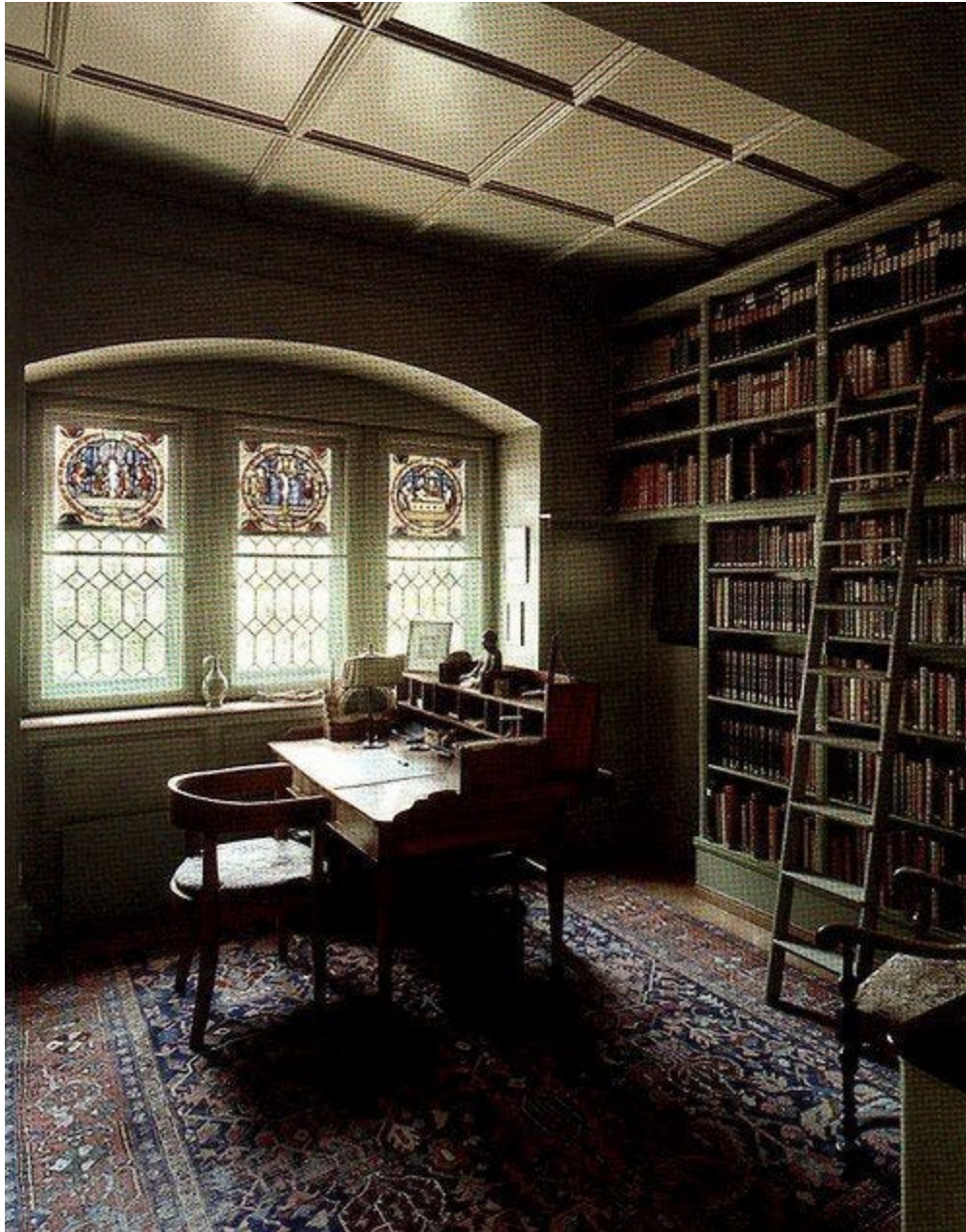
When Carl Gustav Jung began the strange experiment that would become *The Red Book*, he was already a figure of *international* standing — a psychiatrist who had broken from Freud and was attempting to **ground psychology in empirical observation rather than dogma**. Yet beneath the surface of his professional identity, another current was moving. In 1913, on the eve of the First World War, Jung was overtaken by a *series of apocalyptic visions and dreams*— rivers of blood flooding Europe, corpses floating in the sea, and a “monstrous flood” that seemed both personal and prophetic.

Fearing the onset of madness, he decided to **face the images directly. I suppose he was testing his own method**. In his study at Küsnacht, he allowed the fantasies to unfold, recording them in words and paintings. These **dialogues with the unconscious** — conducted through what he later called *active imagination* — became *Liber Novus, The Red Book*. The work is neither art nor science but a record of the psyche in direct conversation with itself.

Yet Jung never published it. **For decades it remained locked in a cabinet**, seen only by a few close colleagues.

Why would a man so devoted to psychological discovery conceal what he himself described as the “numinous beginning” of his later work ?

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The Conflict of Two Personalities

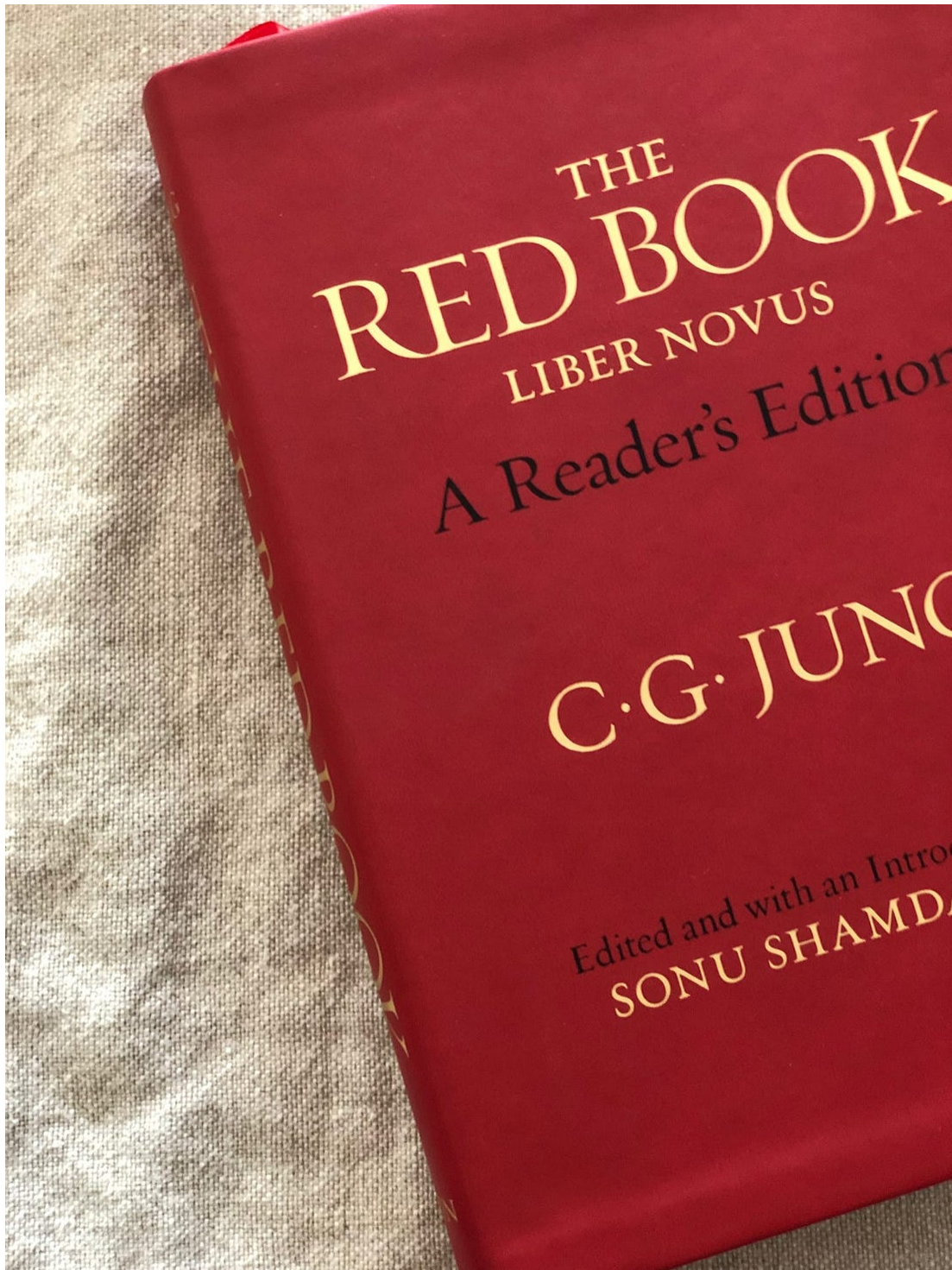
Murray Stein suggests that Jung was “of two minds” about publishing *The Red Book*. The phrase refers not only to ambivalence but to Jung’s own self-conception. He wrote of having two distinct personalities:

- **Personality No. 1**, the modern, empirical man rooted in *rationality* and the scientific worldview;
- **Personality No. 2**, the timeless individual connected to the collective unconscious and the archetypal world.

These two modes of being, he said, “had nothing to do with a **split or dissociation** in the medical sense. On the contrary, it plays out in every individual”.

***The Red Book* emerged entirely from Personality No. 2** — the voice of the “spirit of the depths,” as Jung called it. But the world around him, steeped in the “spirit of the times,” valued empirical evidence and distrusted visions. To reveal this manuscript to his contemporaries would have been to invite ridicule and misunderstanding. Stein notes that Jung, though proud of the book, knew it was “a complete anomaly” beside his scientific publications and that his critics “would have pounced on it as confirmation that he was a mystic or a Gnostic”.

The danger was not merely professional embarrassment, it was the collapse of the delicate bridge **he was building between science and spirituality**. Publishing *The Red Book* too soon might have destroyed his credibility as a psychologist and confined analytical psychology to the margins of mysticism.



The Ethics of Secrecy and the Danger of Inflation

There was also a deeper, **ethical reason** for Jung's discretion. Marie-Louise von Franz, one of his most perceptive students, articulated the principle that likely guided him:

“The Self determines when one should expose the secret and when one should hide it. Two attitudes are to be avoided: the desire to tell one's experience to everyone, which is the result of an inflation, and the desire to guard everything for oneself, pretending that one is the same old intellectual or pious Pharisee” (von Franz, *The Golden Ass of Apuleius*, 1980, pp. 156–157).

Von Franz's warning points to the central psychological risk of visionary experience: **inflation**. When the **ego identifies with the Self** — the transpersonal center of the psyche — it swells with a sense of divine importance. Jung described this in stark terms:

“If the ego is dissolved in identification with the Self, it gives rise to a sort of nebulous superman with a puffed-up ego” (Jung, *On the Nature of the Psyche*, CW 8, §430).

To publish *The Red Book* while still alive might have risked inflating both Jung's own ego and the egos of his followers. As Edward Edinger later explained, true initiation occurs only when the ego can relate to the Self *without* identifying with it: “If one succeeds in that, then one becomes an initiated one ... but preaching about it is just an expression of identification with it”

For Jung, therefore, silence was not repression but containment — the alchemical *vas hermeticum* in which transformation could safely occur.

Psychological and Cultural Timing

Jung's caution was also an act of discernment regarding the collective psyche. He often contrasted the ***Spirit of the Times, which is rational,***

technological, and extroverted, with the *Spirit of the Depths*, which is **symbolic, timeless, and inner**. The early twentieth century was still dominated by the former. Europe was entering an age of machines and mass warfare, not of inner revelation.

Jung recognized that the cultural consciousness of his era lacked the symbolic literacy required to understand *The Red Book*. As he wrote in a later reflection: “In science I missed the factor of meaning; in religion, that of empiricism” . The world could not yet hold both. He seems to have intuited that the text would only find its readers in a later epoch — one less bound by the dualism of science versus spirit.

Thus, his concealment was not cowardice but timing. Like the alchemist who buries the prima materia until it matures, Jung allowed *The Red Book* to incubate. Only when the symbolic consciousness of the culture had evolved — almost a century later — was it ready to surface.

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Jung did not hoard the book in total secrecy

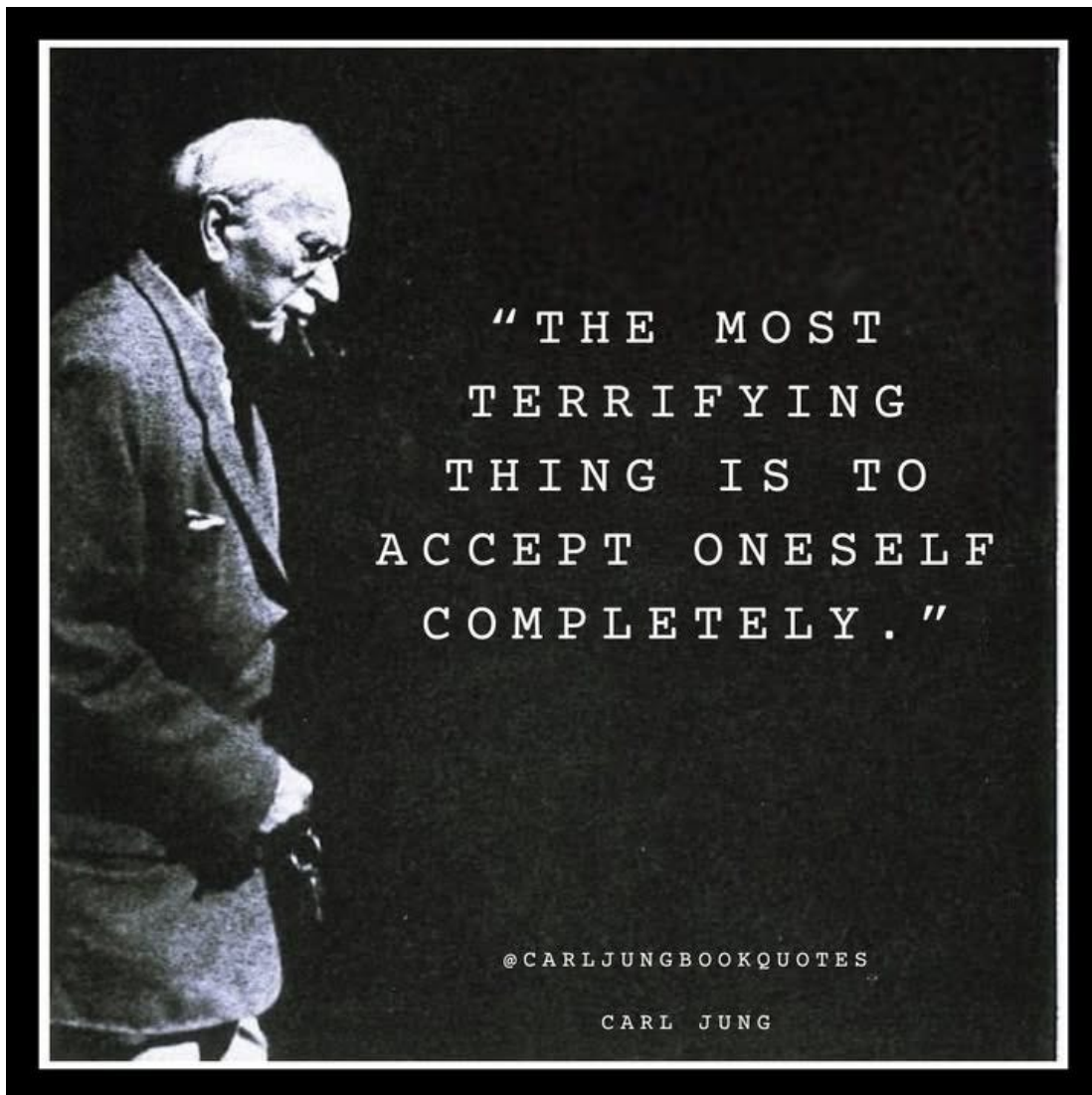
He showed it to select students and patients, using it as an example of the method of *active imagination* and as a demonstration of how creative engagement with the unconscious could lead to transformation. Those few witnesses, such as Aniela Jaffé and von Franz, recognized its value but also its potential danger.

His approach was pedagogical: he offered the fruit of his own descent as instruction for others undertaking theirs. Yet he resisted turning it

into doctrine. As Robert L. Moore wrote many years later, ***grandiosity is the shadow of spirituality:***

“Usually a depression is balancing an inflation ... a really humble person may be having more trouble with grandiosity than someone who thinks they are pretty hot stuff. Depression is the ballast on your psychic balloon” (Moore, *Facing the Dragon*, 2003, pp. 45–46).

Jung’s humility — his willingness to bear the weight of silence — was the ballast that kept him from floating into the sun of self-deification.



A Discipline of Humility? Peharps!

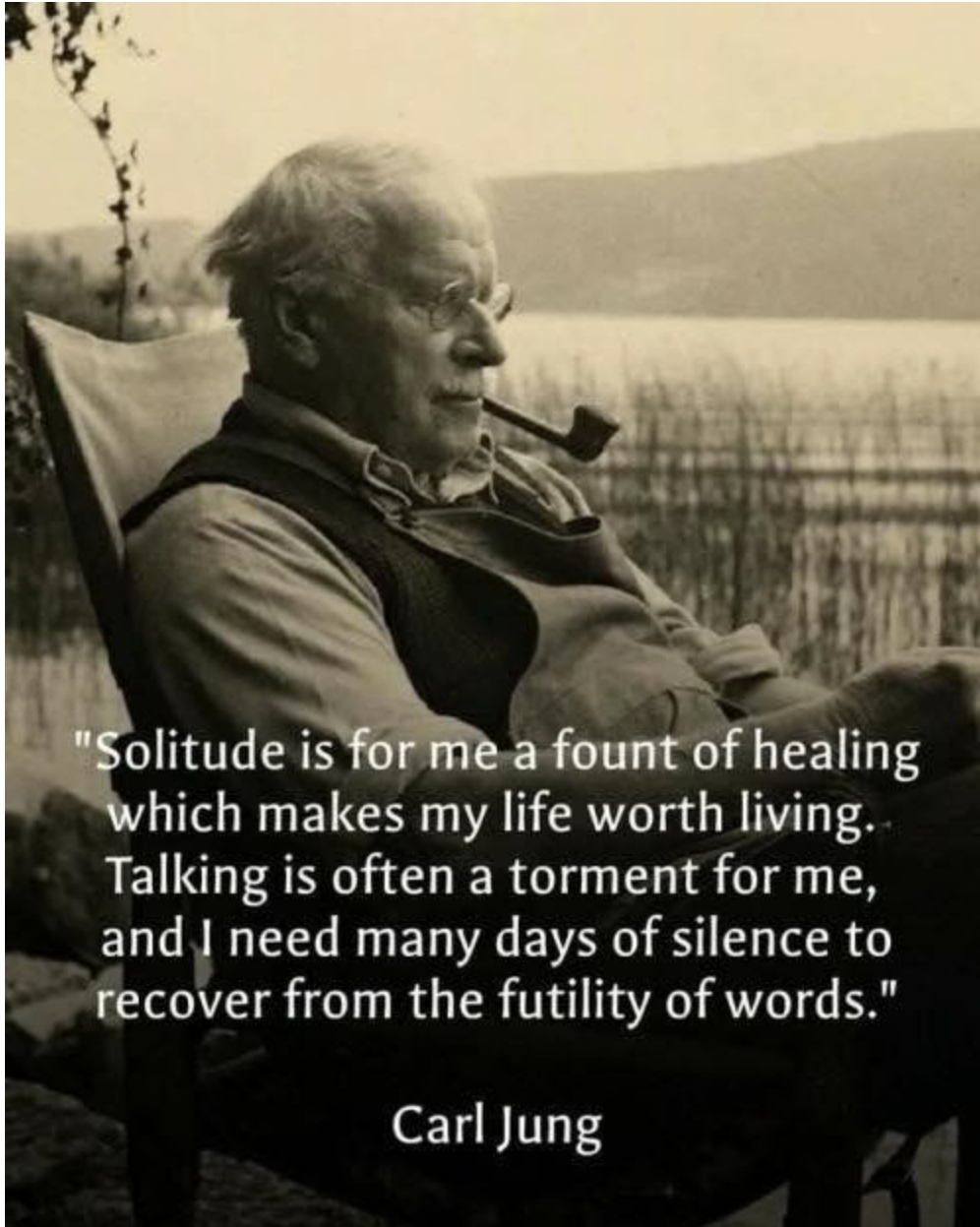
In the final analysis, Jung's decision to keep *The Red Book* private was an act of psychological and spiritual ethics. It was not a rejection of the visionary but an acknowledgment of its power. He understood that revelation without integration becomes fantasy, and communication without transformation becomes propaganda.

By restraining himself, he modeled the very process he described as **individuation — the gradual reconciliation of the conscious and unconscious**, ego and Self, the temporal and the eternal. The outer concealment mirrored the inner containment.

When the book was finally published in 2009 — almost fifty years after his death — it appeared as if on time. The collective mind had changed. The psychological vocabulary that Jung introduced had prepared readers to see the visionary not as madness but as mythopoesis, a dialogue with the deep structures of psyche and culture.

For contemporary readers, *The Red Book* is both revelation and reminder: that depth must be earned through patience, and that silence can be as creative as speech. Jung's restraint was the vessel of his authenticity. **His secrecy was not a failure of courage but a triumph of humility.**

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