



The Alchemy of Symbols

Module 1: Encountering symbols in the world.

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Module 1: Encountering symbols in the world

Welcome to Module 1 on the Alchemy of Symbols Course. This week we will guide you to become aware of the symbols around you and what it means in terms of communicating with the unconscious. We will explore the definition of symbols, their meaning and how your symbolic perception significantly determines who you are and how you are perceived by others.

I will also post the podcast and PDF with the applications onto the Forum.

Signs vs symbols

First let us explore the difference between a symbol and a sign. Signs point towards consciously known knowledge, the points on a compass, chemical signs, mathematical operators, numbers, road signs, alphabetical letters, directions, maps, architectural designs and so on. The information a sign communicates is fully explicit. Its meaning, to anyone able to read the sign, should be clear and unambiguous.

To explain the difference between a sign and a symbol, I would like to use the example of a map. When you look at a map, it contains cartographical characters for rivers and roads, characters that imply inclines in the environment, bridges, and so forth. If you had to travel and use the map as a guide, you will reach your destination. But unless you have been there before, you would not know what it really looks like. To picture the environment from the information purely provided by the map would be using symbolic language, your imagination. Depending on previous experience and the nature of your journey, you will project onto the landscape. If you are travelling for adventure, you might imagine the rivers and bridges being more challenging than they are. If you are travelling to meet a loved one, you may imagine rolling green fields and flowers. If you are travelling for business or a meeting which you are stressed about, you



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may imagine a rocky, unfriendly landscape. Using this faculty of imagination is the root of symbolic perception.

What is a symbol?

Symbolic meaning is found in the external world through projection of unconscious content onto various objects. Objects here refer in the broadest sense to anything that you project onto, whether it is a person, a movie, an image, a vase, a song, a company, event or anything in your vicinity. Whenever there is an emotional response to something, e.g. you really like it or you really hate it; or it stays with you for days/weeks/months, it indicates that there is unconscious content within your psyche that has found meaning in that object. The object represents more than what it appears to be. There is something unconscious within you that you have located outside of yourself. The symbol represents this unknown feeling, idea, concept, belief, dream or goal.

To quote Jung,

"What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us.

As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason".

Jung, C.G., (ed) (1964). *Man and His Symbols*.

We are all constantly relating to symbols. Symbols are found in the meaning we ascribe to objects. Symbols are emotive, capturing dreams, goals, desires, needs and other unconscious projections.



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The following excerpt expresses this idea beautifully:

If there was magic in this world, it happened within sight of the three bases and home plate. All the gems in my world that decorated the walls and floors of dragons' lairs, the sword hilts of privileged princes, and crowns worn by emperors and kings, were nothing compared to the beauty and splendour of the diamond in Wrigley Stadium. It wasn't just a yard with dirt, chalk lines, bases, and a small hill in its centre. Wrigley was a field of dreams. Dreams of eternal glory for the men who ran to the outfield, who took their respective bases, and prepared for battle against those who would dare enter their hallowed realm. Dreams for the kids in the stands, all wanting to don a uniform, kiss their moms goodbye, and wield their bats as enchanted weapons destined to knock the cover off the ball. And for the adults who had already selected their lot in life, Wrigley made the dreams of past innocence, lost wonder, and the promise that there was something inherently good still left in the world, come true.

Yeah, corny as hell. But all true.

Tee Morris, *The Case of the Pitcher's Pendant: A Billibub Baddings Mystery*

The above quote illustrates the meaning, imagery, hopes and desires which symbols contain. To someone else who is not interested in baseball, the baseball field is meaningless, but to Tee Morris it is a symbol of redemption.

To use a simple example, imagine you are walking through a flea market and find a stone carving at a little stall selling trinkets. You hold it in your hand and it seems as if it is vibrating with energy. You love the shape and colour. You simply have to buy it! And if you don't buy it, the loss remains with you for a long time. Every time you go to that market you think about it and mourn the loss. This object is a symbol. The meaning is a mystery since it is unconscious. If you worked with this symbol and used your imagination to play with it, you will realise some of the unconscious content that you have projected onto it. It may represent any number of things



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that you desire – it could be meaning, power, individuality, identity. The magical process here is in uncovering this symbolic meaning and integrating it into consciousness.

Where do symbols come from?

It is very important to understand that symbols cannot be created, they are natural and spontaneous products of the psyche. As a plant produces a flower, so the psyche creates symbols. You can't consciously choose a symbol, they are generated by the unconscious and not through a conscious act. We will explore this process in detail during Module 3.

As Jung states, the symbol making propensity is transformational. The symbol is imbued with magical attributes which convert normal every-day objects into something meaningful and enigmatic. Symbols contain the power to transform. The psyche is naturally prone to create symbols to balance the psyche and create a whole and healthy status quo. If you are lacking something in your life, your psyche will create a symbol that contains all that is absent. If you are one sided, the symbol will bring the opposite. The symbol is always reflective of a movement towards wholeness. This is the difference between a symbol and positive thinking or any will-based approach. The symbol is the psyche's natural product that aims to balance and heal the personality.

Symbols arise internally through dreams or fantasy or externally from objects that surround you. As symbols are created naturally by the psyche and have an archetypal base or root, many symbols are universal. What is important to realise is that although the symbol has an archetypal root, no symbol has a dogmatically fixed generalized meaning. Symbols have a personal meaning for each individual. No symbol can be separated from the individual to whom it has meaning. When reflecting on the Archetypal nature of the symbol, it can aid to expand and amplify the significance of the symbol, but it must never be used solely to interpret the meaning of the symbols.



Why work with symbols?

Working with symbols are an essential part of the journey towards individuation; the ultimate goal of Jungian psychology. To become fully yourself, unique and whole, requires working with symbols since it unearths hidden truths and desires about yourself which will help you to understand and ultimately become who you really are: the most authentic, whole and complete version of yourself.

The symbol is like a key to a door that unlocks your unconscious.

Symbols contain information from the collective unconscious; this means that the images and ideas are not necessarily from memories only, but they express new thoughts that have never yet reached the threshold of consciousness. A good example will be the symbolic images in dreams, as the dream is formed through experiences and memories, yet the dream is always about the future – events that still need to come to pass. All symbols contain this forward looking and transformative potential (Telos). The psyche will necessarily have to adapt to include the unconscious content and integrate it into consciousness. This will bring about change and transformation. This aspect of symbolisation will be discussed in Module 2 when we deal with symbols to *amplify consciousness and access archetypal structures*.

Freud famously said that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. We would go further and say that symbols are the yellow brick road that leads to the unconscious. Just like the dream that captures our experience of the world in symbolic form, symbols come to us during our waking reality.



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To quote Jung:

“In sleep, fantasy takes the form of dreams. But in waking life, too, we continue to dream beneath the threshold of consciousness, especially when under the influence of repressed or other unconscious complexes.”

Problems of Modern Psychotherapy" (1929). In CW 16: The Practice of Psychotherapy.

P.125

It is here, below the threshold of consciousness that the Symbol is activated. The Symbol is the most authentic true reflection of who you are, since it is created spontaneously by the unconscious in reaction to the movements in our psyche.

The symbol is truly the language of the soul. It is the communication from the unconscious to consciousness. In this module, the applications will show you how this language can disclose unknown, unconscious information to you. The symbol reflects what is important to you, what you deem valuable, your likes and dislikes, what you really think or feel. It overrides your conscious perspective and attitude. Learning to listen to this language will reveal who you truly are. What you really think, believe, feel, value, care about at the core, at the most profound level of your psyche, your unconscious self or soul.

Since this is the first Module, we want to touch on the various functions of Symbol work that we will be dealing with on this course.

1. Bringing consciousness to unconscious feelings

The first function is to bring into consciousness unconscious feelings. A Symbol that I am too familiar with is the ear-worm – a song that keeps repeating in my head. Countless times when I reflect on the meaning of the song it reveals to me an issue that I am currently dealing with, but from a perspective that I was unaware of. This type of symbol reveals our true feelings and values, and not what we think ought to be feeling or thinking. This symbol is presented in many



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forms, dreams, fantasies, and all types of objects. These are the symbols that we will explore in this module's applications.

2. A balanced approach

The second function aims to balance you. An unbalanced conscious approach will bring about a spontaneously produced symbol in order to bring into consciousness the opposite approach. To use an example: If you are too controlling, events will occur to balance this one-sided attitude. A crisis that the individual is not able to control, or an out of control event. This falls into the sphere of archetypal dynamics which we will explore further in module 2.

3. Conflict resolutions and overcoming obstacles

The third function of symbols is to offer resolution to conflict situations, obstacles and resistance. This function could be used towards manifesting personal goals and will be discussed in more detail in Module 3.

4. Freeing psychic libido (energy)

The fourth function of the symbol is to bring psychic energy or libido into the conscious sphere. This is often brought into consciousness after a depression or period of stagnation. We have all had the experience of being excited by a new idea or business venture or love affair. Suddenly you jump out of bed in the morning with endless energy to devote to this 'new thing'. This is the type of symbol that brings about a renewal of psychic libido, to move you forward into the stream of life. These are healing symbols. The transcendent function will be discussed in more detail in Module 4.

These functions mentioned will allow you to navigate your way forward with more self-awareness, deeper self-knowledge and a better understanding of who you are and what you need, to live a more fulfilled life. It will also change your perspective on how you perceive what



is presented to you in the world and offer you a way of resolving conflict both internally and externally.

The fluidity of reality

The last section of this module is about who you are symbolically. Not only do we project onto objects per se, but also onto ourselves and others. We symbolise ourselves and others in all our interactions.

Žižek¹ writes in his book *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* about a movie from the seventies called *From noon to three*. The story is about an outlaw, Graham who hides out at a ranch owned by a widow, from noon to three. Their interaction leads to them making love. When he flees the ranch, he exchanges his horse and clothes with a doctor, who is then killed as the 'outlaw'. Graham in turn is arrested as the doctor and jailed for a year for fraud. While Graham is incarcerated, the widow, Amanda believing him dead, writes a book about their interaction and her love for him. The book is called *From noon to three*. The book becomes a best seller, a legend, a play and even songs are written about it. When Graham is released from prison, he goes back to the ranch to find Amanda. But the story does not have a happy ending. The legend has become bigger than Amanda and Graham. In the end, Amanda chooses to kill herself in order to keep the legend alive. Graham ends up in an insane asylum – no one believes his story and he has lost Amanda and his identity. (pp. 419 & 420)

This story illustrates the power of your symbolic identity. Who are you to yourself and to others? Or in another way, what do you project onto yourself? Is it the same as what others project onto you? This symbolic identity is what moulds you into who you are. And this dichotomy between the inner symbolised "you" and the outer symbolised "you" can cause tremendous conflict. You can imagine how difficult it must be for a sports star or a celebrity to keep hold of their personal identity. We all have had that experience that what others think we

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj_%C5%BDi%C5%BEek



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are, is not real. Like Amanda, do you prefer your own legend? Or like Graham do you wish that others would see you for who you really are?

From the Jungian perspective the idea is to balance these two opposing concepts – you are neither exclusively that which you believe you are or the individual that other's think you are. You are both. The challenge is to create this symbolic idea of yourself to represent both the inner and the outer worlds. This is a fluid process that can be tweaked and adjusted and changed and transformed. This is the symbolic life and we will discuss this concept in more detail in module 5.

So, we have come to the end of the first module's podcast. I hope you enjoyed the podcast and were stimulated and challenged in some way.

Please listen to the podcast on the applications or read the transcript below. These applications are for the coming week. Next Monday you will receive your next module which will focus on your personal myth and archetypal patterns.

I look forward to your input regarding the material on the Forum.

Chat again next week.

All the best

Anja



Module 1: Applications

The following applications will help you uncover your personal symbols. These are only examples of how to access symbols; and not limited to these applications only.

Please note: the magic of symbol work is unleashed through the application of the concepts. If you have the time, work through all of these applications, if your time is limited, focus on Application A only.

We welcome your input and ideas on symbols on the Facebook Forum. Please share your questions, ideas, thoughts and inspirations on that platform.

Application A: Becoming aware of your symbols

For the next week, and ongoing beyond that, make conscious your symbols. Journal your experience of symbols during the day.

Make notes of the following symbols:

- objects that fascinate you
- a word that irritates or provoked you in some way
- fantasies that you daydream about
- earworms (songs, ideas, memories or thought that keep repeating in your mind)
- an article or book that affected you (either positively or negatively)
- an action by someone else that affected you
- something that you heard on TV or read in the newspaper
- a movie or TV programme, or just a scene in either of these
- dreams from the previous evening.

You might try these one or two at a time. To become aware of these symbols requires you to be mindful (consciously aware) or your internal responses to what is going on around and inside



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you. This is a form of meditation or meditative activity. You will need to practise a degree of reflection or introspection. Try and be conscious of this throughout your day and make notes of the symbols you encounter that fascinate, enchant, engage or repel you.

Once you have written down the symbol, try to identify:

1. the desire or need that it represents
2. if it was fascinating, enchanting or upsetting, reflect on the reason
3. what associations, feelings, thoughts does this symbol elicit in you?
4. does it trigger a memory?
5. how does it feel physically?
6. what does reflecting on this bring into consciousness for you?

Application B: Engaging an unknown symbol

If you had a spirit animal, what would it be?

Imagine it in your mind's eye.

Now describe this animal. What type of animal is it? How big is it, what colour is it? Is there something unusual about it? How does it interact with you? Where is it in relation to you? What do you love about this animal? What do you fear about this animal/how is this animal dangerous?

Look for this animal in your real world. Find a picture of it and print it and put it somewhere that you can see it. Or buy a toy version of this animal. Ask this animal to give you a message.

Research the archetypal meaning of this animal. How does this add to the depth of your understanding of this animal? How does this animal guide you or protect you?

Application C: Engaging a known symbol



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Reflect on something that you do daily. A ritual or a habit. What does this ritual/habit mean to you? How does it make you feel? When you skip this ritual/habit, how does this affect you? How does it feed your soul? Do you like it (or not) and why? Ask yourself what the intention is behind this ritual/habit.

When you are actively engaging with this activity, reflect on the intention of your ritual/habit. How does intention affect the activity?

Re-imagine this habit and ritualise it to enhance the positive aspects of this activity.

Conclusion

These exercises will guide you to start relating to your symbols on a daily basis. As you will realise, this work is difficult and sometimes unpleasant; it also requires a level of constant consciousness to catch these symbols as they occur. It will however uncover aspects of yourself that you were not aware of. You will start dreaming more and experience many more synchronicities. Synchronicities are unrelated meaningful events that seem to be linked; but not in a normal causal way. Interesting and strange coincidences will start happening to you if you are not already experiencing these.

Once you engage and communicate with your unconscious, it will start communicating back to you through symbols. This in turn will awaken your feeling sense and your intuition. Symbols are layered and often have more than one meaning. This allows the mind to play with the symbol and uncover the different layers of it. Often the meaning of a dream or symbol becomes clear after a long time has passed.

To become yourself, unique and whole, requires this type of symbolic work. This unearths hidden truths and desires about yourself which will help you to understand and ultimately manifest who you really are: the most authentic, whole and complete version of yourself.

Congratulations, you have taken your first step towards the practise of symbolic alchemy!