

The Dynamics of Symbols

**Fundamentals of
Jungian
Psychotherapy**

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Translated by
Susan A. Schwarz



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FOREWORD

CREATIVITY is central to C. G. Jung's psychology. The goal in Jungian therapy is that individuals begin to experiment with their reality and creatively deal with their problems and personal traits. Neuroses are to be replaced by the potentials of creative change.

Jungian psychology offers the techniques necessary to make the creative potential of the unconscious accessible to consciousness and thereby transform possibility into actuality. These "techniques" are essential in an individual's therapy, both for psychic development toward autonomy and for the development of a creative lifestyle, which in turn will lead the individual to realize that his or her problems are relative not only to the environment shared with others, but also to his or her personal depth. By taking the manifestations of both sides seriously, the individual can develop creative solutions that will be expressions of her or his vital self.

Creative development becomes visible in symbols and is presented to consciousness by symbols. Working with symbols forms the core of Jungian therapy.

It is my intention to demonstrate the essential aspects of C. G. Jung's psychotherapy through symbols. At the same time I will illustrate the theoretical connections in which therapeutic considerations are rooted.

I believe it is particularly important to explain the connection between the formation of symbols and the analytic relationship, transference and countertransference.

In therapy, acknowledging and supporting symbolic processes, recognizing and working on transference and countertransference are not diametrically opposed tech-

niques; they are mutually interwoven, just as individuation is not simply an intrapsychic process of integration, but also an external process of relationship.

I would like to thank the analysands who allowed me to use their material to demonstrate the correlation between theory and practice.

I presented most of the ideas introduced in this book in lectures at the Bern and Zurich Universities, as well as at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich. The audience stimulated me to present the therapeutic process as clearly and precisely as possible. Although it will never be possible to relate what really happens in therapy—too much about it is unconscious and mysterious—I do believe that whatever can be discussed should be discussed. The great interest of my students and audiences has continued to motivate me to this end.

Verena Kast

St. Gallen, September 1989

The Dynamics of Symbols

Aspects of Humanity

CHAPTER ONE

EVERY PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY is based on an underlying concept of humanity. Jung believed that a human being should fully become the unique self that he or she is by consciously experiencing the individuation process. This is our task as human beings; this is in our power, and this also forms the theoretical basis of the therapeutic process. Jungian psychology views humanity as immersed in universally connected meaning. We are in the midst of creative transformation, oppressed by lack of transformation, and, at the same time, naturally compelled to seek an additional dimension to all occurrences beyond the obvious in an effort to preserve the mysterious aspect of reality. The reality we experience through the senses is intrinsically related to spiritual reality.

THE INDIVIDUATION PROCESS

The process of individuation is an ongoing confrontational dialogue between consciousness and the unconscious. Conscious and unconscious contents are united in symbols.

The goal of the individuation process is to become who we really are. "Become who you are," said Pindar; the idea is not new. Aristotle emphasized that every creation has

its own unique nature, and that life is meant to guide us to this unique nature. Thus, the plethora of life's potentials inherent in us can be experienced to a great extent, so that what is inherent in us—and perhaps in us alone—becomes visible.

In this sense, individuation is a process that differentiates a person's singular quality, his or her uniqueness. A major part of the process is self-acceptance, acceptance not only of all of one's possibilities, but also of one's difficulties; these are essential because to a significant degree they comprise our uniqueness. Accepting oneself, one's possibilities as well as one's difficulties, is a basic virtue that is to be realized in the individuation process.

Repeatedly, the individuation process has been compared to the image of a tree: a seed falls to the ground and is to become the tree within it, which correlates to habitat, weather, and climate. When we think of trees in this context, their wounds are also characteristic.

"Become who you are" does not imply that we should become smooth, harmonious and polished, but rather that we should become increasingly aware of what we are and of what is voiced by our personality and all its rough edges. In this respect, individuation is a gradual approach, for in the end we do not really know what we are, nor does the analyst know. It is an approach; every transformation we experience is intrinsically corrigible and temporary.

Just as important, perhaps even more pertinent to psychology, and equally connected with the goal of self-realization, is the other aspect of individuation, which aims at increasing one's autonomy. Each individual is to become a singular being, detached from parental complexes and collective standards as well as from the norms and values of society, and the roles society expects. Therefore, self-realization also means a coming of age.

According to the Jungian concept of humanity, whatever is external is also internal, and whatever is internal is also external. Hence, we should try to free ourselves not only from the restraints of collective values, norms, and expected roles—which we have internalized in our persona

—but also from the restraints of the unconscious. Indeed, we should consciously interact with them. We should neither be defined by the unconscious, nor by the values our society has created. To be freed from the restraints of the unconscious means, among other things, that we do not allow our lives to be determined by an archetype without being aware of it.¹

An example: A forty-two-year-old man was dominated by the hero archetype. Whatever the situation, he automatically wanted to be the hero and felt bad when he could not. People told him, in praise or reproach, that he behaved heroically. He was loaded with excess work because he never complained and managed well. He also dreamt about heroes. In time, he realized that he was heavily influenced by the need to be a hero. In many situations he asked himself if it really was sensible to be a hero. A dialogue between the ego and the hero began.

Heroism is not simply a problem to be overcome. The goal is to apply heroism where it makes sense. Such an approach would release this aspect from the unconscious. This is not to suggest that the unconscious factor ceases to function in the old sense, but, by relating to these aspects, we would no longer be governed by them.

When we consider both conscious and unconscious factors, it becomes clear that Jung believed we consciously experience the individuation process—in therapy—thus becoming what we actually are; that is, we are to become less and less externally dominated by the forces of the collective unconscious. This domination is replaced by a dialogue between consciousness and society, and between consciousness and the unconscious. This, according to Jung, leads to a development of increased—though temporary—autonomy during the individuation process.

On the one hand, Jung defines individuation as an internal, subjective process of integration, during which individuals become acquainted with additional aspects of themselves, make contact with them, and connect them to their self-images—e.g., by integrating projections. On the other hand, individuation is an interpersonal, intersubjec-

tive process of relationship, "because," says Jung, "relationship to the self is at once relationship to our fellow man, and no one can be related to the latter until he is related to himself."² Or: "The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a 'you.'"³

In Jungian therapy, the interpretation of symbols on a subjective and objective level is indebted to the notion that individuation is a process both of integration and relationship. For instance, if we encounter an authority figure in a dream, we may regard it as a certain aspect of an external authority. Our behavior in the dream may indicate something about our everyday reaction to authority. This would be an interpretation on the objective level. On the subjective level, the authority is seen as an inner configuration, an aspect of ourselves and, in this sense, as an authoritarian tendency within. Unless we abridge Jung, both forms of interpretation must be considered. The process of individuation should by no means cause people to become solitary individuals, but, on the contrary, should cause them to become more community oriented. According to Jung, the "process of individuation brings forth a consciousness of human community precisely because it makes us aware of the unconscious, which unites and is common to mankind. Individuation is an at-one-ment with oneself and at the same time with humanity, since the self is part of humanity."⁴ Or, to put it differently: There can never be exclusive development of autonomy, for it is always accompanied by the development of the ability to relate to others.

Individuation is a goal. Becoming whole is utopian; at best we are on the way. This process fills our life with meaning.⁵

THE SELF

When we turn to the self it becomes clear that a utopian goal motivates the process of individuation, for the self motivates self-realization. Individuation is understood not only as becoming one with ourselves, but also as realization of the self. Jung says the self, which he considers to be the central archetype, is a guiding principle, the secret *spiritus rector* of our lives that causes us to be and to become.⁶ Jung speaks of the drive toward self-realization. The self acts *a priori* as the creative principle that guides the structuring of the ego complex. Moreover, the self is considered the origin of the psyche's self-regulation. To Jung, the psyche, like the living body, is a self-regulating system. He sees self-regulation principally in the fact that the unconscious can be expected to react against one-sided conscious inclinations, so that even though we are capable of changing our momentary position, our essential structure remains.⁷ The self is the root and the origin of individual personality, which it embraces in the past, present, and future.⁸

The symbols of the self, says Jung, arise in the depths of the body; they express both our materiality and the structure of the perceiving consciousness.⁹ Symbolically, the self is often represented by the symbol of the union of opposites, or by the symbol of the lovers. It is this latter symbol that I feel to be of particular importance, because it expresses the experience of love, wholeness, the union of opposites, and the desire to do away with boundaries.¹⁰ Repeatedly, we find that people are barely able to distinguish between the longing for love and the longing for self. When we are moved by love, we are also moved by a different longing that transcends the love relationship. In such situations the self is constellated. The self can be represented by abstract symbols, such as the circle, sphere, triangle, or cross; these figures symbolize wholeness and characteristically contain many opposites that are not necessarily merged.¹¹ Once we recognize the archetype of the self, we believe it pertains

exclusively to us; we feel self-centered; we then have a sense of inescapable identity and the fatefulness of the situation in which this symbol is experienced. The experience of incarnation or the realization of the self represent the utopia of the entire individuation process.

Jung addresses yet another dimension of the self. The self I have discussed so far could be called "my self," or what my total being can become, what I can become in my own lifespan, and what I can develop by accepting as much as possible. The relationship between the self and the ego is based on reciprocity. The self motivates the development of the ego, and extends far beyond the ego complex; the self, in turn, can actually be realized only through the ego.

Jung speaks of "the self" as the eternal or universal human being within, *the human being* as such, "the spherical, i.e. perfect, man who appears at the beginning and end of time and is man's own beginning and end."¹² This means that realization of the self is more than a personal necessity rewarded by self-satisfaction and sensuality; it also strives for humanity on the whole.

In his last work, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Jung mentions a further level of individuation in connection with the self as *Anthropos*. This idea does not arise from his own experience, but from the works of the alchemist Dorn. I mention this concept because it serves to illustrate Jung's view of the world and humanity. The alchemist Dorn claims that the total human being can merge with the "Unus Mundus," the potentially complete world of the first day of creation. This would mean that the self, which is first of all an intrapsychic center empowered with self-regulating and self-centering abilities, is able to experience union with the cosmos as a whole. Here, the definition of the utopia becomes clear—a utopia that pertains to the ability of conscious human beings to connect with the entire cosmos, or, vice versa, to recognize the cosmos in the individual. All living things are thus seen as one organism. This idea, popular in the Renaissance, is regaining ground today through the environmental movement, which views the

cosmos as an organism and humanity as an integral part of this synergistic organism. In the end, the idea of wholeness and the implied correlations are at the root of the individuation principle. This thought expresses liberation itself. Jung believes that the self motivates the development of the ego complex, while the ego and consciousness give the self the opportunity to manifest. And manifestation, or incarnation, is a form of liberation.

Individuation is utopian. It is the inner meaning of utopias to stimulate desire, give us momentum, and reveal our innermost aspirations. Individuation is utopian because it is impossible to become as whole as we intend. Jung writes in a letter to a Rudolf Jung:

Ultimately we all get stuck somewhere, for we are all mortal and remain but a part of what we are as a whole. The wholeness we can reach is very relative.¹³

The therapeutic process, as an individuation process, essentially consists of activated areas of the unconscious and consciousness united by symbols. The creative development of the personality becomes possible through the formation of symbols.

Aspects of the Symbol

CHAPTER TWO

AN EXAMPLE: AN OBJECT BECOMES A SYMBOL. —While busy cleaning house, a woman lost her wedding ring. She thought it would turn up once she had finished cleaning. But she did not find it and became upset. Could she have dumped it with the dirty water? She asked herself, "Could losing the wedding ring mean something?" And, "How am I ever going to tell my husband?" She tried to calm herself; "It's only a ring!" But that was just the point. It wasn't just any ring, it was her wedding ring. She was afraid to tell her husband. Even though she considered her husband very understanding, she felt guilty.

A friend stopped by. The woman told her what had happened. The friend, a forthright person, said immediately, "Of course—because of all this cleaning you're destroying your relationship with your husband."

The woman thought about her relationship with her husband, and she remembered which feelings, which expectations she associated with the ring. She questioned whether she truly wanted the relationship, or if she wanted to toss it out like dirty water; and of course she also asked herself why she felt so much anxiety.

The loss of the ring could not be separated from its meaning. This was clearly indicated by the woman's dread of her partner's reaction; usually she did not fear her husband at all. She was afraid the union and the wholeness of the relationship, symbolized by the ring, might have been

lost. She feared that, even if a new ring were purchased, the subject of separation would come up, and separation causes anxiety. We often project the impulse to separate onto our partner because we fear the partner's reaction more than our own impulse to separate.

In this situation, the woman did not consider any other meanings or interpretations. She might have thought of the incident as an expression of the desire to renew the relationship with her partner, that a new ring was due. After all, the old ring had become too big.

From now on the woman's life was marked by the symbol "ring." Other women told her what had happened to their rings. It is not unusual for a ring to get caught in the washing machine, or the laundry; all sorts of things happen to wedding rings. Men also talk about their rings—the ring they can't find in their vest-pocket because it is in another vest.

I have chosen this example to demonstrate that a symbol is in the first place a common object perceived by the senses, although it also signifies something mysterious; it refers to a meaning and beyond that a meaning which cannot be fully grasped at first. The ordinary object cannot be separated from its meaning. Though a ring is a common object, there also is something cryptic about it; its meaning can be related to an idea, to the general, or to the abstract.

Whenever a symbol gains importance in our lives, it reflects a current existential situation. An essential element of depth psychology is that we must examine the inherent significance of the actual, existential situation. This symbolic point of view corresponds with a human concept that incorporates our everyday reality into a greater continuity, whereby the hidden meaning influences the apparent and the apparent influences the hidden meaning.

ON THE CONCEPT OF THE SYMBOL

“Symbol” comes from the Greek *symbolon*, the word for token of identity.¹ In ancient Greece, when two friends parted, they would break a ring, a coin, or a clay tablet in half. When the friend, or someone from his family, returned, he was to present his half. If one half fit the other, he was recognized as the friend, or a relative of the friend, and was entitled to hospitality. The fitting together of two halves (*symbollein* = to compare, to fit together, to throw together) is a motif that often plays a role in fiction; for instance, the sign of recognition might be half of an oyster shell that joins perfectly with the other half.

The etymology allows us to recognize that a symbol is something put together. Not until the parts are joined is it a symbol, and, eventually, it becomes a symbol of something else. Here, it represents the spiritual reality of friendship and, beyond personal friendship, the friendship of families, and the right to hospitality. Here—and this goes for all symbols—the symbol is a visible sign of an invisible reality. Therefore, two dimensions of the symbol must be considered: the external can reveal the internal, the visible the invisible, and the physical the spiritual. Something specific can reveal the general. When we interpret, we seek the invisible reality behind the visible and the connections between the two. The symbol is marked by an excess of meaning; we will never completely exhaust its meanings.

The symbol is inherently connected with what it represents; the two cannot be separated. This distinguishes it from the sign. Signs are statements defined by common consensus; although they too are representations, they have no excess meaning. Consider the sign “knife crossed with fork,” meaning restaurant. The knife and fork might conceivably be replaced by some other arrangement. We could just as well accept a bowl and a spoon. A sign depicts nothing cryptic. It has a purely representative function that indicates something. Signs can be replaced, and are re-

placed to suit the current trends (e.g., the sign for railroad).

Symbols cannot be replaced by agreement. The color red, for instance: we associate red with blood; in this way, red comes to mean life, vitality, suffering, and passion. Aside from its tonal quality, a color suggests a meaning. It is unlikely that we could create a convention using the color green to symbolize everything associated with suffering, passion, and warm emotion. We cannot simply decide to ascribe a new meaning to a symbol, because its meaning is intrinsically connected with the image itself.

A sign can be rationally comprehended. It addresses the intellect, which is why signs are used in mathematics, science, and information processing. The symbol is much more irrational, cannot quite be grasped, and has a lot to do with emotions; it is therefore to be found in the humanities, religion, and art.

A sign, however, can assume the characteristics of a symbol. Take numbers, for example. A number is a sign. It is agreed that two is a sign for two units, and thus represents a quantity. But a number can also be considered qualitatively. The number thirteen is the sign for thirteen units, while—in terms of quality—we might say thirteen is an unlucky number. It is assigned a content, or quality. Signs can easily evolve into symbols, particularly when we approach the world with a symbolizing attitude.

THE APPEARANCE OF SYMBOLS

We experience symbols in dream images, fantasies, poetic imagery, fairy tales, myths, and art. Symbols can appear and be created quite spontaneously.

An example of a spontaneously created symbol.—During a discussion following a lecture on love relationships, a participant drew one billy goat after the other on a piece of paper. He drew with increasing fervor, very energeti-

cally. Then he sat back and contemplated his latest goat with satisfaction. Now the goat looked right to him.

When I asked why he chose this particular time to draw goats so enthusiastically, he looked at me in amazement—as if I were the first to inform him that he had been drawing billy goats. We agreed that this was a case of spontaneous formation of symbols. But a symbol for what? A symbol for the lecturer? For a participant in the discussion? For a repressed part of the lecture? (The sexual aspect had been left open.) Of course, the goat might also have been a symbol for the man at that particular moment. Perhaps he felt a bit like a billy goat. We playfully tried to relate this symbol to an actual occurrence in his life. Suddenly he said, “Now I remember—it’s because I saw some illustrations from ‘The Wolf and the Seven Kids’ this morning.” I looked at him, puzzled. I saw a billy goat, not a wolf. He noticed my confusion: “Oh, I guess it couldn’t be that after all, since it isn’t a wolf.”

On closer examination of the fairy tale, one wonders why the nanny goat did not have a billy goat. Where was the father? He could have protected the children. I communicated these thoughts to the doodler and he told me that he had had an argument with his wife that morning. The fight had been about him, the frequently absent father. Now the doodler understood his billy-goat symbol.

Of course, he could have settled for other interpretations. However, it is typical that we are satisfied once a particular interpretation makes sense to us emotionally.

Symbols retain their significance for a certain length of time, and the symbols fill our life with their meaning. At some point these symbols recede into the background and others become important. We can reconstruct a person’s background from the symbols with which he or she lives, and we will recognize a pattern, for symbols have a time of origin, of blossoming, and of passing.

Symbols arise not only during long therapeutic processes, but can spontaneously surface in real-life situations. The question is only whether we anticipate and pay attention to them.

SYMBOLIC ACTS

First, let me cite an example. A woman felt the need to have a diamond set into her wedding ring. This was a symbolic act. She and her husband had just come through a difficult crisis; they had been in therapy, where they fought it out tooth and nail. In the end, when they both realized that they wanted to live together—not simply as a lazy compromise, but because they truly cared for each other—the woman said, “Now I want to have a diamond set in my wedding ring.”

This was a highly symbolic desire. But the husband said, “You always want something material.”

He had little sense for symbols and symbolic gestures. To him, her desire meant that, if this relationship were to continue, he had to pay once again. He experienced her request as a repetition of a pattern and overlooked the symbolic content of the wish: “To renew the wedding ring, renew the bond—with a ‘star,’” as the wife put it. To her it meant having found the way out of darkness, having a new “star” to follow. She interpreted it as understanding the old relationship under a new star.

This example illustrates that it is possible not to see beyond the concrete object. If this happens in connection with therapy, it is the therapist’s responsibility to turn the emotional attention to symbols and point out their hidden message. It is foolish to claim a person has no sense for symbols without first trying to acquaint him or her with their meaning. Of course, the opposite also occurs: some individuals see symbols in everything and everyone. Symbols address our intellect much less than they do our universal perspective and our relatedness to the invisible reality that transcends us. A person who allows only visible reality to count has great difficulty with symbols and symbolic thought and attempts to make every symbol into a sign.

THE SYMBOLIZING ATTITUDE

Certain symbols arise in particular situations; we perceive them in dreams as images or fantasies we cannot suppress. But the symbolizing attitude can also be employed by the ego, as the following example illustrates.

An example for the symbolizing attitude.—A man was driving his car and at the same time discussing his career plans with his girlfriend. He was absorbed in talking and absorbed in driving. As the traffic got heavier, he started to swear; then they hit a traffic jam. He said, “Oh, now we’re stuck. It’s absurd to drive when you know you’re going to get stuck.” Suddenly he became thoughtful and said, “Why didn’t I understand? It’s a symbol! Now I know what it means: If I pursue the plans I’ve just developed, I’ll get into a jam in the end, and we’ll be stuck in our relationship. We’ll lose our freedom. What a miserable feeling.”

In a way, the traffic jam served the purpose of drawing his attention to the possibility that the plan he had formulated might have a dangerous aspect.

To symbolize is to discover the hidden meaning in a concrete situation. There is a mysterious side to concrete daily reality, and it always has something to do with us. This point of view is too extreme for some people, especially if they doubt the purpose of symbols. Symbols can indicate what the future holds in store, but tend to do so far too subtly to state in linear terms what might be good about a situation.

Nonetheless, we can certainly ask ourselves whether concrete things might not after all have a hidden meaning. The traffic jam is a viable symbol for the obstructions we create for ourselves. We should recognize collective situations as symbols for collective problems and accept that we are inevitably a part of the collective. We would consequently be able to effect change in this area. The question of hidden meaning is also a question of meaning itself.

Jungian psychology has been repeatedly called “addicted to meaning.” The symbolizing attitude does indeed form the core of Jungian therapy. It is reflected in the theoretical concept of interpretation on the objective and subjective level, in the concept that what is outside is inside, and that the microcosmic is also macrocosmic. Moreover, to symbolize is a perfectly natural human attitude. When standing by the sea, for instance, we first perceive the ocean with every one of our senses. We might then perceive what we feel; and usually we discover that the sea is not just water, but can also communicate the experience of infinity. The subjects “I and Infinity,” or “I and the Rhythm of Eternal Coming and Going” begin to occupy us. When we contemplate the sea for a long time we sense other aspects of our psyche, and in the end we find that a great deal can be said about the sea.

In this case the symbolizing attitude is a means of projection. We project our unconscious onto manifest reality. We cannot, however, project any subject we choose, but, depending on the symbol, only subjects that truly have an inner connection with our existence. Symbolizing implies inquiring into the hidden reality behind manifest reality, as well as observing the manifest in the mirror of the unknown, hidden reality.

ACCEPTING SYMBOLS

In order to actually experience symbols as symbols—and it is experience that counts in the end—in order to see them as more than signs, we must be prepared to respond emotionally.

An example to illustrate increasing readiness to accept symbols.—A thirty-five-year-old man, who was in therapy, said, “I had a dream-fragment about a seven-year-old child crying. I was impatient in my dream, and wanted the child to stop crying.” He casually remarked that the dream had

no significance, because all children cry, which was why he did not want children. He was not married. He did not want to concern himself further with this dream-fragment.

Since the dreamer had no initial affinity to the symbol, it was my responsibility to establish contact to the symbol. If the dreamer had had children of this age, I might have wondered if he was just as impatient with them. It was also conceivable that in his neighborhood there was a child of about the same age, who always cried.

In order to establish contact to the symbol, we first examine concrete life conditions and then deal with the hidden meaning.

What did the child represent? Did it stand for his own childhood, or for the idea of being a child? I established the connection to the analysand's childhood with the question, "What kind of child were you when you were about seven years old?"

He said: "Oh, you know, I was a crybaby. I wasn't a real boy at all. I'd rather not talk about it."

I visualized the boy and said: "I can imagine you were the kind of rejected child I'd want to buy ice cream for."

He: "Why, do you like boys who cry?"

I: "They make me want to comfort them and make them laugh."

He: "Aha."

The questions and my fantasy caused him to sense the seven-year-old child inside him, and to recognize that this child still existed within him.

For weeks we attempted to keep in touch with this aspect, made possible by my intuition about the analysand's childhood. And thus we achieved contact with the symbol.

Once we relate to a symbol, everything connected with the symbol suddenly comes alive. In the case of the symbol "child," memories are activated, such as: What kind of child was I? What was it like to be a child? How do I cope with my own children? And then the awareness of life we had as children reawakens: The future is still ahead of me, just wait till I grow up. This symbol represents our personal childhood, but it also symbolizes the open future, the will

to live, and constant renewal. Although we know that we are adults, and are fixed in our ideas, the symbol of the child brings up the feeling of becoming anew, of setting out, and the danger in going forth. To be aware of this feeling is of particular importance to those who have a hard time in life.

Once actively accepted, a symbol can stimulate a whole palette of psychic experiences, from memories to expectations, but only if we contact it emotionally. If we fail to do so, no matter how much mythology or how many myths of the "divine child" we discuss, the effect will be immaterial. But at least we would know we had had a very significant dream; and sometimes that can have an effect and give rise to a feeling that something meaningful is happening spontaneously in our life. However, all the force contained in the symbol, the energy inherent in it, is released only if we can emotionally accept it.

Once a symbol has gained meaning, or we have succeeded in emotionally accepting a symbol, we begin to deal with all its implications. A precise and simple definition can never be formulated. Even if one particular interpretation seems obvious, or a relatively straightforward definition is found, we can usually discover further interpretations that are justified by the evident criteria, while someone else may find yet another interpretation. This is characteristic of symbols.

A multitude of associations can be compressed within a single symbol. This is aggravating to our desire for directness. But for our need of mystery and meaning it is a gold mine.

However, symbols also awaken memories we would rather forget, and expectations that distress because we cannot incorporate them into the self-image we have created. This is why defense mechanisms are to be expected when we accept symbols or work with symbols.

Despite difficulties, despite the defense mechanisms, it is true that once a symbol is emotionally meaningful, it channels our interests, and we recognize it when we come across it in art, literature, and conversations. We begin to

remember our personal history—and much of the past becomes visible in the perspective of the activated symbol—but we also remember humanity's past as we know it from mythology, fairy tales, art, and literature. Anticipation is connected with the appearance of symbols, and, contrary to reason, hope for the chance at a better life.

THE FORMATION OF SYMBOLS AS A PROCESS

Even when a fundamental symbol surfaces, it is rarely considered and experienced as a sudden major enlightenment. Frequently, a symbol approaches consciousness through a symbolic process.

To illustrate this, I am including a series of paintings by a forty-two-year-old woman. The paintings were created for the most part outside the therapeutic situation, and indicate *the formation of symbols relating to a mother complex*. I knew the woman from a series of one-week workshops on the subject "Fairy Tales as Therapy." Between the previous workshop and the one in question, the woman had lost her older sister to cancer. This triggered a serious identity crisis, culminating in the question, "Do I now have to be the woman my sister was?" Her sister's death caused her to become depressed.

When experiences of loss call forth depression rather than mourning, the question arises whether the individual exhibits depressive tendencies in other situations as well. This was confirmed by a picture the woman had painted about two years previously (cf. color plate 1).

The picture conveys a gloomy mood: in the center a woman in a dark cloak sits next to a raven, which can be understood not only as a symbol for melancholy, but also of deep wisdom and mysticism. The picture, which is composed horizontally, represents a problem related to dealing with the world, since we take a horizontal position when we settle in the world. The amount and height of sky,

compared to the narrow band of earth, is striking. The picture communicates an overwhelmingly gray and powerful spiritual mood. The woman is faceless; the trees are bare. The overall impression is one of psychic winter.

Ominous clouds gather behind the tree under which the woman sits. She seems to be the center of a problem. The trees stand somewhat to the left, an area associated with the collective unconscious.² From that sector we might expect life to be stabilized—from the inside rather than from active, external life.

We can assume the woman has been subject to melancholy moods, and now experienced her sister's death as if a part of herself had died. Therefore, she had to go through a transformative process, which the process of mourning usually is; she had to become herself again.³ The woman was participating in a workshop in which we examined the fairy tale "The Girl with the Little Moon on Her Forehead."⁴ The fairy tale was about separation from the good mother and confrontation with the evil mother. The good mother was represented by a cow—the symbol for the maternal archetype, or the maternal in a collective form.

Once the positive maternal archetype is evoked, once an individual has experienced a positive maternal aspect, it remains present on an unconscious level, ready to become constellated in times of crisis and need.

In the fairy tale the cow is clearly a form of the mother, and thus the cow offers protection and comfort to the child; it effects a transformation by confronting the evil figures. Another key issue in the fairy tale is rejection and over-coming rejection.

In the workshops, the fairy tales are envisioned while read aloud. The participants then tell each other which passages are important to them and their experiences.⁵ This woman could not visualize the cow, but she had no trouble identifying with the abandoned, rejected girl and her confrontation with the evil mother. I insisted that in this fairy tale there was not only the abandoned girl with a terrible mother, but also a helpful cow. Prompted by my very de-

terminated statement, "But there is a good, golden cow in this fairy tale," the woman painted the cow (cf. color plate 2).

In the fairy tale, the cow is yellow. Of course this leads us to think of gold; yellow and gold are solar and cognitive, while cows usually tend to be earth colored. In addition, the yellow cow was directly related to the moon on the girl's forehead and the star on her chin. This indicated that the cow was to mediate a brighter life with greater insight, which would help overcome depression.

In contrast to the first picture, the second (color plate 2) presents a better proportion between sky and earth. The girl and the golden yellow cow now replace the trees. By insisting that the cow existed, I had reminded the woman of a symbol she had repressed. I led her to accept the positive aspect of the maternal archetype in her world view; this does not mean that it would stay that way, nor that the negative aspects had been overcome. Despite a great deal of initial resistance, the woman became increasingly fascinated by the cow.

After the workshop, which I will not describe in detail at this point, the woman went home and continued to paint. At a particular phase of the workshop we had followed the fairy tale girl's path through the varied waters of the stream. The girl had to pass through green, red, black and, finally, white water. The woman, identifying with the girl, walked through the black water. She felt a strong undertow and had difficulty getting out of the water. One could say she was drawn by the "death-mother's" undertow, and, consequently, one might conjecture that the woman had a tendency to identify with her sister's death (cf. fig. 1).

Images that are mentally painful become tangible and are easier to confront once they are drawn. We can relate to the artistic product and detach ourselves from the problem by simultaneously looking at and working on it. We cease to identify with the problem and the first step toward coming to consciousness has been taken.

In her picture a bright yellow light shines into the blackness from the right, the side we associate with conscious-



Figure 1

ness; an opening to the "you" is still present. On the lower left side we can make out fragmentary trees that may have been left over from the first picture. The painter's fear of being destroyed is apparent. On the one hand, the picture is centrifugal, while, on the other, there is a pull toward the lower left corner. It conveys the impression of a tunnel, a passage, a birth canal, which brings up the subject of rebirth and the passage from depression to light. Vital consciousness appears blackened or still black; the color of the raven is back again. But black also symbolizes beginnings, the yet undecided, and, of course, despair. This situation was recorded in Color Plate 3. The artist wrote the following:

The girl in the black river—she's black. The river tunnel is black with a gray opening. The girl is terribly frightened that she'll be pulled back, deep into the river. But suddenly I saw the golden yellow cow look into the tunnel. I started a conversation with the girl and the cow. The cow wanted to coax the girl out, but it didn't

work. And since the cow couldn't pull her out, I thought, well, that means she can't get out.

The painter was deeply influenced by immersing herself in the symbolic process; she clearly identified with the girl and expressed the process in an imaginative form through her painting.⁶ In the fourth picture the cow and the girl stand at the center. Looking at the cow is like gazing into a deep mirror; the cow's perspective transforms the entire painting. The girl is reflected in the face of the cow, in the face of the positive, maternal aspect. Thus, the despairing blackness constellated the golden cow. Or, to put it differently, the negative aspect of the archetype constellated the positive aspect as well, in an effort of self-regulation. But nothing was yet happening in the realm of experience, the woman was unaware that life can be supportive, not only threatening; beyond blackness and death there is also something that sustains life.

But then the painter remembered a magic wand from another fairy tale on which she had worked. The memory could be viewed as the influence of the positive maternal archetype. The painter remembered the transformative powers of the magic wand and suddenly saw the situation from a new perspective: as long as we live there is creative potential. This was in response to the positive maternal aspect as opposed to the negative that believes only in death. All at once, the woman knew how the girl would get out of the tunnel (cf. color plate 4).

The cow senses that it won't work and transforms the girl into a calf. As a calf she can climb out; as a calf she has a mother of her own kind; as a girl she would have been alone.

Through the reflection the girl became a calf. Archetypal images are also effective in the sense that we see ourselves in the mirror of the archetype. In this example, although the child was carried off by the black tide, she did have a nurturing life-mother, and, in this respect, gained a sense of belonging to life. Consequently, the woman could say that the girl was no longer alone. The girl

was transformed, so to speak, by being seen. A very intimate symbiosis was initiated on a symbolic level.

The painter said the next picture came to her spontaneously (cf. color plate 5). The cow is nursing the calf and licking it.

Naturally, this picture is very embarrassing to me because of regressive desires and so on. . . . I am completely surprised at the last scene because, for the first time, I do not feel emotionally repulsed and disgusted by identifying with the drinking calf. Instead there is a very pleasant feeling. I feel warmth and skin around my nose. The fact that the girl has made her way out of the tunnel is far more important than the feeling of shame.

In this picture, the horizon has moved up considerably, there is a lot more earth, a lot more world in which to live. The birth canal is still evident. What is illustrated here is a symbiosis on an archetypal level. While the painter could now emotionally experience life as nurturing and protective, she was still ashamed of these regressive tendencies, and this was because she identified with the calf and apparently identified me with the cow.

The symbolic processes initiated in a therapeutic environment can continue to evoke transference/countertransference situations outside therapy. Transference and countertransference are even more striking when symbolic processes are perceived, experienced, and represented during the course of therapy. Although the representation of symbolic processes sometimes obscures the developing relationship, the two are never observed in isolation from each other.

When we work on symbolic processes, there are some attitudes that empower, and others that inhibit. Conscious defense mechanisms have an effect on the symbolic process. Symbolic processes move from an indefinite plane to the definite, and from chaos to significance, but they are also influenced by the relevant defense mechanisms. There are relapses to levels we thought we had already overcome.

This was clearly illustrated by another very dark picture (fig. 2). The only contrast to the blackness is provided by



Figure 2

the little yellow calf emerging from the black woman and the yellow mother cow peering through the narrow opening to the right. Perhaps the dark mother is constellated again because of our criticism of the previous picture, in which we recognized the woman's vacillation between the plane of personal transference, where she identified me with the cow, and the plane of symbolic transference. This kind of symbiosis, which is illustrated and expressed on the archetypal plane of vision, can lead us to accept desires for closeness and affection in a preverbal atmosphere, without one person being exploited or another feeling ashamed. However, if we realize that a personal transference is taking place, or that the archetypal image is being transferred onto a person, and that we have thus allowed ourselves to become dependent on a person, we activate every reaction available to us. This is why the painter felt ashamed; she had laid bare her desire to realize herself in this positive situation, and declared her aspirations to be inappropriate. But shame always implies deep insecurity. We treat our-

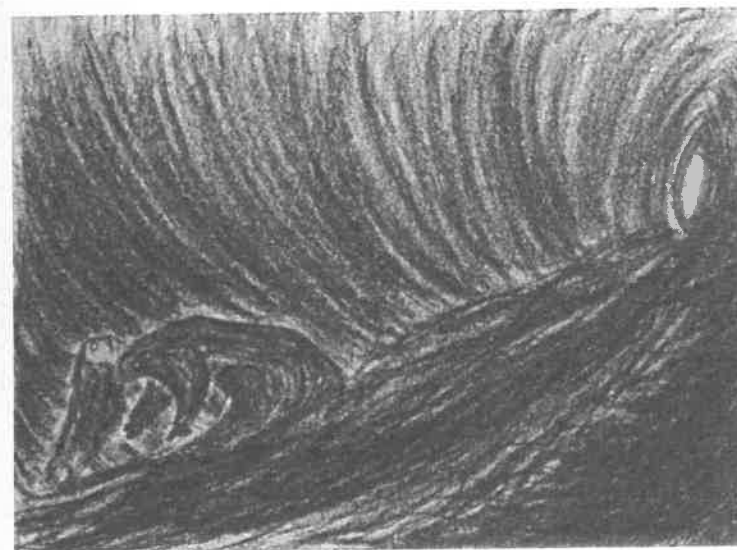


Figure 3

selves the way a mother who wants us to be ashamed would treat us. This is one possible explanation of the black figure's reappearance.

The other possibility is that a counter-constellation had to take shape because the positive maternal archetype had been emphasized so much in the previous paintings. The archetypal mother can never be revealed with only her bright aspect. If life is not to be illusionary and depressive, both light and dark sides of the archetype have to come together.

The picture represented an attempt to allow the dark woman to give birth to the little calf. It was a step backward to ensure that something new had truly been created. The calf, as symbol for new and positive potential, was meant to defy the painter's black thoughts and feelings.

At first, however, as shown in Figure 3, this failed entirely. At the lower left, the black woman is sucked up into a vortex. The yellow has completely disappeared. The entire picture is black and conveys a backward pull. But still

there is a counter-current pulling her toward the opening of the tunnel or birth canal. Although the opening has contracted, its presence suggests that the access to the "you" still exists. The painter, meanwhile, seemed to have come under the influence of the dark, devouring aspect of the maternal archetype; she was in despair and very depressed.

In her next picture (cf. color plate 6), it is clear that out of the darkness a birth has taken place. Dark and light aspects are experienced together. The black woman has stepped out onto the meadow; we can relate to her. The little calf looks curiously at the cow, and the cow, in turn, relates to the black woman. The painter explained that because the cow did not pay attention to the little calf, it had to leave. The entire forsaken-and-alone complex was identified with the calf, which in my opinion did not look forsaken at all, but rather bold. It is obvious that the subject of separation anxiety will be dealt with further. Moreover, this picture reasserts that a double birth has taken place: First, the little calf was born out of the light, but it was also born out of the darkness. This indicates that the maternal archetype was experienced both in its light and its dark aspects, and that, despite the dark aspect, life is possible. A first phase of the separation anxiety, with which we are familiar from the separation-individuation phase in children (sixth to thirty-sixth month⁷), has been reached; a first step toward separation has been taken—a step toward autonomy without danger of destruction. The subject "separation" is still present and will have to be dealt with further.

At this point in the creation of the picture series (the series had taken three months to paint), the woman asked to discuss it with me, because she felt an important symbolization process was unfolding.

This example demonstrated that symbols are rarely made accessible to consciousness in a single creative act. Symbols are usually brought to our conscious awareness through symbolic processes. The important thing is to ex-

perience these processes, shape them, and, finally, interpret them.

Each picture symbolized an aspect of development. Defense mechanisms, as well as situations of relationship and transference, played an essential part.

In this woman's experience, the pictures she created, the manifest as it were, also represented the thing itself in a mysterious relationship to life's hidden, supportive potentials that cannot be fully understood, but can be experienced.

SYMBOLS AND THE GOAL OF THERAPY

When we recognize symbols in a therapeutic process, we feel more alive, more emotional. A confrontation takes place between consciousness and the unconscious.

Not only our current difficulties, but also our unique potentials in life and development become visible in the symbol. Indeed, within difficulties lie the potentials of development.

Symbols communicate inhibitions; they often evoke memories repressed in earlier life. At the same time they address a motif that points to the future. The symbol, as the focal point of psychic development, is the foundation of creative development in a therapeutic process. The process of individuation can be experienced and recognized in symbols.

The basic assumption of Jungian psychology is that the psyche, a self-regulating system, has an inherent tendency to develop, to be in motion. The goal of Jungian therapy is based on the idea of development. In 1929, Jung formulated this idea in an essay as follows:

My aim is to bring about a psychic state in which my patient begins to experiment with his own nature—a state of fluidity, change, and growth where nothing is eternally fixed and hopelessly petrified.⁸

This utopian goal illustrates what the aim of therapy should be: that people are no longer fixated; that they become flexible; that they learn to accept many possible influences in their lives. As an ideal, I believe the goal formulated above by Jung is still very inspiring. But an equally essential goal in therapy should be to learn to deal with "dry spells," to endure stagnation until it truly becomes something new, and to endure tension without counting on the promise of success.

Jung's optimistic formulation of his aim in therapy can be explained as the euphoria of a pioneer. It is a bit harder for those who follow. We have become more practical, and perhaps more modest. But in therapy, our aim is still to have direction, to cope with periods of stagnation, and to deal creatively with our lives. Above all, we aim to accept ourselves as developing beings, with all the rough edges that define us as individuals. The goal, as contained in Jung's definition, is to take on the risk of the self, to risk being ourselves. Fromm phrases the idea forcefully when he says that there are people who have not yet been born, and that you have to be born before you can die.⁹ According to Fromm, we are born through creativity.

The creative development that leads to the therapeutic goal becomes visible in the symbol, and is communicated to consciousness by the symbol. In the essay "The Transcendent Function" (1916)¹⁰ Jung wrote extensively about the formation of symbols. He described how conscious and unconscious tendencies can confront each other and be revealed in a symbol acting as a third factor; the opposing positions of consciousness and the unconscious are bridged by the symbol. Jung explained the energy of the process according to the concepts of depth psychology: when opposites collide, or conscious and unconscious intentions oppose one another, psychic dynamics come to a standstill. The psychic energy activates an image in the unconscious that unites both positions. The image is projected onto the present life and at the same time reveals which tendencies are opposed. Usually, we experience opposing tendencies as tension.

The way Jung described the formation of symbols in 1916, particularly as far as the incubation phase is concerned, is basically how we define the creative process today. In the creative process, incubation is the second phase. In the first phase, we attempt in vain to solve problems with old methods. We gather considerable information in hope of finding a solution. At some point we give up, because we know that our approach will not lead to the goal. The incubation phase begins. We lose concentration, tension. Conscious concentration is replaced by the activated unconscious while in our conscious mind we feel frustrated, anxious, dissatisfied. We indulge in amassed fantasies and remember dreams. The same incubation phase occurs when we must make small decisions. Suddenly we are indecisive; we feel frustrated, fed up; our self-esteem is considerably diminished. Everyday language has several idioms for the incubation phase, such as, "I'm mulling it over," or, "It's percolating, but I feel so undecided, so unproductive." And then, all at once, we know what to do.

In the creative process, the incubation phase is usually followed by a phase of recognition and inspiration. This inspiration may very well become accessible to consciousness in the form of a symbol.

The definition of the creative process¹¹ corresponds to Jung's 1916 definition of the process of symbolization. Basically, Jung's idea is that by working with symbols in multiple creative acts we finally become ourselves.

Processes of change within the psyche's self-regulating system¹² effect a transformation of the ego complex and of experience without causing us to lose our original identity. These processes are presented to consciousness through symbols and the formation of symbols. It would be wrong to consider only the moment when symbols first appear to be of importance in these processes. Though both the symbolic process and the creative process can be recognized in the first flash of a new idea, or in the experience of a new vital consciousness, they are essentially preceded by a long period of insecurity, frustration, and difficult con-

scious conflicts. Jung's observation that the psyche is a self-regulating system may not be true in the exclusive sense as he defines it. As long as the ego complex is sufficiently coherent, the psyche seems to function as a self-regulating system. I will deal with this subject in depth in the chapter "Aspects of the Ego Complex."

Aspects of the Complex

CHAPTER THREE

SYMBOLS ARE FOCAL POINTS of human development. They contain existential themes in condensed form, and they address themes of development, which are inevitably accompanied by inhibitions. This becomes clear when we consider that symbols represent complexes. Jung says complexes develop their own unique fantasy life. In sleep, fantasy appears as a dream, but even while awake we continue to dream beneath the threshold of consciousness "especially when under the influence of repressed or other unconscious complexes."¹

As early as 1916 Jung had referred to content characterized by a common emotional tone as the starting point of imagination, fantasy, and image sequences, and therefore the starting point of symbolization. Complexes are energy centers clustered around an emotionally charged core of meaning, presumably called forth by the individual's painful collision with a demand or an occurrence in the environment with which he or she cannot cope. The complex determines the interpretation of each similar event and thus intensifies it. The mood and emotion that express this complex are preserved and even magnified.² Complexes represent those areas in an individual that are susceptible to crisis. They are, however, active as energy centers and are transmitted by emotions. They make up the greater portion of psychic life. Much within complexes hinders continued personal development of the individual, yet herein also lie