



Symbols of Transformation

Module 4: using symbols for
moving through and healing
experiences of loss and trauma

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Module 4: Using symbols for moving through and healing experiences of loss and trauma

In the fourth module, I will help you symbolise a trauma or loss and teach you how to create a transcendent symbol. It is important to understand that the loss or trauma is a symbol, and as we affect symbols, they affect us. You will never be the same person you were before an event that has left you traumatised; this change is permanent. But sometimes we get stuck and we don't move into the space where we should be, after assimilating the experience. What we are going to do during this module is to help you heal and by that I mean assimilate, grow and expand because of your experience.

This module will focus on the process of symbolising your loss or pain, identifying a symbol to help you move process and move through the experience. It will also teach you how to create a transcendent symbol, which aids in the healing and assimilation of the trauma.

The human condition is littered with experiences of loss and trauma. Everyone will experience losing a loved one, or losing themselves and losing their health. It is inevitable. In this world nothing lasts forever. Yet, we are not prepared when it happens and we often have no idea how to process it. It certainly cannot be fixed by going on a weekend workshop! It takes time, and is often painful and confusing. Moving through it takes enormous amounts of emotional energy. It is not something you can work through rationally. It is an irrational, emotional experience that seemingly is unresolvable. I read somewhere that most people experience loss as an abandonment by god. This is profound, as it reflects that these experiences affect one on a spiritual level and often triggers an existential crisis. In this situation you simply can't pull yourself together and move on. There needs to be a process of grieving and acceptance. In this module, I will share a tool for coping or engaging with your loss in a meaningful way, and help you heal your pain and trauma.



How symbols can heal

Symbols can play a powerful role in the process of healing and recovery. People who have suffered the loss of a loved one or loss of health and find themselves stuck and unable to shift, need to work through the loss and distress to find meaning and purpose. As a human being, we need to believe that our experiences are meaningful and that it happened for a reason, or at the very least that it makes sense at some level. People who are unable to find meaning become paralysed in their grief and this is experienced as depression and feeling stuck. Unless you are able to symbolise these experiences, the ego will remain fragmented and the wound cannot heal. Jung stated that an invaluable tool in creating meaning is symbolisation. But how do we symbolise our experiences to gain meaning from it?

The most basic form of symbolisation is speaking about your experiences. Just telling your story to someone else is cathartic and healing. The act of speaking moves the pain and trauma from yourself and your own experience to a story that is both unique to you and also part of the collective condition of being human, accessing the archetypal dynamics of it. The act of speaking about it brings your feelings and emotions in about the experience into consciousness. Emotional pain isolates one and no one can really know or understand how you feel, but in sharing your story of your pain, you will express it, compare it to something, give it words and a name and a description. This process is an act of symbolisation.

For example the following passage by Jonathan Safran Foer.

'He awoke each morning with the desire to do right, to be a good and meaningful person, to be, as simple as it sounded and as impossible as it actually was, happy.

And during the course of each day his heart would descend from his chest into his stomach.

By early afternoon he was overcome by the feeling that nothing was right, or nothing was right for him, and by the desire to be alone.



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By evening he was fulfilled: alone in the magnitude of his grief, alone in his aimless guilt, alone even in his loneliness.

I am not sad, he would repeat to himself over and over, I am not sad.

As if he might one day convince himself.

Or fool himself.

Or convince others – the only thing worse than being sad is for others to know that you are sad.

I am not sad.

I am not sad.

Because his life had unlimited potential for happiness, insofar as it was an empty white room.

He would fall asleep with his heart at the foot of his bed, like some domesticated animal that was no part of him at all.

And each morning he would wake with it again in the cupboard of his rib cage, having become a little heavier, a little weaker, but still pumping.

And by the mid-afternoon he was again overcome with the desire to be somewhere else, someone else, someone else somewhere else.

I am not sad.'

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is illuminated*

Of course this was written by a gifted writer, but you can see the power in the symbolism of the imagery. He is explaining something that many people experience but cannot express. The writing contains the isolation, sadness, anguish and physical distress that this person is dealing



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with on a daily basis. In telling this narrative, he doesn't cure it, but he names it, describes it, and comes to understand the physical and emotional impact as well as the quality of his experience. The words themselves take on symbolic meaning. It is now possible for him to relate to this experience in a different way, because he has changed his perspective on it. He has created something from his pain and in sharing this he empowers others who are able to relate to these feelings.

Reflecting on how others described their experience of profound loss, I recall that one of the students said that she felt as if her head had split open; another that she felt as if she was erased. This symbolic language captures their pain and suffering in a very personal and descriptive way. Taking a closer look at these descriptions would be able us to explore the nuances and subtle ways in which they were experiencing their loss.

There are many ways to symbolise one's experience, not only through writing, but also through art, by creating different expression such as poetry, photography, drama, sculpting, clay work or any creative activity. To give expression to the pain is often a healing experience in itself.

Moving through distress

A further step to using symbolism for healing is to find a symbol that can help you through your current experience of distress. Our experience of any event experienced that has a profound impact on us has a physical/material and emotional element to it, but it also affects us on a subtler unconscious level. This unconscious trauma takes its toll on us in many ways and it is often impossible to consciously realise the effects of the suffering. When you are in distress, your psyche will naturally be attracted to a symbol that can heal you and move you through your ordeal. Jung said that the most serious psychological crises cannot be overcome, but only outgrown. This is the goal of the symbol. Symbols are teleological and move one into the future. Using symbols to heal trauma and loss are both powerful and profound.



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Many people find this solace in nature, or being with animals. Some have a dream or a numinous experience; but it can be anything: any object that transports you to another place, another time and a different way of being contains this magical elixir of healing. The symbol helps you to move beyond your current experience into the future.

The following passage from Clive Barker is a beautiful description of this kind of symbolisation.

'I remember a window in a farmhouse in North Wales which had a sill of whitewashed stone so deep I could sit sideways in it at the age of six, hugging my knees to my chin. From that spying place I had a view of the orchard of apple trees behind the house. The orchard seemed large to me at the time, though in retrospect it probably contained fewer than twenty trees. In the heat of the afternoon the farmyard cats, having exerted themselves mousing, went there to doze, and I went to hunt through the unkempt grass for eggs laid by nomadic hens. Beyond the orchard was a low wall, with ancient, mossy stile. And beyond the wall an expanse of rolling meadow, grazed by sheep, with the sea a misty blue prospect.

I have little way of knowing how accurate these memories are; well over forty years have passed since I was small enough to sit in that window niche. The photographs my parents took of those distant summers are still pasted in the musty pages of my mother's album, but they are tiny, black and white, often blurred. There are, it's true, a couple of pictures of cats dozing. But none of the orchard, or the wall, or the meadow. And none of the windowsill where I sat.

Perhaps it doesn't matter how accurate my memories are; all that matters is how powerfully they move me. I still conjure that place in my dreams, and when I wake I have the details clear in my head. The smell of the night-light my mother set on the dresser in my bedroom, the dapple beneath the trees, the warmth and weight of an egg found in the grass and carried into the kitchen like unearthed treasure. The dreams are



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all the evidence I need. I was there once, blissfully happy. And though I cannot tell you how, I believe I will be there again.'

Clive Barker, *Weave World*

Not only does the writer describes a numinous memory, you can see the level of magic and meaning he imbues the memory with. He also conveys his desire to return to this blissful, happy state, it also incorporates the elements of happiness and contentment that he desires. A simple story saturated with symbolism that will help him to overcome obstacles he would otherwise struggle to move through.

In the movie *Wild (2014)* with Reese Witherspoon, she finds herself in a drugstore when she is at her lowest and most broken. At the drugstore she picks up a pamphlet about the Pacific Crest hiking trail. She instinctively knows that this is what she needs to do. This was her symbol. Completely ill equipped and ignorant, she sets off on this hike, starting a healing process of returning back towards her authentic self. This is a great example of a healing symbol.

The Transcendent Function

Jung believed that the psyche is a self-healing, self-regulating system. When we experience a tremendous internal conflict, where the distress is intense and there does not seem to be a way out, the psyche will naturally produce a symbol to resolve this issue. So, referring again to the movie *Wild*, her transcendent symbol was the Pacific Crest hike. I am sure that when she was lost in her addiction, the last thing anyone would have suggested to her was a 1000 mile hike. The normal suggestion or route would have been rehab or therapy, but for her, the symbol that was given to her by her psyche was this hiking trail. This again is a good example that the symbol is often not what you expect as the resolution to the problem.



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I will introduce you to the transcendent function and guide you through this process in the applications section in this document.

In life, at times, we are faced with situations that seems to have no clear resolution. Their seems to be no possibility of finding a working solution or resolving the situation in any way. This experience can lead to severe depression, lethargy and distress. This is also true for those of us who had suffered a severe loss or trauma. The potential of moving beyond the trauma, and not being defined by it, seems to be illusive and out of reach. In these situations, I suggest that you work with symbols in order to bring about a transformation of the situation. Jung understood that the greatest problems in life are not resolvable on their own terms and the only thing that one can do is to grow beyond it and not be petrified and emotionally frozen. This is the mysterious quality of the transcendent function. The key to its effectiveness is that it does not follow a linear path or enact a rational solution, but instead brings about an irrational, mysterious resolution that allows for a transformational jump in consciousness.

The practice of the transcendent function allows you to symbolize the two opposing, conflicting situations that you are grappling with and allowing for a third symbol to arise. This third symbol that is born from the tension between the initial two paradoxical symbols, will allow for a new movement, a resolution which is beyond conscious understanding.

When we speak about a transcendent symbol, it is a pre-requisite to have the two conflicting sides, the paradox, clearly defined in consciousness. So in other words, in relation to a situation that seems irresolvable, the idea is to clearly define the paradox. For example: let us imagine that you are out of work and the only work available to you is far away and you will need to leave your family in order to provide for them. In this case you would create a symbol that represents the wound on the one hand - being with your family but being unable to provide for them, and on the other hand, having a job and being able to provide for them (the redemption symbol). Or alternatively, if you are out of work and there is no prospect of work on the horizon, your first symbol, representing the wound, would be the reality of having no work, and



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your second symbol would represent the redemptive symbol, which would be a job. Again you would need to capture these two ideas in detail in your journal and then allow the unconscious to give you the symbol. As I mentioned in the previous modules, you cannot consciously assign a symbol, it has to arise naturally and spontaneously from the unconscious. Do not exchange or reject the symbol. Work with what you are given. Once you have received your symbols, capture them in detail in your journal.

The last step in this process is your transcendent symbol. For this purpose, I would like you to draw in your journal a triangle of three circles, with the point of the triangle (third circle) facing the bottom. So in other words an upside down triangle made up of three circles in each corner. This diagram is available on the applications PDF.

Capture your symbols in the top two triangles. Reflect on each one independently, read each description in your journal and feel the accompanying emotions that the descriptions evoke in you. Now allow your unconscious to distill a third symbol into the bottom circle of the triangle. It could be a completely different symbol or a combination of the two symbols, allow your unconscious to create this for you.

Capture your transcendent symbol in your journal and any thoughts or ideas that you may have about it.

Conclusion

As with the previous module, the symbol work will drive you into the future and towards a resolution which may not be what you would have expected. Allow for the unconscious to manifest the transformation in you. Be aware of new and unexpected information or opportunities that may present itself to you. Don't be blocked by having preconceived ideas about what the resolution ought to be. Also, don't try to put a timeline on your symbol, allow the resolution to arise like the symbol, spontaneously and naturally.



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Next week is our final module, *The symbolic life*. Chat again then.

Anja

Module 4: applications

Follow the guidelines below in order to complete the applications. The main application, Application B, is creating a transcendent symbol.

Application A: symbolising a traumatic event

This application is for anyone who is carrying a wound. It could be anything from a traumatic experience, to the loss of a loved one, your health, or an internal belief that you are not able to move beyond. It could also be an experience that seems to define you but which you would like to shift and move beyond.

For the purpose of this application you can use any creative medium that attracts you. First capture your experience in detail and focus especially on your feelings and emotions. Try to find as many metaphors for these feelings, emotions and experiences.

Now allow yourself to express this as a symbol. You can imaginatively access an image, draw, paint, use clay, mosaics, poetry, etc. The focus here is to give rise to a symbol imbued with your experience.

Share your work on the Facebook forum. The sharing aspect is very important for the healing process.



Application B: creating a transcendent symbol

Reflect on the paradox or crises that you are experiencing.

In your journal, explain the wound in detail. Now allow the unconscious to give rise to a symbol. Capture this symbol in detail in your journal.

Also, explain the redemption that you seek. What do you think would be the opposite to your current situation? Explain this and capture it in your journal in detail. Allow the unconscious to give you a symbol and capture this in your journal in detail.

Now put the symbol representing the wound in Circle A and the symbol representing the redemption in Circle B (see diagram on next page).

Once you have captured your wound symbol and redemption symbol in the circles above, reflect on each of the two descriptions of your symbols. Now allow a third symbol to appear in your mind's eye for the third circle (Circle C). Remember that there should be tension between the symbols in Circles A and B, so try to hold this tension in your mind until the third symbol appears.

Capture this symbol in Circle C. Describe it in your journal in detail.

Reflect on the meaning of the transcendent symbol. You can engage the symbol in an active imagination to see what emerges further.

This is a difficult week, but I hope you have the courage to attempt these healing exercises. I look forward to hearing about your experience with this process on the forum.



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