



MAGNUM OPUS: RUBEDO

Module 4: The Symbolic Life

QUOTE

We have no symbolic life, and we are all badly in need of the symbolic life. Only the symbolic life can express the need of the soul – the daily need of the soul, mind you! And because people have no such thing, they can never step out of this mill – this awful, banal, grinding life in which they are “nothing but.” . . . Everything is banal; everything is “nothing but,” and that is the reason why people are neurotic. They are simply sick of the whole thing, sick of that banal life, and therefore they want sensation. They even want a war; they all want a war; they are all glad when there is a war; they say, “Thank heaven, now something is going to happen – something bigger than ourselves!” C.G. Jung seminar talk 1939

The Symbolic Life

Compiled by The Centre for Applied Jungian Studies



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1 <http://appliedjung.com>
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Transcript

This is the concluding module of the final stage of the Magnum Opus Programme. If you are listening to or reading this, you have completed all three prior stages of Magnum Opus: Nigredo, Albedo and Citrinitas. As we now conclude Rubedo with this module: The Symbolic Life, it seems appropriate speak about the process you have been through, its intentions -whatever your personal experience may have been, the meaning and ethos behind the development of this programme and what the journey ahead may look like. In addition to this lecture, I will be offering a live webinar and encourage you to participate, time zone allowing. This will give us a chance to discuss things and for me to personally address any questions or concluding thoughts you care to share with us. The time of the webinar will be announced on the forum. In addition to this, I hope you will share your thoughts on the forum, in completing and posting the final application.

This seems a good moment to share with you something about my own journey, and, as much as I can speak for her, the co-founder and current director of the Centre, Anneke van Kralingen (Anja). I hope you will indulge this very personal story, and, if you are able, hear it with a sympathetic ear. I am no hero, if anything, I would describe myself as quite cowardly. I am fallible, wounded and of questionable character. However, in the topic under discussion, my very fallibility, may be of some utility. Because whatever I have achieved, modest as such achievements may be, through this work, is surely within reach of the humblest personality. In a sense then, my story is



everyman's story, because I stand in, in my narrative, as a symbolic placeholder for everyman (I trust no gender bias will be read into the expression 'everyman', certainly none is intended. I am by gender male and so use the term 'man').

A story such as the one I will share with you, like any narrative tale, is a mythological creation. It is a symbolisation. It is the creation of a symbolic life. To quote a late friend of mine¹, with an aptitude of putting things plainly, "Something happened, and you made it mean something." I trust that idea speaks for itself, nevertheless given the context in which this story is being told, I will elaborate briefly.

Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst and philosopher, described three registers of activity:

- The real,
- the symbolic, and
- the imaginary.

Although Lacan, one of the greatest contributors to psychoanalytic theory in the twentieth century, was a card-carrying Freudian, and explicitly forswore Jung, there are many parallels between these two bodies of thought. The points of convergence where these theories illuminate each other is currently

¹ Michael van Rensburg, a man I came to refer to as the 'veraaier' (betrayers). It was, I confess, a complicated friendship. He died last year, 2017. We encountered Jung's work, under the guidance of the same teacher, in the late 90's, early 2000's. I never believed he quite got the work (assuming such a thing as getting it actually exists). Nevertheless, he was not without recourse to some penetrating insights on occasion.



the subject of an ongoing study, appropriately called, the Jung-Lacan dialogue. Initiated by an English psychoanalyst and academic, by the name of David Henderson.

I will not here attempt to elaborate these registers, there is an abundance of literature on them should you wish to investigate them beyond this lecture. I will keep my comments on these registers to a minimum and only in as much as they apply directly to the issue of personal myth. The register of the 'real' is naked and brutal reality. At first, as many people do, this may sound like the register in which you wish to function. On sufficient reflection though, I guarantee you, you will come to conclude, it is not. Ironically, the aspiration to the 'real' is itself a fiction or myth. What makes us human, and psychoanalysis has long understood this, but was recently brilliantly described by Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens*, is our access to and aptitude for the symbolic register. The 'imaginary' for the sake of completeness, is the mediating third between these two poles: the real and the symbolic.

Lacan, provides a useful way of understanding this. Asked, what he was listening for in his psychoanalytic sessions, he replied, unsymbolised content. To which we might add, neurotically symbolised content. The gift and hypothesis of psychoanalysis is that it can, "intervene upon the 'real' with the symbolic."² You are not the passive recipient of your myth or needn't be. On the contrary, the imperative to individuate, calls on the subject to be the co-creator of her mythological journey.

² Žižek, *Less than nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism*.



Simply put, to repeat my late friend, something happened, and you made it mean something. But, of course, that may not be all it could mean or even does mean. With that in mind, I return to my myth.

This was the year, 1999, and Anja and I, were a young couple with a young daughter, Kiva. And, we were lost. Neither of us were able to make heads or tails of this thing called life. We were a sorry pair thrown together into a mythological structure we struggled to comprehend, never mind navigate. We were to speak frankly, in dire straits. Added to which, the responsibility of having a young child to care for weighed greatly on us. We were stuck, caught in a liminal space with no obvious way forward, and no path of retreat. We had each other, and we had our child whom we both loved, but self-love or more modestly self-acceptance was in short supply. What we had in abundance was a neurotic disposition. Unable to see much but the reflection of our very poor selves, through the dark glass of our projections.

It was in this state that we were fortunate enough to encounter Jung. Of whom, at the time, neither of us knew anything. We encountered him in an unusual vessel in the form of Châtillon Coque, a poet, dramatist, and teacher of Jung's work. A man who taught or dramatized— as he preferred to put it— Jungian psychology, in a unique way. Some twenty odd years later, having completed a Master's degree in Jungian Studies, attended and been involved in a number of international Jungian conferences and been exposed to a few of the brightest minds in the Jungian universe, having read the Collected Works cover to cover, he still stands head and shoulders above any other Jungian teacher I have subsequently been privileged to learn from.



This encounter, coming at such a critical time in our lives, we were younger than most traditionally are when they first discover Jung, had a dramatic and life changing impact. Not all of it wholly pleasant. I trust by this point in your own journey and after the last year of Magnum Opus, you will concur, consciousness is not the most comfortable condition.³ Many sustaining illusions or fictions, as the Buddhist's put it, had to be given up. That is one of the most difficult aspects of the individuation journey, letting go of certain stories we have long told ourselves about why we are who we are and believe what we believe.

Despite this new discomfort and because of it, the veil of the Maya that has so trapped us, kept us small and miserable, parted.

Note: I appreciate that such a statement must sound like hubris and quite possibly it is. I am keenly aware of the psychological and social dangers of inflation.⁴ Despite the pause that such considerations give, I must now speak to you from the heart and as truthfully as I know how. Not to do so, would be to deny Christ. There comes a time in each of our lives where we can no longer sit on the fence, for doing so simply costs too much. Also, I hope there is some intimacy and trust between us after the journey we have travelled together, that can accommodate such plain speaking.

In time, a friend of ours joined “the school”, as we referred to it. Our triumvirate, would convene each week, the night after class, which was always

³ It is, to quote Garfield, that irritating things that happens in-between naps.

⁴ One only has to witness how Jordan Peterson is currently being torn apart, to see the very real demonstration of the violence and hatred anyone who dares stick his head above the crowd – and speak his truth – as JP would put it – elicits in us as a society.



on a Tuesday evening, and grapple with the material. We weren't clinicians, nor academics. We were simply three people who desperately wanted to understand the value of this work and how it might be applied to the betterment of our respective lives.

We remained on this course, part of the weekly study group and I took the further step of working privately with de Châtillon, or "the Duke" as we called him, for the best part of about seven years. There were interruptions and highs and lows in the process. It wasn't an unbroken period of solemn study, naturally life still happened and often got in the way. Still, during this time we were committed to our Jungian studies in the school.

About seven years into this process, a final break with the Duke, a notoriously difficult character, occurred. Not the first break, by any means, but the final one. But by this time though, the Jungian theoria was in our blood, and we would never look at ourselves or the world around as in the same way we had before this fateful encounter. Although thereafter Anja and my paths of study went in their individual directions, and, finally, so did we, as a couple at least, this work laid the foundation for who we were both to become and influences our lives and mythological structures to the present day.

I continued to read, study and apply Jungian theory in my life. I formalised this knowledge, with a master's degree in Jungian Studies from the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex in 2011. So radical was the impact of Jungian psychology on my life, that I committed myself to teaching it. In 2011 Anja and I co-founded The Centre for Applied Jungian Studies. This



programme you are about to complete is a product of that process and journey. Magnum Opus and its sister: The Conscious Living Programme, are our attempts to distil this vast body of knowledge into something sufficiently accessible and digestible to be offered in an online programme of this form.

Over the course of the last twenty years, since first encountering Jung, I have been occupied with the understanding and actualisation of my personal myth. I have been busy with trying to understand what it means to live life symbolically, or, if you prefer, live a symbolic life. I share my story with you, not simply or even primarily because I seek your approbation – although, naturally I do. But because, it is the best and most honest way for me to communicate to you what it has come to mean to me.

The symbolic life, is a liberation from the tyrannising effect of narrow adherence to the literal. Your shield against being browbeaten by the reductive. It is armour for your soul, to protect it and arm it against those who would seek to reduce you to a causal phenomenon, to nothing but another link in a chain of casual sequences. A narrative wherein you are reduced to a cog in a giant machine, not of your making, in which you become an epiphenomenon, rather than the sacred axis around which the cosmos itself revolves.

Once many years ago, on a family trip to Mauritius, during Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, one of the celebrants using Hena tattooed on my arm the word, 'spirit'. My sister-in-law, found me at a loss when she asked what exactly what that word meant to me. Why I had chosen it. Having the benefit of many years to reflect on what the answer to this question is: what does the word



‘spirit’ symbolise, I can now answer, the ineffable essence without which we are reduced to mechanistic meat-machines. The symbolic life is that which honours and ensures that spirit lives on in us.

As Jung teaches us, the spiritual and symbolic apparatus that gave birth to the mythological forms from antiquity, to the religious traditions, to mystical experience, to salvation, to redemption, the vision of the burning bush atop Mt. Sinai or St. Paul’s encounter on the road to Damascus, are not alien to you or me. These are our birth right. Nothing that exists in the soul of man, does not live in latent form in ourselves. We can access the archetypal and indeed do, via the symbolic.

Magnum Opus is a course in symbolic thinking, teaching you an alternate lexicon one that can be used to engage with psyche or soul, practising the royal road to the symbolic life, the imagination, or to use a term that Hillman coined, the imaginal. To understand the imagination not as essentially a tool of escapism, although it can be so used, but as faculty of perception. A lens through which the symbolic life becomes visible.

Postscript

The journey towards consciousness, meaning and individuation is an ongoing. It doesn’t end with the completion of Magnum Opus. The suggestion is not that you are whole and well and able to go forward without a care, that would be both false and inhuman. We do hope though that you have made some progress down the road over the duration of this course. The final application



will be a reflection on the journey and an attempt to help you make conscious and assimilate what you have achieved over the last year.

One of the better ways to think about the individuation process is as cyclical. A series of deaths and rebirths. The Old king – the governing attitude of consciousness that no longer serves the self– your individuation process, needs to die and make room for a new more appropriate consciousness.

In other words, the process you embarked on in Magnum Opus is a cycle, a kind of gearing designed to elevate you to the next gear in your psychological and spiritual evolution. An, admittedly ambitious goal, but that is what it is. In one form or another though this journey continues, and the complete cycle needs to repeat itself infinitely. Each cycle forging a more refined, honest and beautiful version of you, so that that which is immaculate in you may shine through. You are the philosophers stone, the Lapis.

Each time you re-enter a cycle, come at it from the perspective of the shadow. This simple principle, given to us by psychoanalysis, is infinitely valuable, keep it in mind as you go forward.

On that note, let me say that further study opportunities exist with the Centre and as graduates of this programme, we will let you know more about these. Beyond analysis there is an abundance of excellent literature available to keep you engaged, stimulated and working on your process.

On behalf of the Centre for Applied Jungian Studies, Anja, myself and the facilitators who have worked with you on this programme I want to say the



privilege has been ours, thank you for entrusting your psyche to us for during this time and we wish you love, beauty and Godspeed on the road ahead.

Adieu,

Stephen.