

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE HOUSE OF IDENTITY

From the very earliest times human beings have built shelters of many different kinds, depending on climate, available materials, the need to protect ourselves from the weather and the environment i.e. dangerous animals. Because the human baby takes so much longer to grow and learn to walk than the offspring of other mammals such as the higher apes, mother and baby needed shelter for a long time if they were to survive. They also needed structures with some kind of roof covering to protect them from heavy rain and storms.

Over the centuries many different structures evolved, becoming gradually more and more complex and making use of ever more materials fabricated for the purpose of building houses, rather than simple shelters. But this was a long process evolving over many thousands of years. In a way it was also about human beings needing to imprint their own image on the landscape, the natural world of moor and forest, hills, valleys and the flat land of plains where crops could be grown.

So houses offer shelter and protection from the elements; as places of nurture in which we are born, they become extensions of the mother archetype and the symbolism involving the womb as the primary place of shelter inside our mother. A house comes to represent a home, and a place of security that takes us into an enclosed space, and into which we can retreat from the external world, a place we can make our own.

At a symbolic level, buildings are a projection of the human psyche into the outer environment, and different parts of a house have come to have special meanings. For instance, the kitchen is associated with the transformation of raw materials into food through the use of fire, and we can see this as a kind of alchemical process used to provide the nourishment essential to life, as well as the pleasure of eating food that has been cooked.

The stairs of a house can be associated with ascent and descent, and in dreams and guided imagery, going downstairs can be associated with going down into the unconscious, while going upstairs can symbolise an aspect of collective consciousness - being able to see more widely from above - or an image of the Self as being higher than ego consciousness.

The house as it appears in dreams, how it looks externally from the outside, can often represent the persona as that aspect of ourselves we display to the world. The persona is rather like a public mask; it seems to function as a way of masking our more vulnerable inner self and is often part of our ego that is involved in outward social adaptation. It plays a part in how we like to present ourselves through the way we dress, our style of living, the way we furnish a house, what we put up or take down from the walls, the way we talk and what we talk about; essentially how we like to portray ourselves in relation to external reality. It is very much about how we want other people to see us and how we adapt ourselves to the differing social situations of work, play, family and so on.

To have a persona is a natural response to the demands and the requirements of the external world and a way of relating to outer circumstances. But it can also get out of control suffocating other ego needs and we can over-identify with it. Then the persona will

use us rather than our being able to make use of it when needed and can become constricting and limiting to who we really are and want truly to be.

One useful definition of persona is that it was a mask used in classical Greek and Roman times to represent the role being played by the actor, usually in ritual plays. Jung described the persona as "a functional complex that comes into existence for reasons of adaptation or personal convenience, but is by no means identical with the individuality". So we can see the persona as a sometimes necessary expression of an aspect of our identity that is given form through the roles we play on the worldly stage, and the masks we devise to either cover or to express a reaction to external reality.

In the course of psychological development in order to know more of who we are, we need to become clearly aware of ourselves as individuals separate from the external demands made on us, and to which we often have to respond. We have to learn to use our appearance for protection when needed, but also to be able to change our external image as and when this is appropriate. The clothes we wear in relation to different situations, the varying ways in which we present ourselves, the way we furnish our houses, are all important ways of establishing aspects of our identity, making ourselves known both to ourselves and the world.

Again what is important is to live the persona aspect and the demands that it makes, to be conscious of the function it has for us, but not to be unconsciously lived by it. We need to relate to the persona archetype, but also to feel free to change or alter its image when faced with our own need to do so, to experiment with another mask, perhaps one that is more transparent, either in terms of our own needs, or in response to collective adaptation when this is required. It is important that the persona should never become too rigid or stuck; we always need to recognise the distinction between our individual skin and the covering we may have to find - in other words the mask does not have to be unchangeable. And here the concept of 'play' comes in. Playing a social or professional role does not mean one has to be totally identified with it and so lose the sense of our own individuality.

The Jungian psychiatrist and analyst Anthony Stevens has described our human situation in relation to the different aspects of the human psyche as being rather like that of a lodging house keeper having to keep track of many different lodgers, some easy going and friendly, some difficult and demanding, others frankly impossible. Good sense dictates that we should get to know them and try to get on with them for each lodger has tenure for life in our house of identity.

In terms of psychosynthesis we can see the lodgers and their difference as sub-personalities and although they may have tenure for life, we can change our relationship to them and make use of what they have to give us, rather than seeing them as all-powerful and controlling. We can always change the furniture in the house of identity and we have the capacity to do this, however difficult it may sometimes seem.

During one lifetime, we live a number of different lives, just as we may live in different houses or experience the same house of identity from different angles. On a surface level our identity can manifest in different ways at different stages of life; baby, child, schoolchild,

adolescent, student, job earner, wife or husband, parent, grandparent, retirement, old age, and so on. There are many different houses of identity in ourselves that we may inhabit along the way. But the crucial fact on which the whole experience of life rests is a sense of continuing personal identity, knowing 'I am me and shall go on being me till I die'

Yet behind the ego and ego consciousness is the Self, or what Assagioli has called the Higher Self. Jung has said that the Self, like the unconscious, is in existence from the beginning, and out of it-the ego evolves. "It is ... an unconscious prefiguration of the ego. It is not I who create myself, rather I happen to myself" (*Collected Works, vol.II*)

No ego can ever incorporate the wholeness of the Self and, in terms of being actualised, the Self is invariably constrained by the living circumstances of the growing individual - the kind of house we are in both actually and figuratively, the parents we have and the environment that surrounds us, will inevitably constrain our development in relation to the Self. What we seem to be in relation to ourselves and to others is only a small part of the potential that is in us to be. And in this sense the house of identity can have a very important role since we can move from room to room, go upstairs to the roof, or down into the darker basement or cellar. To be able to move through this house involves knowing more of ourselves, of who we are, and what we can be.

Jung saw the transcendent function of symbols, the ways in which they can transform our states of mind, as part of what he called individuation. "Individuation," he wrote, "is an expression of that biological process - simple or composed as the case may be - by which every living thing becomes what it was destined to be from the beginning ...Individuation means becoming a single homogenous being and, in so far as individuality embraces our innermost last and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as coming to selfhood or self-realisation." (*Collected Works. vol. 7.p.266*)

For Jung, living the symbolic life was supremely important as a human characteristic. Being constantly alive to the symbolic meaning of events, both in waking and in dreaming reality, greatly enhances realisation of the Self. Anthony Stevens has said; "we can all experience the symbols created in our dreams, and we can open ourselves up to them as inner springs teeming with those archetypal energies that have inspired the human spirit since we emerged from the primeval forests and began to walk on two legs."

How do symbols work and how is it that the human psyche has the power to create images that have such deep emotional significance? How is it that an abstract idea can become transformed into something tangible? As for instance, when the archetypal conflict between good and evil becomes dramatised into images of a personal god and a personal devil, or when the brave hero fights with a monstrous dragon.

A symbol can exist by itself as part of a religious myth, legend or folk tale; it can be portrayed in many forms of music and visual art, and in the art of the word with all its subtle associations. It can be found in dreams, meditative states, and altered consciousness. A symbol is an image which acquires symbolic value through the emotions and the feelings it

evokes in us. At the same time it cannot be consciously invented like a mathematical or a chemical formula.

In Jung's definition of symbolic meaning, the symbol points to more than our consciousness can know, and therefore symbolic images can create a bridge between the known and the unknown. Psychologically speaking, something unconscious becomes connected with consciousness, so creating the experience of new and deeper meaning.

Through evolution we have acquired the capacity to use symbols to connote concepts, and once we have formed a symbolic concept of a thing or a process, we can play with it in our imagination. We can also relate one symbolic concept to another and in this way extend our understanding of reality at a symbolic level. The attempt to understand the salient experiences of human life such as childhood, becoming adult, finding a mate, sickness and healing, birth and death and the struggle for survival have all been symbolically described within many different cultures in strikingly similar ways.

The use of symbols has created a language that transcends differences of culture, place and time. Human beings appear to have a symbolic capacity to express ideas, and an understanding of life through imaginative images, expressed in the development of language and art, and also in dreams.

In a book entitled *The Symbolism of Dreams* published in 1814, the author Gottillf von Schubert argued that when we fall asleep our minds begin to think in dream picture language in contrast to the verbal language of conscious thought. This picture language, the capacity to translate concepts into pictures, is unusual in so far as similar images are found in the dreams and myths of people from all over the world. Von Schubert defined it as '*transbildsprache*', and saw it as a higher kind of algebra.

A study of dreams and dreaming by the American psychologist Calvin Hall during the 1950s and 1960s on the basis of over 50,000 dreams from all over the world, concluded that typical dreams are symbolically represented over and over again.

It is likely that the evolution of our capacity to decipher unusual meanings happened much earlier than our capacity to use verbal language. This could explain the universality of symbols, their occurrence in dream images, their more emotive level of communication, and the power of a symbolic image to evoke many different levels of experience.

Symbols, like the dreams of which they are a part, have more than one meaning. A tree in a dream, may at a collective archetypal level symbolise the Cosmic Tree, the Tree of Life, but it can also symbolise and represent a subjective psychological process in the person creating it in the dream, such as an image of the Self: or at a more personal level, incidents associated with an actual tree or trees. All these different images would have value at different levels.

To experience the power of a symbol has to do with the capacity of the human brain to create meaning through the imagination. Watching children at play, we can see the stories and games they can invent, the magical belief systems they can improvise, and this capacity

continues into adult life. To a Catholic, for instance, in the ritual of the Mass, the bread and wine actually become the Body and Blood of Christ at the moment of consecration by the priest who is seen to act as a channel of Divine power. Such ritual does have a certain dream-like quality in its capacity to take on a symbolic power, as so do certain dream incidents.

To take part in a symbolic religious ritual, or to imaginatively experience a dream, is to enter an altered state of consciousness beyond rational meaning. We can also see it as an important form of imaginative play, in the way dreams often are. The 18th century German Romantic poet Novalis commented how "dreams are a shield against the humdrum monotony of life; they set imagination free from its chains so that it may throw into confusion all the pictures of everyday experience and break into the unceasing gravity of grown men with the joyful play of a child."

To live the symbolic life, in Jung's definition, is about being alive to the symbolic meaning of events both in our waking and our dreaming, is part of the process of what he saw as individuation - sometimes called self-realisation - coming to know more of who and what one essentially is and which Jung considered to be a life-long process.

Dreams with much archetypal symbolism are very likely to take place when we are under stress or challenge, perhaps needing some kind of symbolic answer, which of course is not always the kind of answer we want! But living symbols do have a life-enhancing effect and the symbol is alive so long as it has meaning, for one cannot consciously invent a living symbol based on known associations. A dead symbol becomes no more than a sign because it loses its power.

"A symbol really lives only when it is the best highest expression for something divined but not yet known to the observer. It then compels his unconscious participation and has a life-giving and life-enhancing effect." (*Jung, Collected Works*)

The power of the symbol to create images with meaning has the capacity to influence consciousness, but this will inevitably depend also on the conscious attitude with which it is received. Yet the symbol is alive only as long as it has meaning. Symbols have their own life cycle at both the personal and the collective level. Symbols that have particular meaning for us in childhood may lose some of their magic as we grow older and our experience widens, although not always. Collectively, religious symbols may lose their vitality when they can no longer inspire religious feeling, though again not always, for their association may transcend particular belief systems. The vitality of a symbol will depend on the meaning with which it is received, the conscious attitude towards it. At the same time, the meaning of a symbol can be amplified through conscious associations, especially when we are working with our dreams.

An issue of much psychological significance and interest is how the personal symbols of dreams, and the collective symbols of mythical and religious images, relate to each other. We can see symbols arising out of the interaction between external objects i.e. trees, mountains, rivers, fire, water, air, earth, sun, moon, to name but a few very important ones, as well as personal experience. For this reason collective symbols transcend time and space,

while a personal interpretation of the symbolic relates to the here and now, although we also need to be aware that all symbols relate to both the collective and the personal.

Many of the symbolic rituals created by our ancestors were ways of dealing with the anxiety experienced by human beings living in the environment of the natural world. Fears of crop failure, or the earth being less productive, led to fertility rituals, animal sacrifices to the Earth Mother all over the world. Fear of the sun's failure to return after the winter solstice led to rituals that would ensure it would not. Forever disappear over the horizon. Fears of predatory animals, or the hostility of neighbouring tribes, generated the image of hero figures and hero gods who could triumph over human fate through their god-given supernatural strength. Fears of illness and bad spells, demons and witches, could be helped by belief in the power of shamans, medicine men, white witches and wise women who were believed to have the power to heal and protect from evil things. Over thousands of years human beings have had the capacity to find symbolic ways of coping with these fears.

On one level the human need to discover meanings and to explain origins, has led to the universal existence of cosmologies with their symbols of chaotic waters, sky gods, earth mothers, cosmic trees, and so on. The need to postpone or go beyond death gave rise to all the symbolism of suffering, death and resurrection expressed in the figures of Osiris, Dionysius, and Jesus, and also of alchemy in its quest for the elixir of life and the philosopher's stone - the search for what is real beyond the changing facets of everyday existence. Today we might see this in terms of the inward search for the Self.

Jung, in his contribution to our understanding of the numinous, explains the Self as the nucleus of the personality which incorporates the archetypal potential of the collective unconscious. The central importance of the Self in sustaining and co-ordinating our psychic existence explains the need human beings have had to identify and project it on to a supreme being or a god, conceived as a transpersonal entity outside of ourselves, although mystical traditions of all kinds have tended to speak of the God within. Eighteen hundred years ago the Gnostics were suppressed by the early Christian Church for daring to seek God within oneself, rather than outside. Then all is made clear, for one learns "whence is sorrow and joy, and love and hate, and waking though one would not, and getting angry though one would not, and falling in love though one would not."

Since the activity of the collective unconscious is experienced by the individual as being both autonomous and transpersonal, Jung often referred to it as the objective psyche in relation to the subjective psyche of ego consciousness.

To be open to the sacred in a moment of numinous vision or understanding, is to be in touch with the objective psyche, and this has a powerful energy. As a result, the sacred is something human beings have always approached with some degree of fear, surrounding it with taboos and prohibitions out of fear it may destroy us through its power. Belief in ancient gods may have been illusory, yet the numinous experiences induced by such a belief were not. Today we may possibly have more insight into the symbolic and ritual practices developed by human beings as a way of getting nearer to the Self. What is perceived as sacred has invariably been chosen through the need of people to pay homage to whatever has acquired a religious significance. As human beings, we are constantly engaged in a

dialogue with our own unconscious, experienced through dreams, visions, artistic expression, religious and cultural symbols and so on. And this dialogue has surely been in existence over thousands and thousand of years, ever since men and women developed the capacity for imaginative thinking. This allowed them to relate to the unconscious psyche and give it expression through images projected on to objects and places found in the external world. So earth and air are not only experienced in the straightforward, objective sense; they are also the medium whereby images of the mother goddess and the father god can be unconsciously projected into the surrounding environment.

The symbolism of descent and ascent by means of a staircase, ladder, pole, or tree, climbing a mountain, going down into the darkness of a cave, or up into the sky, the symbolism of death and rebirth, are all some of the ways in which the dream and the image can provide a transforming and healing function in the relationship between ego and Self. Ritual can also constellate a traditionally sanctioned experience and create a transforming awareness of the ego's experience of the Self; ego and Self, individual and collective, can come together in an acknowledgement of how outer change can lead to inner transformation.

Through the process of finding out more about ourselves in the integration of conscious and unconscious process, we can see archetypes, and the symbolic patterns they initiate, as useful models within this process because they help us to think about the ways in which symbolic images are such a necessary part of being to have more understanding of ourselves. While each culture and each civilisation may find different ways of expressing these images, they will continue as an essential part of our humanity, influencing us in our dreams and in the many ways in which we can become able to experience ourselves.

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