

Entering the Symbolic Life



Providing for/Riding the Elephant

The old character shows a hand holding the shuttle of a loom and a child riding an elephant. It combines the hidden power of the Great Symbols with the ability to act spontaneously.

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There must be something in the cult, in actual religious practice that contains a living mystery, and that is the thing that works – a *mysterium tremendum* that points back into prehistory, into a continuity of tradition that has always been the expression of a fundamental psychological condition. The sad truth is we do not understand it anymore, and this is nothing to be proud of.

You see, we are in need of a Symbolic Life – badly in need. 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, grinding, banal life in which they are “nothing but.” We have no symbolic existence in which we are something else, in which we are fulfilling our role as one of the actors in the divine drama of life. That gives peace, when people feel that they are living the Symbolic Life, that they are actors in the divine drama. It expresses the desire of the soul, the actual facts of our unconscious life.

But for us there is trouble; we must go on the Quest. We must find out what our souls want to say, travelling through the solitude of a land that is not created. Here dreams and divinations are our guide, the original guidance of man in the great darkness. We must listen, very primitive, going by the next thing - the *somnia a Deo missa*, the dream or divination sent by God. For the Symbolic Life is one of the most essential manifestations of the human mind. It is an experience, not an opinion, an experience nothing can take away from you. And it means more than the whole world, because it makes sense.

C. G. Jung, from *The Symbolic Life*, CW 18 §608-696.



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We talk a lot about education and communication, information and training, ambition and ideals these days. We deplore the state of our schools, make plans to get our children into good programs, develop courses to ready social aliens to enter the work force and try our best to teach the marginalized and suffering how to integrate themselves into our society. At the same time, though many of us are formally educated, often highly, we spend countless hours searching the spiritual supermarkets of the world for something that can “raise our consciousness” - though we seldom have any real idea of what is being raised or how. Our educational and religious institutions have failed us. Our souls and our dreams have become a battlefield of violently diverging feelings, needs and aspirations. Our real desire to be of help and service to others has been turned into confusion, despair and anger.

We might call this falling apart of the connectedness of things by a term that has become quite familiar: spin. The spin we are caught up in is an ever-widening dance of empty but highly emotional words and images that destroys any connection between the names of things and what they mean. W. B. Yeats’ famous words in “The Second Coming”, written back in the 1930’s, seem even more true today as we confront an escalating war of competing fundamentalisms backed by a media-driven market economy capable of reducing anything to a series of meaningless but highly emotive slogans:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of a passionate intensity.

Out of the Prisons and Back to the Well



This symbol from the I Ching or Classic of Change, the East's great wisdom tradition, gives us a portrait of our times: a crisis that combines real danger and the opportunity to come out of the prisons that trap our minds and keep us cut off from one another. It portrays the secret inner connections that lead the noble person out of the thought prisons of a corrupt system through a return to human community, a common source of life-water that all can rely on.

This return to the source is what can happen when we stop simply driving forward with our plans and desires and begin a dialogue with the I Ching – or Change as it is usually called - through the practice of divination. This practice opens an interactive space *between*, between action and reaction, mind and heart, night and day, in-breath and out-breath where insight is born and individual change occurs.

This place between is where deep feminine powers can work with the dark river of our pain and sorrow to find the hidden sickness and clear the stream of painful memories. It can make the soul connections that let us emerge as a true individual, freed from the social conventions that imprison our spirit. For make no mistake, our personal acts and decisions can make a difference. Each of us is a makeweight in the great process of cultural change. The real question is how we can participate in this great change rather than being its victim.

The Ritual Education of Change

Jung once called us “modern man in search of a soul”. He maintained that the background to our search is what he called a cultural *kairos*, a critical moment, the time for a metamorphosis of the Gods when things fall apart and the web of fate opens. A shot must be made through this critical

opening or we may perish beneath the weight of our own technologies. For, far from having left the Gods and the myths behind:

... modern man has rejected only their verbal specters, not the psychic facts ... The Gods have become diseases, producing curious specimens for the doctor's consulting room or disordering the brains of politicians and journalists who unwittingly let loose psychic epidemics on the world (CW 13, § 54).

Vocatus atque non vocatus Deus aderit - Called or not called the God(s) will be here - was one of Jung's psychological maxims. He felt that a dialogue with this unseen world - "not to learn something but to experience something and be set right" - could make the difference between serving a God and falling victim to a world-devouring mania. This kind of inner work is more than dealing with our personal problems; it is our entrance to the Symbolic Life. It turns us away from the prisons of logical thought to the underworld of the psychic image, to what Jung called the "living units of the unconscious psyche that are the architects of dreams and symptoms."

This is a world of dream, divination and ritual where we can reconstitute *esse in anima* or being in soul, a faith in the images in a time when the Heavens have fallen and the Ghost River flows all around us. If we do this we are "making soul", creating the opportunity through which the world can be re-imagined. The co-creative process of soul-making is the psychic connection at the heart of the old sacred cosmos. It is also the central concern of all divinatory systems and of the act of divination itself: to move through the shadow of the literal situation towards a psycho-active and transformative force which is demanding access to consciousness. This transformation has a deep and healing significance. When we touch on this border, "the realm of subtle bodies comes to life again ... the physical and the psychic are once more blended" (CW 12, §394).

The Water-Spirit Disorder: "The best lack all conviction ..."

According to contemporary African shamans and healers, when we are separated from the spirits and ancestors who live in the Village beneath the Water, we experience what they call the water-spirit disease. The symptoms include moodiness, lability and stomach problems; a sense of alienation and disconnection from community and the world at large; excruciating empathy, being undone by and afraid of our responses to the suffering of the world; a history of tragedy and mishap, bad luck, money easily made and lost; vivid, dramatic and incomprehensible dreams, daydreams and visions; and social awkwardness, not knowing how to deport oneself in the world. It is a general instability and dislocation, a literal haunting caused by a profound disconnection from the world of the spirits.

Probably the single most characteristic feature of the traditional cultures that this description of our sickness comes from is what we have called the

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“worship” of ancestors. We, of course, no longer “believe” in ancestors and few of us would or could return to a traditional or pre-technological culture even if we wanted to. Yet there is something in the experience of ancestors in these cultures that we desperately need. It mirrors the *hole* or lack in our lives, the “missing information” that might connect us to the *(w)hole*.

The experience of ancestors in traditional cultures is an image of a creative relation to the figures of the deep psyche that people our imagination, the archetypes and complexes, the “little people” as Jung called them. These architects of dreams and symptoms speak through divination, myth and ritual enactment, offering a hidden language suffused with a sort of pre-rational verbal therapy that seeks to produce and does in fact produce a real and effective change in the mind of one upon whom it acts.

The Greeks called the effective change this hidden language produces *psychogogia*, a leading-out or education of the soul. It is precisely through the symbols and the ritual education this hidden language offers that we can respond once more to the beauty and the mystery of the world that surrounds us, the imaginative potency and healing power the ancestors carry.

Ancestors and the Sacred Sickness Pathways

We in the modern west have a great difficulty with ancestors. We do not know what they are or how to enable them. Yet establishing a harmonious relation with these ancestors is crucial to our Symbolic Life. Giving the ancestors that people our psyche, figures that both came before us and will outlive us, the recognition they need is the only way their blessings can flow.

In the world of Change, the Ancestors live in the tomb and, at the same time, sit at the court of the High Lord in Heaven. Their job is to ensure a continuous flow of blessings from the invisible world, connecting what is above and what is below. The sacred cosmos portrayed in the deep structure of Change revolves around the axis they create, an axis that is invoked any time the ritual of high divination is performed. This axis is the *Axis Mundi* or World Tree, a zone of absolute reality where there is perfect access to the spirit world. It is where the dead rest in peace and receive the great offerings. It has the shape of the human heart.

The axis of ancestral power and imagery operates on a sliding scale or spectrum with body or matter and one end and spirit at the other. The interconnection between these two poles is psyche or soul that is constantly weaving and dissolving connections. In working with the ancestral symbols and energies we have to first of all distinguish between what we might call ancestry – literal genealogies – and Ancestors, archetypal forms that are common to larger groups and, indeed, humanity itself, our cultural DNA.

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Traditionally, we must work through and clear the inner images of our parents and our grandparents – our ancestry – in order to connect with the Ancestors. This work can be called soul-making:

- We personify the inner images we confront, returning their “persons” to them rather than reducing them to concepts or allegories to be used in our own self-development. We honor their otherness and independence.
- We let them pathologize us by introducing us to our own and our culture’s shadow. This de-literalizing process wounds our certainties and our self-image, freeing the reality of the soul from the prisons of the literal. The door to the soul is sickness, the “sacred sickness”, the sickness from which we can never recover.
- We psychologize everything we encounter in the world, taking it into imagination rather than seeing it as literal fate. This is the great power of the inner work to break the chain of literal cause and effect and constellate synchronistic fields around us.
- We see through the literal events of the world to the psychic realities behind them: “Behind the symptom is the complex, behind the complex is an archetype and behind the archetype is a God.” We see through the eyes of the God(s), putting their perspective on like a mask, a truth that is both truth and fiction.

This co-creative process of soul-making takes us out of our “only personal” ancestry and empowers the Ancestors, constellating them in the psyche as what I call Dream Animals. These animal powers constellate active or *daimonic* energy, the ability to break through the boundaries we experience as “mind-demons” that separate our inner and outer lives. They create synchronistic fields around us that continually generate and store symbolic awareness.

This experience of Ancestors as opposed to ancestry is central to the Symbolic Life. It connects us to what Change calls the Sacred Sickness Pathways, hidden channels both inside us and outside us that are the cure of the water-spirit disorder. The energy of the Dream Animals flows through these channels, clearing the corruption in our inner parental images by linking it to the transformation of cultural images, ideals and institutions. They create synchronistic fields around us that continually generate new symbolic awareness.

Symbols and Symbolizing

In Change the symbols of this hidden language are called *xiang*. Symbols/*xiang* combine linear diagrams, rich and allusive omen words and an iterating chain of mythic associations that extends outwards in all directions like the ripples from a stone tossed into a pool of still water. Scholars have called these symbols/*xiang* image-concepts; they unite the

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two halves of the brain by participating simultaneously in their opposing forms of activity. The chains of association, the ripples in the pond, set the image-concept moving through a whole set of polarities, deconstructing oppositions like subject and object, psyche and world, inside and outside, male and female, presence and absence, life and death.

The Chinese word *xiang* is both a noun and a verb: Something can indeed *be* a *xiang* but we must also continually *make* it into a *xiang* by “*xiang-ing*” or “symbolizing” it, empowering it as a symbol by encountering it in ritual space.



A symbol/*xiang* is a bright omen at the frontier between the visible and the invisible. It is the self-presentation or self display of all beings, a spontaneous expression of their inner form as a signifying evocation of the on-going process of the real or Way. The character *xiang* (classical form above and old form below) literally refers to the elephant and the Elephant Mind as an inner thesaurus of all possible symbols and modes of symbolizing activity.

Jung felt that the symbols from I Ching, symbols that “traced the course of the valley spirit, the *tao*, winding like a dragon or a river” (CW14, §636n), were an answer to the West's spiritual needs, a sign that we are finally beginning to relate to the alien elements in ourselves (CW13, §72). Thus he insisted that “psychology in the stricter sense is bound up with the *whole practical use* of the *I Ching*” (Letter to Olga Froebe-Kaptyn). This “*whole practical use*” cultivates and stores symbolic awareness. It is a surrender or deconstruction of the drive toward rational meaning and heroic striving. It opens a space where the meanings of the symbols and their transformative energy can arise freely and spontaneously in the heart.

The Water Initiation

Coming into contact with one's personal ancestry as a conduit to the greater powers is a central part of the Rites of Passage in virtually all traditional

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cultures. During the Water Initiation and the “night-sea journey” that follows the initiate experiences the great symbols of the psyche literally re-arranging his/her connections to the world through a radical transformation of the heart-mind.

During this initiation several things occur. We are opened to the Ghost River and contact our personal dead in very vivid dreams. We make our peace with them through a practice resembling the ritual creation and enshrining of an ancestor spirit: We fix the ghost (*gui*) or passion-body of the Departed One in the tomb by clearing all negative feelings - rage, sorrow, longing, betrayal, need - we might have inherited from them or may feel toward them. This enables us to perceive and enshrine their *hun*-soul or “bright spirit” - what was truly of worth in the being, their spirit-potential or spirit-body - in an image or symbol/*xiang* placed on our ancestral altar. As we do this the Great Symbols appear in our dreams, literally re-arranging our connection to the World of the Dead and installing the Pathways through which blessings flow. This “fixes” the omen an ancestor offers in an enduring symbol and gives it an enduring place in human life as a paradigm of sacrifice and blessing.

In Change the ancestral potential in the heart-mind and its realization are symbolized as the Burning Water. This mysterious and numinous *prima materia* images the great River of Life and Death that links all ends and all beginnings. It is an imaginal fire-water that represents a radical fertility of the imagination that is the cultural link between the generations. This Burning Water must be created and nurtured within the individual through setting up what is called the *Kan-Li* or Fire-Water Axis. This Axis, called the Microcosmic Orbit in meditation practice, is a ritually controlled process of integrating the various parts of the psyche. Its goal is to produce a true individual.



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29:30 Ghost River and Bright Omens portray the fundamental powers of Fire and Water establishing the Inner Axis of Change that recharges our existence with meaning and energy by redeeming the Ancestral images.

The Fire-Water Axis works through a continual making and breaking of symmetries or certainties. It connects the light of our awareness with the violent and un-lived passions of the shadows of the past. It is the engine that powers the Sacred Sickness Pathways that connect personal and cultural suffering. We can see it as something like a double ladder or stairway for spirit beings and the intertwined process of ascent and descent.

The transformation of the heart-mind that results from the accumulation of realizing power produced by working of the Fire-Water Axis is imaged in one of the great symbolic Engines of Change.



61 Opened Heart/Connecting to Center ZHONG FU



Connect your inner and outer life. Empty your heart so you can hear the inner voices. Act with sincerity and honesty. Gather the pigs and fishes, the hidden wealth and fertility. Enter the stream of life with a purpose. Let **Opened Heart** be your inner guide. It will turn your need to influence the world into a self-restraint that stills compulsive desires.



Circle of Meanings

Connecting your inner and outer lives, connecting life to the spirit; sincere, truthful, reliable, verified; a heart at peace, a stable point that lets you face the vicissitudes of life; capture, spoils, captives offered in sacrifice; incubate, hatch, the Calling Crane who leads her children out of the entanglements of life. The old characters show an arrow at the center of a target and the claws of the bird protecting her child and grasping her prey.

MYTHS FOR CHANGE

Zhong Fu, connecting to center, connects two very important terms in the world of Change. *Fu* “connection to the spirits” has many interrelated meanings: a return to and of the spirit, the blessings that flow from the Ancestors, benediction, celestial favor and great prosperity, capture, spoil, booty, prisoners offered in sacrifice to drive out evil spirits. It suggests a Founding Father, and is a sign that connects partners, a jade talisman, the Jade Shrine and the great bronze sacrificial vessels. The thread that runs through all is the connection to the spirit world and the wave of blessing that pours into the heart through it. *Zhong*, centering, means moving to the center, an equal or still point between opposites. It is an arrow that hits the center of the target and suggests the equinoxes, the pivotal points of the year, the “coming in and going out” of the souls, the heart and its inner animation. It points at the inner world and the inner way and putting something to the trial through divination. The root of the word is a banner placed at the center of the Four Sides, a hole or link to the world of the dead and the ancestors. The figure as a whole offers access to the thought of the heart where the vital forces are rooted in the deep self, the inner riches of “pigs and fishes”. It is the space between Heaven and Earth where the Myriad Beings live that connects the inner and outer lives of all things. It is a trust in images that flow from the heart and the spirit that makes them true.

This is an Inspiring Figure and Engine of Change that recharges our existence with meaning and energy. It is a Gate to the final stage of the Symbolic Life, birth into the life of the spirit and the passage across the River of Life and Death where the significance of life is revealed.

At the Inner or Heart Center of this figure, the Bird Mother calls out to the initiate:



Line 2 Inner Center: inner organization that leads to harmony with others.

A Calling Crane hidden in the shade. Its offspring respond in harmony.

"I have a winged wine vessel. Come to me and I will simply pour it out."

This is the center of the heart's desire. This is the profound call of one soul to another and the call of the inner self. Respond to it. It can change your life. Do not hesitate to answer. This is a blessing, an ever-flowing Way, and nothing can oppose it. Strip away your old ideas. Be open and provide what is needed.

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These symbols articulate the experience at the center of the Water Initiation that opens the Symbolic Life. Each time we step across the threshold into the Land of the Dead, drink of the Ghost River and let it change our hearts we re-emerge into life as what Carlo Ginsberg called *Benandanti*, Good Walkers. We step out to fight for the health and fertility of our both our language and our culture in a new way. And this is what Change would say to each of us as we approach the magic circle where we put our destiny and the destiny of the world we live in into play:

Open Your Heart to Change

Change is a book you cannot push away.
Its way is always shifting.
Transforming and moving, never resting,
it circles and flows through the six empty places.
Rising and falling,
like the messengers of life and death,
strong and supple transform each other.
Rules cannot confine this, for it follows only Change.

It issues forth and re-enters in a stately dance,
teaching caution within and without,
illuminating the causes of trouble.
It is not your spiritual master or an army to protect you
but a beloved parent who draws near.

Follow the words and feel their place in your heart.
Then you will have charge of the symbols and the omens.
If you are unwilling to do this, the Way cannot open to you.

Dazhuan: The Great Treatise, my translation.