

# **Practical Campbell**

## ***The Mythology of Archetypes***

*In this Practical Campbell essay, Stephen Gerring (bodhi\_bliss) ponders the presence of archetypes in myth, and what role these patterns might play in our own lives.*



**Joseph Campbell  
Foundation**

*The Foundation was created in 1990 in order to preserve, protect and perpetuate the work of one of the twentieth century's most original, influential thinkers.*

[www.jcf.org](http://www.jcf.org) • 800-330-Myth

© 2006 by Joseph Campbell Foundation.

This article is intended solely for the education and entertainment of the reader. Reproduction, alteration, transmission or commercial use of this article in any form without written permission of the Joseph Campbell Foundation is strictly prohibited. Please contact the Foundation before reproducing or quoting extensively from this article, in part or in whole.

# PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

## *THE MYTHOLOGY OF ARCHETYPES*

*The archetypes to be discovered and assimilated are precisely those that have inspired, throughout the annals of human culture, the basic images of ritual, mythology, and vision.*

- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, pp. 18-19.

The concept of the archetype is central to Joseph Campbell's understanding of mythology. Cross out every instance of "archetype," "primordial images", "mythic motifs," "archetypal images," "symbol," and related terms that appear in his work, and we have major holes and unreadable books.

And yet pinning down an archetype is as easy as stapling your shadow to the wall. Like so many concepts associated with mythology and depth psychology, archetypes are quicksilver by nature – indeed, that shape-shifting quality is responsible for their effectiveness, and their allure.

What, then, does Campbell mean by the term? What role do archetypes play in myth and psychology? What is their source? Are archetypes gods, metaphors, or simply convenient designations? Or might they merely be insubstantial products of the imagination with little bearing on reality? Apart from the specialized vocabulary of literature, art, psychology, and myth, have archetypes any practical application in our lives today?

### *“ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR WATSON ... ”*

Joseph Campbell finds variations on the same basic motifs occurring universally throughout the myths and rituals of all cultures. Many of these images precede the written word - whether painted on pottery, shaped into figurines, or even etched on stones and bones, stretching tens of thousands of years into the past.

Campbell isn't the first to discover these patterns. The pioneering anthropologist Adolf Bastian, in the nineteenth-century, refers to these motifs as *Elementargedanken* – “elementary ideas.”

However we never meet these mythic structures in their raw form, but rather cloaked in raiment peculiar to each culture, which Bastian calls the *Völkergedanken* - “folk (or ethnic) ideas.”

*[O]ne of the ways we realize an image is archetypal is because we see it turning up in different cultures and different times: we see a pattern, as well as the particular local instance. Studying a mythic image over thousands of years, there gradually emerges a pattern of constancy and variation that allows an evaluation of how these ideas are expressed, sometimes finely, sometimes crudely, sometimes only partially ...*

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, p. 556.

The *axis mundi*, for example, or world axis – that still point around which the universe revolves – is a pattern evoked through archetypal imagery found in all mythologies: the Tree of Life, inscribed on cylinder seals from ancient Sumer over four thousand years ago, and again in the Garden of Eden creation story; the *djed* pillar, raised during rites sacred to Osiris, the dead-and-resurrected god of ancient Egypt; the serpent-entwined caduceus of Hermes, in Greece; the spinal column, up which the *kuṇḍalīnī* serpent rises in the yogic traditions of India; the Bo Tree, under which the Buddha achieves illumination; the Cross, to which Christ is nailed; Yggdrasil, the World Tree of Nordic mythology, on which Odin crucifies himself; and the totem pole, common to the coastal peoples of the Pacific Northwest – all variations on one underlying theme ...

and yet, despite obvious congruencies, these variations are often distinct and dramatic, reflecting differences in cultures and beliefs.

Though Campbell wholeheartedly supports the study of differences between cultures – those unique expressions of Bastian’s *Völkergedanken*, which he believes more the province of historians and ethnologists – he nevertheless is drawn to the parallels, focusing on the universal aspects of these images, individual and collective. Because of that focus, some critics automatically assume Campbell believes a psychological reading of myth the only interpretation possible – an assumption that suggests a lack of familiarity with the man’s work.

Joseph Campbell, however, cannot ignore the grounding of universal themes in the human psyche:

*For example, the idea of survival after death is about conterminous with the human species; so also that of the sacred area (sanctuary), that of the efficacy of ritual, of ceremonial decorations, sacrifice, and of magic, that of supernal agencies, that of a transcendental yet ubiquitously immanent sacred power (mana, wakonda, sakti, etc.), that of a relationship between dream and the mythological realm, that of initiation, that of the initiate (shaman, priest, seer, etc.), and so on, for pages. No amount of learned hair-splitting about the differences between Egyptian, Aztec, Hottentot, and Cherokee monster-killers can obscure the fact that the primary problem here is not historical or ethnological but*

*psychological – even biological; that is to say, antecedent to the phenomenology of the culture styles*  
...

- Joseph Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander*, p. 50

To that list of mythological patterns I would add time, space, the cosmic sea, the great goddess, the tree of life, the serpent, virgin birth, the hero, sacrifice, the mandala, illumination, and a host of other images culled from Campbell's writings.

### ***THE INHERITED PATTERN***

In "Psyche & Symbol," the opening lecture in the **Mythos** DVD series, Joseph Campbell identifies Carl Jung as the twentieth-century psychologist whose work says the most to him.

*Now I don't present Jung as a final, definitive theorist. His work is suggestive – this is an enormous subject full of mystery still. I want to begin ... by reviewing Jung's approach to the problem of [Bastian's] Elementary Ideas, which he calls "archetypes of the collective unconscious." Now that immediately gives us a psychological ground on which to build – that these are, in some way, features in the unconscious of the human animal, and that experiences that come in through the nervous system are assimilated and interpreted in terms of the psychological ground, archetypes.*

Jung borrowed the term archetype from Plato, Pliny, Cicero, St. Augustine, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and other classical sources, re-defining it for the purposes of depth psychology. He describes archetypes as "[f]orms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origin" (cited by Joseph Campbell in a footnote to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 18).

*It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a very limited degree ... The representations themselves are not inherited, only the forms, and in that respect they correspond in every way to the instincts, which are also determined in form only. The existence of the instincts can no more be proved than the existence of the archetypes, so long as they do not manifest themselves concretely.*

- Carl Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, p. 173

Jung distinguishes between archetypes – which are unknown and unknowable to waking consciousness, any more than we can directly apprehend a raw instinct (which we identify by its effect in our lives) – and archetypal images. In the phenomenal world - which is where we all live - what we encounter and engage are those archetypal expressions, rather than the archetype itself.

Both Jung and Campbell speak of archetypes as structuring patterns of the human psyche. Our imprinted experiences, collective and individual, fill out and take the shape of these inherited forms in much the same way a crystal's shape follows the parameters of a basic, recurring pattern (which doesn't mean all crystals look the same and are identical - plenty of room for variation and individuality - and yet we all recognize the pattern).

Each human, for example, has ten fingers - the collective inheritance of our species - so it's no surprise that "base ten" is a numerical system common to most cultures – an archetypal numbering, so to speak. Critics might argue that humans are not born with base ten in their head, and they would be right - but that's not what Campbell and Jung are claiming when they speak of "archetypes of the collective unconscious." One needn't automatically assume that there's some sort of mystic, esoteric transmission of information wafting across the ether from one generation to the next, or, conversely, that base ten is embedded in our DNA.

On the other hand (pun intended), our inherited biology - the structure of our body - shapes our experience of reality. We can fairly easily tick ten items off on our fingers - but after that, we need to borrow someone else's hand. Hence, base ten becomes the default numbering system in many cultures.

Perhaps, if we had only eight fingers, base ten would just be a difficult concept in grade school arithmetic, rather than the context within which we experience the world around us.

## *ARCHETYPE AND INSTINCT*

Jung does suggest that archetypes are related to the instincts - which leads to a school of thought that archetypes are the same as instincts - a far cry from gods! Marie-Louise von Franz and Emma Jung – Carl's wife – clarify Jung's remarks in their work on the Grail: "As inborn possibilities of forms of behavior and comprehension, the archetypes are connected with the instincts, **with which they have a reciprocal relationship**" (*The Grail Legend*, p.37, emphasis mine).

The same mistake is made by those who read the first hundred pages of *Primitive Mythology* and think Campbell is arguing that only biology - genes and instinct - drive myth and archetype, ignoring the context of the rest of his work. Campbell certainly believes that myth, like dream, has a biological basis - but he doesn't cling to a causal relationship, instead revealing a correspondence between biological, biographical, mythological, mystical, psychological, and cosmic perspectives. As suggested in the myths of many cultures these are all different layers, different dimensions, of oneself: no single one causes the other - they just all go together, like the notes of one chord.

I see a pretty girl whose qualities seem to match my *anima* image (in brief – and barely scratching

the surface – “the personification of the feminine nature of a man’s unconscious,” sometimes inadequately described as one’s inner female ideal) and heart starts to flutter, pheromones are released, and the dance begins. The eternal mating ritual unfolds - clearly, a biological impulse at work - yet that’s not what I experience! I live a passion play, experience the consequence of individual choices, endure agonies and ecstasies in the loving and living of life - an experience rich, complex, and far more fulfilling than suggested by any sterile, clinical term like instinct!

Our DNA plays a role in providing the context for, if not the specifics of, individual experience - but the fact that I fall in love with Amy rather than Betty or Cindy is not genetically predetermined. My anima image is shaped by several factors, including proximity, influence, and impact of my mother and other female figures in early childhood (teachers, relatives, etc.), as well as contemporary cultural ideals (e.g., rubinesque figures of centuries past vs. the slender models that serve as today’s yardstick). Nevertheless, what *is* biologically based is the drive to mate, to unite with some other, and procreate. How this need is met is individually determined and takes a variety of forms, from sheer lust and physical sex, to intimacy, love, marriage, platonic friendship, religious celibacy (union with God), etc.

## *THE AUTONOMOUS ARCHETYPE*

But there seems more to it than what’s been said so far. It feels as if we’re circling something unseen, rather than directly addressing the question.

What is an archetype?

The short answer is you just can’t put it into words.

Jung, in *Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* (*Collected Works, Vol. VIII*), speculates that “the real nature of the archetype is not capable of being made conscious ...”

Archetypes are examples of what Campbell, quoting Heinrich Zimmer, calls “the best things, which cannot be told.” The second best things are conversations about those “best things, which cannot be told,” and so are often misunderstood. A discussion of the archetypes falls into Zimmer’s “second best” category – difficult to comprehend, for we are using words to describe what is beyond words.

Hence, though Jung often relates archetypes to instincts (which arise from the physical body), elsewhere (*Collected Works, Vol. VIII: Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, as well as his essay, “On Synchronicity”), he conceives archetypes as existing outside space and time, believing them responsible for the “meaningful coincidences” we experience (for which he coined the term synchronicity). It’s difficult to empirically locate archetypes both in the body, and floating

somewhere outside Time and Space in the same instant ... unless we realize that "instincts" and "inherited structuring principle" and "gods" and even "archetype" are all metaphors - yes, metaphors - for that which cannot be precisely defined, labeled, analyzed, or categorized.

How any of us interpret archetype may depend on where we're standing at the time. It's a slippery, shape-shifting term, and Jung and Campbell seem to prefer it slippery and shape-shifty.

*Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language (Indeed, language itself is only an image.). The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress ... The archetype – let us never forget – is a psychic organ present in all of us.*

- Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p.160

Though we risk losing ourselves in Zimmer's realm of the "second best things," there is a longer answer to the question "what is an archetype?"

A working definition can be found in *Jung for Beginners*:

*Universal patterns or motifs which come from the collective unconscious and are the basic content of religions, mythologies, legends, and fairy tales; emerging in individuals in the form of dreams, visions and fantasies. The archetype carries specific energy and is capable of acting upon the world. (p. 58)*

The author (Jungian analyst Jon Platania, Ph.D.), directs the reader's attention again to that last sentence:

***"The archetype carries specific energy and is capable of acting upon the world."***

Clearly, as used by Jung, Campbell and company, an archetype is far more than an abstract pattern. In Jung's words, "The archetype is a phenomenon of 'numinous' or 'God-like' dimensions. The archetype is in a very real sense alive and functioning in the world. The archetypes thus have their own initiative and their own specific energy. These powers enable them both to produce a meaningful interpretation and to interfere in a given situation."

In the Jungian model of the psyche archetypes are unable to directly access, or to be directly perceived within, mundane reality - but when patterns that evoke the archetype arise in an individual's life, a "complex" set of behaviors are constellated, in effect adding flesh to the archetype as it comes to life in the individual. This complex is often projected unconsciously out onto others

who have hooks in their own personalities on which those projections can catch (e.g., the shadow complex - "lazy hippies," "fascist cops," etc.) and can even "possess" an individual if the underlying archetypal energy has been neglected in one's life.

How does Jung arrive at this understanding?

## *COMPLEX PSYCHOLOGY*

I've met many who believe Jung's concept of the collective unconscious is the result of an intuitive leap – vague, touchie-feelie, new age-y wishful thinking. True, Jung does have a reputation as an imaginative theorist - however, a closer study reveals that many of his "intellectual abstractions" are grounded in empirical science - indeed, his reputation and stringent research methods are what brought him to Freud's attention, providing validation for some of Freud's observations in the eyes of the greater scientific community.

Ironically, it is this same clinical research that led Jung to his theory of archetypes almost a century ago.

Jung came to Freud's attention in 1905 with the publication of the results of his pivotal word association experiments (conducted from 1901 - 1904). At this point in time Freud's star seemed to be fading, with few in the psychiatric community taking either his theories or his drawing room practice very seriously. Carl Jung, on the other hand, was widely respected as a researcher in the medical profession despite his youth. In his position as senior physician at the Burgholzli Clinic (the psychiatric facility associated with the University of Zurich) he was on the front lines in the field of experimental psychology.

Many of the patients confined to Burgholzli suffered from *dementia praecox* (schizophrenia) and other debilitating psychiatric disorders. At the time many doctors thought these disorders might be the result of brain lesions, which, alas, could only be discovered through the process of autopsy – just a little late to help the patient.

Carl Jung and his colleague, Dr. Franz Riklin, Sr., sought to explore the possibility that word association tests could point to the presence of brain lesions. Jung was *not* looking for the existence of unconscious, semi-autonomous complexes in the human psyche that interfere with conscious processes – but that's what he found.

Word association tests evoke in the popular conception an image of a psychiatrist giving a patient a word and noting the response. Most people assume there are right answers and wrong answers, and hence the psychiatrist must be looking for the right answer ... and if we get the wrong answer, then

there's something wrong with us. However it's a bit more complex than that (pun again intended).

At first they followed a format similar to Freud's practice of free association, but dropped that technique in favor of a more rigorous, scientific approach. Each subject was administered a list of one hundred words chosen for the rich associations possible (for example, "king" or "mother" inspire a greater variety of immediate, spontaneous associations than, say, "is").

Jung and Riklin and their colleagues weren't testing for the "correct" answer. They early on noticed that most words on the list evoked an immediate, impromptu reply ... but for each subject a handful of words triggered a disruption in the patient's response – hesitations, stuttering, asking to repeat the word, etc.,. These words tended to group together in related clusters (or complexes) that reflected unconscious disturbances within the individual's psyche.

Jung found that his patients differed in the amount of time they took to formulate responses to the stimulus-words, usually hesitating before those that had something to do with distressing personal information. Together with Riklin, he coined the term "complex" to stand for "personal matter" that was "always a collection of various ideas, held together by an emotional tone common to all."

The investigators measured precisely the amount of time it took the subject to answer, which they believed determined the underlying complex, or, the root cause of the patient's distress ... Words such as "marriage" or "mother," for example, often provided striking insights into the subject's mind.

Besides the actual time it took the subject to answer, they measured other factors, which included prolonged delay or an outright inability to respond. They sought reasons that might underlie superficial or spurious reactions and paid careful attention to the reasons that the subject expressed some responses in highly charged and emotional language. Jung adapted and encapsulated Theodore Ziehen's term *gefühlbetonter Vorstellungskomplex* (usually translated and explained as an emotionally charged complex of representations, of which the patient was probably unaware) into the single word: "complex."

In his terminology, he used the word to designate detached fragments of personality that maintained an independent, autonomous function within the unconscious, and from which they (i.e., one or more complexes) were capable of exerting an influence on the conscious mind. Jung described the complex as an "agglomeration of associations" that were "rather difficult to handle."

- Deirdre Bair, *Jung: A Biography*, p.65 – 66.

Jung and Riklin and their colleagues (Drs. Frederick W. Peterson, Charles Ricker, J.B. Lang, Emma Furst, and Ludwig Binswanger, among other doctors in France, England, and America), upon noting the unconscious interference with conscious, spontaneous associations, thus designed the experiment to test for these interruptions.

Jung started with thirty-eight normal subjects as a control group (which led him to conclude “the concept of normality must be very elastic,” as complexes were found to be active in “normal” people as well), before expanding the testing to those suffering from hysteria, schizophrenia, and other pathologies. Over the four years the experiments ran, the list of words administered grew to four hundred – and clear patterns emerged in terms of the cluster of words that evoked an interrupted response. For example, “father,” “police,” “king,” and “sun” might be part of a cluster suggesting a father complex - an authority complex – but rarely “sun” and “womb,” or “father” and “cave.”

Could these hesitations be conscious?

Well, out of a list of four hundred words, try for example to consciously *not* respond to just those words that evoke, say, authority, while spontaneously replying to the rest ... just not possible – especially not for those suffering from psychological disturbances. Many times even “normal” subjects were flustered and seemed at a loss as to why they responded as they did, as they weren’t always conscious of the disturbing personal contents contained within these complex clusters.

Just in case there might be some sort of unconscious distortion or bias in the way the researchers measured responses, Jung eventually employed a psychogalvanometer - measuring breath rate, perspiration, pulse, and skin conductivity - to record the physiological response to stimulus-words. Whatever dynamic interrupted the subject’s verbal response to the stimulus-word turned out to also affect unconscious physical reactions – which suggests a degree of recognition and autonomy distinct from conscious intent.

The cluster of words to which subjects reacted – Jung’s “feeling-toned complexes” – while related to the personal circumstances of each subject, provided evidence of unconscious structure underlying the human psyche. Jung’s work was thus the first to experimentally confirm the existence of the unconscious, and so rescued Freud’s reputation. Ironically, Jung’s research provided the ground for a much broader view of unconscious processes than that espoused by Freud, though it took a few years for those possibilities to gel in Jung’s mind.

By 1911, Jung had noticed that each complex uncovered in his patients, though weighted with personal content, revolved around themes congruent with motifs echoing throughout mythologies from all eras and cultures - suggesting a collective core that serves as a magnet round which these personal contents cluster - an unseen structuring agent Jung labeled the *archetype*.

The concept of the collective unconscious is thus rooted in empirical data collection. Jung didn’t start with the theory of archetypes and work backwards from there ...

(Last year *Psychology Today*, without mentioning Jung, printed a blurb criticizing "word association experiments" - but the column was a bit vague itself, and the flaws detailed describe a fuzzy, sloppy approach closer to the free association of Freudian psychology - assuming, for example, that results are a subjective call of the researcher rather than measured physical responses outside the administrator's control - very different from the rigorous standards applied by Jung. These justifiable complaints about sloppy performance are nevertheless projected backwards in many people's minds to include Jung's research - guilt by association?)

Archetypes are not how we hope to act - but are very real energies that exert considerable power in an individual's life. We feel the influence of archetypes in our various complexes and neuroses, relationships, and patterns of behavior. It's as if these archetypes are driven to live life - to take on flesh, so to speak, and engage the world of external phenomenal reality. Generally this drive is satisfied through us, via complexes constellated within us acting as agents or manifestations of specific archetypes, moving us, for example, to fall in love, or raise a family. When we resist or repress these impulses the back flow builds, until the dam bursts. The archetype often then "takes possession" (think of Hitchcock's *Psycho* as an extreme cinematic example - talk about a mother complex!).

Jung identifies a number of figures one meets in dream - the archetypal images of the Shadow, Anima and Animus, Wise Old Man, Wise Old Crone, and other figures populating the pantheon of the individual psyche. My anima, for example may appear in dream tonight as maybe Betty, or Susan, or some other woman to whom I am drawn - but neither Betty nor Sue *is* my idealized anima image, which is a product of my interior world. However, this archetypal figure is often projected onto real flesh-and-blood women, and so I find myself married to Betty or Sue ...

Archetypes thus shape and mediate our experience of the exterior world.

The same is true at the collective level. Myths are expressions of the archetypal dynamics of the collective psyche; these myths often collect around specific historical figures and events (e.g., there really was a Troy, at conflict with various Greek city-states off and on for generations), but it is those mythic patterns which fuel history, not the other way around. (For example, we don't know if there ever was an Achilles, but we do know that the frenzied battle rage that possessed him reflects an experience common in battle, reminiscent of the Viking *berserkers* - and excavations of Troy's ruins show this spirit animating conflicts between Trojan and Greek...)

On the other hand, from the individual perspective, these myths ring true only if they *are* rooted in history - personal history. The labors of Hercules, the wanderings of Ulysses, Parzival's quest for the Grail, all harmonize with my personal experience. I recognize the same stirrings, the same feelings, and the same energies unfolding in my life.

*ARE ARCHETYPES THE SAME AS GODS?*

Yes – and no ...

Jung clearly finds some overlap between god/desses and archetypes.

Today, we call the gods "factors," which comes from "facere" - "to make." The makers stand behind the wings of the world-theater ... This is a new problem. All ages before us have believed in gods in some form or other. Only an unparalleled impoverishment of symbolism could enable us to rediscover the gods as psychic factors, that is, as archetypes of the unconscious ... All this would be superfluous in an age or culture that possessed symbols.

- Jung, *Collected Works, Volume IX: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p. 23

Here Jung boldly asserts a parallel between gods and archetypes. He also occasionally refers to individual deities and myths as archetypes. Campbell does much the same; for example, in an interview with Michael Toms, he describes Quetzalcoatl as "an equivalent archetype" to Christ (An Open Life, p. 47).

So Jung, who coined the term as it's used today, and Campbell, who constructs his life work around the archetypal elements of myth, at times use the terms interchangeably, which does unnerve some orthodox Jungians who tend to concretize the archetype, using it to refer only to "a specific organizing principle in the psyche."

Unlike his disciples, Jung is fluid and expansive, and not so rigid in his use of the term (which brings to mind an apocryphal saying attributed to C.G. himself: "Thank God I am Jung and not a Jungian!"). We can, of course, count on Jung to be confusing if we expect one precise, specific answer. What we actually get are a number of precise, specific, and seemingly contradictory answers – but then in the realm of myth and dream we should be used to paradox by now.

Elsewhere, Jung uses "archetypal images" or "archetypal expressions" to refer to gods and goddesses and figures in dream and imagination, distinguishing between these personages and the archetype - which bolsters the argument of those who claim that the gods are *not* archetypes.

Are gods and archetypes identical?

Not quite - there is overlap there, but they aren't always the same thing.

Those who rigorously profess all archetypes are gods, and/or vice versa, risk falling into the same trap as those who claim no overlap - thus concretizing the metaphor. This is why I prefer to say that god/goddesses and archetypes are **congruent** – a word that does not mean identical, equal, or exactly the same, but **corresponding** – or, as in math, "coinciding when superimposed."

Archetypes are so much more than gods and goddesses, so much more than the traditional inner pantheon of Archetypal Mother, Father, Anima, Wise Old Man, Self, and the other denizens of psyche. Ultimately an archetype – like gods and other mythic metaphors – points to what is transcendent, what is beyond thought and word.

## *THE NUMINOUS*

The essence of archetype for me is found, among other places, in Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, a work unfinished at the time of his death. Jung describes how

... archetypes appear in practical experience: They are, at the same time, both images and emotions. One can speak of an archetype only when these two aspects are simultaneous. When there is merely the image, then there is simply a word-picture of little consequence. But by being charged with emotion, the image gains numinosity (or psychic energy); it becomes dynamic, and consequences of some sort must flow from it. (p. 87)

Powerful language!

We can talk about love, or we can talk about Cupid - yet these are not in themselves archetypes.

Feel the sting, though, of Eros's shaft as it pierces your heart, the burn of desire that consumes you, the rapture that seizes you as you are overwhelmed by love for some Other, and you know you are in the presence of something greater than yourself, something greater than all the world.

Archetype? God? Does it really matter what we call it?

Jung continues:

I am aware that it is difficult to grasp this concept, because I am trying to use words to describe something whose very nature is incapable of precise definition. But since so many people have chosen to treat archetypes as part of a mechanical system that can be learned by rote, it is essential to insist that they are not mere names, or even philosophical concepts. They are pieces of life itself - images

that are integrally connected to the individual by the bridge of the emotions. That is why it is impossible to give an arbitrary (or universal) interpretation of any archetype...

The mere use of words is futile when you do not know what they stand for. This is particularly true in psychology, where we speak of archetypes like the anima and animus, the wise man, the great mother, and so on. You can know all about the saints, sages, prophets, and other godly men, and all the great mothers of the world. But if they are mere images whose numinosity you have never experienced, it will be as if you were talking in a dream, for you will not know what you are talking about. The mere words you use will be empty and valueless. They gain life and meaning only when you try to take into account their numinosity - i.e., their relationship to the living individual ... (p.87-88)

But, unfortunately, those rare people who do not deny the very existence of the archetypes almost invariably treat them as mere words and forget their living reality. When their numinosity has thus (illegitimately) been banished, the process of limitless substitution begins - in other words, they glide from archetype to archetype, with everything meaning everything. It is true enough that the forms of the archetypes are to a considerable extent interchangeable. But their numinosity is and remains a fact, and represents the **value** of an archetypal event. (p.90)

Jung doesn't mince words. An archetype is "a living reality," charged with **numinosity** - a sacred experience, fully engaging one's emotions. We can speak of Artemis, see a picture of Shiva, or hear a sermon about Jesus - yet these are not archetypes. If, however, you pray to Artemis, if you feel her breath on your neck in the woods beneath the full moon, or if you dance with Shiva, let your ego, your soul, your being, dissolve into nothingness, dissolve into the Dance, or you experience the transformative power of sacrifice and resurrection as you eat the flesh and drink the blood in communion with Christ, you are living/experiencing/engaging an archetype.

Though it is true that such living ideas become manifest only in terms of some specific historical moment, their force nevertheless lies not in what meets the eye but in what dilates the heart, and this force, precisely, is their essential trait.

- Campbell, "Bios and Mythos," *The Flight of the Wild Gander*, p. 50

## ***PRACTICAL ASPECTS: ENGAGING THE ARCHETYPE***

Psychologists Carl Jung and James Hillman, philosopher James Ogilvie, mythologist Joseph Campbell and others have explored the polytheism of human nature, showing that our inner life is many-dimensional, multilayered, and teeming with presences of various kinds. This rich complexity, they have argued, is inescapable. If we do not accommodate the many powers in which we are secretly rooted, they come to us anyway, as physical sickness, depression, obsession, or unexpected epiphanies that disrupt our everyday functioning. We are led, gradually or suddenly, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, to live in many dimensions at once.

- Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Human Body: Explorations Into the Further Evolution of Human Nature*, p.559

***“Vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderit,”*** reads the inscription carved above the door to Carl Jung’s home – “Called or not called, the god will be present.”

We ignore the power of the archetype at our peril, as Murphy points out above. But if the archetype is inescapable, aren’t we then consigned to always playing the victim?

Jung offers a warning, and a clue: "When an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears outside as fate."

But can we ***consciously*** call forth what is unconscious within us?

Archetypes have little to do with consciousness. As we become conscious of the archetypes active in our lives, those archetypes tend to lose much of their power over us – but the more unconscious we are of a working archetype, the more it shapes and controls our behavior. We do not choose an archetype - the archetype chooses us. Often, a complex constellation of events and experiences will activate an archetype (for example, after years of fitful slumber, the resurgence of Ares/Mars in the national psyche, in the wake of 9/11). The most common triggers are basic life initiations – coming of age, intimate relationships, bearing and raising children, etc.

Archetypes are primary.

If we allow the archetypes a life, provide a conscious conduit for these energies to express themselves and engage the outer world, then all is well ... but if we don’t acknowledge these forces, deny them a life, they will take over ours, even at the expense of life itself.

We open such channels by tending to ritual, myth, and dream – the practical aspect of archetypes.

We carry all potentialities within us. It is not by reason and conscious will that we can rouse them from their slumber when the need arises. But the symbolic, revealed again and again in myth, practiced forever anew in the rite, has this magical conjuring power over our unconscious ...

The archetypes or variants of archetypes in myths and rites speak to the unconscious, which no rational admonition or consolation can reach; in the unconscious they encounter something that is related to them at work in its depths, which they awaken and make into an instrument of the regent

within us, a guiding image which can gain power over our individuality and adapt its behavior to that of the archetype.

Thus such archetypes, awakened from their slumber within us, become visible images and effect transformations in us; when called forth by kindred archetypes in myth and observance, they rise up within us and become our guides. Our conscious will cannot create such guides ... and this archetype summoned from our depths preserves us; it prevents our formless forces from tearing our personality apart or driving it to madness under the pressure of the eternal contents of life, of the destiny that oppresses and threatens to crush us.

*Heinrich Zimmer, "The Significance of Tantric Yoga," in Spiritual Disciplines: Papers From the Eranos Yearbooks, ed. Joseph Campbell, p.7*

Campbell illustrates this dynamic in action (but one of multiple examples of this process found throughout his work):

The Navajo perform a healing ceremony, which involves the creation of a large sand painting that portrays a healing myth. The patient is placed in the center of the sand painting, where the patient or initiate is ceremonially identified in mind and heart and costume with the mythological protagonist of the relevant legend. He or she actually enters physically into the painting, not simply as the person whose friends and neighbors have solicitously assembled, but equally as a mythic figure engaged in an archetypal adventure of which everyone present knows the design.

- Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, p. 93

Carl Jung refers to this as getting back into an archetypal situation:

The old priests and medicine men understood this, not by knowledge, but by intuition. They tried to get a sick man back into an archetypal situation ... What is the use of such foolishness? I assume that these people were by no means idiots. They knew very well what they did, they were as intelligent as we are, they had good results with these methods so they used them; it was "good medicine."

- Jung, *Dream Analysis: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1928-1930*, p. 129

How is this possible? Why does it work?

A mythological image is one that evokes and directs psychological energy. It is an energy-evoking and energy-directing sign. A mythology is a system of affect or emotional images; these representations themselves produce this emotion or affect.

- Campbell, *Thou Art That*, p. 86

Rather than either fighting fate, or resigning ourselves to playing the victim's role, we can symbolically align our self with the archetypal patterns in play, thus moving on a level beyond that of the conscious ego, restoring the harmony between our inner worlds and the universe that produced us.

The numinosity of the archetype can swamp or shatter our surprisingly limited egos. Indeed, in many cultures to look directly on a god is to die (Moses, unable to gaze on Yahweh's face; Semele, incinerated when Zeus appears to her in all his glory; the New Testament disciples, knowing the Father "who no man can see" not directly, but through Christ, as the image of God; etc.).

Ritual, however, provides a sacred space in which to confront these energies, and myth presents archetypal images we can safely engage in that sacred space.

There are many ways to do this, from following traditional paths, participating in ancient ceremonies, to tending to dream (indeed, in Jungian psychology the meeting between analyst and analysand presents a ritual setting for dream work, where one engages the archetypal figures active in one's own psyche). Art also provides a portal into archetypal realms.

Given the lack of an active, effective mythic tradition in contemporary western culture, Campbell advises we discover our own myth in the images that speak to us, drawn from the myths of all time:

There are mythologies that are scattered, broken up, all around us. We stand on what I call the terminal moraine of shattered mythic systems that once structured society. They can be detected all around us. You can select any of these fragments that activate your imagination for your own use. Let it help shape your own relationship to the unconscious system out of which these symbols have come.

- Campbell, *Thou Art That*, p.86-87

## *INTO THE MYSTIC*

Archetypes may indeed be projections of our psyche, of our being, but we - and our psyches - emerge from nature, both as individuals and as a species.

Joseph Campbell makes a good case for mythology being rooted in our biology - and follows that back into the material, or manifest, universe, which today is thought to be the result of insubstantial quanta of particles (the apparent ground of matter that many physicists characterize as simply "tendencies to exist,") interacting with each other, flashing into and out of existence billions of times

each second, emerging from some sort of voidless void (for lack of any more precise designation, mathematical or otherwise) that transcends time and space, a universe that does not exist until it is observed (much like the gods)...

...and suddenly here we are, sailing "into the mystic."

I don't think that somewhere before the foundations of the earth Thor and Kali and Yahweh and Raven and Isis and Jesus and Coyote and Wakan-tanka and Brigid and Hermes and Vishnu and Legbe and Kuan-yin were all sitting around in the Great Hall of Archetypes somewhere, poring over blueprints of the world-to be, divvying up the map: "Coyote, you get everything west of the Mississippi; Vishnu, since you do well in a humid climate you might as well settle in India; meanwhile Lono says he'll ride his cosmic surfboard to Hawaii ..."

Yet certainly the elemental forces which have everywhere been identified as gods - the sun, the moon, the earth, gravity, space, stars, night, day, the wind, a spring or river that makes green the land, the energy that opens the blossoms and unfurls the leaves, the design inherent in DNA, and the transcendent realms out of which the material universe appears to have emerged - all these existed long before humanity branched off from other primates, long before human consciousness differentiated itself from the unconscious.

Perhaps the gods are the way humans engage and experience these pre-existent patterns and energies. Maybe the gods *are* embedded in our DNA, or inhabit an electro-chemical impulse in the brain - which might suggest they don't exist, from one perspective - but if we look beyond the personification to the dynamic at work, one could say the gods *were* here before us, and may indeed be in one sense responsible for our creation, as these forces of nature have helped shape who and what we are.

In *The Hero's Journey*, Joseph Campbell captures the infinite permutations of our subject in one final image:

[T]he implication of the mythic images ... is that deities are symbolic personifications of the very images that are of yourself. And these energies that are of yourself are the energies of the universe. And so the god is out there and the god is in here. The kingdom of heaven is within you, yes, but it's also everywhere. (p.127)