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COOKING UP SYMBOLS FOR THE SOUL



The psyche occasionally tells us about itself, and those of us who observe and record the panorama of the interior life may be granted glimpses of this mysterious Other. A particular dream of mine, set in a library of reference books whose symbols of food fell off the page for eating, offered just such a glimpse of how images are stored, measured out and then prepared for human use. Its contents are not especially private, so I would like to put it on the communal table for general consumption:

I am in a library. There is a Jungian reference book in which one can look up ideas and see where else they are discussed. I open the book at "A" and the listing is "apricots"—with real ones on the page! I take several onto a plate to eat; they had been dried, then stewed with onions and spices—unusual, and very good-tasting. A man looks at the next entry, "B." It is "beans," and again there are actual ones, also dried. He takes some out. Then he asks me how many apricots I took. I say, "twelve," and explain that women are more familiar with estimating according to weight: I took a quarter of a pound of apricots. Then I estimate by

weight how many beans he took.

I was as surprised on waking as I was in the dream to find symbols falling off the page, ready to eat.

The setting of the dream is a familiar research context; it could be the reference room of a local public library, an A.R.A.S. collection, or the Campbell archive. The book contains a huge spectrum of information and identifies where else ideas have been written about, like a concordance or index of cross-references.

The motif of a special book is akin to the "Book of Knowledge," a mythologem that has appeared cross-culturally. It may take the form of a scroll, an ancient tome in arcane script, or a sacred text. For St. Teresa of Avila, Christ himself became a book, which she read. At the culmination of Mazatec healer Maria Sabina's interior training, she was given a "Book of Wisdom" in which everything was written, though she did not actually read and her village did not have books. This resplendent text in sacred language grew to the size of a person. These brief amplifications illustrate the universal process by which images come to life on the page.

The shift from two dimensions to three describes a fun-

damental aspect of psychic reality as it expands via our attention to images. If some spark of emotional or spiritual numinosity is not present, images remain flat and merely academic. The transformation to "real" denotes a coming-into-being of a living symbol. What sort of library might contain a reference that displays this curious alchemy? Jung once dreamed of just such a library in a wing of his house where antique volumes enticed him toward his own discovery of the historical reality of the psyche. In my dream, this quality of becoming real may reflect my enjoyment of doing archetypal research. At times, it has seemed as if meaning leapt off the page, potentiating a previously flat image. This almost magical aspect makes the research process far from dry and intellectual.

The dream suggests how to orient oneself when doing objective research: to begin at the beginning. This is reminiscent of a child's first reader in which "A" is illustrated by apple, "B" by ball, and so on. By harkening back to something elementary, the dream gives practical and reassuring advice, for it is easy to become overwhelmed when looking through reference books on symbols.

The alphabetical arrangement may connote an underly-

ing order to archetypal material. The dream does not specify whether this is inherent in the material itself or crafted by human codification. The notion of "order" within archetypal images brings to mind recent discoveries in physics, such as the beautiful butterfly-like wave pattern that droplets of water exhibit when filmed over time. Similar "slow wave" patterns can also be seen in dream images when they are tracked longitudinally.

"Order" also takes place in relation to weighing and measuring the apricots and beans. The man in the dream approaches the matter in terms of *discrete units*—"how many"—whereas I estimate by *portion*—"a quarter of a pound." Men and women do differ in how they approach the unconscious—as well they might, given their fundamentally different developmental tasks in relation to the mother. Are women more inclined to perceive situations in terms of part-to-whole and men in terms of discrete units? Or is this perhaps not a gender characteristic, but an aspect of masculine and feminine archetypal functions in each of us?

What I took from the book—twelve apricots or a quarter pound—is about what a person could eat at a single

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meal or in a single day. This detail may refer to the quantity of amplificatory material that can be digested at one sitting. Many archetypal images are so broad in scope that researching them can lead to voluminous quantities of material. Look up star, tree, elephant, cross—you can easily get lost in the abundance and end up with a case of imaginal indigestion! A small portion, on the other hand, can be chewed on, mulled over, then swallowed and digested.

The apricots have been stewed with onions and spices. Cooking is a familiar metaphor for the alchemy of turning the raw ingredients of images into a form we can absorb, something that feeds us. Though there are images that can be stir-fried or converted quickly to meaningful material, others need the slow-cooking method of stewing, which retains vitamins and minerals and blends the flavors into a novel composite. Dried apricots and dried beans each take a while to cook, just as images that are dense and compressed take time to expand to their full vitality.

Spices are flavorings added to food and vary from culture to culture; universal staples such as rice, potatoes, corn, and beans may suggest the fundamental archetypal level of symbols, to which spices are added to craft them into their cultural variations. By adding “spices” from our own imagination, we perk up an interpretation that might otherwise be bland and rote: e.g., a dog represents domesticated instinct; a dark figure, the

shadow; a basement, the unconscious. To these two-dimensional versions, we add the fluidity of our emotional reactions and the spice of the imaginal to come up with a unique yet savory repast.

To understand why the dream presents apricots and beans for the letters “A” and “B” rather than, say, apples and beets, we need both personal and objective associations. Apricot is a fruit I love and could eat often; as a color, apricot, along with peach, salmon, and the earth- and sunset-tones near them on the color-wheel, is an enduring favorite of mine. Beans have been a staple crop throughout much of history and the legume family, which includes peas, garbanzos, lentils, peanuts, as well as a whole array of beans, comprises the foundation of diets around the world: *soy* in Asia, *dal* in India, *ful* in Egypt, *frijoles* in Mexico. Is the psyche here expressing the fact that images are as basic to our emotional and spiritual diet as beans are to our physical, and almost as complete a food source?

Beans also lead to associations of planting and growing. The sprouts of many legumes can be used fresh after just a few days soaking, the way images from one night’s dream can pertain to the immediate present. With the fable of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” we arrive in the mythic realm, transported on a magic stalk that extends downward into the lower world with its roots and upward into the heavens with its twining vine, making a vegetal *axis mundi*. This fairy tale reminds us that we have to *do* something with an image; it

invites us to cultivate the image so that it can develop beyond its dry, two-dimensional state.

When we first come upon an image, it may have a generic quality we call “archetypal.” Knowledge stored in books, tomes, and scrolls is merely encyclopedic until we call upon it for human use. My dream seems to suggest that images have a prior existence or place of origin in which they are “stored” or housed, waiting to be used. Like winter clothes stored in the attic or flour and sugar in the pantry, images too are apparently stored. Just as physical food can be preserved by drying, curing, salting, smoking, so too may images be preserved in their “dried” state.

The dream-recipe for working with images, then, seems to go something like this: Begin with whatever ingredients are at hand, whether an image from the night-world or an unusual event from the day-world. Keep it in a cool, dry place until you have time to prepare it properly, for it will take time to expand into its fullness. Look up the image in a reference book but put onto your plate only what moves you, what speaks to you. Measure out a portion carefully and don’t take too much. If you think the image is ready to sprout, plant it in the fertile field of your daily life. Or let it soak in the fluid medium of an ongoing drama until it is softened. When it seems ready to cook, use a slow method; avoid the pressure-cooker. As the mixture simmers, add some spices from your imagination. Taste the concoction at intervals to see if the results have the right

balance of salty and bitter, sweet and sour. This food must be fit for the soul.

This recipe outlines in elementary terms our human responsibility and role in relation to images: to discover them, take interest in them, learn about their universality, and let their emotive meanings grow. This process can go awry if one of the steps is rushed or skipped, and it is not for everyone. After a year of therapy, a middle-aged woman dreamed that *she opened a book and found gems within its pages; they fell out into her hands, but then slipped between her fingers and were gone*. A person of many talents, she seemed unable to engage with the experiences and opportunities that came to her; she went through the motions of life but let its essence slip through her fingers.

My library comments on both the process and the content of the psyche. It shows how to work with images. But beyond the process of engagement is the objective source from which images emanate. I hope that another researcher will take up the challenge of ascertaining whether dreamers elsewhere are busy looking up “C” for centipede, “D” for dingo, “E” for energy, “F” for finger, in the spellings of Dyak, Hindi, Swahili, Zuni.

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