

SYMBOLS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Symbols and Mental Illness



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SYMBOLS AND MENTAL ILLNESS

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of mental illness can be approached from any of the many facets involved in its infrastructure and antecedents. Factors such as brain function, neurochemistry, environmental contexts, genetics, and internalized early life influences have been studied with much benefit. Less attention has been paid to the highly central, and highly accessible role of cognitive function, altered memory and symbolization in the development of aberrant conception, perception and behavior.

This chapter deals with that aspect of the symbolizing function that creates aberrant memory's influence on mental illness. This influence can be studied both as an enhancement to the understanding of mental illness and as an aide in devising psychotherapeutic strategies.

“Time, Memory and Recollection”

For over two thousand years it has been known that “For the thinking (person) images take the place of direct perception”¹ Symbolic images, derived from prior experience, reorder remembered reality for a patient and shape the interpretation of future perceptions. Should the sense of a time past origin for these influential images be lost, a quality of timelessness attaches itself to the image. Timelessness is an elementary component of primary process thinking. The latter provides the cognitive underpinning for aberrant thought and behavior. For instance, a distortion in normal time perception can occur in which imagery becomes indistinguishable from perception and a neutral percept comes to be experienced as an ancient terror. Phobia or paranoia can occur when the symbolized influence of a past pain is sensed to be immediate and real in present time. Memory (the nonconscious retention of symbolized images across time) appears to cease, as its contents and the new symbols they inform are interpreted to be actual perceptions of immanent reality. This process occurs normally in dreams and pathologically in hallucinations and phobias.

Images, which are retained in memory in health, are little distorted or are neutralized by reality

testing. They serve to aid in the accurate recognition and interpretation of new perceptions. Conversely, remembered images that have been distorted and symbolized can become a source of memory derived impairments in the *sense of reality*. These can negate *reality testing* and create the aberrant and distorted perceptions which give rise to false beliefs and inappropriate actions.

Distortions of Retained Images

Distortions of retained images are produced as the result of the influence of a number of factors. Some of these are: impaired maturation, regressive alterations of cognition, traumatic alterations of cognition, the natural waning of retained memory elements resulting in partial recall, and repression and displacement of elements of remembered imagery into new representations in the service of diminution of affect.

The last of these vicissitudes of the elements of memory is the focus of our study. Alterations of perceived elements, which have been retained in memory, fit the definition of symbols. If their formation results from repression, they are symbols of a specific type, called secondary symbols by Piaget and Psychoanalytic symbols by Ernest Jones. Such symbolic forms are the focus of studies of symbols for these workers. Other leaders in the field such as Cassirer and Kaplan, ignore such symbols.

Images, which were created from perceptions that were traumatic at the time of first encounter, are most apt to be retained. Referents, which at their time of origin awakened strong drives and intense affects, are most likely to be distorted through displacement into symbolic forms, that mask them beyond recognition. In displaced form, they are less apt to undergo a resolution such as working through in manifest fantasy or action. In the form of the masking symbols to which they have been converted, potentially highly charged and troubling images are protected from being identified and worked through. The danger that they portend can be averted through the identification and working through in consciousness of their restless referents in memory.

When the symbolizing function is healthy, the symbols, which represent such highly charged images, have sharply reduced valence for attracting affect when they enter consciousness. As a result, the effects of unconscious conflict on neutral areas of functioning are reduced, and the conflict free sphere of

the ego is protected so it may pursue adaptive behavior.

When the Ego functions associated with the symbolizing function falter, symbols become relinked to affects as occurs in a phobia in which the representing manifest psychoanalytic symbol (i.e. an animal) is feared in consciousness. There is always pressure to master the traumatic referent experience, which was converted into latent imagery in memory (i.e. seduction, brutalization, humiliation, overwhelming affect etc.). This is seen clinically in a driven compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences. This pressure thrusts symbols into dreams, fantasies into current experience, and to an overriding extent distorts perception through the intrusion of symbolic imagery into interpretation.

The compulsion for repetition of affect laden imagery in the form of symbol and fantasy derivatives can intrude upon successful adjustment. The repeated patterns of fate neuroses, traumatic neuroses and traumatic dreams are examples of such intrusions. Essential to the nature of severe mental illness is the failure of the individual to recognize distorted images and symbol contexts, which are retained in memory, as the referents that distort conscious perception. Perceptions, which have been subject to distortion, are experienced as real by the mentally ill. In the history of Psychiatry, this has long been known. Aristotle (ant.) put it this way in speaking of 'Lunatics'² " ... they spoke of their mental pictures as if they had actually taken place, and as if they actually remembered them. This happens when one regards as a likeness what is not a likeness." (p297)

Symbols play an important part in the process of distortion during the interpretation of new perceptions. They overpopulate the fantasies that motivate action. They are germane to an understanding of many forms of impairment of reality testing and compulsions to repeat. For these reasons, the origin, development and nature of symbols, both healthy and pathological are worthy of the attention of those who work with the mentally ill.

AFFECT AND SYMBOL

The more intense the affect that accompanies a trauma or event, the greater is the intensity of the memory of the event. The greater the intensity of the affect associated with the memory produced, the greater is the implied need to symbolize. Potential affect associated with a memory forces the conversion

of the elements of the memory into masking symbols as it ascends to consciousness. A masking symbol is a memory moiety that is established to provide for repetition in consciousness for mastery of traumatic memories. This mastery is achieved in the context of minimal interference with the neutral ego functions that are required for carrying out life's chores without confusion. The primary functional role of psychoanalytic symbols in the establishment of mental equilibrium is the muting of affect associated with original memory.

As Starobinski (1982) has pointed out, a concept that could shape human action (such as a symbol laden wish fantasy or a symbolized memory element) does not become action until there is affect enough to transform and propel the concept into awareness and at a higher level of intensity into action. Starobinski offers as an example of an increase in affect that moves latent fantasy toward conscious expression the fact that the affects of civil unrest under despotism give rise to actualization of the unrest in the form of a revolution. He notes in support of this group dynamic, Rousseau's concept that a ruler can only rule with the consent of the governed. In individual human psychopathology, a referent is pushed towards awareness in the form of symbol based fantasy or action, when affect enough has been stirred by related day residues. For a child the visualization of his father as a giant or ogre from a story he has heard serves as a potential referent in memory. It has the potential to become a phobia should the child become angry with his father and defensively project the anger onto an ogre.

Therapeutic techniques aimed at reducing affect can clear manifest phobia without resolving the distorted latent image of the father. Though the disquieting manifest symbolic form may be put to rest, its potential for harm is not extinguished. From the standpoint of symbol theory, for instance, the role of medication—targeted to work by diminishing affect—is to reverse the process through which affects are converted into action. Though the potentials for harm of driven fantasies may be muted in the mediating conduits of symbol and metaphor, they are not obliterated. They continue to find expression in character pathology, awaiting another day to burst on the scene in the form of a regressed symbol such as a phobic object. Psychotherapeutic intervention has the potential to correct the referent concept that holds the father to be a dangerous creature. This erases the intuitive symbolic linkage that makes possible threatening neurotic false beliefs.

Regressive Symbolization

In borderline and psychotic personalities there is an impairment of symbolic processes, which leads to a failure of adaptation in areas in which the symbolizing function attempts to aid adjustment. The functional impairments in the symbolizing function that lead to severe disorders in mental functioning include regressive symbolizations, which involve verbally based symbolizations such as affect porous symbolization, and invasion of the symbolic process by concrete thinking, and psychosomatic symptom formation.

Verbally Based Regressive Symbolizations

Regression in verbal symbolization selects verbal representations from concepts and experienced sensations drawn from a zone beyond the boundary of the self. These representations have the characteristics of symbols, formed in the time after the development of speech and before the ontogenetic development of repression, which display too much displacement to be considered to be concrete symbols. The abstract link between the representation and the represented, is too conscious for them to be considered to be psychoanalytic symbols. To a minor extent, their affects may be displaced and muted. Their paradigm can be found in the following developmental outline of symbol formation.

Developmental Outline of Symbol Formation

The human being undergoes an ontogenesis that continues for years after expulsion from the womb. One of the important areas in which the psyche weaves its way from the newborn state to maturity deals with the increasingly complex way in which conscious perception is organized. At first there is total awareness of concrete phenomena, sensations and objects in the surround. By 15 months (This is Piaget's dating,) relationships between perceptions and memories become available to consciousness, and detected similarities give rise to the sense that things that are similar are identical. At twenty-six months, capacity for repression and capacity to differentiate between similar entities develops. As a result perceptions, which have a high valence for attracting affect can be represented through memory by symbols with low valence for attracting affect. This results in a psychic apparatus, which is capable both of expressing and buffering any provoking drives and inputs, while continuing them in memory in a way

that makes them available for processing in consciousness at some future date. Regression in the symbolizing function to the use of symbols without repression of the link between what represents and what is represented produces symbols associated with strong and uncomfortable affects, disordered thinking and bizarre behavior. Failures in symbolizing function during psychotic decompensations can be seen as regressions to stages of perceptual organization extant before the maturational introduction of repression during the first half of the third year of life.

Affect Porous Verbally Based Symbols

Affect porous symbols are examples of symbols that have only failed a little. The link between the representation and that, which is represented is still repressed. However the mechanism of displacement has failed to find a representation, which achieves sufficient distance and so the underlying image, though hidden, retains valence for attracting affect. The symbolic representations though displaced enough to hide referent meanings are often derived from those elements, which are associated ordinarily with 'awe'. (In this regard see Kant (1790) 'Critique of Judgment'.) As a result, one sees nightmares containing storms, and floods, and blood and shadows. When such symbols appear, the patient is using symbols pathologically and is deserving of evaluation for regressed functioning in other areas.

Concrete Thinking Reinvades the Symbolizing Function

Concrete thinking is described by Gartelmann (1986) as the archaic system of thought, which enables (one) to conflate and confuse objects and even worlds which in realistic and abstract thinking should remain strictly separate. (p98) When manifest symbols in the form of objects and worlds are conflated because of similarities that which the symbols represent to the observer on the level of unconscious meaning is by implication and association conflated, linked and sucked into a sense that they are identical. This is the basis for the mode of Barbara, (Indians are swift. Antelopes are swift. Therefore antelopes are Indians.) and the Predicate Identification thinking disorder. For example, a seclusive man who had long felt that he was being penetrated by rays from an influencing machine, attacked a T.V. repairman who had just parked his antenna equipped repair truck in the next door driveway of his neighbor. He had conflated his preexisting electronic persecution with a newly

perceived element (the electrician's truck) and acted as though they were one.

Concrete Symbolization Dominating a Psychotic Process

A male patient in his mid twenties caused some complaints from fellow patients because he monopolized the drinking fountain. When asked about this, he said that he was doing this to aid the ward staff in keeping control over the patients on the disturbed ward. He explained it as follows. The water fountain spigot to his perception was shaped like a penis, a concrete symbolic linkage based on similarity of external form. When he drank from the spigot penis, he was performing fellatio on all the men on the ward. That was what made them calm and quiet.

The water spigot, through its form, was consciously linked as a symbol to the male genital. This link through form was held in consciousness without repression. It was reinforced by poor reality testing, and used for the sympathetic magical control of others. Notice that aggressive affect was projected onto the poor potential for control of the patients on the ward. (See also page 75 of this volume.)

PSYCHOSOMATIC SYMBOL FORMATION

In psychosomatic symbol formation, (see this volume Chapt. 5) the representations of affects or body parts are expressed in the functions of organs of the body, which are at the interface between inside and outside, such as lungs, mouth, and colon. These representations could best be called protosymbols. For example, a thirty-year-old man experienced transient fantasies of killing his girlfriend. As these fantasies disappeared from consciousness, he developed abdominal cramps and diarrhea. The symptoms receded with interpretation and the direct confrontation of his problems with his girlfriend. Such protosymbols are characterized by a choice of representations from a zone of experience within body boundaries.

THE SHAPES AND FORMS ASSUMED BY PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOLS DURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERSONALITY.

Birth to One Year of Age

There is a general erroneous belief that fully adult symbols are present at birth. In the paper by

Freud (1911) titled “Two Principles of Mental Functioning”, which contains a reconstruction of infantile early development based on adult analyses, this belief finds support. Freud described two partners in the perpetuation of mental immaturity in adults. These are primary process energies and primary process thinking. Primary process energies consist of drives and passions unbound. Primary process thinking is characterized by displacement, condensation, absence of negative, timelessness, and symbols.

Implied in the concept of primary process thinking is the existence of symbols, without differentiation in terms of maturity of form, which come into being at an early unspecified age; one presumes it is soon after birth. Symbols and primary process thinking seem to spring into being early on and fully grown. Developmental aspects of the symbolizing function are not taken into account. A gradual development of symbolic forms that provide a series of paradigms to which the troubled psyche can regress is not accounted for in the concept of primary process thinking.

The clinical observation of children justifies the concept of the early origin of primary process thinking. Most elements of such thinking can be demonstrated to be present when thought processes involving interpretation of the environment are detected, during the first year of life. Psychoanalytic symbols come into being at twenty-six months. Failure to take this timing into account seems to be the province of those whose source of information about symbols comes from reconstruction backward from observations on adults. The theories of Otto Rank and Melanie Klein require the acquisition of the capacity to form representations based on memory and symbolization of perceptions at birth or before. The concept of transcendental symbolism posits symbols and a symbolic function that can exist without the benefit of the existence of an organic substrate. Ontogenesis is unimportant in these contexts. All other types of symbols, (simple, psychoanalytic, and poetic) can be traced from developmental forms which can be tracked through child development and which are the paradigms for symbolic forms that can be detected in ego regressions that occur after twenty-six months. As will be elaborated below, this implies that primary process thinking, and the underpinnings of psychotic thought regressions do not come into being as a unit at birth. Rather primary process thinking has its own developmental and maturational schedule.

Direct observations of the symbolizing function of the developing child were made by Piaget (1945) under experimental conditions and later by Child Analysts in clinical settings. Their work

established a set of early stages in the developmental march of symbols, in which the earliest appearance of symbols associated with repression and displacement occurs at twenty six months. Before this, the relationship between the representation and that, which is represented, is conscious and direct. Before fifteen months, as mentioned above, internal organ function, and little displacement in form marks the products of the weak symbolizing function of the child. He is capable of symbolic play to achieve mastery over trauma, but not capable of repression which can be used to put trauma away from awareness for a while. The symbolic signifier, if effective, aids not only in the exclusion from consciousness of the signified. It also aids in the diminution of anxiety associated with other representations of the signified to the point that the alternate representation can be approached without fear. For instance, the child who has projected his fear of his father onto a feared intruder in his bedroom can run to his father for protection.

Primary process thinking has not matured as a functioning entity until the appearance of all of its components, one of which is the psychoanalytic symbol, which appears at about 26 months. Further elaboration and development of the symbolizing function and the vicissitudes of its nature and development proceeds until well into early adulthood.

The thought processes that underlie dreams, creativity, borderline function and psychoses have their own patterns of regressions, fixations and pathologies. A start in the study of the maturation of the primary process can be made through the explication of the stages in the developmental march of symbols. Each stage of symbol formation donates its own peculiar coloration to the symptoms produced by regressions in later life.

The Developmental March of the Symbolic Forms Associated with Primary Process Thinking

There follows a listing of the development march of symbolic forms with timing, and clinical examples of manifestations at the point of maturational development and linked clinical manifestations in adult life.

Up to fifteen months the symbolic forms are concrete. There is little displacement and no repression. Affect gives way to rage. There are no fantasies to blunt the effects of trauma. Dreams are traumatic or

pure wish fulfillment and repeat the events of the day with little modification. For instance a child who was frightened by a loud bell heard a loud bell in his dream that night. In adult life a similar pattern can be seen in the traumatic neuroses in which the trauma is relived repeatedly in dream and fearful memory.

From fifteen years to twenty-six months a representational form of symbol begins to appear. Attempts at mastery of trauma can be achieved through the conscious expression of a traumatic situation through the use in play of displaced symbol representations of the traumatic situation. This is called symbolic play. A child in this stage can place a block on top of a block and say that is a baby on a potty. I have seen a four-year-old child whose capacity to experience symbolic play passively was turned to therapeutic advantage. His mother had told me that he had been hit by another child whom he had provoked through constant poking during the day. When I asked him about this, he could not describe what had happened. I reenacted just such an interchange using little plastic figures. As we played he spontaneously spoke of the parallel activity in his life that day.

At twenty-six months, repression becomes strong enough to cause a break in an awareness of the abstract relationship between the symbol and the symbolizer. At this point distortion dreams begin and traumatic images can be mastered through the expression in fantasy of conflict while hiding meaning. Thus a child who dreamed that she had been bitten by a fish was able to express cannibalistic wishes without revealing to herself the source of the forbidden impulse within herself. In the form of dream symbols, primarily visual in form and called by Piaget "Oneiric Symbols" such symbolic forms are available throughout life. Adult dreams contain distortions through symbolization, which enable mastery through psychotherapeutic interpretation as well as through spontaneous reparative displaced 'living through' during dreaming.

Dream like psychoanalytic symbols appear while awake in the symbols of play, which were called by Piaget "Ludic Symbols". Children have access to these symbols from twenty-six months to late latency early adolescence. Such play symbols, primarily tactile small objects used in play are available only till the brink of adolescence when the process of ludic demise demotes them. Ludic symbols are reduced at that point from the primary position of importance as the means through which drives can be expressed to the lessened stuff of plays and fairy tales. Ludic demise results in their replacement as the primary

tools for drive discharge with verbal fantasy or real human objects with whom to play out their fantasies. Child therapists, playwrights and regressed adolescents persist in the use of Ludic play into adulthood. For instance one man in his forties built ship models with great care. He rarely enjoyed or went beyond the making of the hull, which he fondled and polished with great care. Analysis revealed that the hulls represented idealized female figures. In the phase of transition from the ludic symbol to real objects, one's own body at times becomes the ludic symbol. Self-mutilation and autostrangulation are examples of this.

Ludic symbols dominate the Psychoanalytic symbols of Latency. There is a specific maturation of evocative symbolic forms within the period of hegemony of the ludic symbol. For instance, there is a march of preferred symbolic forms for the representation of persecutors to populate masochistic fantasies. At 26 months Phytophobia and Zoophobia dominate. This means that the children are fearful of such things as seaweed and bamboo and storm tossed trees, dogs and biting fish. At about six years of age, these persecutory symbolic forms give way to amorphous figures with hardly human forms in the shape of ghosts, goblins and generally scary things. At about 8 1/2 symbols begin to take on forms, which are more realistic. Fear fantasies begin to be populated by humanoid figures. A lad told of a woman who stopped him on the street and told him to study or she would find him in his home and kill him. He had readily believed his elaboration of the experience of a chance meeting. The persecutors at this point are people who are real in form but are only to be found populating children's fears in the world within their head. As the child approaches puberty, the persecutors are selected from amongst real people in the child's life, to whom the child imputes hostile wishes. By this time real people outside the head begin to be recruited to play roles in persecutory fantasies within the head. Then symbols shift from playing roles in a polarity that evokes inner fantasies, moods, and images. They shift to a dimension, which involves communication to someone else. In this polarity, the psychoanalytic symbol becomes a communicative pole symbol. Through the assumption of this polarity, way is made for the recruitment of a real person to play the role played by symbols in children's fantasies. Concurrently other symbols involved in the fantasies are adjusted to fit the reality of the object. This intrusion of a reality element into fantasy modifies memory. Used in such a way symbol laden fantasy becomes a bridge to the object world. Primary process thinking does not exist as a unitary endpoint. At least one of its components, psychoanalytic symbol formation continues on a path of maturation and development that parallels temporally the

growth of secondary process thinking.

Secondary Process And Symbols

Secondary Process thinking is mature reality based thinking. Through the use of abstractions, secondary process thinking applies insight into the intrinsic nature of phenomena to the solution of reality problems. During late latency through early adolescence beginning at about age eight, secondary process thinking strengthens. During this period a partial confluence of the influences of primary and secondary processes appears with ever increasing input from secondary process thinking. This is seen clinically when psychoanalytic symbol formation more and more produces symbols, which communicate rather than evoke inner images and mood states.

Shift to Secondary Process Informs Symbol Formation

Especially when the process of relating to an object as symbol is accompanied by a state of healthily subdued narcissism, fantasies can be effectively put aside and replaced by the reality of the object. In these states the object is permitted to shed its cloak of symbolism and become an object in reality. When this is accompanied by a shift in the child's cognition that stresses the development of communicative skills and a decrease in adolescent narcissism, symbols give way to object love as the primary outlet for the libidinal drives.

TRANSCENDENT SYMBOLS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

The Use of Transcendent Symbols in Psychotherapy

Dynamic psychotherapy began about one hundred years ago. Other forms of psychotherapy are as old as mankind. They consist of confession, suggestion and magic. Rubbing the body to force out demons, and sending the spirit of the shaman in search of the wandering soul of the dispirited, were and are still forms of psychotherapy. The potential exists to this day for belief in miracles and worlds created by the minds of gods, and the conclusion that mental illness is the result of living a life course that strays from the wishes of the deity. As a result of this potential, transcendent symbols, which are recognized as messages from gods about the world's direction and gods' needs, are used by platonic dualists and

pastoral guides as wellsprings for action and spiritual insight for mentally ill patients in times of stress. Deriving content from what Meissner(1984) has called the "... inner experience, affective and cognitive, that characterizes the believer's approach to his realized and lived experienced of a relationship with his creator." (page 8), the therapist searches for clues to adjustment in instruction from above packaged as a dream. Indeed, Loyola saw as part of this relationship "... something that was not and could not be a part of himself, but depended entirely on God." (See Meissner 1992 p 280) That something included symbols in the form of "visions" and "interior and exterior locutions" (p 280) reflecting a "... transcendental influence on human experience and behavior..." (p 348) The core of the approach of the therapist to transcendental symbols is the search for such symbols in the dreams and experiences of a patient and the interpretation of their meaning in terms of expressing the will of deity through the patient's life. Avoidances of the responsibility to carry out these wishes lead to conflict which may be experienced as anxiety. The search for transcendent symbols in dreams, which deliver a message whose neglect may be causing anxiety, is part of dream interpretation for the initiated. Savary (1984) taught that the "... dreamwork (is) an area of relationship between (man) and God..." (page 2). It is a way of "... consciously getting in touch with God's will and cooperating with it" (page 5) "Working with symbolic experience as coming from God..." (p 30) helps "... to understand those communications which come to us in dreams and visions." (P 31) An instance of such an interpretation of a symbol sees "A burning torch in a dream (as a possibly) symboliz(ed) guiding force lighting our way and offering us the energy to continue following our call from God." (p 61) Dreamwork with transcendent symbols is "... designed to release a symbol's energy and help us bring it into consciousness in a way that makes it useful in our daily life and decisions. (p 73)

Transcendent symbols carry the message of God's will. Identification and interpretation of the content of sacred wishes aids in helping a patient to end the tension associated with a life that runs counter to the will of the creator.

Notes

[1](#) Aristotle, "De Anima" Loeb 288. Page 177

[2](#) Lunatics - @jitam[noiq - ecstasies, meaning insane, or "a person out of his wits" during the fourth century B.C., - Oxford English Dictionary.

