

Ian Gordon-Brown

Meeting with Harlequin – An approach to Imaging in Psychotherapy

Jung described the process he discovered as "active imagination". Robert Desoille named it "the waking dream". Hanscarl Leuner called it "guided affective imagery". Today growing numbers of therapists and group leaders use these techniques and their variants (I dislike the word technique but can find no better) to explore the inner world of consciousness, to clear blocks to growth, and to release the powerful energies of the Self into expression.

I first hit imaging and fantasy techniques, or to be more accurate they first hit me, some five years ago. I was in California, on a psychosynthesis training programme for professionals and found myself increasingly irritated by the seeming excessive dependence on exercises based on visual imagery. I had used visualisation in meditation for many years, and although this had helped me to contact and channel inner energies of various kinds, only rarely did I experience the clear and vivid mental images so many people report. I had long ago concluded that I was not much of a visualiser – sound and energy were far more real experiences to me.

And then one day, in the second week of the programme, I met "Harlequin". It was in an exercise to explore sub-personalities, and as usual my images seemed shadowy, vague and without substance. Suddenly a figure in a multi-coloured loose fitting garment wearing a black mask, exploded into my inner screen, moving in the style of Jean Louis Barrault in *Les Enfants du Paradis*, a film I had not seen for years but which had made a great impression on me. My image was in vivid technicolour, the film I recall was in black and white.

This was at the end of the first half of the exercise, when we stopped, drew our material and talked about it in small groups. So I had no time at that point to get to know Harlequin, and could only sense into his meaning: sadness, sensitivity, gentleness, compassion, and feminine grace of movement, not exactly qualities I would attribute to myself! Hardly one of my sub-personalities?

In the second half of the exercise we were asked to see ourselves standing on the centre spot of a white circle, and to invite our sub-personalities out again. Nothing happened at first, until a little later we were asked to visualise a column of white light coming down into the centre of the circle where we were standing, prior to ascending it for a discussion with a wise person. And at this moment Harlequin again emerged, and in quick succession the cloak and mask fell off him to reveal a young feminine figure and face. The face immediately started to move fast up the column of light, changing as it went into the face of an old woman, in the style of a William Blake painting. This face too moved up the column changing too into the face of an old man, again in William Blake style. The impact of this series of

images was profound. It felt as if it took no more than two or three seconds, yet I can still recall the experience and images at will, and they are before me as I write.

I am still working on the message my psyche gave me five years ago. At the time I was going through a critical phase of mid-life crisis, and it was only gradually that I came to explore and understand the meaning of Harlequin, and eventually to live him/her. During the previous 20 years I had worked very much through my masculine side, and had allowed myself, as I now see it, to get caught in structures, organisation and the more material side of life, notwithstanding that I worked full time for a group whose purposes and work were concerned with spiritual and esoteric values and realities.

I had lost touch with my intuitive, feminine, gentle, musical side, which I was to discover had qualities I never dreamed I possessed. Harlequin came in order to remind me of these things, and to indicate that before I could truly be and live my strongly masculine nature, it needed to be balanced and complemented by the powerful and repressed feminine components of my psyche. I discovered, or perhaps rediscovered because I must once have known, that the sequence of my 3 second inner drama followed an archetypal pattern, that Harlequin's mask and multi-coloured cloak (shadow?), the young feminine figure (anima) and succession of old woman and old man (both wise?) were among the classic symbols of the world of the psyche.

I tell this story for two reasons. First no one who has had such an experience, and there are many who have done so in imaging and fantasy work, needs any persuading about the creative power or value of images and symbols. I believe such experiences to be of the same order as peak and mystical experiences, big dreams, and central life crises, in their power to change and transform human lives. The work I now do as a counsellor, therapist and group leader, working with imaging techniques, is a daily reminder of their extraordinary, even magical potency.

The second reason for this story is that it can be used to illustrate some key principles, basic to all sound work in imaging and fantasy. For example:

- 1. The message I got was given me by my own psyche. No one else laid it on me. The exercise gave a symbolic structure which facilitated Harlequin's emergence, but that was all - or should I say enough!*
- 2. Because it was my own message, and because it came in such a dramatic (for me) form, it was and is memorable. I neither forget it nor its message. It goes on working within me.*
- 3. It could not have come at a more opportune moment. I was ready for it, and it was ready for me.*
- 4. In no way was the experience forced, or manipulated, or suggested. It was a genuinely free, and unconditioned happening, as far as anything can be in human affairs.*

5. *It was powerful, but gentle. In the most fundamental sense I did not realise at the time what was happening. It took many months for some of the more superficial meanings to become fully conscious and to integrate themselves into my being. As I have said, I am still working on it. The symbols contain a number of levels of meaning.*

I think of myself as a transpersonal psychologist. For me the transpersonal is a perspective which is based on the reality of a "spiritual factor", or "centre" within each individual. I believe that this Centre-Self, Soul, Atman, or whatever it may be called in different traditions - is the central motivating and co-ordinating energy within the psyche. Many of you will know the ditty by Alan Watts

*"There was a young man who said though
I think that I know that I know,
What I would like to see
Is the I that knows me
When I know that I know that I know"*

Whenever possible we should be concerned with the release of the "I that knows me". From this point of view the five key principles I have mentioned are of fundamental importance. If we can allow the true Inner Self to speak to us, in whatever mode it chooses, then the message will be relevant, timely, free and unforced, both powerful and gentle, and long term and creative in its effects. In the right hands of course this can be so of a great many psychological and growth procedures. It seems to me to be particularly so with imaging techniques, because the encounter is with the self within, and can therefore be somewhat free of the conditioning effects of the Self outside, in the environment and in other people.

A second fundamental perspective of Transpersonal Psychology is its eclecticism - it is a synthesis of a number of streams both Eastern and Western. It tries to see the many streams and schools within contemporary psychology as aspects of a larger whole, a unitary reality. Thus behaviourism and psycho-analysis, to take two "extremes", will be valued, and used when appropriate, though always from the perspective of "The I that knows me".

I mention all this because the more I use imaging and fantasy the more do I find myself combining it with gestalt, with body work, and with the energy fields where different functions and dimensions of consciousness interact with body states.

I would like to map what are for me some of the more important and practical aspects of imaging and fantasy techniques from my experience in one to one and group work.

First: Images and symbols form one of the oldest most basic languages of the psyche. Myths, legends, Fairy Stories and dreams are some of the primary ways in which the world of the unconscious, speaks to us. Imaging techniques are in this tradition, and open aspects of this world to consciousness. This

is one of the sources of their power, and the primary reason for using them with great care. I will come back to this later.

Second. I believe the line of symbols and images, and particularly imaging techniques, is an expression of the feminine aspect of the psyche. It can put us in touch most easily with the instinctual, emotional and intuitive dimensions of consciousness. People who are locked in their heads or bodies often have difficulty with imaging, as I did.

Third. Images and symbols come from many different levels. In this sense they can be likened to dreams, where at one end of the spectrum they express the surface froth of the previous day, and at the other link the individual to the archetypal patterns and motifs underlying all life. One of the key questions in all imagery work is from what level of meaning do the images and symbols come, and therefore what significance do they carry.

Fourth. As a universal language, symbols have collective meanings. Container shapes generally relate to the feminine principle; water to the unconscious. If you want to explore the shadow side of the psyche, or a symbol, or go into the past, one way is to go on an inner journey into a cave, or the earth. And so on. But symbols also have highly individual meanings. For some a house will symbolise home, warmth and shelter, a place of peace and retreat. For others it will mean a prison or cage, from which they cannot escape fast enough. In every case one must ask the individual for their own association and meanings.

Fifth. The key to successful work with images and symbols is to attend to them, not judge or value or interpret, but to listen; and to engage in dialogue to discover why they are there and what they are trying to say. Real and total attention opens the consciousness to the flow of symbols, it lets them speak, and dialogue opens up to their meaning. I was working once with a girl who had encountered a very frightening dark hooded figure in a nightmare. It seem to be bringing death. I got her to image and then speak with this figure, and to ask it if it could take off its cloak and hood. It did so, to reveal a skeleton. I suggested she ask the skeleton when it became a skeleton, and suddenly her father stood before her, as he was when he died. He had died when she was two. She then spent ten very important minutes in inner dialogue with her father image. It transpired that death meant the death of an old and limiting image of her father. The image came in a frightening form, as they often do, because only in this way will most Westerners take any notice of them.

Sixth. Dialogue with symbols, inner dialogue, can take many forms. One way is simply to let the images flow, without intervention. Another is to ask important symbols to reveal themselves; either - by taking different forms; or indicate what they would like to do or become; by taking them into the light, or up a mountain, thus providing a different perspective; by cleaning or washing them if dirty; by enlarging them and so on. One can also get images to dialogue with each other and listen in to what they say. It is like being in a dream, but instead of the dream taking its own course, the dreamer intervenes from time to time to discover or clarify what the dream is trying to say.

Seventh. A very important technique, developed in transpersonal psychology, is that of the talisman. Before undertaking an inner journey the subject chooses a talisman, to accompany him, as a guide, friend, counsellor and help in trouble. The talisman in fact stands in for another aspect of the person's consciousness, often the Self. Thus if at any point the subject is uncertain what to do, they can consult the talisman. In a therapy/counselling situation the talisman is a marvellous means of keeping things moving, and unblocking, without being directive. In gestalt the observer chair is the equivalent of the talisman.

Eight. I and my colleagues use imaging with individuals in 3 main ways

- a) *In the middle of a session, when some important question comes up, we may spend 5 or 10 minutes in imaging, on the spot - we know of no better way of getting into the feeling tone of incidents, problems, relationships, and inner states of awareness.*
- b) *Again in mid-session, but spending rather longer, working over some particular area or complex for perhaps 20 minutes to half an hour.*
- c) *The long guided daydream, where the individual lies on a couch, and undertakes what is often a symbolic but very meaningful journey. This procedure will normally take the individual into deeper levels of the psyche than a) or b).*

Ninth. I have to sound a note of warning. Imaging techniques are very powerful, deceptively so. I started to write: "They should never be used with", but perhaps I should say they are contra-indicated for people with a weak ego structure, psychotics and pre-psychotics (I don't like labelling people either but I have nearly run out of my space) and people on drugs of many kinds. Nor are they for party games. I have been fortunate in having good experiences of imaging. I have met too many who have not. Responsibility and care are essential keynotes.

Finally, the psyche has a great sense of humour. There was the man who went up the mountain, to meet the wise person, about whom he was at the time highly sceptical. He got there to find a notice "Gone to lunch, back at two", and hanging by it a tassel (Read your House at Pooh Corner for deeper meanings). And the woman who felt that her mind and feelings were not communicating too well - her symbols for her present state was a Giraffe in a circus - is there any animal whose head is further from its heart? And the woman who got a beautiful saw as the symbol for her mind, and a lovely tree for her emotions. But when mind talked to emotions the saw started to cut down the tree. Don't most of us do that, if not to ourselves at least to others.

Ian Gordon-Brown is joint director and founder of the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology and is also Director of the Industrial Participation Association.
