Fridays

Drop-in Encounter run by experienced AHP leaders, at 8.00 p.m. 188 Old Street - £2 per session. 2/6p
Womens Groups 2nd and 4th Fridays - for those who are in close relationship with a 'gay' or 'bisexual' man - SIGMA Penny Edwards - 01 444 9967. 2/6p
Primal Group - Nottingham. Fortnightly - Tom and Elli Chamberlain, tel: 0602 51793.

Beverly Besmer

Conceive the Inconceivable!

Imagination, Symbols and Change

Much of the work of personal change and psychotherapy has to do with what is technically termed construct loosening and construct reorganization. Mental attitudes, or thoughtforms, ideas or constructs, whatever term one chooses, can shape and govern - even control - the life one lives. The notion of self-fulfilling prophecy and the power of expectations in determining what is experienced are commonly accepted. This one may verify by personal experience. There is also respectable and convincing theoretical support for this popular belief. Authoritative sources in the literature of humanistic psychology support the personal construct theory of George A. Kelly *(A Theory of Personality. The Psychology of Personal Constructs.)* In the literature of spiritual development or transpersonal psychology, refer to the works of Jane Roberts, especially *The nature of Personal Reality. A Seth Book.* A gripping account of this phenomenon of mental projection, the impact of thought forms or self-fulfilling prophecy in connection with scientific reserch, is presented by Joseph Chilten Pierce in *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg.*

Equally potent in determining one's being-in-the-world is the mental imagery that plays on one's mind screen. While the reality impact of these 'home movies' varies, day-dreaming, nocturnal dreaming, and other fantasy and imaginal activity have been known to have a transformational function. Our secret inner life and personal myths may not only or always be just an escape from a drab or distressing life. This activity may also constitute a form of active involvement in finding new ways to enliven our existences, vitalize relationships, solve problems, experiment and rehearse new behaviours, explore new self-images and creative potential. In short, may enrich and make our lives more beautiful. Jerome L. Singer, Yale University Director of Clinical Psychology, has written several books including *(Fantasy and Daydreaming)* which enthusiastically advance this view.

Mental imagery is a fundamental creative act, and yet a commonplace cognitive process. In this article the mental image may be understood as a pictorial

representation of a mental construct. Constructs also have a verbal form, and are more commonly discussed as such. In this discussion however the focus is on mental imagery. Since this term has been used in a variety of ways to refer to a variety of phenomena, here it will be used generally to include images and symbols in dreams, day-dreams, guided day-dreams, spontaneous imaging exercises, and active imagination exercises, the pictorial content of stream of consciousness reveries, and free drawings. Major sources for the theory and methodology of imagery in psychotherapy are Carl Jung, Roberto Assagioli, Martha Crampton, Jerome Singer and Mardi Horowitz.

Let me now clarify what is meant by imagination in this discussion. Broadly the imagination has to do with putting things together in new ways, seeing new combinations, new solutions. When we speak of the imagination we refer to one of the psychological functions of which there are seven according to Roberto Assagioli: will, imagination, desire and impulse, emotion and feeling, physical sensation, thinking, and intuition. (Jung defined four psychological functions: intuition, thinking, feeling and sensation.) Imagination in this broad sense has much to do with creativity and originality. Imagination may refer to an internal process, a mental activity that sometimes, but not always, entails imagery. It may also be used in externalized activity or behaviour such as cooking, dressing, joking.

I also like to think of imagination in a very literal sense, as the image-making function. This is my own specific way of using this term and it is in this sense that I use it in this article, in connection with the types of mental imagery experiences mentioned above.

For an interesting discussion of the physiological and neurological bases of inner vision or visualization (imaging), and outer vision, see Ulric Neisser's paper in Robert Orstein's book, *The Nature of Human Consciousness.*

Images or mental pictures, like dream images, become symbols when they are perceived and experienced as having multidimensional meaning, more than the literal or pictorial definition, and potentially beyond conventional interpretations. In a psychodynamic context the symbol has a highly personal significance and emotional charge related to the individual's total psychic situation at that moment in time. *Symbols are the living* language of the psyche. The psyche speaks in symbols. Music, dance, mathematics, and words are all symbolic forms, but we are mainly concerned with pictorial symbols here.

The process of producing symbols is mysterious. Where *do* they come from? When we have the answer to this question, we may have answers to many more questions about human perception and reality. Empirical investigation of the inner life of the human being is still beyond the methodological reach of 20th century science. Some exciting hints are suggested by recent research in holography and primal reality perception, published in *Brian/Mind Bulletin* based on the work of Stanford neurophysicist Kark Pribrin and London University physicist David Bohm.

From the writings of Carl Jung we have a theoretical foundation for understanding the psychodynamic function of symbols. The following comments are based mainly on his writings and those of Roberto Assagioli.

Jung has said, "As a plant produces its flower, so the psyche creates its symbols" *(Man and His Symbols).* They are powerful "living realities." "The image is a condensed expression of the psychic situation as *a whole*, not merely, nor even predominantly, of unconscious contents pure and simple." *(Psychological Types.)* The symbol represents the person's total psychic situation, and it **IS** that situation at a given moment.

Dreams are an important bridge between conscious and unconscious processes. Dreams play an important complementary or compensatory role in the psyche in the on-going recreation of a dynamic equilibrium. There is no simple or mechanical system for interpreting dreams; but a basic approach is to amplify the associations.

Symbols help us to express the ineffable, that which we simply cannot put in words. Take for example the butterfly. An ineffable quality of lightness and freedom is evoked by the image of these exquisite creatures. The experience exceeds verbal communication. We know about the caterpiller and the chrysalis, and the biological process of metamorphosis. But the experience evoked by the image exceeds verbal communication.

The image of a spiral conveys a picture of something too complicated to say gracefully in words: the notion of circularity and turns, climbing and retracing a path at another level of altitude. For some, the spiral symbolizes the path of life, the journey of the soul. We see it in our own personal way, with steep or gentle inclines; a rocky, sandy or soft grassy path; solitary or crowded with commuter traffic. Humour and glorious colours may describe it.

And the rose. Gertrude Stein said about as much as words can say: A rose is a rose is a rose. The roseness of a rose. . . the rose by any other name. . . Now let the picture say something to you. Visualize the rose. What sort of rose is yours? Colour? Scent? Location? Memories? The rose as bud. We know about the opening and blossoming of the rose, its movement too infinitessimally - what **IS** the word? How would you describe it? - the unfolding of a rose bud, blossoming into a full open perfect flower. See that happen now in your imagination. Is that a symbol for the growth process that feels like something you can feel, happening at some deep level of your being?

Some light may be shed on the question where do symbols come from by Freud's theory of primary and secondary process thinking, considered by some to be his major contribution to psychology. Why is it that the symbol has such a living reality, an energy charge more intense than that of the word? Fromm calls symbols the forgotten language, the preverbal language of childhood before the native language is learned by the child, and with it all the social conventions and distinct cultural patterns of thinking built

into each different linguistic structure. Freud's primary process thinking refers to this pre-verbal imaginal mode of thinking; it in non verbal, non-rational, non-linear, organized around sensory impressions. In adults, a relaxed state often produces a primary process-like stream-of-consciousness type of reverie. Perceptual isolation or sensory deprivation environments can produce this state and the more vivid type of mental images such as visual hallucinations. A reduction of external stimuli and withdrawal of attention from outer events tends to increase inner events. The reclining couch and free association techniques of Freudian analysis encourage this mode of communication.

Secondary process thinking in Freud's theory is the regular type of mental activity we engage in, which is characterized by reasoned thought, logic, conventional linguistic forms, and concepts. In short, this is typical conscious adult reality-oriented thinking. This is the ego-centred mode of communication that employs conscious and unconscious censoring and decision-making devices, unlike primary process thinking which is closer to id dynamics, and the unconscious free-floating domain of experience. What is interesting about these two distinct cognitive processes is that primary process thinking, once thought to be regressive, less developed, inferior and primitive, is now being discussed in the literature of psychotherapy and psychonalysis as a valuable psychological function that seems to have developmental potential which may be actively and deliberately employed throughout adult life. Jerome Singer, mentioned above, is one proponent of this revised view of the primary process.

How might this imaginal cognitive mode have a developmental function? It can provide messages or feedback from the inner self. From the Jungian point of view the language of symbols is holistic, representing a person's total psychic situation here and now. The symbol condenses and combines information from many levels; it has both feeling and thought content, emotional charge and mental insight. It is Janus-faced, looking backwards into the

past and possibly triggering memories of earlier childhood experiences; and it looks forward into the future, yielding information on potential direction for the unfoldment of the person. It is paradoxical; polarities meet and are inter-related; yin and yang aspects are presented. In this sense the symbol whether the product of a dream, a psychotherapy session, or a day-dream, can reflect the person's psychodynamic state of being at a particular time. In response to a simple question like, "Who am I?", or "What's happening right now in this particular part of my life?" the psyche, though a spontaneous symbol, can provide insight. Thus the person may get some perspective of himself, and experience a sense of wholeness as inner processes are co-ordinated with outer experience. This feedback function of the symbol is an invaluable resource for self-awareness, for living a more conscious life. In effect, as Jung says of dreams, the symbol bridges the person's inner and outer reality. In psychotherapy dissociated, conflicting or repressed material is often accessible through mental imagery techniques because secondary process intellectualization and censoring mechanisms do not seem to operate.

However, contrarily Freud and some contemporary psychologists view imaging as an avoidance or censoring strategy, as dream symbols are enshrouded in obscurity. This view is disputed widely in the literature, and seems to depend on the context and use made of the image. Another point of contention in the literature is the matter of interpretation of symbols. Some practitioners like Jung emphasize the importance of consciously decoding or interpreting the message of the symbol. For others the very act of producing a symbol seems to represent a significant psychodynamic change, a rearrangement of psychic contents, which brings about an inner adjustment in whatever imbalance may have been currently experienced. This inner adjustment may then be carried through into consciousness to take concrete effect in one's life circumstances. The process both facilitates construct loosening, and generates construct reorganization. It helps to create a new level of integration. In this respect it has a transformational function.

As for the message itself, there is often a potent emotional charge to the symbol which energizes the person so that the impact of the picture remains, and is remembered vividly, as are some dreams. Not all symbols have a profound impact however. Some may be easily recognized, and perhaps, if too easily deciphered, quickly dismissed. Whether the symbol is important is a matter for the person himself to know. How surprising, confusing, beautiful, funny, cryptic, vibrant, scary, illuminating, potent or "right" is a particular symbol? The more impact, the more potentially meaningful. Although sometimes the very obvious one is overlooked, and upon closer attention it reveals some dazzling secret!

As with dreams we may take them seriously or let them pass barely noticed, and live on the surface of our lives. It is useful for some people to ask themselves how they feel about the symbols they produce, because a low opinion of themselves in some area may show up in a low opinion of their symbols, a quick dismissal of their inner life as 'not very interesting.' Have another look!

Whatever the meaning of a particular symbol, it must be individually and personally relevant. Standard interpretations may be helpful to spark one's own associations or connections, and the comments and guesses - the projections - of others may also shed some light and assist one's understanding. However it is above all a highly personal creation and must be treated as such. As Jung advised, never know first and never know better what someone else's symbol means for them. One person's house is cosy, another's is a trap. Yellow is gaity for some, bile for others; the colour yellow is healing for some, while for others green is a healing colour.

To the extent that we are interested in getting these messages from the inner self, and listening to them, we approach them with intentionality, the will to relate to our inner life and to bring it more fully into consciousness. With this intentionality, a dimension of depth, deepening meaning and inner resonance is added to our lives. It seems that intuition comes into play and is developed as one develops this capacity for imaging. It is one way

to ultilize the resources of the right hemisphere of the brain, the side associated in current brain research with the intuitive, imaging, symbolic processes. The left brain has been associated with the masculine polarity and rational processes. Utilizing both cognitive modalities one may expect to have increased self-determination and a fuller and more holistic experience of reality and perception of the world.

It is thus with a sense of tremendous freedom and responsibility that we find more and more empirical evidence in support of the concept of inner vision, and the psycho-spiritual law, "As we envision it, so shall it be."

It seems worthwhile looking at our personal constructs, and self-images, and in a larger sense at our image of the world. What vision do you hold?

Self and Society Vol.VI No. 6 entitled Symbols for Growth and Enlightenment is still available at 50p post free.