

Symbols: Magic Keys to the Soul

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Few words in the 20th century were used so frequently and occupied so many thinkers as the word “symbol” and its derivations. Symbols can be found everywhere: in the arts, in science, in politics, in religion. Language itself as a means of understanding is considered a system of linguistic symbols (or “signs” according to another terminology). In books or on the Internet, you may learn about the symbolisms of Christianity, Asian religions, or healing stones. Whatever you may wish to think about this, it is a living reality that cannot be overlooked. A desire for imaginative and symbolic thinking emerges spontaneously in our world that prefers rationalization and effectiveness in everything. How shall we regard symbols, and what do they mean to us? Is there any link between symbols and music, or with art in general?

The word “symbol” derives from the Greek word *sýmbolon*, meaning token, pledge, sign by which one infers a thing (the adjective *sýmbolos* means suitable). The verb *symbállein* means to throw together, to compare¹⁾ [see also *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*, 3rd College Edition, 1991; or *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, 1989: “2.a. Something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation); esp. a material object representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract, as a being, idea, quality, or condition; a representative or typical figure, sign, or token”]. In the life of the ancient Greeks, *sýmbolon* represented a sign that helped friends and neighbors recognize each other: a guest on the departure from a host broke a piece of clay in two; he kept one half as a

¹⁾ Frantisek Lepař. *Slovník řecko-česko-německý*. Prague: Nákladem knihtiskárny Dra. F. Skrejsovského, 1873.

sign when he or his kin visited in the future. To put the broken pieces back together meant to recognize a friend. I use this frequently mentioned example of etymology because I am convinced of the importance of meaning, often hidden or seemingly forgotten, that charges words on the basis of certain (never accident and willful) experiences of reality, or on the basis of a real function in life; the older meanings live on hidden beneath more recent layers. Or, as the great French hermeneutist René Alleau says, “The whole history of mankind develops in an additive way. Old features and signs are kept, while over them new features and signs are layered.”²⁾

For further explanation, let's first of all keep in mind the expressions: correspondence of all things, natural and unforeseen and to throw together, to connect. In our analytical-rational age, the word “symbol” has gained many different definitions; the application of the word in various fields widened the word's meaning depending on the discipline from which the usage derived. On one hand, these various interpretations illustrate its multilayered character and universality; on the other hand, if they are individually made absolute, they lead to the narrowing of the word's capacity to describe complex manifestations of life (and thus cultural phenomena, too). Perhaps the most general definition of a symbol is as follows: A symbol is something that stands for, represents, or suggests something else [as in the dictionaries mentioned above].

An extreme semantic example of the symbol is found in mathematics, where the symbol is a conscious product of human intellect, and can be used only as such a symbol. Here it corresponds with a basic semiotic understanding of a sign, which indicates something, and has a strictly defined meaning in an ideal case: one at best. In the positivism-oriented sciences, there is a general tendency to explain symbols as signs and to work with them as such. Here, signs are pure bearers of a meaning.

²⁾ René Alleau. *Hermés a dějiny věd*. 2nd expanded edition. Prague: Malvern, 2005, p. 15.

Yet the symbol, apart from indicating something, also symbolizes something (that is, links it as well). This opens a door to another understanding of symbols, which can be found for instance in psychoanalytical psychology: a symbol can be any thing that primarily and emotionally affects the soul of a man, material or nonmaterial in character, with or without a clear primary meaning. The emotional part of a symbol is enormously important: it has the function of linking and connecting. It works reactively on the basis of spontaneous and unconscious mental mechanisms, and it sets psychic activities in motion, which may reveal previously hidden contents or meaning, and so help self-understanding or even healing (which for instance has been used in Jungian psychotherapy)³⁾. Similar semantically “vague” symbols can be found in the field of fine arts, where each feature serves as a basis for its effect: they resonate the human heart in an unpredictable way, opening up unknown and mysterious spaces. To move some one inside, you must move him emotionally.

This so-called restitutive conception of the symbol (as opposed to the common scientific reductive conception) is the basis of my thinking.⁴⁾

The symbol, then, is a theme complex enough for this short paper. Here I want to focus only on one important aspect: the emotional component, which cannot be separated from functioning symbols, but which, on account of its alleged subjectivity and intangibility, is often underestimated or even ignored. At the same time, emotions are the only living, pulsating link between the symbol and the soul of the man; they are literally a “short circuit”, to use electronics terminology.

Here I must return to the question of how symbols originate. All of us have experienced it, but few of us realize it: if we link objects of everyday use with emotions, if we link them with an experience, then they become symbols. Such a symbol can be our morning teapot, our teddy bear, or a

³⁾ Verena Kastová. *Dynamika symbolů - Úvod do jungovské psychoterapie*. Prague: Portál, 2000.

⁴⁾ Vladimír Borecký. *Porozumění symbolu*. Prague: Triton, 2003.

pebble presented to us as a gift. These objects symbolize something to us (they not only mean, but even evoke!) - comfort, security, a certain emotional harmony, a particular life situation or relationship, and so on. A summary of such symbols characterizes us on the outside as unique individuals. Any other symbols originate following the same principle: in religion, in politics, in the arts; they characterize our culture. The difference is only in the way that they create emotional links: for instance, through religious rituals or political meetings.

For a thing to function as a symbol, a person must have an emotional link to it, whether it is a teapot or a political slogan. For a true reflection of our emotional “engagements”, which are not at all accidental but conditioned by our specific spiritual equipment, we have to look at our selves as a mirror. The example mentioned above of a pot and a pebble uses individual symbols. They have an important role in psychotherapy in the search for important but forgotten psychic moments in the life of an individual. A therapist must begin a sort of game, in which the patient begins to link emotionally to things, which will help him return to places that he would not reach in normal and reasonable thinking. In all scenes, real or imaginative objects link with human emotions, and so they become symbols; with their help, a man can express himself and his feelings. Such expression is more rich and lively than with the use of mere words. . . . It was demonstrated that patients with a normal medical history expressed themselves very stingily but could speak about their family's medical history in a more differentiated way with the help of symbols than they would have done at a purely verbal level. Thanks to the symbols, they had more ideas. They remembered their specific family lives, and all of a sudden felt much better. . . The symbols loosened associations linked with emotions, which were inaccessible in the language of words.⁵¹

⁵¹ M. a G. Wollschlägerovi. *Symbol v diagnostice a psychoterapii*. Prague: Portál, 2002, p. 17.

I would like to remind you of one of the most important meanings of the verb *symbolleinen*, which I mentioned at the beginning: to link. A symbol links objects-verbal concepts (products of intellect) or material objects-with the emotional part of the human soul. I take this as a very important principle, which also shows the extreme importance of a symbol as a means that allows us to express ourselves, or on the contrary, to capture reality in its wholeness. Psychologist C. G. Jung says:

An intellect itself can never capture the wholeness of a soul. Whether you want it or not, we must impose an approach of world view [that is, the general and universal conception of the world. -J.P.], because the soul craves for an expression, which would capture it as a whole. . . . Intellect is one of many basic psychic functions, and it is not enough to create a full picture of the world. At least, you must also add emotions. Sometimes emotions are persuaded about something other than intellect, and you can not always prove that emotional conviction would mean less than intellectual conviction.⁶⁹

Consequently, the linking role of a symbol will not stop at the emotional field; it overflows into the field of human imagination, which is fuelled by emotions. A symbol not only launches a stream of associations connected with the past, it also ignites our capacity to create images in music, literature, and the fine arts. Emotional intelligence, as well as the field of imagination has been the subject of increasing interest in the past decades; it is also the subject of emancipation efforts of some philosophical, psychological, and anthropological streams.⁷⁰ It has been proven that these very mental functions are of primary importance for human existence and development, and they also precede rationality to a certain extent.

We have reached the understanding that emotions developed as primary mental mechanisms that guard the life of an organism, enabling

⁶⁹ C. G. Jung. *Člověk a duše*. Prague: Academia, 1995, p. 208.

⁷⁰ Vladimír Borecký. *Porozumění symbolu*. Prague: Triton, 2003.

it to orient itself and motivating it towards action. As such, they are in us eternally and provide a basis for our thinking (which is evolutionally younger) and functioning.⁸⁾ Those who are not aware of this miss the deepest basis of their existence. Exactly the same development can be found in each individual as in the history of mankind: at the beginning, a child is a bundle of elementary, unconscious emotions of a very archaic character. Only later, with developing cognitive abilities, does a child gradually start to name, differentiate, and use its inner movements and motivations. It is not clear, though, whether we will be able to understand the deepest emotional motives at the end of our lives, and these motives lead us on our life journeys. Behind each great life decision, whether you admit it or not, there is a deeper emotional level: no one will consciously and freely decide to do something that does not fulfill him emotionally or that may even lead to a condition of anxiety and fear. You must be forced by someone or something to take a step that you do not choose. This may cause a deformation in your subsequent development (even in the case of an illness), or, if you are a strong enough personality, this may be perceived as a call to overcome unsatisfactory situations or personal developments.

Basic life decisions and attitudes are not purely rational, and we must accept this fact. Those who will not accept it will, by the end of their days, have followed a path lighted by reason, but they will have been constantly attacked by demons with dark powers from narrow side lanes - the demons of unrecognized and unreflected - upon feelings. They will kill his best rationally justified intentions. I do not develop this theme here to demonize human emotions; it is the other way round. I want to stress a very basic fact that at the very moment we accept and reflect on our emotional activity as a fundamental part of us and that plays a crucial existential role, we may be able to observe how many of our attitudes, reactions, and messages are motivated by, for example, hidden feelings

⁸⁾ Milan Nakonečný. *Lidské emoce*. Prague: Academia, 2000.

of existential anxiety, threat, or power-by a hidden and unrecognizable energy that deforms our effort and activity.

Symbols and their associations are one of the means by which we communicate with and make use of the emotional area of the soul. I will return to the words of René Alleau, who spoke about an additive character of human development. We can now understand the rest:

Consider a man of 1992. Part of his essence has already been built: this part is his archaism, his genetic code, which involves millions of years of experience, and ways of behavior that are written into our character. These are masked features, but they are almost unchangeable. Apart from this primary conditioning and archaism, there is an ability to adapt to the forms of life; that is, to what has just originated, which is our work of freedom and our possibilities of change. If we want to understand ourselves, we have to do it from two aspects: archaic and liberal. An archaic aspect can be discovered from inside with the help of symbolism, which always leads us to the depths of our existence. . . .⁹⁾

An individual level of a symbol, like a linking knot, further deepens at the place of meeting of the souls at a supra-individual level. This happens when a symbol, a subject, or a word resonates emotionally for a greater number of people. Deeper levels of the soul, which are structured similarly to an organism at the biological level, speak out according to various general principles via generally shared symbols. It has been demonstrated (in fine arts, music, and in literature) that the timelessness of a work consists in a great simplicity of its basic principles and the use of symbols. It is here that the art's utmost symbolic ('linking') character comes out. The most outstanding examples in this connection are rural folk songs, where a minimum of period facts and emotional directness of the message create an utmost symbolic material, which crosses ages. It is quite unlike the broadside ballads of their time, for example, which were

⁹⁾ René Alleau. *Hermés a dějiny věd*. 2nd expanded edition. Prague: Malvern, 2005, p. 15.

bearers of important news and information, but which today seem more a system of 'dry' signs, a picture of the period, or a document than living symbols.

Each song that resonates in a person, that opens up something inside him, that moves him, has a symbolic character. It links with something inside that is specific and alive. The captivating melody of a song, its lyrics, metaphors, and images are symbols of an inner life for each of us. They are a mirror for emotionally charged places; they can open doors closed by anxiety and mental deprivation; or, on the other hand, they can help to fully begin circulating life-giving creative energies, and more. Symbols embody inner structures of the soul, archetypes, and fullness, and as such we may regard them as avenues toward deeper investigations of the relationship between individual and group forms of address. Nevertheless, this is outside the bounds of this paper, and each song would perhaps have enough material for its own paper. Because songs are, for their symbolic character, keys to the human soul.

An extended version of this paper can be found at www.gnosis.cz.