

Working with Symbols and Imagery

by Carl Greer, PhD, PsyD

By expressing your story through art, movement, poetry, and other nonverbal or metaphorical ways, you engage both the rational (left) and intuitive/nonrational (right) hemispheres of your brain. The rational hemisphere is more involved than the nonrational one is when it comes to processing language and thinking logically. The nonrational hemisphere of the brain thinks in pictures and symbols, the primal language of Source and the universe. Be careful not to analyze the symbolic messages received too quickly, however, because the rational mind is used to perceiving in a limited way and may distort the message. Take your time and don't rush to verbalize and interpret what has come to you in the form of symbols, energies, and sensations.

In time, you will become more adept at interacting with energy and symbolic messages through the use of techniques such as journeying and dialoguing. Then, you can discard or replace the metaphors that you have outgrown or that don't serve you anymore. By changing your metaphors, you usher in forces that can bring to life a new story, perhaps one of an adventurer, a nurturer, or a wise elder. You can stop telling yourself and others that you're "swimming upstream" and adopt a new metaphor of "surfing the waves of uncertainty" or "going with the flow."

A woman went on a shamanic journey to ask for symbols that would help her create a new story. She described her experience in this way:

One aspect of my story that I wanted help with was my relationship with my parents. On the journey, I received the symbol of a silver spoon, offering love and nourishment. Upon my return to ordinary consciousness, I was skeptical of this gift. It seemed too facile a symbol to capture the conflicted way I felt about my parents. To get more information, I decided to dialogue with the symbol [consciously ask the symbol questions, make observations, and then let the unconscious mind respond from the perspective of the symbol, in a back-and-forth conversation]. In the dialogue, I challenged the symbol of the silver spoon, pointing out that it could rapidly tarnish, losing its bright beauty. To my surprise, the energy of the spoon symbol communicated that I had hit upon one of its main messages. What I had seen as a flaw was really part of the symbol's deeper significance. Underneath the veneer of dark tarnish, the essential nature of the spoon remained unaffected. From the dialogue, I realized that although my relationship with my parents was tarnished very deeply in some places, underneath that, their love for me was steadfast.

This woman's journey allowed her to realize that her parents did, in fact, love her, and made it easier for her to be accepting when their behaviors disappointed her.

Finding and Reclaiming the Hidden Pieces of Yourself

Techniques such as journeying and dialoguing are highly effective for discovering and uncovering qualities and behavior patterns that may be hidden from your awareness. You may see these qualities and behaviors in others but not be able to recognize them in yourself. These hidden or lost aspects of yourself, which are buried in your unconscious and will often appear to you as symbols, influence how you act, think, and feel. They are pieces of your story, your life, and your identity. If you reclaim them, learn from them, and incorporate your insights into your self-knowledge, you can write a better story.

Any quality you have disavowed and relegated to the shadowy corners of your consciousness has both positive and negative aspects. When you rediscover a quality you thought was negative, you may uncover its gifts and become conscious of how to access them while

minimizing the more problematic aspects of that quality. When you embrace a positive quality you did not realize was within you, you become empowered.

It's difficult to change your story without bringing some of these qualities into your conscious awareness. Only then can you free the energy that you have been using to hide from your conscious mind the truths you have denied. This energy can then be channeled toward changing your life story. What's more, you will find it easier to stop wasting energy in endeavors that you don't value as part of your story. You will have fewer regrets.

Each aspect of your current story has, in one way or another, served a purpose. Even if you want to change or shed part of your current story, it is important to honor it for the role it has played. Although you can't change your past experiences, you can alter how you feel about them by scrupulously examining your current story and its origins.

You will likely choose to keep those patterns and roles that serve you well. But first, you must emotionally detach from them in order to appraise them with objectivity. In looking at your story, you must free yourself from both sentimentality and cynicism.

If you decide that some of your patterns and roles don't serve you or feed your soul, you can make new, better choices. As you change one aspect of your story, you might find that you want to change others as well. You might also discover there are parts of your story that are more important to you than you originally thought they were. For example, I have worked with women who felt inadequate and unsuccessful because they had not found a suitable life partner, and finding one was a pressing goal for them. After they did shamanic and Jungian work, this goal stopped being so important to them, and they developed a new goal to become strong and self-assured regardless of whether or not they found a life partner. After using shamanic and Jungian techniques to access wisdom hidden from the unconscious mind, you may find you have new ideas about what you would like to bring into your life.

A goal of this work is to bring into your life greater integrity, that is, an unbroken condition or wholeness, rather than allowing a disconnection between the actions you take and your conscious beliefs and intentions. Resolving your inner conflicts leads to greater equanimity.

You may experience moments of transcendence in which you are able to see the larger picture of your life, glimpse possibilities otherwise unseen, and give birth to a new story you had never before imagined for yourself. You will be able to make conscious choices and see an ever-expanding number of possibilities as you become more attuned to messages from Source, encoded in symbol and metaphor and made accessible to you when you use consciousness shifting techniques. You can learn to comfort your aching heart.

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