

“The new developments in depth psychology have made it possible to approach the realm of the unconscious from an inherently affirmative and constructive point of view. The new holistic sense of depths is not conceived in terms of the malfunctioning of personality, but rather in terms of what man’s nature requires him to become.”

--Ira Progoff: (Depth Psychology and Modern Man, Julian Press, NY, 1969.)

ANSWERS FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS

This monograph is taken from Synthesis Journal Volume 2 (pp 140-152) 1975-1978

By Martha Crampton

Recent decades have witnessed a reevaluation of the human unconscious and the development of new methods for an expanded use of its processes. The purposeful use of the imagination is a most effective and fruitful means to explore the unconscious. It is of particular interest to psychotherapists, educators and all persons who, in their lives, seek to make use of the positive potential of unconscious processes.

In recent years numerous techniques utilizing mental imagery have been developed. They can be considered to be *methods for exploring the unconscious by using the imagination under the direction of the conscious intellect and the will.*

When used in such a disciplined way (as opposed to mere daydreaming or unproductive fantasy) mental imagery offers the possibility of exploring new realms of the unconscious while maintaining contact with our rational faculties. We are able to shift gears back and forth, at will, between the direct experience of our inner world – including its affective components – and a more rational, analytic framework from which to consider such experience. This has an advantage over the imagery of nocturnal dreams as it permits us to work directly with the imaginal material, extracting its meaning and moving towards conflict resolution.

Mental imagery techniques can play a valuable, integrative role by bridging the conscious and unconscious as well as the rational and affective dimensions of our personality.

There is a broad range of techniques available. Some are best used with an experienced person who can serve as a guide, while others can be employed effectively with or without such help. Among the latter, one technique with many varied applications is the method known as “answers from the unconscious.” (M.Crampton, “The Use of Mental Imagery in Psychosynthesis,” Synthesis Graduate School, S.F., CA.) This method is generally used to acquire information, obtain guidance and gain better understanding of our inner processes. The basic idea is to *formulate a question*, addressing it to one’s unconscious and *allowing the answer to emerge in the form of a*

mental image. Such an answer will emerge spontaneously, in most cases with surprising facility. It is important not to reject images that may seem irrelevant. Usually, given sufficient attention, their significance will become clear. And if a sequence of unrelated images emerges, often the very first one turns out to be the most meaningful.

The question posed need not be held continuously in the foreground of one's awareness. Once it has been clearly formulated we can turn our attention to the answer that is about to emerge. Thus the mind takes an expectant attitude – one which is simultaneously receptive, relaxed, and yet goal-directed – much like listening for a faint sound, or being in a movie theatre and waiting for the film images to appear on the screen.

Often, people can do this spontaneously at the first try. But sometimes a beginner in the use of this method will try too hard, or attempt to “make something happen,” and this blocks the process of spontaneous emergence. Or one may become anxious that nothing will happen, that there will be no images. This anxiety can be allayed if one knows that the unconscious is a vast storehouse of imagery accessible at all times, if one is reasonably relaxed and trust the process to occur.

Many kinds of questions may be fruitfully explored, provided they are vital, authentic, existential questions for the asker. For example, you may choose to ask a question related to your personal growth, or your relationship with others. This can be illustrated by the case of a woman who closed her eyes and asked, “What is it about my behavior that makes my husband angry?” The image that emerged was that of herself playing the role of a martyr. When she had analyzed its meaning, this image helped her to understand how her behavior provoked her husband's anger. As another example, a man asked, “What is the cause of my headache?” He saw himself hitting his head with a hammer, and later hitting his mother. He realized that the severe headache stemmed from turning back on himself the childhood anger he had felt toward her. Having realized this, and ventilated his anger in harmless cathartic ways, his headache disappeared.

Answers from the unconscious may also be used to get in touch with the meaning of a dream image, a drawing, or other symbolic material. Simply ask for an image that expresses the meaning of that symbol. The technique may be used as well for the initial phase of “grounding,” – the relating of symbolic material to everyday life. For this purpose, you can ask for an image showing you how the message conveyed by the symbol applies to your life. In answer to such a question, you will probably see yourself in a concrete life situation. A woman who first used the “answers from the unconscious” technique to ask about the next obstacle to her development saw an image in the form of hooks, and got a feeling of wanting to clutch or grab something. She could not understand what this meant, so she then asked for an image of a *real-life situation* in which she had experienced that same feeling. She then saw herself clutching her husband, playing a dependent role with him and refusing to accept responsibility for her own actions.

This last example shows that it is quite possible – and very productive – to ask for an image that expresses, or that is related to, a particular feeling one is experiencing. This procedure enables us to further understand the meaning and causes of our feelings, to get in touch with those that are repressed and to respond to the needs and urges that generated them. It is especially powerful when the feeling is a recurrent one. This approach is also quite useful, in a therapeutic situation, when the client is not aware of anything specific to work on and a productive starting point is needed.

Answers from the unconscious are also useful for finding out more constructive ways of being or acting – the next phase of grounding. One might ask, for example, “How could I act in a class so that my students would be more involved in their work?” or “What do I need to develop to overcome my fear of what others will think?” Often the answer suggests the development of a particular inner attitude or transpersonal quality such as “joy,” “courage,” “self-acceptance,” etc. which can be purposefully cultivated.

Sometimes when using the answers from the unconscious method, it is necessary to go through several steps in order to find a response that is really useful and meaningful. In this way, the answer to one question is used as a starting point to formulate another more precise question, and so on until one feels satisfied with the final answer. One woman who had asked, “What do I need to work on?” saw a wall. The wall seemed to be too vague and general to be very useful to her, so she then asked, “What is the specific meaning of the wall for me?” This time she saw a jagged-toothed saw, which after some reflection, put her in touch with a “cutting” quality within herself. Then, in order to more fully ground the experience, she asked her unconscious to show her how she was being cutting with people in everyday life. She then saw herself in various relationships expressing critical attitudes towards certain people. She took some time to understand how her overly critical tendencies were creating a “wall” between herself and others. Finally, in order to end on a constructive note, she asked what she needed to develop within herself in order to overcome this tendency. The answer she received was an image of an enclosure that seemed to include both herself and another person. Unlike the original wall that served to separate her from others, this image pointed the way toward taking others within her own boundary. She began to sense a way of identifying herself empathically with the needs of other people, so that she could experience others “from the inside,” rather than from the outside as a critical judge. As she continued to concentrate on this image, the sense of oneness with others grew in intensity and generality. She had a peak experience, realizing the great joy and love that could come through this kind of blending.

This example illustrates the importance of taking sufficient time to reflect on the meaning and implications of each image so that its full impact and message is felt. It also illustrates the principle of ending on a constructive and positive note, so that one is not simply left with an awareness of blockage and limitation. Taking the process to a positive ending has a generally encouraging and vitalizing effect: it allows the person to see his positive potentials and to realize that he can turn an apparent obstacle into a stepping stone in his growth, by mobilizing the will to overcome it.

A further way of extracting meaning from the images that appear is to make a thorough rational and intuitive interpretation of their nature and function. An example is given below.

A client saw an image of himself carrying a plank with five lamps on it, connected by a cord to the East Indian shop where he had obtained it. It reminded him of a Jewish menorah or candlestick used for religious purposes, though the number of lights was five rather than the traditional seven, and the lights were table lamps rather than candles. His association to five lamps was five working days. The lamps were seen as something used in a living room where one might have a social gathering. In other words, they were lights used for a profane rather than religious purpose. The image of East Indians, he said, was associated with oriental spirituality or mysticism and ideas of inner light, but to him they were also great talkers and tended to talk things to death rather than act. This corresponded to his feeling of pride in carrying the light and a wish to display what seemed to be a sort of trophy he had won. He was then able to see that this image expressed his own spiritual pride. He had been so concerned with talking about his experience, with displaying his “accomplishment,” he said, that he dispersed its energy, profaning a sacred experience in making it the object of “living room” conversation, a product of the “five working days,” a personal achievement rather than a “gift from the Lord on the day of the Sabbath.” (*Op.cit*, pp. 147-148.)

Another valuable mental imagery technique is that of **identifying** with the person or other element one is visualizing, by “becoming” it in one’s imagination. This approach has been used extensively by Perls (F.S. Perls, R.F. Hefferline and P. Goodman: *Gestalt Therapy*, Julian Press, NY, 1951.) and has been discussed with Gerard (R.Gerard: “Symbolic Identification,” paper presented to the 5th International Conference on Psychosynthesis, Rome, 1967.) with the name of “symbolic identification.” With this approach, one is able to better understand the various elements in a dream or visualization. The elements of such symbolic productions usually represent tendencies or characteristics of our own personality. By identifying ourselves with them in our imagination, we can sense their quality and “own” these previously unacknowledged aspects of ourselves. This will enable us to begin the process of transmutation and integration of these internal elements. It will also help us develop empathy, and avoid distorting our perception of other people by projecting erroneous aspects onto them.

Symbolic identification may also be used to expand our consciousness and to gain a deeper sense of participation in, and oneness with the universe. “Becoming” such natural symbols as a flower, a tree, a rock, a river, the ocean, the sun, or even the galaxy, can be particularly valuable for this purpose. This is especially effective and appropriate after personal work which has resulted in the elimination of some obstacle. It is possible to attempt this type of symbolic identification on one’s own, though people can generally enter into the experience more fully when some sort of guided visualization is used.

In addition to the basic visualization technique of allowing an image to appear on the mind screen, other techniques utilizing visual imagery may be employed for obtaining answers from the unconscious. One may, for example, ask to **see a word or phrase**

written on a chalkboard instead of the more pictorial symbols that have been discussed to this point. Or it is possible to combine visual and auditory techniques, by entering into dialogue with an image after it appears. While most people tend to receive answers as visual images, some who are not strongly visual will more commonly experience auditory imagery as though hearing an “inner voice,” or will even experience a kinesthetic form of imagery. Thus a variety of “channels” – either singly or in combination – may be used in obtaining the answer: in fact, what we call mental “imagery” can include the full range of our senses. (Exercises to develop all sensory modalities of our imagination can be found in Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis, A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, pp. 152-163.)

In exploring the elements of our imagery we may notice that some appear to be in conflict with others. This is a sign that some integrative work needs to be done. One way to begin this is to set up an inner dialogue between the elements involved, and gradually work toward greater mutual understanding. One can thus achieve greater coordination, and possibly the integration of the conflicting aspects. This process is usually deeper and more meaningful if at some point we actually *become*, in our imagination, first one and then the other element. In this way, we sense more accurately what the true needs of each part are and what message it can give us.

Integration of the warring factions is usually achieved most effectively by evoking a symbol of the “fair witness.” On occasion, especially when there is a strong need to encourage self-nurturing tendencies, we may think of it as a “wise and compassionate Person” representing the “Higher Self.” My own experience suggests that this designation tends to evoke more love, while the fair witness descriptor tends to evoke clarity of perception and insight into the problems involved. With the mediation of this objective element of our consciousness, we are generally able to understand more clearly what the true picture is and how the dysfunctional patterns can be corrected.

Evoking the image of a sage or other symbol of inner wisdom and entering into dialogue with it is a particularly powerful technique. It may bring about very meaningful insights and most valuable guidance applicable to almost any inner or outer situation. There are a variety of symbols of inner wisdom such as a Wise Old Man, a Wise Old Woman, a phoenix, eagle or dove, a gem, a spring, fountain, flame, sun, star, or light. Sometimes these symbols emerge spontaneously, or they can be evoked intentionally. Each symbol has its own particular value, its own kind of wisdom. For example, the masculine and feminine archetypes of wisdom are often complementary, with the male symbol tending to give insights of a more guiding, affirming nature and the female symbol tending to play a more nurturing role. So it is worthwhile to experiment with several of these symbols, or allow our unconscious to choose the one most appropriate to meet our particular need at the time.

In the communication with the symbol of inner wisdom, sometimes the verbal dialogue is the most important aspect. Other times, the visual imagery plays the central role. At other times still, the experience takes place largely at intuitive levels. There is then a direct realization of certain realities without much verbal or visual exchange, and

the experience can become one of contemplation, of absorption in the awareness communicated.

PRECAUTIONS

In evoking answers from the unconscious there are certain precautions to be observed, because – as with any other effective approach – it is not without pitfalls or limitations. It can open up to us a wealth of knowledge but it can also land us in trouble if we do not use it wisely. For example, once we are convinced of its validity, we must be prepared to apply in our everyday life the knowledge we have received. Too much unused knowledge undermines the will and dissipates energy, delaying our growth.

We must also pay attention to our own rhythm of unfoldment – what is a realistic step for ourselves – for if we attempt to move too fast we risk defeating our purpose. In other words, we need to be sensitive to the scope of the material we are dealing with. This is particularly important for people with a present or past history of serious emotional difficulties, or for those who are on their first steps along the path of personal growth. In general, we must use our common sense to avoid “biting off more than we can chew” at any one time, especially if we are not working with the support of a counselor, therapist or other guide – or be prepared to seek such help if this becomes indicated by the nature of the material that emerges.

In order to obtain the best answer, it is worthwhile to ask for it with our consciousness as much as possible in a “centered” place. This means detaching our selves from the issues involved, seeing them “at a distance,” by disidentifying from them, and if we have learned how, identifying with the “I” or personal self.

Another important and more subtle consideration in seeking answers from our unconscious has to do with “whom to ask for an answer.” The woman who wanted to know what it was about her behavior that made her husband angry could have addressed her question to her unconscious in general, or to have a specific element in it. This element could have been an image of her husband, or that of a wise old man. The “husband” would likely have answered according to his own subjective perspective, while the Wise Old Man would have given a more objective response, and probably advice on improving the situation. Thus the two answers would have been different, but complementary. One would have given her a valuable insight into her husband’s point of view (whether right or wrong) and helped her develop understanding and empathy for him. The other would have been more inclusive, reaching closer to the roots of the problem, and pointing to its solution.

In general, our unconscious has many levels, and as we have seen, different kinds of answers can come from different levels. If one chooses to address elements at different levels, such as, for example, the subpersonalities involved as well as the Wise Old Man, it is best to work with the higher element last, as it will have a more inclusive and synthetic quality and thus will help to integrate all the previous material.

But in most cases – and especially when first using this technique – it is sufficient, at least as a first step, to address “the unconscious” generally. In this case, it is important to deal with the answer on its own merits. In other words, one needs to use appropriate caution before accepting any answer from the unconscious – or any other message in life – at face value, and then acting on it. The answer may be coming from a source different from the one that was addressed, and thus be more or less objective and more or less appropriate. Therefore, we can best deal with all answers with common sense, discernment and objectivity, as we would with any advice given to us. But even when the answer comes from a subpersonality, or other element in the middle or lower unconscious, it can be of great value, not necessarily as something to follow, but definitely as a source of understanding of that element, of how it acts, and what it needs.

OTHER APPLICATIONS

These techniques for obtaining answers from the unconscious have been used effectively not only for personal growth and psychotherapy, but also in such fields as education, creative problem solving and work with groups. They offer an effective method that can complement the purely rational approach by shedding fresh light on a situation and opening up new possibilities to examine. Mental imagery often functions with a rapidity, depth and vividness that can replace many hours of merely “talking “ about something.

As a group technique, the method is effective for exploring a question of general interest or for generating personal material which can later be discussed in small groups. (Specific symbols that can be used for group visualizations as well as individual therapy have been suggested by R. Desoille (R. Desoille: “the directed Daydream,” Synthesis Graduate School, San Francisco, CA) and H.K. Leuner (H. Leuner: “Guided Affective Imagery,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, January). Some of these are the meadow, the mountain, the river, the cup, the sword, the house, etc.)

Mental imagery techniques are also being used in research and in educational and industrial settings for group problem solving. The “Synectics” method developed by Gordon (W.J.J.Gordon: *Synectics*, Harper, NY, 1961.) uses metaphors and analogies drawn from fields other than the problem under investigation to open up new ways of seeing things. In one of the steps in synectics called “personal analogy,” the group members imagine what it feels like to actually be whatever object they are considering – whether it is a bird, a windmill, or an octopus. This is essentially the same technique as symbolic identification.

In the field of education, Gordon (W.J.J. Gordon: *The Metaphorical Way of Learning and Knowing*, Porpoise Books, Cambridge, 1966.) has also applied the synectics principles of using personally experienced metaphor and analogy as a tool in concept formation. In a lesson on Boyle’s Law, children were asked to imagine what it would feel like if they were inside a cylinder and a piston was pushed down on top of them. In coming to understand experientially the principle that as volume goes down, pressure, goes up, they came up with such statements as, “Like if you were a molecule

and you're getting more and more squished between the cylinder walls and all the other molecules, you get crowded and squished" and "As things close in on me, I hit more things....more often." Gordon holds that such ways of learning are more effective as they permit the child to grasp a concept from inside rather than by simply memorizing a formula. Also, there is very valuable indirect learning for the students in that they are being told implicitly that their inner worlds, feelings and experiences are important.

There are many other rich possibilities in the field of education. Techniques of visualization can be of great value in helping children as well as adults to express their creative resources. Guided imagination exercises can help people to enter a rich world of inner experience that can be expressed in many ways, including writing, drama, music and art. The "Method" school of acting and the "creative drama" approach utilize such techniques to develop dramatic imagination. Morgan (F. Morgan, *Here and Now: An Approach to Writing through Perception*, Viking, NY, 1972.) has used techniques based on imaginative evocation of sensory experiences as a way of evoking material in teaching creative writing. He suggests, for example, that students recall a childhood scene, concentrating on sensory data such as colors, textures, sounds, smells, bodily sensations, etc.

Work in the field of confluent education (G. Brown: *Human Teaching for Human Learning: An Introduction to Confluent Education*, Viking, NY, 1971.) is concerned with integration of the cognitive and affective domains. Mental imagery techniques could contribute to this process by helping students to get in touch experientially with material from various disciplines. The symbolic identification technique could be used, for example, to help bring about empathy with people in diverse cultural contexts or with other life forms. Fantasy could be extended by the use of dramatic techniques. Projective imagery of the "answers from the unconscious" type could be used to explore students' attitudes toward various issues (e.g. "Allow an image to come that reflects your perception of the role of government: or "the way you perceive Black people").

A course offered at the University of Vermont on "Myth, Symbol and Ritual" utilizes mental imagery exercises to add an experiential dimension to the theoretical material. De Mille (R. De Mille: *Put Your Mother On The Ceiling*, Walker, NY, 1955.) has developed a set of guided fantasies for younger children, designed to set free the imagination, to ventilate feelings and to open up new ways of looking at things. In the field of creative problem-solving and creativity development, the writer has worked with a number of clients to help them solve problems in a variety of disciplines, from mathematics and engineering to art and philosophy. Several people who had reached an impasse in working on research problems of a theoretical or practical nature were enabled to break through to a creative solution with the aid of this method. Objectives of working in this manner are twofold: to help people remove obstacles in the personality which block clear perception of the problem or solution, and to help them get in touch, through mental imagery, with the creative sources in the higher unconscious.

In summary, the imaginal world offers a vast field to explore, of endless fascination and great potential usefulness. The imagination, or "image-making" faculty,

is a precious toll that we can learn to harness for human betterment and delight. Like all tools, it can be used for good or evil. It was Coue who said that when imagination and will are in conflict, imagination will win out. So we have the choice of bringing our imagination into harmony with our will or allowing it to function in a chaotic and negative way. It is a challenge to all who seek to realize their highest potentials to learn to use imagination wisely and intelligently, so that it can play its part in our growth toward wholeness.

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