

The Symbolism of the Body

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A symbol is a signifier, representative, or substitute for a person, place, thing, idea, or quality. The symbolic function is the mental activity that enables us to make symbols - to transform, displace, and condense aspects of ourselves and our worlds, into and onto other things. This uniquely well developed ability to create, recognize, and respond to symbolic meaning is what enables humans to become conscious, think, speak and be artistically creative in the ways that we are. It is largely responsible for the construction of our language, dreams, fantasies, personality styles, psychological symptoms, and sense of self.

Sigmund Freud said, "The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego." In other words, the ego is partially fashioned out of symbolic representations of sensory (bodily) experience. Ernest Jones elaborated on this point by saying, "All psychoanalytical experience goes to show that the primary ideas of life, the only ones that can be symbolized - those namely concerning the bodily self, the relation to the family, birth, love, and death - retain in the unconscious throughout life their original importance, and that from them is derived a very large part of the more secondary interests of the conscious mind."

Symbolism is formed on the threshold of bodily experience and cognitive operations within the context of culture. The symbolic function is a cognitive operation, which links sensations, organizes them into perceptions, associates them with other perceptions and condenses or displaces them into new forms. Symbols develop through successive levels of non-verbal representation and are ultimately clothed in a veil of linguistic and culturally determined representations, such as 'words', which further reshape the experience of a sense of self, a sense of other, and a sense of the world. Thus, all symbolism from the personal to the cosmic is ultimately derived from bodily experience.

Symptoms and even the sense of reality are made out of the metaphors of the body. From an open ear to an open mind; from excretion to rejection; from the navel to the center of the world, over and over again the metaphors of the body are projected onto and into the world.

We speak of the eye of the storm; the mouth of the river; the head of the line; the foot of the mountain; and the butt of the joke. We say: The relationship is suffocating. She bit off more than she could chew. He rose to the occasion. Let me sleep on that. And, I can't stand it. These are all metaphors derived directly from the anatomy and functions of the body. While other metaphors are derived more directly from weather, geography, and technology, we can say that, in a sense, all metaphors are born of the flesh of bodily experience in that the world is known only through the medium of the body and through the association, condensation and displacement of one experience onto another.

This notion of a world of representations derived from bodily experience is exemplified in the Indo-European cosmogonic myths (creation myths) which contain the common

motif of a cosmic Goddess (or God) who is said to have existed in the beginning and was dismembered in order to facilitate the creation of the universe. The parts of her body then became the various parts of the world - the sun and moon were derived from her eyes; the earth from her flesh; the grass from her hair; the wind from her breath; the stones from her bones; the vault of heaven from the crown of her skull and so on. Thus we can see how encoded in our loftiest visions, myths, religions, and philosophical speculations are our most personal concerns.

Though cultural symbolism associated with myth and ritual is not equivalent to personal symbolism, the two run parallel and the study of one can be useful in understanding the other. When we examine the symbolism of the mouth in myths and rituals, for example, we see that the hero's death and re-birth through the mouth are common motifs in mythology which are re-enacted in the initiation rites of many cultures not to mention Jonah and the whale. The mouth as a passageway for the embodiment of the soul, is described in the literature but even more common is the depiction of the mouth as the passageway for the disembodiment of the soul at the time of death. Other illustrations from the Middle Ages depict the exorcism of demons out of the mouths of the possessed. The mouth as integral consciousness is represented as a cosmic orb in the mouth of the East Asian dragon. The Ngadju Dyak of Borneo say that the cosmic totality originally resided in the mouth of a great coiled water serpent and in a Hindu story the universe was seen residing in the mouth of Lord Krishna.

Thus, the mouth becomes the gaping maw of hell or the life giving mouth of god. Biting and chewing come to represent psychological dismemberment. To take in an exciting new idea is to breathe it in - to inspire and be inspired. The location of the anus, urethra, and genital organs and the term 'underworld' are not unrelated. The blood of Christ, the Evil Eye, the hand of god, the long arm of the law, the head of state, and the body politic all involve the projection of bodily experience onto the social and religious screens. I'm under her thumb. She's under my skin. He's a pain in the neck. She put her foot down. And children not uncommonly, describe thunder as God rearranging his furniture and the rain as his tears or urine.

When mythology is read with an eye on the metaphors of the body, the recurring references to sexuality, including infantile sexuality, between the gods and goddesses impresses us. There are sexual unions and incestuous acts, infidelities, immaculate conceptions and castrations. Male gods give birth, children are born through masturbation, and some goddesses even have penises. There are deaths, rebirths, mutilations and miraculous healings. The primal fantasies, which psychoanalysts recognize in the dreams of modern people are suddenly seen projected onto the vault of heaven by the great religions of all time. In the mythologies of many traditions, the primal concerns and bodily metaphors that underlie the myths are clothed under layers of displacement and sublimation. But in other traditions, such as the Tantric Indian tradition, the bodily metaphors are covered by only a diaphanous veil. In the Tantric tradition the universe is represented by the linga and yoni - a stylized representation of a penis and vulva. Speaking of the Tantric tradition, the Indian art historian, Ajit Mookerjee, wrote, "The complete drama of the Universe is repeated here, in this very body. The whole body with its biological and psychological processes becomes an instrument through which the

cosmic power reveals itself. According to Tantric principles, all that exists in the Universe must also exist in the individual body."

Throughout history hair has been symbolized as power and cutting it symbolized castration (Sampson and Delilah). Yet castration itself is another metaphor for either socialization (submission to the social order) or the loss of power. But in the social domain, the meanings echo off of each other and the result is that short hair and long hair are alternately associated with both power and loss of power; femininity and masculinity; conformity and rebellion. The cutting of hair becomes associated with both initiation and shaming. With an understanding of the symbolism of hair, children's fears of barbers and adult experiences of hair stylists who 'cut too much' take on new meaning.

Benevolent forces descend into the crown of the skull as religious blessings when the top of the head is touched, kissed or anointed; when royalty are crowned; and when the winner of a race is showered with champagne or a bride and groom are showered with rice. In the Hopi cosmogony, when the first human was born he received his life and communicated with the creator through the soft fontanel - the kopavi, or 'open door' - at the top of his skull.

The descent of malevolent forces into the crown of the skull is suggested in the Native American story of a woodpecker, who counseled Hiawatha to kill his adversary, Megisogwon, by shooting an arrow into his only vulnerable spot, the top of his head.

The emergence of the 'creative thought' from the crown of the skull is suggested in the image of the River Ganges emerging out of Shiva's top knot in the Hindu tradition; in Athena's birth from Zeus's skull; in the Chinese notion of the Golden Flower, or Spirit-Body, emerging out the crown of the skull; and in the 3000 year old Egyptian representation of the soul departing the body by way of the top of the skull.

The notion of madness emerging from the crown of the skull is seen in the ancient tradition of trephination in which a piece of the skull from a living person is literally removed by sawing or boring into it in an effort to treat convulsions, headache, insanity and to aid in the release of bad blood and evil spirits. The earliest evidence of trephination comes from Neolithic Europe (c. 4,000-5000 years ago) but it is well-known to have been practiced in Ancient Greek and Roman times, in Medieval Europe and even in modern times in parts of South America.

A single eye seeing from only one perspective represents a strange or subhuman view of the world (the cyclops) or the notion that the blinded or missing eye is actually looking within. Two eyes represent a human view of the world. Three eyes represent a view of this world and beyond. And a multiplicity of eyes may represent either the all-seeing god or the chaos, multiplicity and fragmentation of madness.

The heart has been symbolized as a center of love, the navel as the center of the universe and the guts, spleen, testicles and backbone are commonly associated with courage. The teeth and bones, owing to the fact that they deteriorate more slowly than the rest of the body, are commonly seen as the seat of the everlasting soul and used as amulets for

communication with the dead. The penis has been metaphorized as a destructive thunderbolt and the fertilizing plow, as the May pole and the Totem pole, as the royal scepter and the warrior's sword, as the pillar of justice and the tower of Babel. The vagina as the giver of life is metaphorized as the Garden of Eden and as the taker of life when seen as the pit of hell or as the gnashing teeth of the vagina dentata, a common theme of mythology and personal fantasy.

Thus from the penis to the axis mundi (world axis) and from the breasts to the heavenly spheres, the hills and valleys of the body become metaphorized and the personal body is projected into the house, the body politic, the landscape and the cosmos. And we find this symbolism not only in the myths of all ages but every night in our very own dreams, as well.

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