



Illustration 12: Christ, as totality, stands on globe of earth. The elements earth, air, fire and water pour into the four spherical quadrants of the material world. *Psychology and Alchemy*. Jung.

fig.1

7-SYMBOLS-METHOD

An article about the method applied in practice
in the context of art therapy and coaching

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7-Symbols-Method is a drawing exercise involving seven specific archetypal symbols. Within the dynamics of the finished drawing you can read how basic psychological forces are constituted in the current life situation. Moreover the underlying biographical foundation is reflected, and, not least, the areas offering immediate opportunities for personal growth and integration are indicated.

This article gives a brief introduction to the 7-Symbols-Method. It then describes a practical example of using the method in therapy and personal development. Lastly some concluding observations about the applications and limitations of the method, and the issue of ethics in working with this type of method.

7-Symbols-Method - A creative process

The area I have worked with in education, development and art therapy has specifically been about dreams, symbols and archetypes. Mainly on a depth psychological basis, but also very much based on my own experiences with the creative processes in music composition and performance. Since I began teaching symbols, archetypes and dreams in 1983, I have worked with different types of drawing exercises. It was soon clear to me that various forms of spontaneous and intuitive drawing not only can uncover deeper layers in dreams and other subjective experiences, but that they seem to be able to facilitate insights and inner guidance very similar to the way dreams can do it.

One of these is the 7-Symbols-Method(7SM), a drawing exercise involving 7 specific symbols. A detailed review of the approach is beyond the scope of this article. It is but a short introduction to the method and how it has developed.

About 30 years ago I incidently heard of a particular exercise with 7 symbols. But the interpretation that was referenced in relation to the symbols suggested to me that it was primarily focused on the person's social and group relations. However to me the psychodynamic perspective remained more relevant and interesting, and I chose to reinterpret some of the symbols accordingly.

I have since then worked with this 7-symbols drawing in different contexts, in groups and with individuals. For nearly 20 years I have been developing and teaching this method at the Art Therapy Institute in Denmark and Norway. In the

same period, I have also had the opportunity to use the method in various workshops in Denmark and in several other countries.

So the way I work with and teach this method is simply and entirely a result of accumulated personal experience with the exercise. It has developed through many years of observations and experiences by looking at several thousand drawings, and through conversations with the individuals who produced them. There has been no preconceived theory of how these symbol drawings could or should be read, but empirical observations has gradually revealed an inherent underlying structure and formulated a now quite comprehensive method.

I have never managed to find any literature on this drawing exercise, although it most certainly has been used in other contexts. Of course one can read these drawings in several different ways, but from the beginning I have chosen to see them as a kind of dream images in a psychodynamic perspective - basically reflecting how a deeper self-regulating force in the psyche seems to work towards developing increased balance, dynamics and coherence.

How to draw

In practice a person, after adequate and specific preparation, is given the task to draw a picture involving seven specific archetypal symbols. The drawing is composed freely and spontaneously, but must when finished contain all seven symbols. The drawing process itself seems to be a valuable experience that can readily lead to further associations, reflections and sensations - and sometimes even continues to unfold in dreams following. Within the dynamics of the finished drawing it can be fairly accurately read how basic psychological forces are gestalted in the current life situation. Also, aspects of the biographical foundation are reflected - and most interestingly the areas that holds immediate opportunities for personal growth and integration are indicated.

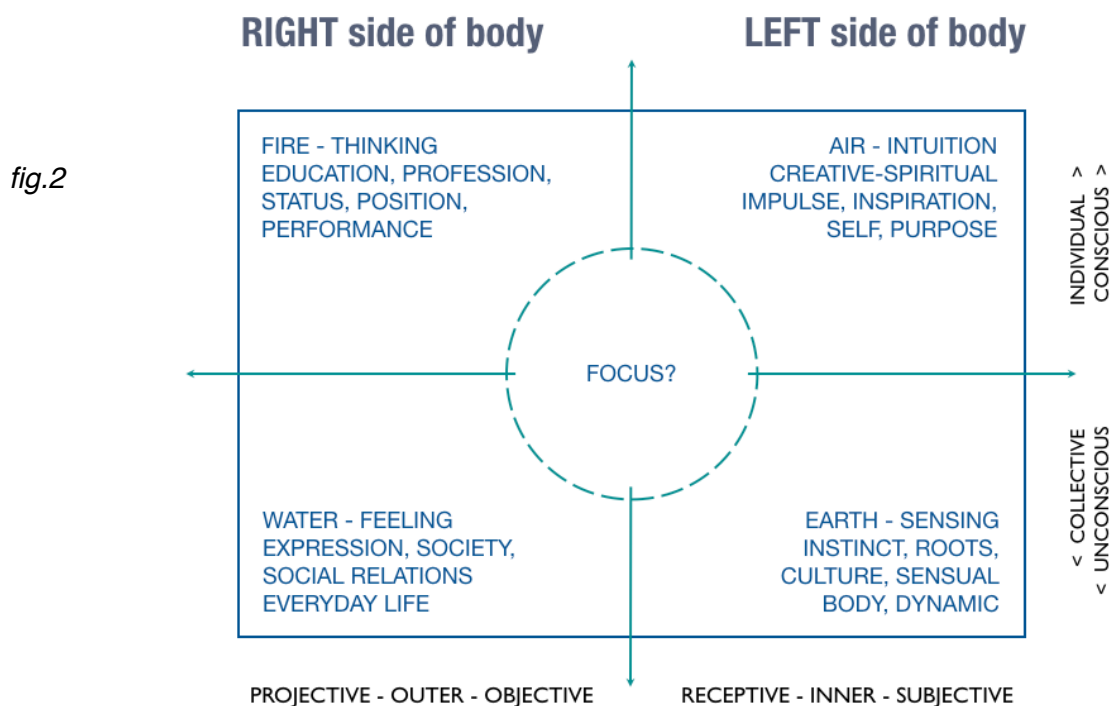
The actual reading of the symbol drawings requires a combination of many disciplines and skills, in particular a good sense of archetypes and symbols, combining ability, a sense of body-mind relationship, graphic decoding of image elements, their distribution and dynamics, understanding the psychological and energetic symbolism of colours, - and not least (life)experience and intuition. Just like in dreams everything in these drawings can turn out to be significant. Even the smallest detail, a figure that is repeated, a negligible graphical variation or omission, could prove to be a vital and indispensable piece of the puzzle that will make a deeper meaning fall into place.

Although this presentation of the method necessarily must be short and incomplete, it is important to stress that these drawings, despite the method's apparent simplicity, should never be read mechanically or simplistically. No two drawings are alike, and you really have to start from scratch every time. Experience shows that the specific nuances of each symbol, and especially the understanding of their relational dynamics reveals itself only by unique observation of individual drawings. And since symbols, as such, are neither positive or negative, but can play out both constructive and destructive in context, it is always necessary to view the drawing in conjunction with the artist's biography and current life situation. In each drawing is a story that is all about real life and existence - and it is always best of course to have the artist to tell it themselves.

The 7 symbols and their interpretation

The seven symbols are - in no order of priority: a house, a tree, a lake, a sun, a mountain, a dragon and a snake. Without going into any further qualification at this point, we assume that the 7 symbols respectively refers to: I / self image, growth potential, mother image, father image, aspirations/ambitions, obstacles/fears and libido/development drive. Initial reading of the drawing includes observing the relative size of each symbol, their location in the drawing space, drawing style, choice of color and color intensity. Over the years we have formulated a number of analytical models, one of which is shown below (fig. 2).

Please take note that right and left are oriented in the same way as the alchemy mandala of Christ and the four elements (fig. 1) depicted at the beginning of this article, just as the distribution of physical elements are identical. Experience has shown that the left/right orientation of these drawings should be read as if you are facing a real person, and not as a mirrored image (i.e. right side of drawing = left body side and vice versa when you look at the drawing in front of you!). The concepts of thinking, feeling, sensing and intuition here are not referring strictly to Jungian typology but rather indicate general basic psychological functions.



Such a schematic arrangement may seem square. But this mapping of the pictorial space is actually empirically based, as it grew out of the many drawings observed and the stories that went with them. And it has been found to be a practical means for reading and navigating the image composition. It makes it easier to sense the balance right / left, up / down, as well as the distribution of symbols in the four quadrants - and the first leads toward an interpretation will often be apparent already here. You can use the model to spot the important structures and details within the drawing, and to consider some relevant probing questions about it. On the other hand this cannot be used to draw square conclusions about anything.

The 7 symbols method - a Case Story

As an example of applying the method, we will look at a series of five 7-symbol-drawings produced by the same person over a period of half a year. The client is a woman of 49 years, followingly referred to as A. A has an appropriate educational background, have a job, have a husband, children and a lovely country house. A seems to be a resourceful person with a reasonably accomplished life but is still searching and open to new challenges and opportunities in life. Here is A's first drawing (fig. 3):



fig. 3

We notice that the drawing is drawn in the so-called portrait perspective - with a focus on the vertical axis. This often means that the exchange or tension between the upper and lower space are currently more pronounced than the horizontal balance between right and left. It is further enhanced by the picture being made up of two almost completely different scenes.

The lower half (fig. 4) is naturalistic, concrete, earthy, almost like an innocent children's drawing, filled with life, play and activity. It seems at first glance like a good place to be.

The top half (fig. 5) is completely different. It is more symbolic, archetypal and with dramatic undercurrents in stark contrast to the immediate idyl of the lower drawing. A green (paper!)Dragon (in Nordic languages the words for 'dragon' and 'kite' are homonymous) is apparently engaged in a bloody attack on



fig. 4



fig. 5

a blue snake - flying up in the air; the sun is strikingly large and radiates through three monumental mountains - the sun's emanation and color dominates the entire upper half of the the drawing.

The only thing that seems to connect the two halves are connective lines between two of the children and, respectively, the snake and the dragon/kite, as well as some symbolic lines connecting the large tree crown below with the many small trees above on the three peaks.

Within the context of this article, we will review the first drawing in full, while in the remaining drawings we will just track the transformation of a single representative symbol - in this case the dragon. It should be noted that the insights and interpretations presented along the way, are the result of, and verified within an authentic exchange between two people - therapist and client.

What in context seems obvious to the experienced eye and the trained practitioner may not be as readily evident to an outside observer.

In the first conversation about the drawing A comments: "It seems quite merry, so nice what is going on. All is well. There is activity though they are occupied separately, except for the two that converse in the house. They are (all) by themselves and yet being part of something The mountains is an environment I want to go out into! "

In the continued conversation we come to the following conclusions. Although there is plenty of activity below, there is also an absence - something is missing, which instinctively is sought after in the mountainous landscape at the top. Centrally placed are four children - two who are struggling to 'put' each others 'dragons' out of the game (a common play / sports in several Asian cultures). The child on the right is clearly the attacker here. The child in the center is about to make a fire. At the edge of this field the blue child is sailing on its own - on closer contact there is a feeling of loneliness here. A describes the three branches between the mountains and the great tree at the bottom as nourishing springs. So the unfolding potential of the personal growth (large deciduous tree crown) must therefore be nourished from the many, respectively 7, 8 and 9 'Old' conifers on the 3 distant mountains. The position of the house suggests that, in spite of good size and comfortable togetherness, there is too much accommodation to daily routines - too much duty and too little play.

The snake or serpent usually reveals the direction of development; where the energy will instinctively try to move towards further development and integration. In the initial drawing the snake quite clearly indicate an energetically connected line from the upper left corner over towards the sun, continuing diagonally down through the central children's theme to the house, and from there to the tree on the opposite side at the right bottom corner - like a big letter "Z".

In this case one can already fairly accurately read what constitutes the current existential issue, how it is rooted in biography, and in which direction the next likely step in the development could be. In telegram style this could read:

“the central theme is a self-destructive conflict between expression and repression - an important project “fell to the ground” at a crucial moment in childhood. It was all about independence and creativity, to express and manifest herself and succeed in life. It is historically linked to the father figure. Apparently no constructive compensation from the mother figure. Age period of 7-9 years is suggested. The theme must be strongly (re)activated in the current life situation; as if being confined to a corner of life with too little space to unfold. There is an instinctive longing towards feeling her own power (again) and realize a more creative and spiritually unfolded life.”

But the key is, of course, what the artist herself will say about her drawing. As we move from talking descriptively *about* the drawing and enter into a dialogue *with* the drawing, A starts telling about her life and background.

When she was 7 years old, the family went to live in a foreign country. The father had got a new job opportunity there, and the family came along to make a new life there. It was a very positive and exiting experience for A. She adapted very well and learned the new language very quickly. However, for arbitrary reasons her father's project did not succeed, and the family had to return to Denmark after only one year. A directly says, "The feeling was that we went out to conquer the world, - but it just never came to happen..."

Not only was it "a big blow" for A to lose the *new world*, but upon return she unfortunately had to switch to another class in school - never felt settled in again, and thus lost the *old world* as well.

So the father is on one hand positively associated with the creative initiative, but on the other hand the negative reason that the creative initiative had to be abandoned and replaced by an involuntary adaptation. A spontaneously recognize this problem in her present relationship and life situation. She has been with her husband since she was quite young. Not surprisingly, she has "chosen" to live with an artist, and not surprisingly, she has too often allowed his needs to

fill up and dominate her own life. This has now reached a critical point where an inner need for radical changes presses on. As in life, so in the drawing.

We reflect on how this formative childhood experience contains both reactive and proactive aspects. For the 8-year-old A, there was no choice - to adapt was a matter of survival. But on the other hand, she experienced a successful expression of independent creativity and ability to change until the project was shot down by circumstances that A did not personally control. For the adult A there may be no choice either. If she wants to really live, she must now cease to adapt.

As in the saying: *what you survive on in childhood, kills you when adult.*

In other words, A need to regain confidence in her own strength, the joy and the desire to "... go out and conquer the world." She has experienced once that she could do it, and it felt good. One way or another there needs to be made more room for that feeling in A's life again.

Following the initial drawing A has a number of nocturnal dreams with a common theme. A's nearly adult daughter is included several times, there is a lot of traveling, and there is especially a whole gallery of positive male figures, all acting as helpers in different contexts. There is transportation when needed, treatment by doctors at the hospital, construction of new buildings, etc.

There seems to be a fine continuity related to the symbol drawing. It looks like A can now develop some potentials, as a woman and as an individual, that was left behind at some point in the biography. And the subconscious backs it up with constructive male input in the form of mobility, healing and new structures.

The dragon's transformation in the further process

As mentioned earlier, we will only follow and comment the transformation of the dragon symbol in the remaining four drawings of A's series. It will lead too far here to go in depth with each drawing, and there are particularly good reasons to see the dragon as a representative symbol of the process that unfolds in A's life and simultaneously appear in these drawings. The interested reader could, based on the already examined, study the next drawings on their own.

One good reason in this case to take a closer look at the dragon, is that it plays an unusually dramatic role here compared to what we usually see in these drawings. It is extremely rare to see a dragon that apparently try to harm or do away with the snake.

Another good reason is that the dragon is a particularly important dynamic figure in the 7-symbols drawings. Experience has shown that the dragon is quite a complex symbol. The dragon's interpretation as obstacle and fear can basically be understood as the fear of our own deeper unconscious powers. One can say that the dragon is filled up with the part of my own power that I cannot, will not or dare not accept. As such the dragon can be both a scary threshold guardian, and later in the process an ally and powerful helper. It makes perfect sense that dragons in many fairytales live in deep and distant mountain caves, where they guard an innocent virgin and a huge amount of wealth and treasures - while in other myths acting as sacred messengers connecting different dimensions.

Obviously a paper dragon (kite) is not as powerful and frightening as a fire-breathing archaic creature. And that is perhaps part of the problem in A's first drawing. The inner power that is needed in the current process of change is 'disarmed' or hidden in a harmless form hovering somewhere distant. Even so, the potential power reveals itself in the self-destructive aggression. So it could be particularly interesting to see how this particular dragon symbol develops over the next four drawings (fig. 6). Although we have not included the dreams here, their parallel representation of the process always helped us to check and refine our work with the drawings.

fig. 6



From left to right top row drawing nos. 2 and 3, - bottom row drawing nos. 4 and 5

Drawing no. 2: the dragon/kite has turned into a creature without limbs, like a harmless bath toy, but with a good strong red color. A says that the dragon is happy. Notice how the house has moved into the center. All symbols revolves around the house. The background is blue like the lake on the first drawing. There is no horizon(!). The road connects the distant sun above the house and further down into the lower right corner which was designated in the first drawing. Powerful transformation in house within a house.

Drawing no. 3: the dragon has now evolved into a red baby bird like creature, a little more alive; little disheveled but standing on its own feet and singing with its own beak. The background is now the sun's color from the first drawing. There is again no horizon(!). Sad little house, and dragon, is isolated in same corner as in initial drawing. Five out of seven symbols located on the opposite side.

Drawing no. 4: *the dragon has changed color, and has for the first time a certain prominence in the form of a kind of sea lion. It looks friendly but should probably best be respected. The house expands and continues its transformation, there are still rooms to fill (upper/inner). The horizon is now back again. 'A' particularly welcomes the emergence of ten new young birch trees - a new beginning. Is there a new way out into the world?*

Drawing no. 5: *the dragon has finally stepped into character, a vital beast with both legs and wings, with a curly tail and a good fiery breath, which also corresponds with the sun's rays. The previous dragon's new color is here applied to the trunk of the tree, straight and strong. The house is firmly in the middle, there is a good symmetry and gravity in the drawing. It looks like the archetypal intensity in the first drawing that was referred to a distant and out of reach mountain landscape, is now mounted as an inner strength with the dragon as squire. The mountain has now become an accessible area within reach with new paths and meeting places to be explored - and it rests precisely where the house was located to begin with ...*

Of course the process does not stop here. But you might get a sense that what was so to speak 'promised' in the first drawing has basically been redeemed in the fifth. This is a good example of how the 7-symbol method can be used to facilitate a constructive communication between the ego and the deeper layers of the psyche. It is as if the Self participates - at once confronting and loving.

In A's case, we are looking at a very comprehensive existential change process. All the basic anchorages in life related to personal identity has been at stake - work, money, home and relationships. And within the relatively short period of time covered by these five drawings, A successfully lived through radical changes in all of these areas.

The fact that it went so relatively well as it did is probably because there was an inner need for the change, a fairly robust personality to begin with, and that there has been a good network within reach, both privately and professionally.

Epilogue

A more comprehensive review of the experiences underlying the 7-symbol method, and the deeper structures that has gradually revealed themselves over time, will have to wait for an actual workbook on the method. The purpose of this article is to give a brief introduction to the method, and show an example of how it can be applied in practice.

Although it is quite easy to have other people draw these seven symbols, I hope that with this article it is quite obvious that a responsible use of the method poses some ethical requirements. The exercise can easily touch on very personal issues, so it is always important to maintain good situational awareness.

And when the drawing is done to let the artist themselves decide at what level to communicate about the drawing - to follow the artist's natural process of relating to their own drawing. It is not an oracle exercise where one can come up with easy answers and frivolous conclusions.

This method is primarily a starting point for a confidential dialogue. It may be an inner dialogue between different levels of consciousness. Or a dialogue between two people - either about the image, with the image or from the image. It is the supervisor's job to be open to the artist's need to express themselves; but on the other hand also to ensure that he or she is not lost in unproductive projections.

Underlying the self-confrontation that the 7-symbol method conveys seems basically to be great kindness and wisdom. Herein lies the key.

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