

1 Symbols and Their Kin

Signs, Symbols, Sacraments, and Stories

IF YOU DRIVE a motor vehicle and come upon a traffic light, you must know what those colored lights mean and respond accordingly. Green means go; yellow means proceed with caution and be prepared to stop if necessary; and red means stop. Those traffic signals are signs with one specialized meaning. The meaning is direct and exclusive as far as the laws concerning operating a motor vehicle are concerned. To go against the meaning, especially of the red signal, breaks the law and risks legal consequences as well as places those in the vehicle—and any other person or vehicle at the intersection—in danger. A sign stands for a single thing. A stop sign means the approaching vehicle must come to a full stop. However, there are times when a sign is not just a sign. When an image shows up in a dream or a meditation, it may be a *symbol*.

Symbols differ from signs. Symbols offer multiple layers of possible meaning. For example, I occasionally dream that I work as an orderly in a hospital. An orderly provides personal care to patients, takes vital life signs, and transports patients to various locations for medical treatment. The appearance of the symbol “orderly” might have something to do with assisting those in medical need, being a link to their well-being. The dream says something about that part of me that wants to help or is concerned about a physical problem (someone else’s or my own).

I have some personal history of working as an orderly in a general hospital in my early twenties, so being an orderly in my dream might touch upon my young adulthood when I was beginning to make a living in the world. Because I spent two years employed in hospital jobs (including as an orderly), performing alternative service as a conscientious

objector during the Vietnam War, there might be a layer of meaning connected to what I consider to be a religious, moral, and sociopolitical issue.

Of course, the wordplay on *orderly* may point to a feeling that things are somewhat out of balance or seem chaotic and that a part of me wants to get my life in order. That particular interpretation often rings true for me. Sometimes I even laugh with recognition when I awaken from an “orderly dream.”

Symbols are multifaceted images, words, sounds, or actions with many potential meanings that can range from the physical and personal, to interpersonal, social, political, national, archetypal, religious/spiritual, global, and even cosmic perspectives.

On a religious level, I might be seeking the Divine as an agent of care and healing in the midst of the pain and suffering of the world or the chaos of the universe. I want God to bring healing from suffering, order out of chaos. Perhaps an “orderly” archetype—of someone who brings order—exists in various ways in different cultures. I’m sure that you can come up with additional meanings for the symbol “orderly” based on your own frame of reference and personal history.

Symbols are multifaceted images, words, sounds, or actions with many potential meanings that can range from the physical and personal, to interpersonal, social, political, national, archetypal, religious/spiritual, global, and even cosmic perspectives. Where signs have a sense of social consensus about them so that a sign has one meaning, symbols may be interpreted in many ways without consensus that one meaning is the only right or authorized interpretation.

Archetypal psychologist James Hillman writes about going beyond interpretation in the interaction with powerful symbols (he calls them “images”):

There is an invisible connection within any image that is its soul. If, as Jung says, “image is psyche,” then why not go on to

say, “images are souls,” and our job is to meet them on that soul level. I have spoken of this elsewhere as befriending, and elsewhere again I have spoken of images as animals. Now I am carrying these feelings further to show operationally how we can meet the soul in the image and understand it. We can actively imagine it through word play which is also a way of talking with the image and letting it talk. We watch its behavior—how the image behaves within itself. And we watch its ecology—how it interconnects, by analogies, in the fields of my life. This is indeed different than interpretation. No friend or animal wants to be interpreted, even though it may cry for understanding. We might even call the unfathomable depth in the image, love, or at least say we cannot get to the soul of the image without love for the image.¹

The Cross

Certainly in the Christian faith, the cross of Christ provides the most universally recognized symbol. While sometimes bare and plain, at other times the cross appears with flourishes, such as in the design of a Celtic cross. Sometimes the cross includes the figure of the risen Christ clothed in priestly vestments or crowned and adorned in royal majesty. Sometimes it bears the crucified body of Christ. Innumerable poems, hymns, meditations, and theological treatises focus on the cross. The symbol of the cross offers a source of profound devotion, inspiration, humility, compassion, forgiveness, and mystery. For some people, however, the cross can be the cause of painful confusion or outright abuse. A long and terrible history of Jewish persecution and anti-Semitism due to falsely or ignorantly condemning a whole people as “Christ killers” provides one example of such abuse.

In my spiritual direction practice, I sometimes sit with people as they struggle to find an adequate personal understanding of the meaning of the cross and Jesus’s suffering and death. Various atonement theories have been offered over the span of Christian history, but none of them seems to fully comprehend the meaning of the cross. The “satisfaction” or “substitutionary atonement” theory developed by Anselm

in the eleventh century is particularly subject to criticism for the way it portrays God the Father as demanding a sacrifice that is sufficient to redeem humans from their sinfulness. In this theory, God sends Jesus the Son of God as the sacrifice that satisfies that demand. Many people in our era may find such an image of “father” repellent or even monstrous, although it might not have been viewed that way in earlier centuries.

Other atonement theories emphasize other possible meanings. Jesus’s faithfulness to God and finding the right way to live even in the face of the threat of death can be seen as the “moral exemplar” for our own struggles in living moral, purposeful, faithful lives that are compassionate and self-giving reflections of a loving God. Or we might view Jesus’s crucifixion as his triumph over all the powers of evil, breaking the hold of evil and death over humanity (*Christus Victor*).²

“Coming to the cross” can provide a profound devotional practice. For some it is a ritual practice at a special time of penitence, such as the veneration of the cross on Good Friday. Others may use the imagination in prayer with a contrite heart. One of my most powerful experiences as a spiritual director was as a companion for several years to a pastor in an Anabaptist tradition. At the end of each session he asked me if I would accompany him “to the foot of the cross,” and then, as I sat with him in humility, he poured out his heart and soul before Jesus there on the cross of his imagination. It was one of the most beautiful and moving spiritual practices I have participated in.

Language and imagery about the nature of God are highly symbolic and metaphoric. We never fully capture God in conceptual terms; the Divine will always be beyond the language we use. However, symbolic terms help us understand the role of God in our lives and in human history. Many Christians use the symbolic language of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit point to the communal nature of God and how God acts and reveals aspects of God’s self in human history and the cosmos. This language runs the danger of becoming encrusted and rigid over time, or of being experienced as an oppressive tool of patriarchy if the understanding of God becomes limited to male gendered attributes. “Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit” and other ways of naming the Trinity help us break away from the gender-restricted language in

our perception of God. Many other metaphors expand upon our understanding of God—often drawn from poetic images in Holy Scripture—and show up in prayer, theology, and liturgy. Metaphors of *rock, mother hen, protective eagle, judge, healer, living water, good shepherd*, and *Wisdom* are just a few symbols used to expand our images of the Divine and describe aspects of our relationship to God. What language and symbols we use about God reflect the way we relate to the Divine and affects whether we wish to turn to God for discernment. This is crucial, because if I am relating to a judgmental and potentially wrathful God, I may not want to seek “God’s will” for me. I probably just want to hide and keep out of God’s sight for fear that I will provoke disappointment and anger. If my metaphoric language for the Divine expresses a positive and loving relationship, I am much more likely to seek what God desires for me.

Sacraments

The Book of Common Prayer describes sacraments as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.” So a sacrament is a special kind of sign, a ritual activity with an external, visible action that we see and in which we participate, but that also carries multiple symbolic meanings. A sacrament, then, is an effective representation of—and a vehicle for—God’s favor (grace) acting upon us. Many Christian worship traditions recognize two sacraments that were commanded by Jesus in Scripture: holy baptism and holy Eucharist (Mass, communion of the Lord’s Supper). Some branches of the Christian church recognize and celebrate additional sacramental rites: holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent (confes-

What has been your own experience of rituals and symbols? Do you recall any situations when a ritual or symbol powerfully affected you? If so, what occurred?

Have you had any experience of baptism or Eucharist or other sacramental rite that produced a profound change in you? If you are not Christian, what religious or spiritual rituals are important for you?

sion and absolution), holy unction (healing), confirmation, and ordination. Any ritual provides a process for change. Religious rites focus on intentionally bringing people into the presence of the Divine with prayer and holy symbols, and we are affected by that encounter. Sacraments use powerful symbols embedded in divinely graced transformative rituals, intended to move people from one state of grace to another. For example, with holy baptism, in which a person is ritually sprinkled or fully immersed in water, grace is conveyed that has multiple powerful and transformative meanings:

- ▶ the purifying effect of the ritual washing away of sin
- ▶ the participation in Christ's death and resurrection, dying to an old self and taking on the new self in Christ
- ▶ the initiation of the newly baptized into the body of Christ the church, sometimes with a new name
- ▶ the receiving of the Holy Spirit and being marked as Christ's own forever, sometimes signified by applying chrism.

In truth, the reservoir of symbolic meaning in these primary sacraments of baptism and holy Eucharist runs so deep that we may never be able to fully comprehend the vastness of God's love for us shown in these unitive rites. There will always be something more that the rites can tell us about divine love, just as there is always something more to the holy mystery we call God.

Stories

Within the sacraments, stories provide powerful symbolic images and actions that convey various meanings and interpretations. The sacrament of holy Eucharist, for example, contains a retelling of the story of Jesus's last supper with his disciples and his command for them to receive the bread as his body and the wine as his blood whenever they gather in remembrance. This sacred story is often cast within a broader narrative of the history of God's saving actions drawn from Jewish scripture as well as Christian Gospels and Epistles.

In many Christian liturgical traditions, *remembrance* is not just of

something that happened once upon a time, it also actively links the past sacred story with our present situation, with Christ present with us now in our ritual participation in the breaking of the bread.³ Bread and wine become powerful sacramental symbols of Christ's Presence, and in eating the sanctified bread and drinking the holy wine there is a level of interpretation in which we are renewed as the holy people of God and become Christ-bearers in the world.

Other sources of stories and symbols prove useful as we reflect upon meaning, wisdom, and direction. Dreams contain stories—or fragments of stories—that include symbols that become objects of interpretation, adding additional levels of possible meaning. Guided-imagery meditation provides a story that elicits symbols and actions. Reading Scripture may entail imaginatively engaging sacred stories. And I (as well as you) bring my own unique story, my life narrative.

When I go to see my spiritual director, I often tell stories about what is going on in my life—situations that challenge, fascinate, or frustrate, stories that feel like a special gift to me, bore me, or that call forth some other feeling or desire. Often I try to understand these parts of my story more deeply. We look together at the narratives and the symbols within the stories, exploring their possible meanings and the spiritual invitations and directions God may have for me in my unfolding life.

I provide this discussion about signs, symbols, sacraments, and stories to help us understand the power symbols offer. Symbols give rise to thought and feeling. They elicit reflection on meaning and interpretations on multiple levels. In this book we explore how symbols emerge and guide us in deepening our spiritual lives and in discerning our most authentic direction amid the multiple forces that call for our attention and the choices and possibilities on our life journey. Symbols that deeply connect us with our spiritual tradition and our own particular life circumstances provide a light on the path.

What happened to you recently that seemed sacred or holy in some way? What does this say about the presence of the Divine in your life?

Guiding Symbols and Divine Communication

Wisdom lies deep within us. Its source is the Holy One who resides within the core of our being as the indwelling Presence. We are each a tabernacle for the Presence, though we are frequently dulled to this incredible gift through our attachments, the tugs of our little sins, our ignorance, and our self-absorption. And yet, from our depths, the Divine beckons us through the language of symbols to attend to its guidance, as this Presence desires that which is truly best for us and for our fullest participation in the unfolding unity, destiny, and joyful fulfillment of all things in God.

In the Christian faith, we speak of God the Holy Spirit who dwells within us as our advocate, counselor, and guide, and who gives us gifts that we exercise for the benefit of all. We remember in the final chapters of the Gospel of John Jesus's assurance to his disciples that he brings them into the abiding unity of the Father with the Son, and that the Holy Spirit will come to lead them into fuller truth (see John 14–17). The second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon 120 men and women gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Peter grounds this experience of the coming of the Spirit in the foretelling of the prophet Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

Acts 2:17–18; Joel 2:28–32

The Jewish tradition of the nearness of God, the knowledge of God, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to the anticipation of the prophet Joel. For example, the eleventh chapter of the book of Numbers tells the story of Moses, who is being overwhelmed by the

burden of leadership. God tells Moses to gather seventy elders. Moses gathers the seventy elders and places them around the “tent of meeting,” whereupon the Lord takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and transfers it to the seventy elders, who then prophesy. The story continues: two elders, Eldad and Medad, who missed the event at the tent of meeting, also receive the spirit and prophesy. A young man sees what happens to Eldad and Medad and reports this to Moses. Joshua, Moses’s lieutenant, calls for Moses to stop them. Moses replies, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!” (Num. 11:29).⁴

The poet of Psalm 139 speaks of the intimacy of God’s spirit and the inescapability from the presence of God. The whole psalm offers a magnificent meditation, but one portion of it in particular vividly conveys the sense of the immediacy of the Presence within:

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
 If I make my bed in Sheol you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Psalm 139:7–10

Divine wisdom and guidance is available, but often it requires the arduous work of making a journey. Sometimes the journey requires physical travel, but always it requires some interior exploration. We can assume the writer of Psalm 139 made an interior wisdom journey to discover the ubiquity of God’s presence and intimacy.

But sometimes the sacred story of a physical journey also stands as an archetypal symbol for the interior wisdom journey. We find one such interpretation of the journey of the wise men (or Magi) in Matthew 2. In this story, the wise men from the East observe and follow a star to seek the newborn king of the Jews. As they ask about this new king

What do you understand from your own spiritual tradition about how the Divine attempts to communicate with you?

in Jerusalem, the reigning King Herod feels threatened and asks his counselors where the child might be. Herod deceptively asks the wise men to share information with him on where they find the child so he also can honor him. The wise men continue to follow the star to a house in Bethlehem where they give homage and gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the child of Mary. Then, warned in a dream of Herod's murderous intention

against the child, they leave by a different route.

On a literal level we can approach this situation, as the wise men did, as a warning that Herod is lying and intends to murder this new king. That interpretation should not be discounted, for certainly clear and direct warnings can come to us through dreams. It was realistic to question the sincerity of Herod given the potential threat a new king would pose to his power. Other rulers, then and now, have used deceit and violence to suppress or prevent possible loss of power. Our commemoration of Holy Innocents' Day during the Christmas season remembers this grim story. Herod commands the slaughter of all children under two years old in the vicinity of Bethlehem after learning that the wise men had taken a different route back after visiting the holy child. Fortunately, according to this narrative, an angel warns Joseph in a dream about Herod's intention, and the holy family flees to Egypt after the wise men's visit and before the slaughter begins.

We can also interpret this story as an interior journey of wisdom. We seek enlightenment (following a star) and look for the royal child that has been born within us. The light guides us on the path to the Divine. The inner journey is done with others who honor true wisdom and the traditions that bear divine grace for humanity, so we are not alone. As each of us encounters the inner divine royal Presence, we offer that which represents our true self. It is a costly offering but also a joyous one. In the journey we also must consciously recognize the jealous and fearful parts of ourselves, those parts separated from our deepest desire that, if unrecognized, could harm and supplant the vul-

nerable innocence and purity of the divine mystery that could dwell at the center of our lives. Dreams might warn us of those shadowed parts of ourselves that need to be acknowledged and reconciled or otherwise dealt with before they cause severe damage to our well-being.

Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures contain many stories in which a dream symbol or an image from meditation provides divine revelation or a guiding message to a person, a community, or a nation. Consider, for example, the role dreams and their interpretation take in the saga of Joseph from the time of his conflict with his brothers and being sold into slavery to his rise to power as the chief administrator of Pharaoh's storehouses. Those tales are rich in dreams and interpretations that are instrumental in developing the plot in Genesis 37–41. Earlier stories of the patriarchs also present powerful, revelatory accounts of dreams or visions. In Genesis 15, Abram—later renamed *Abraham*, with the new name itself symbolic of a changed identity and new life—encounters God in a vision and receives a promise of greatness and offspring. Abram responds with belief in the promise and makes a sacrifice to God. In what seems like a dream state, he sees the covenant ratified by God, who passes through the sacrificed creatures as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch.

Jacob, afraid of his brother Esau's wrath after Jacob tricks his father Isaac into receiving Esau's birthright and blessing, leaves his family in Beer-sheba and travels toward Paddan-aram in search of a wife. On the journey, he sets up camp at one wilderness place, takes one of the stones there for a pillow, and goes to sleep. Then he has a dream that could be considered the greatest archetypal dream of the Hebrew Scriptures:

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and

all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Genesis 28:12–17

In this dream, we share with Jacob a vision of correspondence between the divine life and our earthly lives. God is not far off and uninterested in human affairs. The gate of heaven can be as close as where we are.

There is a wonderful story of Jacob wrestling with the angel of God as his brother Esau catches up with him years later. Their pending meeting could bring about disaster or reconciliation. As Jacob anticipates meeting his brother the next day, he spends the night in a wrestling match with a “man” (his shadow? conscience? God?). Jacob refuses to let the man go until he receives a blessing, so the wrestling partner strikes Jacob’s hip and puts it out of joint. The man then asks Jacob for his name and says, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (Gen. 32:28b). When Jacob asks for the man’s name, he refuses to give it, but instead gives Jacob (now named Israel) his blessing. Beware: when we struggle with important things in life with our conscience intact and ask for divine wisdom to discern the right way forward, we may find ourselves wrestling with God. The struggle might well give us three gifts:

- ▶ a limp, meaning that struggles can be costly and we will be thrown out of our self-centeredness;
- ▶ a new name, meaning that we will gain some new sense of identity;
- ▶ a blessing, meaning that some creative outcome will emerge.

An exhaustive treatment of the dreams and visions in Holy Scripture is beyond the scope of this book.⁵ Suffice it to say that both the Old and New Testaments present many dreams and visions as vehicles for God's guidance, both personal and collective. I now consider how these kinds of revelations did not end with Holy Scripture.

I am going to look briefly at three historical developments that have particular impact on engaging symbols as a guide for spiritual direction in our lives:

- ▶ first, the "showings" or visions of Julian of Norwich;
- ▶ second, the contribution of Ignatius of Loyola to spiritual direction;
- ▶ third, the development of depth psychology and its application to spiritual understanding.

Julian of Norwich: *Revelations of Divine Love*

Lady Julian (ca. 1342–ca. 1413) was one of the great fourteenth-century English mystical theologians. As a young woman she prayed for three graces: first, to be consistently mindful of Christ's Passion; second, to experience sickness severe enough to bring her near death at age thirty; and third, to receive three wounds. She sought the wounds of true contrition, loving compassion, and a deep longing for God. Shortly after she turned thirty, Julian experienced a severe illness and received the last rites of the church. She remained gravely ill. Then, on a Sunday, the pain left her and she received fifteen visions (showings) related to God's love for humanity and the cosmos, centered on the cross of Christ. The next day she received a sixteenth vision.

These visions convinced Julian to become an anchoress, living her life enclosed in a church and dedicated to Christ, serving as a spiritual guide to many people who sought her out—including the mystic Margery Kempe, who dictated what may have been the first autobiography

Which of the Bible examples spoke most powerfully to you? Can you say why? Are there other examples in scripture that are important to you?

in the English language. Julian spent twenty years in theological reflection on those visions and wrote both a shorter and longer version of her visions and contemplation of their meaning. Julian is credited as the first woman to write a book in the English language. Her reflections display a remarkable depth of theological understanding on the love of God and the compassionate nature of Jesus Christ. She refers to the motherhood of God and of Jesus, and her work has profoundly influenced Christian mystical theology and spirituality.

Reading Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* for the first time when I was a seminarian was a truly spiritually formative experience. Drawing on still earlier theologians such as Anselm, Julian's portrayal of God and Jesus as "mother" spoke of the tender and compassionate nature of the Divine. Jesus, in his sacramental self-offering, nurtured humanity by his body and blood. I read this at a time when there were vigorous debates in The Episcopal Church about expanding the use of metaphors for God and including feminine imagery. The movement for the expanded use of images for the Divine was not only supported by a multitude of scriptural metaphors for God, but I learned through Julian of Norwich that it was also supported by centuries of theological writing and prayer.

I persistently struggle in my life to accept my limitations as a servant of God and Christ. I get anxious about whether I have done enough and judge myself as falling miserably short of being the "good and faithful servant." Reflections that Julian wrote about the revelation concerning the lord-and-servant parable provide a wonderful healing balm to my soul.⁶ In that revelation a servant first stands face to face with his lord. They behold each other in great love. The servant receives a mission from his lord. Excited about the opportunity to serve the lord that he loves, the servant eagerly sets off to fulfill the mission. No sooner does he begin the journey than he falls into a ravine. He is so injured and caught in mire that he is unable to get out or even move his head to see anything. The servant is filled with shame and remorse at his inability and failure to serve the lord that he loves so dearly.

In the meantime, the lord, who has a different perspective on the situation, looks at the servant with great love and respect. The lord sees

the servant's desire to be good and loyal to his master and his willingness to offer service and suffering. The lord will restore and richly reward the servant. God then leads Julian to understand that the servant is Adam and therefore is the archetypal representative of the human condition, as is the restored Adam through Christ's suffering and faithfulness. God sees our love and desire to serve, and judges us with the divine love and compassion which we cannot provide for ourselves from our limited human perspective.

Lady Julian's contribution to mystical theology stands monumental. But also she is representative of many remarkable visionary women and men in history who dared pray for insight and deep revelations from God, as well as leading others into their own relationship with the Holy One. Some, like Lady Julian, left a record of their encounters with the Divine. Among many spiritual writers and mystics are Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, and Teresa of Ávila, as well as John of the Cross. These visionaries support us in our own desire to know God more deeply and to open ourselves to divine guidance and wisdom for ourselves and our world.

Are you familiar with the writings of any of the Christian mystical theologians? Other religious traditions also have their great historical spiritual teachers. If you are aware of some of those women and men, what is it that deeply connects with your own spiritual life and desires?

Ignatius of Loyola and the *Spiritual Exercises*

There are many treasures in the history of Christian spirituality, but for our purposes one development in the sixteenth century made immeasurable contributions to contemporary spiritual direction by showing ways of engaging Scripture imaginatively, using guided imaginative forms of meditation, and attending to the affective dimension of our spiritual lives in relationship to God. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) desired to be a glorious soldier, but in a battle at age thirty, when he was defending a castle in Pamplona against a French attack, he sustained severe wounds from a cannonball. One leg was injured and the other

Read a passage of Scripture such as a Gospel story. Close your eyes and, using your imagination, enter into the scene. Are you one of the characters mentioned in the scene or an observer? What do you notice and feel as the story progresses? What thoughts and questions come to your mind? If you wish, ask people questions, engage in a conversation, or initiate your own actions within the scene. When finished with the meditation, journal about it or debrief with others. Did insights emerge about a situation or direction you are considering in your life?

Three additional meditations are

broken. He was taken to his castle in Loyola, Spain, to recover from the injuries. His broken leg needed to be set (without anesthesia), but it did not heal. The leg needed to be rebroken and reset. Ignatius's condition worsened, and he was told to prepare for death. Surprisingly, he recovered, though when his leg healed, a portion of bone protruded below his knee, and that leg was shorter than the other. The doctors sawed off the protruding bone, and Ignatius tried stretching exercises, which failed to level his legs. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life.

During Ignatius's convalescence, depressed that he had to give up his dream of being a soldier, he underwent a gradual process of spiritual conversion while reading books on the life of Christ and on the lives of the saints. He reoriented his life's dream from becoming a great soldier in the military to becoming a soldier for Jesus Christ. He practiced various spiritual exercises to help deepen his life in Christ and compiled some of these exercises to assist other spiritual directors in leading retreatants. Later, in mutual discernment with his companions, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was formed.

Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, which he revised and expanded throughout his life, reflects his desire for deepened commitment to Christ and discernment of the vocational path that Christ calls forth. Ignatius designed the *Spiritual Exercises* for a four-

week directed retreat making use of scripture, imagination, affect, and meditation.⁷ Thematic weeks, variable times, and a gradual movement from head to heart and from meditation to contemplation mark the design of the *Exercises*.⁸ He wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* as a guide for spiritual directors, based on what Ignatius had found helpful in his own conversion process, using the spiritual practices available to him. The spiritual director adapts the exercises to the individual retreatant's needs. A person might use all their time on just one "week" or focus on the prefatory "Principle and Foundation."

One of the hallmarks of the *Spiritual Exercises* is the invitation to use our imagination in meditations. Some spiritual exercises ask us to enter with our imagination into particular scenes in the Gospels, listening to and taking the role of different characters, noticing how this affects us. For example, the second contemplation of week two instructs the retreatant to enter a prayerful time of imaginative meditation on the Nativity of Jesus. This contemplation (meditation) begins with a prayer for God's grace to know Jesus more intimately, love him more intensely, and follow him more closely. The retreatant imagines the scene at the birth of Jesus and notices all its characters, what they say, how they feel, and how they respond to God. The fuller context of the hardship the holy family experienced and the purpose of Jesus's birth and death on the cross for the retreatant should be recognized.⁹ The retreatant also reflects on how the exercise affects him or her.

While some imaginative settings are based on Scripture, such as the nativity scene we just considered, others are opportunities for imagining situations not directly drawn from Scripture but that nonetheless help us as we deliberate. For example, in week two of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a section about making an "election," or discernment, around

mentioned related
to making a decision:
providing advice to a
stranger who is facing
a similar situation,
imagining you are at
the point of death,
and standing before
the judgment seat of
God. If you are facing
a major decision or
seeking direction is
there one or more
of these meditations
you could use?

a choice and wishing to follow God's call. Here one of the suggestions about making a good decision invites us to imagine that a person we have never met comes asking for advice in a similar matter. How would we advise that person? Or another suggestion is to imagine you are at the point of death and have the freedom and clarity of that moment. What decision would you make? Or a third meditation is to imagine that you are at the final judgment and standing before Christ, reviewing your life with him. What decision would you have wanted to make about this choice?¹⁰ The Ignatian meditation on Scripture, imagining life situations to bring us closer to God, continues as an important resource for discernment.

Ignatius's counsel on the movements of the affective spiritual states of consolation (toward God) and desolation (away from God) provide further value for spiritual guidance. For example, at times of spiritual consolation, God feels most present to us, we experience comfort and peace, and we make better decisions. We then ask ourselves if the path we are considering will bring us even nearer to God. We should also recognize that this felt experience of nearness and grace will pass. And so in the time of spiritual consolation we store up a well of memories of what it is like to receive God's graces.

But, Ignatius counsels, when in a state of spiritual *desolation*, we feel more distance between ourselves and God, and we should *avoid* making decisions. We will tend over time to oscillate between these affective states of consolation and desolation. So we should wait out the times when we experience desolation, persevering in our faith and trusting in God's love for us even if we do not feel the closeness. During desolation we draw from our memory—like drawing from a well—what it was like to receive the graces of consolation, and remind ourselves that those times again will come to us.¹¹

How does Ignatius's discussion of spiritual desolation and consolation fit with your understanding of the movements in your own spiritual life?

With Lady Julian's "showings" as profound examples of symbols for contemplating our relationship to God, and with Ignatius of Loyola's

meditation exercises and teachings on consolation and desolation, we see how symbols serve as important guides illuminating our path. Other visionary saints and spiritual teachers in Christian history add their own rich symbols and ways of prayer, although I cannot give them the attention they deserve.¹² However, that doesn't need to stop you from learning from them on your own.

Depth Psychology and Re-appropriating the Power of Symbols

The Christian liturgical tradition in the West developed and led people over many centuries into the power of the sacraments. Christian mystical writers and theologians endowed the church with a wealth of reflection and understanding about spiritual life. Tragically, due to the twin forces of the Protestant Reformation's suspicions of religious superstition and the Western enlightenment's emphasis on rationalism, we lost much of the appreciation for the inner guidance and wisdom of symbols arising from dreams and meditational practices.¹³

However, there was a rediscovery of the value of symbols in the developing field of depth psychology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) made pioneering contributions to understanding the relationship between the unconscious and conscious aspects of the psyche and in therapeutic work with manifest and latent meanings of dream symbols in psychoanalysis. His younger colleague Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) branched off on his own in the development of analytical psychology and in archetypal theory. Jung found it important to bring not only dreams but also cross-cultural symbols, myths, and religion into his understanding of psychology. Jung's expanded study and recognition of the importance of religious meaning for analytical psychology had profound implications for prayer, meditation, and dreamwork practices as sources of deep inner wisdom and divine guidance.¹⁴

What is your own understanding of the interplay between psychology and spirituality?

In 1968 two Episcopal priests, John Sanford and Morton Kelsey, brought the contributions of Jungian psychology into direct con-

If you decide to use the meditation on death and rebirth from Dr. Simonton, are there any safeguards you should consider? For example, are you asking someone who has a reasonable knowledge of meditation and safety to lead you? If you are dealing with any significant mental health issue that could weaken your boundaries, I encourage you to think about and talk about the movements in the meditation with a trusted companion during the exercise, rather than immersing yourself in the scenes through imaginative visualization.

versation with mainline Christian spirituality. Sanford, a Jungian psychoanalyst as well as an ordained minister and the son of Agnes Sanford, a major leader in the inner-healing movement in mainline Christianity, published *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language*. Sanford argued for bringing Jungian archetypal understandings to bear on the interpretation of meaning in dreams, including dreams presented in Scripture. His book *The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus' Sayings* (1970) continued to focus on the inner meaning of Scripture through a Jungian perspective.

Kelsey, a parish priest and scholar who taught at Notre Dame and studied at the Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, also contributed breakthrough understandings of the power of symbols to illuminate our inner world and provide revelatory insight. He published *Dreams: The Dark Speech of the Spirit* in 1968 and in 1974 revised and released the book as *God, Dreams, and Revelation*.¹⁵ Here Kelsey provides comprehensive historical scholarship coupled with dream theory and dreamwork practice in a thorough treatment of Jewish and Christian experience of dreams. One of many books he wrote on the lively interface between psychology and Christian spirituality, *The*

Other Side of Silence presents Christian meditation, dreamwork, and practices using imagination and art.¹⁶ I am personally deeply indebted to Morton Kelsey's writings on dreamwork and meditation and other creative methods for exploring the inner world and encountering God

within; through his writing I discovered a vital Christian path for my own spiritual journey.

While a seminary student in the early 1980s, I spent my first summer taking a clinical pastoral education course as part of the pastoral-care staff at a general hospital. As a student chaplain I covered both a general medical-surgical floor and the major burn unit. I began researching what spiritual and psychological resources could help patients. In my study I came across the work of Dr. Carl Simonton, a radiologist and oncologist, who used mental imagery to help manage pain, fight disease, and improve quality of life. He published *Getting Well Again* in 1978, which continues to support many in looking at the mind-body connection to wellness.

One of the imagery meditations he offered his patients was about death and rebirth. This is my adaptation of Simonton's meditation to introduce guided-imagery meditation. It presents powerful themes of discernment:

Meditation on Death and Rebirth

In this meditation, visualize as best you are able the different scenes presented and explore the feelings, thoughts, and conversations associated with them.

1. Imagine the situation that is to bring on your death.
 - ▶ What are the circumstances surrounding your impending death? Accident? Illness?
 - ▶ How do you feel? To whom do you talk?
 - ▶ What do you say or do?
2. See yourself moving toward death, experiencing the dying process, and seeing who is present at your place of death.
 - ▶ What is said and felt?
3. Attend your own funeral. Who is present? What is said and felt?
4. See yourself at the moment of your death.
 - ▶ What occurs?
 - ▶ What happens to your consciousness?

5. Your consciousness goes out to the Source of the universe. Imagine yourself in the presence of God.
 - ▶ What is happening?
 - ▶ How do you feel?
 - ▶ What do you and God do?
6. Review your life in detail in the presence of God.
 - ▶ What pleases you about your life?
 - ▶ What would you have done differently?
 - ▶ Do you have resentments?
 - ▶ Is there any significant unfinished business?
 - ▶ Are you at peace in all of your significant relationships?
7. You come back to Earth. You have a new body and can create a new plan for your life.
 - ▶ Would you choose the same parents or new ones?
 - ▶ How about brothers or sisters? Friends?
 - ▶ What would your life's work be?
 - ▶ What is essential to accomplish in your new life?
 - ▶ What is important in your new life?
8. Recognize and appreciate that the process of death and new life is continuous in your present lifetime, every time you change your beliefs and feelings.
 - ▶ What would you like to take with you from this meditation to aid you in creating the next phase of your life?
9. Return from your meditation and reflect on the important insights you have gained.

The meditation emphasizes that life is a constant process of death and rebirth, and you have opportunities to initiate changes while still alive.¹⁷ I have used a form of this meditation many times for individuals and groups, sometimes resulting in profound insights.

Before I began leading others through this meditation, I asked my clinical pastoral education supervisor to lead me. I discovered with complete surprise that the overwhelming love I received from the Pres-

ence and those nearby this Being was so great that I didn't want to come out of the meditation. Years later I still remember the powerful feeling of that unconditional, absolute love freely given to me. My perspective shifted and was reframed in the anticipation of my own death.

Since the late 1960s and 1970s, other resources have come out that relate to our subject. Carolyn Stahl Bohler's book *Opening to God: Guided Imagery Meditation on Scripture* was released in 1977 and revised and expanded in 1996. The early edition offered my first opportunity to read about guided imagery based on Scripture and to use it in individual or group settings. I found it remarkable that an ordained United Methodist minister at that time was crediting Ignatius of Loyola for having used Scripture-imagery meditation centuries before. Bohler's book opened my eyes to the depth of this Christian practice in church history.

In 1982, Dominican Sister Marlene Halpin published *Imagine That! Using Phantasy in Spiritual Direction*, the first contemporary book I have seen intended for spiritual directors leading guided-imagery meditations. Elizabeth-Anne Stewart (Vanek) published *Image Guidance: A Tool for Spiritual Direction* in 1992, a work that also addressed the importance of attending to the symbols that arise for spiritual directees. Robert A. Johnson's *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth* (1986) introduced students of spiritual direction to the use of dreams and archetypal symbols that arise from active imagination in order to help directees explore their inner wisdom, needs, and desires for wholeness.

In recent years a number of books have been written on the subject of spiritual discernment. Two come from recognized leaders in practical theology and spirituality, both of which address spiritual discernment for individuals and couples: Elizabeth Leibert's book *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (2008) provides useful information on practices and exercises for discernment in personal decision-making. Dwight Judy offers very helpful guidance on listening within and attending to external practical issues during major life transitions in *Discerning Life Transitions: Listening Together in Spiritual Direction* (2010). I mention several other books when I ex-

plore spiritual discernment for a church or other organizational context in chapter 4.

The late 1970s and early 1980s brought remarkable growth in the development of spiritual formation centers for training lay and ordained spiritual directors through certificate or degree programs; this growth continues. Many of these centers offer training programs for an ecumenical or interfaith population. Because of these centers, we have many people now skilled and available to guide individuals or groups through spiritual direction or retreats.¹⁸

In this chapter we began our exploration of the functions of symbols and their kin, especially clusters of symbols arising from sacramental rites, dreams, and meditations. We looked at some of the powerful visions and dreams in Holy Scripture. We noted that the importance of symbols as sources of revelation and wisdom diminished with the rise of the academy, Protestantism's attempt to eradicate superstition, and the rationalism of the enlightenment era. Yet Lady Julian of Norwich, Ignatian spirituality in the sixteenth century, and the rise of depth psychology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries strongly attested to the value of symbols as sources for insight and wisdom. Since the late 1960s, the guiding potential of symbols as God's language speaking to us from our personal and collective unconscious has gained increasing recognition.