

By Ronald L. Massanari\*

## A Symbol by Any Other Name . . .

When John C. Diamond asked me to respond to Anne Wimberly's article "Spirituals as Symbolic Expression," I was both intrigued and somewhat skeptical of this undertaking. As I wrote him the letter saying that I would try to make such a response, I kept hearing in the back of my consciousness the qualification made by James Cone: "Black music must be *lived* before it can be understood."<sup>1</sup> Even as this claim resounded in the background, I decided to try it anyway.

Quite frankly I have never lived Black music. I am, in terms of social categorization, a white middle class mid-American, a person brought up (although no longer at home) within a Mennonite community whose grandfather was a German-Italian Catholic immigrant. I have had some experience with several Black communities but obviously not as an insider. I am one of many people who was (and still is) intensely moved by the songs sung in Black churches, on the marches in the 1960s, and by the spirituals themselves. There is, as Wimberly argues, something very deep and basic in these spirituals, something that taps the depths of human and religious experience. As James Cone contends, there is in Black music "a deeper level of experience which transcends the tools of 'objective' historical research."<sup>2</sup> But the matter seems not to end here. Cone also notes "that [this] experience is available only to those who share the *spirit* and participate in the faith of the people who created these songs. I am referring to the power and energy released in black devotion to the God of emotion."<sup>3</sup> In large measure I must simply accept the validity of this experientially based claim. It does however, in an analogous way, concur with the experience I have had with particular religious symbols and images within specific communities and traditions.

As I understand human and religious symbols, Cone seems correct. Alive symbols bubble up within a particular community's context so that those of us who are not direct participants in the Black experience are in a real sense cut off from the full power and potency of these symbols. No amount of "objective" research, even archetypal studies, can do what intimate participation does. But Wimberly also seems correct. Alive symbols are also archetypal in the sense that they carry with them a kind of universal experience. In other words, alive and creative (creating) symbols are both highly specific, relative to a concrete historical context, and universal, tapping and revealing common human experience. While

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<sup>1</sup>James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and The Blues* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

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it seems necessary to state this dialectically, the alive symbol transcends this descriptive dialectic. Description, whether from within or from the outside, is ultimately inadequate. The style of symbolic transcendence is that of participation rather than analysis and description.

The Wimberly article specifically addresses the archetypal or universal side of this dialectic. As I understand symbols, this article needs to be read in tandem with something like Cone's treatment of spirituals. The universal remains only one side of an alive symbol. The more particular and concrete side is the other and necessary side. One without the other tends to domesticate symbols; one by making them abstractions, the other by making them esoteric. The first approach is analogous to seeing the mind without the body while the second approach is like seeing the body without the mind. Just as with anthropology, a disembodied mind is no more human than a mindless body. The alive symbol lives like a person (the descriptive dialectical "categories" of body and mind are here transcended in our image of person). Thus I find Wimberly's title somewhat problematic since the article focuses almost exclusively on one side of the symbolic dialectic. There is a difference between archetypes and symbols. By its onesidedness, this treatment does not allow the descriptive dialectic to be exploded so that the symbol can live immediately in that transcendent yet vibrantly concrete world which is its home.

The archetypal approach is a suggestive way of dealing with the profoundly universal dimensions of symbols. Those of us interested in symbols owe Carl Jung and this perspective a great deal. I would, for example, by and large agree that Jung is correct in his claim that "To gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the psychological approach. That is why I take these thought-forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again and pour them into moulds of immediate experience. It is certainly a difficult undertaking to discover connecting links between dogma and immediate experience of psychological archetypes but a study of the natural symbols of the unconscious gives us the necessary raw material."<sup>4</sup> But I think it must be remembered that this is a descriptive symbol system used to open us up to our experience. "Raw material" remains raw until we move (or are moved by the power of the symbol) from description (subject/object duality) to participation (identification). We must be careful not to give more to these descriptive expressions than what they are. One illustration of Jung's notation of this problem can be found in *Psyche and Symbol*: "The archetypes are by no means useless archaic survivals or relics. They are living entities, which cause the praeformation of numinous ideas or dominant representations. Insufficient understanding, however, accepts these praeformations in their archaic form, because they have a numinous appeal to the underdeveloped mind."<sup>5</sup> Sometimes we tend to confuse the

<sup>4</sup>C. G. Jung, *Psychological Reflections: A New Anthology of His Writings 1905-1961*, edited by J. Jacobi and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup>C. G. Jung, *Psyche and Symbol*, edited by V. S. de Laszlo (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), p. xvi.

cadaver with the person. To treat archetypes as the symbols is analogous to confusing images of love with the experience of love. It leads to a kind of false narrowing of our experience with the participatory world of symbols.

Symbols, however, do have a creative narrowing quality because they cause us to focus intensely. But the process is not alive or creative if terminated at this point. They narrow and focus only as a prelude to exploding wide open. Symbols, when alive and creating, allow us to focus on a dimension of our experience but also allow us to pass through that narrow opening into the other side. To get stuck in the narrow opening, like in an hour glass, stops the flow. The connection between those dimensions of our experience is blocked. We become fixed on a lifeless description of a symbol because we have cut it off from our experience.

As a symbol system to talk about symbols, the archetypal approach has been liberating but it carries with it the potential danger of confusing the descriptive analytical symbol system with the alive symbol. I sense a kind of "archetypal fundamentalism" in the Wimberly article in which almost everything depends upon the authority of Jung or his fellow archetypists. (I wonder if this is the kind of thing Jung meant when he announced that he was not a Jungian.) To be able to find, label, and categorize particular aspects or images of spirituals is descriptively helpful but it might not, probably will not, tell us much about the life and potency of a particular symbolic image. (As I read Carl Jung, he was well aware of this.) The article tends to take an external literalistic "truth" scheme and lay it on the spirituals, much like fundamentalists lay an external truth scheme on the particularities of human life. In addition to listening to the "Jungian explanation" for a particular image, we need to listen to the image in context, and ultimately I suppose that means participation.

In many ways, symbols that have to be interpreted, described, and explained have lost their life and potency. Even the father of the archetypal approach knew this. One of his clearest statements describing an alive symbol is: "To be effective, a symbol must be by its very nature unassailable. It must be the best possible expression of the prevailing worldview, an unsurpassed container of meaning; it must also be sufficiently remote from comprehension to resist all attempts of the critical intellect to break it down; and finally, its aesthetic form must appeal so convincingly to our feelings that no argument can be raised against it on that score."<sup>6</sup> Symbols may be resurrected, in some sense at least, through interpretation but to allow them rebirth only within particular schematic frameworks is to allow them a deformed and truncated rebirth at best. This is the dilemma of all of us working in and with symbols.

What I am advocating is a much more radical incarnational view of symbols. As in the religious image "the word become flesh," so the symbolic image has a life of its own in particular contexts, one that must be heard in that context, one that may escape the appeal to, at least in a

<sup>6</sup>Jung, *Psychological Reflections*, p. 47.

literalistic sense, "the Jungian explanation." Even as Jung argues, "It is a great mistake in practice to treat an archetype as if it were a mere name, word, or concept. It is far more than that: it is a piece of life, an image connected with the living individual by the bridge of emotion."<sup>7</sup> They are "invested with certain dynamic qualities which, psychologically speaking, are designated as 'autonomy' and 'numinosity'."<sup>8</sup> The more incarnational symbolic style needs something like the archetypal approach but it cannot end here. It is especially needed when most of us have lost a keen referential sense. The poetic-symbolic dimension with its basic ironic character has been rather systematically eliminated for many in our culture. But once that referential sense has been rediscovered or reopened, once it becomes an alive and powerful dimension of our experience, such schematic, analytical, and descriptive systems as Jungian archetypes become vehicles at best, and, when taken literally, objectifying blockages to experience at worst.

As I read and hear spirituals, they emerge from a people who still had an acute and alive referential sense. Their language was clearly multi-dimensional. It reveals a perspective (probably tacit or unconscious) that can be touched by archetypal analysis as a secondary description but most certainly cannot be domesticated or explained by this or any other symbolic scheme that talks about alive symbolic images. Just as with a person, no one or may be even all, psychological approaches can adequately describe or define that person. An alive symbol, like a person, defies such objectification and categorization. (Jung's word for this is "irrepresentable.") These approaches may be helpful but only with the conscious qualification that such descriptions are always inadequate and artificial. The sense of irony (the use of words to say something words cannot carry) that pervades alive symbols must also resonate through any attempt to describe or explain symbols. To confuse the two, the person and the psychological analysis, or the symbol and archetypal description, almost certainly kills. It simply takes the life out of the person or the symbol. The "spirit" cannot be domesticated in the "letter."

Part of the nature of alive symbols is that they defy such external objectification and abstraction. Their life resides in their concreteness and in our participation, "becoming one with" rather than plugging them into some pre-established framework. For the purposes of communication about symbols or for analysis the latter may be necessary. It is just the danger of such confusion that needs to be constantly and consciously guarded against. The sense of irony must pervade our descriptions.

While I do find some of this confusion in the Wimberly article, this ought not completely minimize what this study has done. I find the reemphasis on the universal dimensions of the symbolic images found in spirituals to be quite valuable. In addition the author provides an excellent illustration of what can happen when we put on a rather literal "Jungian pair of glasses." They can open up particular aspects of seeing

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>8</sup>Jung, *Psyche and Symbol*, p. xvi.

but they close others. What I find missing here is the power of alive symbols to explode any particular pair of glasses, which allows a person to see and participate in a new way, immediately, ironically, sacramentally, openly. I am not sure if this can happen for someone like myself whose experience remains outside the Black experience of the spirituals, but to the extent that it can it is clearly because of the universality of these images and a style of imagination. Archetypal analysis may provide a clue, even a key, and this Wimberly does uncover. But like a key, it is not meant to remain in the closed door but to open it so that one can cross through into another dimension of experience. Clearly each of us must open the door ourselves, that is to respond to the call of these symbols resonating on the other side, but when one is so fascinated with the key itself, I wonder if the door is ever opened.