

“When operating from an archetypal perspective, intuition plays a larger role and is incorporated as the healing arts are set in motion.”

—Lynn Keegan, RN, PhD, AHN-BC, FAAN

Archetypes in the Nursing Experience

by TONI GILBERT, RN (ret), MA, ATC

Modern consciousness research is producing profound interactions between all levels of reality and creative intelligence. Scientific explorations have postulated the possibility that our universe is not three-dimensional and linear, but rather that it is a four-dimensional continuum known as *time-space*. The synchronicity, or meaningful coincidence, that intuitive practitioners of Tarot counseling encounter may be a part of this fourth dimension. With this perspective of the universe, boundaries between objects, such as Tarot cards, and empty space disappear and the entire universe is seen as one continuous field of varying densities. In modern physics, matter and energy can be perceived as one interchangeable body (Goswami, 1995). With this new worldview, objects and our consciousness can be seen as a part of All That Is and not limited to the activities contained inside the skull.

Archetypes and Psychology

In Latin, psychology means the study of the psyche; translated as mind or soul. To ancient sources, dating back to at least several millennia BC, the word *psyche* meant the animating force or spirit in the body or material vehicle (Wilber, 2000). Today, a modern integral psychology encompasses the totality of mind, body, and the spiritual. Attention to archetypes is prevalent in the literature of psychology, and nursing draws some theory from that literature. Some archetype theorists support, while others debate, an emerging model which sees archetypal imagery as a phenomenon arising out of neural biostructures, such as mirror and motor neurons, laid down in early infant life as a result of developmental experience (Merchant, 2006).

Some nurses have gravitated toward archetypal concepts and are beginning to integrate them into nursing practice (Rancour, 2008). Nurses often are in ideal positions to create such healing experiences by helping survivors to recognize “shadow” emotional experiences stemming from the recovery process, to accept these emotions as normal transitional phenomena, and to actively use the illness for spiritual growth and self-actualization (Rancour, 2008).

Transpersonal psychologists Achterberg and Lawlis (1984) furthered medicine’s knowledge of the use of visualization or imagery in diagnostics and treatment. This work is unusual in the scientific sense because the imaginary scenario is from a unique and transpersonal level of the personality. The symbolism most commonly relates to a person’s framework of those symbols that best relate to his or her perceived psychological attributes of the disease process that includes memory, dreams, and visions. Many of the symbols identified are ancient archetypal figures of good and evil. For instance, the symbols representing strength and purity show as heroes like knights or Vikings. Other frequently used symbols that appear to be positive predictors of the healing process are those of large, powerful animals, especially dogs and bears.

Archetypes in Nursing Practice

Nurses can use knowledge of the archetypes in selected areas of nursing practice. Once studied and skilled in this form of expression and interpretation, nurses can call on this body of knowledge to help them better understand some of the psychological complexities of their patients. From the perspective that the archetypes are the absolute essence before manifestation into an image or action, we can see archetypes as a formless energy – full of information and ready to represent the possibilities of certain types of perceptions, actions, and feelings as well as physical manifestations (Gilbert, 2011). It can be assumed that archetypal energy exists inside and outside the body; we are immersed in and permeated with this energetic information. When a nurse, skilled in working with the archetypes, sits with a client, they can identify what archetypes are at work in the client’s life and help them to understand the developmental options that each archetypal expression presents.

In theory, the archetypal energy is activated in the individual consciousness and that energy provides the specific energetic patterns that give the individual his or her personal expressions. The archetypes each have their unique purpose and have higher level aspects as well as lower level shadow manifestations (Gilbert, 2011). For example, one major archetype is the caregiver. At a higher psychologically healthy level, the caregiver is concerned with the needs of his or her patients and displays empathy and kind patience. Healthy caregivers begin the caring process by taking responsibility for a healing situation, but as the patient grows stronger and begins to heal, the relationship with the healthy caregiver changes. He/she continues to be nurturing, but helps create situations to facilitate the client’s growth and development. Conversely, a psychologically unhealthy caregiver may lose her/himself in meeting the needs of others, without the capacity to care for self.

Symbolism has many interpretations and is also dependent upon the developmental level achieved by the person viewing an archetypal image, their significant life experiences, and their resulting projections. Many of the images on Tarot cards are derived from characters and symbols that can be found in the popular art of the Renaissance. In this article, I use images of

the classic Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot deck to illustrate and discuss how two archetypes are expressed in a holistic nursing practice.

Self-Care Archetype

Self-care is a core principle of holistic nursing. “The nurse’s self-reflection, self-assessment, self-care, healing, and personal development are necessary for service to others, as are growth/change in the nurse’s own well-being and understanding of the nurse’s own personal journey” (ANA & AHNA, 2019, p. 14). Self-healing itself is a significant goal of holistic nursing (Quinn, 2016). In order to understand how to be an instrument of healing, the nurse must undertake a personal journey. This journey not only involves the outer world but also a meditation and contemplation of the inner life. “They [nurses] endeavor to integrate self-awareness, self-care, self-healing, and self-responsibility into their lives by incorporating practices such as self-assessment, meditation, yoga, good nutrition, energy therapies, movement, creative expression (e.g., art, music), support, and lifelong learning” (ANA & AHNA, 2019, p. 159).

One major archetype that represents the self-care aspect of holistic nursing is the Hermit (Figure A. See below). “The Hermit

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Figure A – The Hermit

The white hair and beard of the old man, tells the viewer that he has lived long and gained wisdom. That he is simply dressed connotes the humility with which one must approach inner work. The cold grey sky gives one the feeling of aloneness. The staff symbolizes a philosophy and belief system that steadies his way upon the difficult journey. The lantern held aloft represents the light of knowledge that he is willing to impart to those who are ready. Standing at the top of a high snow-capped mountain (high spiritual attainment), he looks down to others who are making the difficult inner trek to their highest inner knowing.

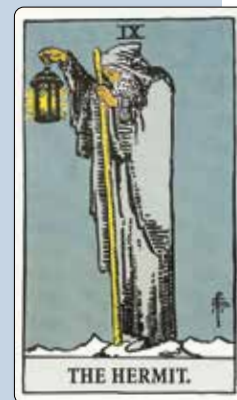


Figure B – The High Priestess

The masculine and feminine shapes on the crown represent a balance between yin and yang energies. The sea behind her is a symbol of the unconscious mind and the realm of the spiritual. Because it is behind her, it can also mean that she has had many (vastness of the sea) emotional experiences in her past. The black and white pillars represent the duality; a yin and yang of opposing forces, the law of contrasts. The crescent moon at her left foot symbolizes the feminine. Yellow is reflected in the moon and symbolizes the light of the sun. The sun is representative of the masculine or the ego.



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represents the universal principle of completion, contemplation, and introspection. The Hermit is the lantern-bearer, the way-shower and the wise leader who draws upon internal wisdom and life's experience as invaluable resources for assisting others through life's processes" (Arrien, 1997, p. 59). This archetypal image is representative of the journey towards inner knowing and integration of life's experiences. When the nurse does inner work, she gains the confidence to shine her light of wisdom for others to see.

The Caring Process

Holistic nurses provide care that recognizes the totality of the human being (the interconnectedness of the body, mind, emotion, spirit, social/cultural, relationship, context, environment, and energy). "Holistic assessments include not only the physical, functional, psychosocial, mental, emotional, cultural, and sexual aspects but also spiritual, transpersonal, and energy-field assessments of the whole person" (ANA & AHNA, 2019, p. 27).

The archetype of the High Priestess/Priest (Figure B. See p. 15) represents the universal principles of intuition, independence, self-trust, self-resourcefulness, and balance (Arrien, 1997). The teaching of the Priestess is based upon imagination and intuitive wisdom. She represents highest form of thought and has respect for all things as holy. At the highest level of the archetype, her judgments are based on fair assessment and a comprehensive and tolerant understanding of the current circumstances. The High Priestess can represent a number of major aspects of the caring process. Like the High Priestess, holistic nurses have competence and their intentions are of the highest good with every encounter and intervention. They are facilitators with a significant focus upon guiding individuals and significant others to utilize their own inner strength and resources through the course of healing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary studies in psychology, including observations of archetypal expressions, form a basis for nurses to study archetypal psychology; a field of study that refers to all cultures and all forms of human activity across all time. Archetypal psychology explores the use of the images and levels of consciousness in the imagination of which the unconscious mind is a part. It behooves the nurse to be familiar with archetypal images and their origins and to recognize them as

they appear in client dreams, guided imagery, Tarot images, writing, and other psychic content. They are the patterns of the psyche that appear in humankind's physical, social, linguistic, aesthetic, and spiritual expressions all over the world. Ultimately, as health professionals gain an ability to see the archetypes, they recognize basic patterns of life and begin to see the world and the entire universe as holistic.

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