

A photograph of a swan splashing in water at sunset. The swan is in the center, with its wings spread and water splashing around it. The background is a warm, orange and red sunset sky. The water in the foreground is dark with some ripples.

# CONSTRUCTING YOUR INNER IMAGINARIUM

*A workbook*

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## *The Mythic Imagination – why it matters*

When I was a small child, I inhabited, like most children, a vivid imaginal world. But just as many of us do, I came to understand at a very early age just how profoundly we have come to devalue imagination in the West – how we think of it now as little more than fantasy, or escapism.

But throughout human history, until the so-called ‘Enlightenment’ actively disenchanting us, the imaginal world had always been known to be just as real as any other. To the ancient Sufis, it was the *mundus imaginalis*: the imaginal world which exists between the physical world of our senses and the intellectual world, and a world in which images and stories *have an independent existence*. To archetypal psychologist James Hillman, the act of imagining was the act of soul-making; to contemplate the imaginal is literally to dream ourselves into being. But although such ideas might be alive and well in academic psychology or in the therapy room, they really haven’t much impacted our everyday lives at all.

It wasn’t always so. Until the Reformation, medieval culture in Western Europe was characterised by contemplative practices which depended on employing the imagination, and at the heart of this contemplative culture was a belief in the power of the imagination to connect us to the divine. There is also a rich tradition of Buddhist, Tantric, Hindu and Taoist practices in which the imagination is foundational; most of us would be familiar with practices like visualising the chakras, for example, or the contemplation of mandalas. But purposeful engagement with the imaginal as an everyday activity – or more than that, as a way of being in the world – is a rare thing here in the contemporary West.

In this cutting ourselves off from the imaginal world, and in relegating the powerful act of imagining to mere ‘day-dreaming’ or ‘fantasising’, we are also cutting ourselves off from what philosophers and poets throughout history have understood to be the underlying reality of our existence. Because imagining is arguably the only way we have of coming to know the world which lies beyond the limits of the physical world which we can perceive with our senses. It is imagining which allows us to penetrate that veil, to see beyond the everyday, and into the world of myth and archetype – to understand the ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’ which Plato suggested were the underlying structures of the cosmos. To engage in the practice of imagining, then, and to work with the mythic imagination, is above all a way of moving into relationship with the *anima mundi*: the ‘world soul’ of ancient Western tradition. It’s about moving beyond the limits of our ego and descending into the deepest layers of our individual psyche, in order to understand the ways in which we are uniquely entangled with the psyche of the cosmos itself.



## *What is your inner imaginarium?*

The practice of mythic imagination which I teach is premised on the fact that each of us has our own unique inner *imaginarium*. We are each haunted by different images; we each resonate with different myths or fairy tales, and with different archetypal characters within them. And each of us identifies with different archetypal characters and patterns at different times in our own lives. How do we uncover those patterns; how do we bring those images to life, and let them work their magic on us?

The practice of mythic imagination is about being open to, and about actively contemplating, the images which arise unbidden in our dreams, in stories, poems and art. Most importantly: it's not about striving to *interpret* them. An image is like a kiss: once we begin to dissect it, the magic is gone. It's simply about being with the images which call to us. It's about believing that these images hold wisdom. It's about letting them reveal themselves to us.

This way of working invites us to open ourselves up to the possibility that there might be an order of reality which lies beyond that which we can experience through our physical senses. An order of reality which we can access through the practice of the imagination – because to contemplate the imaginal is ultimately to court the world soul, and to put ourselves directly in touch with the sacred.

## *Where do we find our guiding images?*

The imaginal realms can be experienced in various ways – for example, through dreams; when we are touched by a sense of the sacred in prayer or meditation; when we feel ourselves strongly moved by an image from a film, a book, or a work of art. The imaginal world is beckoning to us when an image really stirs something in us, and awakens us to a strong emotion. If we can learn to explore and to interact with these images, they will often guide us to insights that are both unexpected and mysterious



## *Begin to construct your own unique imaginarium*

Start by making a collection of your images. In your notebook or journal, follow the guidelines below; you can write about what you discover, or draw, or both.

### STORIES

Which stories – especially any fairy tales – did you particularly love as a child? Why did you love them? Think about the following things:

**Theme:** what is the story about? (Not what *happens*, but what is it *about*. For example: lost love, the fall from grace, understanding the value of friendship ...)

**Setting:** where does the story take place? How much does the time, landscape and culture in which the story is set affect your love of it? Why? What is it about the setting which draws you?

**Characters:** are there any characters in the story who you particularly love? What archetypal qualities do they possess? For example – is there a Wise Old Woman, a Bad Mother, a Warrior, a Trickster?

**Images:** are there any particular images in the story that have stayed with you? – for example, a pair of red shoes? If so, what do these images symbolise for you?

## FILMS

Carry out the same analysis for the films you love.

## POETRY

Find a poem which you particularly love. Why do you love it? What image(s) in the poem particularly speaks to you? What words do you especially remember? How does the poem make you feel?

## ART

Think of a painting which you love. What do you love about it? Think of the following things:

- The colour scheme
- The style of painting (realistic, impressionistic etc)
- The mood of the painting
- Is there a particularly potent image in the painting?
- How does the painting make you feel?

## DREAMS

Do you remember any images or characters in dreams that continue to haunt you? Try to write them down without striving to interpret what they might 'mean'.

## *Working with your images*

1. Do you notice any repeating patterns? Any themes, characters, colours, moods, visual images occurring often in the stories and works of art that haunt you? If there are, make a particular note of those recurrences; these are the ideas and images that you'll want to spend a good deal of time with.

2. Engage with your images! There are many different ways of engaging with the different types of content which make up your own unique imaginarium; here are two to get you started.

Pick an archetypal character which particularly resonates with you – a human, animal or plant – from one of your stories, poems, films, paintings or dreams.

- Work with it creatively, depending on the things you love to do. Paint it, sew it, write poems about it ... this contemplative practice helps you to engage.
- Find other representations of that character – in other stories, poems, films, and paintings. Make a collection; explore, contemplate. Wait for the character to make itself known to you.

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*If you've enjoyed this brief foray into the world of the mythic imagination,  
and would like to find out more, please visit:*

[www.sharonblackie.net](http://www.sharonblackie.net)

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