

# A HOLISTIC NURSING GUIDE TO IMAGINING THE HEROES WITHIN

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The imagination is a goldmine of ideas and archetypes waiting to manifest. The archetypes exist for us to connect with and integrate into our daily living. The creativity of manifestation may be difficult to recognize within ourselves but, if we choose to intentionally draw upon an “inner reserve of courage,” that creativity is available. This is learned by using experiential practices such as writing, meditation, guided imagery, by sharing our stories, and more.

Notably, the inner world of the imagination is where archetypal energies show up to help us. Encounters with my own inner archetypes made me realize the value of having images, exterior and interior, from which to draw psychic energy. Christine Downing in her 1991 book, *Mirrors of the Self*, called archetypal images a rich mirroring of our inner experience and our interactions with the world outside ourselves. Carl Jung (1963), a transpersonal psychiatrist, discovered that he learned to access the *unconscious mind*, which is a transpersonal source of inexhaustible creative energy. We all have such a place and when you find this place in yourself, it is life changing. Many times, I’ve been surprised by the rightness of a particular archetypal symbol in my life at a poignant moment. The following is one account of how I drew upon an image to access extra courage to push myself beyond my usual boundaries.

As a graduate student at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), my academic studies led me to do much inner psychological exploration that involved shadow work as well as courage and insight. During this time, I visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art and was surprised by a large, beautiful 19th century French oil portrait of a Moorish Chieftain, a descendant of the Muslim people of African descent who ruled parts of the

Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal) between the 8th and 15th centuries. As I stood awe struck by the image, I sensed in his character an inner strength, conviction, integrity and courage. I felt that anyone would know immediately that he, this most magnificent warrior, would not take much foolishness nor disregard for what he considered valuable (See Figure 1).

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Shortly after this encounter, I attended a week of classes focused on transpersonal psychology. During one session, we did a walking meditation on a diagram made with tape on the floor. The taped lines represented psychological developmental levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Here

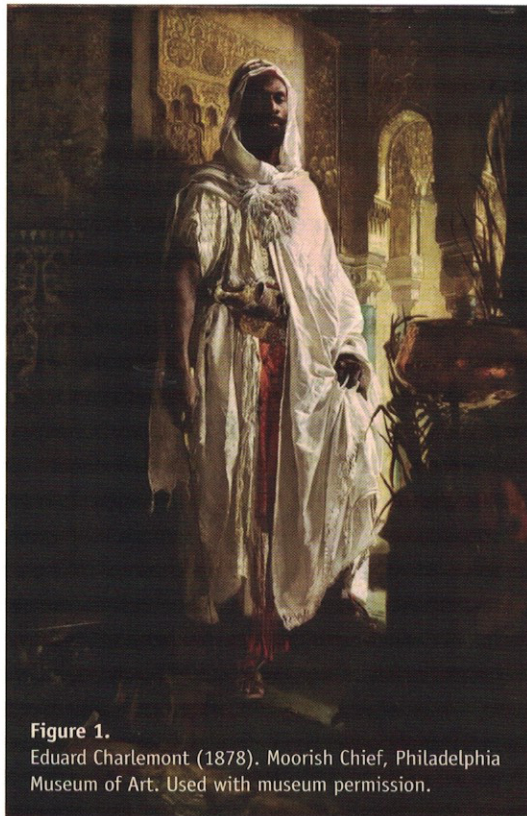


is where I began to understand that archetypal energies exist in layers correlating with Maslow's hierarchy. The Moorish Chieftain appeared in my imagination as my inner warrior, representing Maslow's level three, having to do with competition and cooperation in the world, and Maslow's level five having to do with speaking one's own truth. After the meditation, when the class regrouped, I shared my experience of my inner Moorish warrior, only to draw the ire of those present, for presuming that as a white person my intention to connect with a Black African historical figure was not enmeshed with white privilege. I was overwhelmed by what felt like negativity of shadowy projections of others and ran from the room in tears, a reflection of my usual avoidance behavior. However, my inner warrior showed up in my imagination impelling me to return to the group and take a more courageous stance. I was able to express my belief that the courage projected by the warrior's image embodied a source of powerful connectivity that would foster inner healing for divisive misperceptions—my own included.

The discussion that followed shifted perceptions of who I am, for both me and my colleagues in the room.

The entire experience was powerful and impelled me as a holistic nurse to become a transpersonal counselor so could I guide others to access deeper levels of consciousness with archetypes that are their inner healers. In the past, psychology has been mainly focused only on personal history and pathological issues. Today, we find hidden treasures in the recesses of our minds that help us heal and grow to our full holistic potential. No religion or scientific study truly explains how our world works. Thus, what we can ultimately know may lie in our ability to observe inner and outer archetypal patterns and their unique expressions. The more we become aware of how our archetypal images impact us, the more we come to know ourselves. The better we know ourselves, the more comfortable we will feel in the company of others. All in all, the knowledge that we gain from observing our archetypal images makes us more aware, and as we learn to make use of the archetypes, we'll enhance our personal and social life as well as the world at large (Gilbert, 2011).

Our lives are shaped by our fantasies and dreams as well as our intellectual thoughts and deeds. In this way, we respond to our ordinary lives with imagination as well as our logical and pragmatic side. As we observe our consciousness



**Figure 1.** Eduard Charlemont (1878). Moorish Chief, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Used with museum permission.

responding to an inner world full of symbols, signs, metaphors, there are images that emerge. Unlike ideas, these inner images may feel “given to us.” Interpreting the meaning of these revelations requires paying attention to the specific situations in which they emerge. The characters in our imaginations are a psychic potentiality that can elevate us beyond our narrow personal selves and help us become a person with more breadth and depth.

It is easy to acknowledge the ego, the mask we put on to win social acceptance. But we are reluctant to approach the shadow part of our selves; the part the ego disowns. We may also meet an alter ego, the double that offers up support and companionship. We can meet an inner figure with the attributes of the opposite sex that are actually part of our own psychological potentiality—the anima and

animus. We discover that we carry within us multitudes of a whole self that can draw us to a fuller richer life.

### Putting Archetypes into Action

As an experiment, I formed a group of five people who wanted to learn more about transpersonal concepts to facilitate their personal growth. In an initial gathering, we briefly discussed several archetypes, such as the orphan, caregiver, seeker, lover, creator, magician, sage, and fool and how modeling their attributes can teach us many lessons. As the group leader, I selected the warrior archetype as our main focus and centered our first discussion on what a warrior teaches us about fear, something that everyone needs to confront from time to time. Participants began by identifying manifestations of courage and other traits in images of warriors they had individually selected to share with choices ranging from Jesus to Jane Fonda. The image of a spiritual warrior was the type which seemed to hold the most intrigue. Eventually, discussion pivoted to how courage and other warrior attributes were needed in their own lives to face fear.

In a subsequent session, I shared handouts intended to teach how warrior attributes can be understood through the lens of Sigmund Freud's three levels of awareness—the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious, and other clinical assessments of the human mind (Balint, 1958). According to Rossman (2000), it takes teaching for some people to achieve imagery as it isn't something that most of us grew up with. The teaching can mean the difference between fantasy and the deeper meaning of an image. For example, one of the



men imagined a warrior, who turned out to be his father. He didn't like this so he fantasized a woman in a red riding cloak. By controlling the imagery, he brought it to the ego level and it became fantasy and a way of avoiding tapping into the unconscious mind.

Progressive relaxation was the aim of another imagery session where I guided the group to find themselves in nature with imagined surroundings, observing the colors, textures and any smells that might be present. Next, I asked everyone to see a cave that had a path leading down into the earth. According to Arrien (1993) in her book *The Four-Fold Way*, it is in the underworld that the warrior and their courage can be found. Hence, I asked participants to evoke in their image of an underground encounter with their warrior, ask them a question, receive an answer, and finally, receive a gift from this warrior-- perhaps a gift with additional guidance from the warrior.

Meditation in a standing warrior pose unfolded in another session, with the abdomen open and the feet wide apart. In the book *Ecstatic Body Postures*, Gore (1995) suggests that the flow of energy from the planet is enhanced in this position and therefore more powerful. Gore also suggests that through this process one can discover what it feels like to stand on one's own two feet or stand up for oneself, experiencing what it feels like to set limits or come from a personal place of self-esteem and self-respect, as a warrior is wont to do.

In a final session, the participants were asked to write a story for ten minutes that began with the words "Once upon a time..." without stopping for punctuation for 10 minutes. The act of writing reaches depths in us that mere thinking does not.

In my assessment, the one participant who accessed archetypal energy with remarkable outcomes was a woman coping with a pressing need to apply reserves of courage to a problematic marriage. Others had developed the ability to call upon their warrior archetypes knowing that when access to an inner hero was needed, it would be available.

### A Brief Review of Archetypal Theory

The Greek root *arche* means "origin or beginnings" and *type* is from a Greek verb meaning "to strike." In psychology, archetypes are sometimes referred to as "first imprint." According to Plato's philosophy that took hold in Greece around 400 B.C.E, an archetype is formless energy that is full of information--- and waiting to manifest as perceptions, behaviors, and feelings in the world of human experience (Gilbert, 2011).

The early Greek philosophers were visionaries, much like the early Hebrew prophets. And like the Hebrew prophets, they were enthralled with the spiritual presence that certain archetypal concepts and images held. The prophets expressed their vision in their particular style of language, and the philosophers expressed their visions in the language of rationalism.

It can be argued that philosophy and religion are primarily psychology, the study of the mind and soul. Both embrace

the philosophical investigation of a psyche exploring itself in a particular time and place. One can see that the archetypal concepts that held the early philosopher's attention are a living system of interdependent ideas that undergo continued analysis as inquiring and creative modern minds continue to wrestle with them.

The Golden Era of Greek philosophy lasted for about 1,000 years and ended in 533 when Emperor Justinian I forbade the teaching of non-Christian philosophy and closed the Platonic Academy. However, the ancient Greek concept that all that all humans are a part of a Divine reality continues today as we discuss the nature of divinity and how it merges with our lives at multiple levels of consciousness and manifestation.

Archetypes have been with humanity since the beginning of our existence. Archetypes are universal and hence reside as energy within the unconscious psychological life of all people everywhere and throughout time; they exist in our inner and outer worlds. We can find them by going inward in meditation, imagery, and fantasy. The archetypes are also expressed outwardly as in mythological stories, art, literature, and religion. Thus, they provide images from the personal and the transpersonal parts of ourselves. We know the archetypes because they leave the same or similar traces over space and time.

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