



THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLS

Compiled by Manjula Nanavati

New Acropolis India celebrated World Philosophy Day on 17th November with a special event in Mumbai that explored the meaning of Life through symbols.

UNESCO commemorates World Philosophy Day on the 3rd Thursday of November every year, to recognize the contribution of Philosophy as a force of transformation for the development of individuals and societies. To this end it encourages philosophical dialogues, conferences, and workshops with participation from scientists, philosophers and artists from all branches of knowledge, as well as teachers, students and the general public, in order to refine the ethical principles that should guide humanity to build a better world.

As part of the global celebrations that **International Organization New Acropolis** hosts in 400 centres over 60 countries, New Acropolis (India), in collaboration with the National Gallery of Modern Art (Ministry of Culture, Government of India), hosted

Yaron began his presentation by explaining that philosophy is a means to come closer to wisdom. He made clear the difference between knowledge and wisdom, and explained that *"philosophy is a path to penetrate the mysteries of life. But because we cannot interact with Wisdom and Mystery with words alone, we need to go beyond, and transition from Kama Manas, (the mind that defines by separation and segregation, that sees things partially), to Manas, the higher mind which sees holistically. This is to transition from Duality to Unity. If we operate through our Kama Manas we will be stuck in our assumptions, opinions and superstitions. We need to cross this sea of limited intellect and go beyond, towards Manas, towards the shore of wisdom. **One of the keys to help us achieve this, to go beyond the visible and touch the invisible, are symbols, and philosophy can***

a presentation in Mumbai exploring The Universal Language of Symbols through philosophy and art. Yaron Barzilay, Director of New Acropolis (India) and Philosopher-Photographer Pierre Poulain, whose work has been presented in exhibitions all over the world, and who is also Coordinator of New Acropolis (Asia, Africa and Oceania), gave a rapt audience of almost 200 much to ponder, about the richness and depth that life offers us through symbols.

Below are excerpts from both their separate talks, transliterated from their own words and amalgamated to underline that the Path of the Philosopher and the Path of the Artist in the search to touch the invisible are not so different at all.

help us to understand not just the words that give meaning to the symbols, but to unveil the deeper universal significance of them."

Pierre echoed this when he began his talk: *"There are Universal Archetypes like Justice, Goodness, Truth, etc. Beauty too, is one face of the archetypes. Symbols are a gate that allows us access to the universal Archetypes that we cannot see, touch or hear, because they belong to the Aroopa, the realm of the invisible."* Knocking on the lectern and touching his own arm, Pierre continued, *"These seems quite real to us, and of course they do exist, but they will soon vanish, in a moment in time. They have a beginning and an end. So it is an illusion of permanence in the impermanent. **Symbols are the tool that can help us pierce this veil of Maya, this world of illusion, to perceive what is behind the veil."***

Yaron in his presentation had further clarified, "Symbols are not signs: We all recognize a traffic signal red light as an instruction to STOP but it carries no other meaning than that. Symbols are multidimensional and carry deeper, multiple meanings. They are an offering and a transmission. **Symbols awaken our intuition because they speak to the innermost, sacred authentic part of ourselves.**"

Pierre too in his talk expressed similarly, "My work as a philosopher-photographer is not philosophy, not photography but what I call *Photosophy*: How to take a picture of the visible and through the camera touch the invisible so that everyone can see it. When I touch the archetype of Beauty, real Beauty that is not linked to my opinion and the subjectivity that

Encounter with the archetypes by Pierre Poulain



comes from my persona, when I perceive true Beauty even when my personality doesn't like it, (because it may be that my personality was not educated to like the real Beauty), then I touch Truth, and Goodness, and because the archetypes are all aspects of the ONE, I understand Unity. I feel like I belong to Life, because Life is one: This is the greatness of Art.

An artist stands in the midst between the Archetypes on the one hand, and a work of Art on the other. The artist is thus the channel or medium between the impermanent and the eternal. If the artist is able to put his mask aside, and be transparent, he can allow the viewer to 'perceive' a glimpse beyond the Maya. That is how photography becomes Art: it becomes a symbolic image that contains more than we can see. An image that awakens in us a question. Much like Philosophy. **The answer is not in the photograph. It is within yourself. And the photo becomes the impetus for the search within. The answers are inside each and every one of us: the philosophical process and the artistic process is to reveal the answer.**" Here on earth, we are in 3 dimensions. An image is in 2 dimensions: 2 is the natural link between 1 and 3. That is why symbols work so well as the bridge between the concrete, and the metaphysical.

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The Bench by
Pierre Poulain



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During the course of his talk, Yaron presented slides to show that symbols have existed since man first began to paint the walls of his cave, and since then they have appeared across all cultures and civilizations. Yet even across geographies and epochs there are similarities that demonstrate a universality of meaning. The Tree of Life, for example, is portrayed in various religions and philosophies including the Ancient Greek, Ancient Indian, Scandinavian, Celtic and the Egyptian traditions to name just a few.

Explained Yaron, *"Mythology and Allegories give us powerful and profound symbols such as the Kurukshetra from the Mahabharat, symbolic of the battle within, between light and darkness, or Labyrinths in Greek mythology symbolizing an inward journey to meet our 'animal self', our lower ego. Constellations of stars have been translated symbolically, most universally known as the Zodiac."* **Sacred Architecture in almost all cultures have used elements of space such as shape, dimension, proportion, angle, etc., in the construction of roof, floor, columns etc. to enhance access to the spiritual.**

Pierre in his talk made a similar observation: *"In Egyptian Temple Architecture, the front façade is a huge door. As you enter the floor slowly slopes upward and the roof slopes*

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*gradually down. and **finally where the 2 meet, where the sky and the earth are joined, is the place of the Gods: the place where we discover ourselves."***

Yaron had pointed out how we use symbols in formal ceremonies like weddings, (image from ppt of significant moments) as well as casually in our daily life. *"When we hug one another, as*



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lovers or brothers or even competing fighters, we bring our hearts together. The raised hand of a Hello, the folded hands of Namaste, all carry a symbolic meaning which we may have lost today, and we need to empower them and fill them once again with meaning". Symbols abound in nature, in repeated patterns from the micro to the macro, for example, the spiral pattern that is revealed in sea-shells, in ocean currents and in celestial constellations.

Quoting Joseph Campbell, he said "Once you understand symbolic things you will see symbols everywhere", but he added, **"to decode them we need to develop an ability, one which we all have."**

Pierre, in his turn amplified this point: "The consciousness of Symbols does not need to be acquired. **Symbolic consciousness is inherent in all human beings.** I believe it is this, maybe more than anything else that is the difference between Man and Animal: We can work with symbols, we can be living symbols. If we develop this ability that allows access to higher levels of reality, **we become the bridge with our feet on the ground and our consciousness in the sky, and we awaken to what it means to be a human being.**

Using Antoine De Saint-Exupery's words "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye," Yaron during his presentation had underlined that to unveil the language of symbols we need to foster centeredness. **"When we are centred we are able to see with the heart, beyond what separates us, and realize what unites us. Perhaps then we will be able to become a little more conscious, as Rumi said, that we are not a drop in the ocean, but the ocean in a drop."**

"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Antoine De Saint-Exupery

Shedding more light on how photography can relate to Art and to Life Pierre shared, *"I believe in street photography because in a studio everything is structured, planned, arranged and dictated by your personality. Whereas on the street you never know when the right moment will be presented to you, so you must be ever alert, and watchful. You need to put the mental in white, your mind transparent, and you must allow great photography to be offered to you. If you have a pre-conceived idea, in photography as in life, your mind cannot be open to other options, and you close yourself from perceiving every possibility, every gift of life"*.

To have and have not by Pierre Poulain



Yaron ended his talk by concluding: *"Our world is full of Symbols. Symbols are the language in which life speaks to us, to show us a deeper meaning than we can tangibly see. They are footprints that urge us to walk, a step at a time, and invite us to discover the path of consciousness."*

Sometimes we need to dare by Pierre Poulain



Symbols are the language in which life speaks to us, to show us a deeper meaning than we can tangibly see.

"Truth is one; sages call it by various names," the Rig Veda, one of Vedanta's most ancient texts, declared thousands of years ago. And that evening through these two distinct presentations by acknowledged experts in their own fields, we the audience had a chance to understand this experientially: Yaron spoke to us through the voice of a philosopher, and Pierre through the eyes of an artist, yet both with their own individual approach and their own unique examples, shed light on Symbols as a tool to for us to go deeper within ourselves and access the spiritual; demonstrating that in the search for the sacred, the way of Philosopher and the way of the Artist are two paths that lead to the one, eternal Truth. 