

The Real Bottom Line

Accessing Archetypes of Meaning



C a r o l P e a r s o n

"Our life's work is to use what we have been given to wake up."

—Pema Chödrön

Human beings have an innate desire to feel that their lives matter. Hence, meaning is a primary motivator. Soldiers will die for their countries if they believe doing so will make a great enough difference to others. Martyrs have always been willing to die for their faith or their cause. People with a sense of meaning in their lives are better able to survive heart attacks than those who lack a sense of meaning.

In a more everyday way, people who believe that their work is meaningful may work longer hours for less money than those who work just for the money. In addition, such fulfilled people often have a happy glint in their eyes and a spring in their step, which comes from knowing they are making a difference in the world.

Yet, in our materialistic culture, many people experience meaning deprivation because they make life choices based exclusively on issues of financial security or ambition. When this happens, they feel an emptiness inside which can leave them prone to manipulation by the purveyors of pseudo-meaning—who sell products which are cleverly branded to promise various intangible meaning benefits, who spin political agendas in deceptive ways, and who offer quick fix spiritual cults that lack the depth to pay off in the long run.

People, however, can be spiritually vaccinated against the pull of pseudo-meaning if they have real meaning in their lives. Businesses and other organizations can contribute to this much-needed cultural inoculation project, but only if they avoid the prevailing paradigm of business, according to which the meaning of business is simply to make money. So many business leaders subscribe to this reductionistic idea, in spite of the fact that most people do understand that healthy, moral enterprises actually are in business to provide products and services that enhance people's lives and, in doing so, to provide employees with meaningful jobs that contribute to the overall quality of their lives.

My experience with my coaching and consulting clients has shown me that however important the financial bottom line may be to sustainability, it is never the *real* bottom line. People’s deeper motivations are almost always in the realm of meaning. Even when people are not that clear about what matters most to them, they are very quick to be demoralized when their central commitments are violated in some way. I’ve seen more than one organization that is thriving because of the commitment of their employees take a nose dive when a CEO is hired who violates what is most sacred in the organization and hence devastates morale. In one, I asked a standard question—“If your organization were a movie, what would its title be?”—and got the answer “The Invasion of the Body-Snatchers.”

Mapping the Archetypal Story

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Businesses and nonprofit organizations can and should do business in ways that provide meaning to everyone involved with them. This includes suppliers, employees, customers, and constituents. However, to do so organizational leaders and consultants need to have reliable methods for figuring out what their ultimate motivators are or could be, and where their own commitments interface with those they serve.

Although it seems logical to simply ask people what their values are or what is meaningful to them, people tend to answer such questions from their conscious ego-identities and often in ways that reflect internalized attitudes from the larger culture about what they *should* want. It is no wonder corporate values statements often just sit in a drawer somewhere. Indeed, Enron had a particularly beautiful one.

The hard truth is that most of us do not even know what would really give us meaning unless we deepen our connection with a wisdom that is more fundamental than what the ego gives us.

How to get at the real bottom line? My experience is that the best way to access this is to look at the archetypal stories that individuals and the organizational culture itself are living out. For example, while many organizations tell me that they value customer service, I do not really know what that means until I know if they are living a Caregiver, Hero, or Sage story (to pick three archetypal examples). If they are living a Caregiver story, they likely mean they are always monitoring customer needs and expect staff to sacrifice if necessary in order to ensure customers feel truly cared for. If they are living a Hero story, the staff is more likely to be expected to be winners who rise to meet difficult challenges, astounding customers with their willingness to go the extra mile. If they are living a Sage story, they will tend to develop their expertise to understand and solve customer problems.

Moreover, just knowing the story is not enough to ascertain what about that story could provide any ultimate meaning. All the great archetypal stories can be expressed at superficial (and even counterproductive) as well as more profound and transformative levels. At a superficial

level, the Hero is someone who wins the game. At a more profound level, it is someone with the courage, skill and daring to (in Joseph Campbell's words) "bring new life to a dying culture." A person living a Hero story will find greater fulfillment by moving from the more superficial versions of that story to those that make a more fundamental contribution to shifting consciousness and to benefiting the world.

How do we recognize the archetypal stories at work? They can be recognized in people's behaviors if we know what we're looking for. To help with this, Hugh Marr and I developed the Pearson-Marr Archetype Indicator (PMAI). The higher scores are most likely to reflect an individual's deeper motivations as well as the ways he or she tends to make meaning of experience. For similar reasons, I developed the Organizational and Team Culture Indicator (OTCI) to assess the archetypes active in workplaces and other organizations.

Working with Meaning Maps

Once you have identified the archetypes that provide meaning for individuals, teams, or organizations, the question is then, How can this information be used to help people and organizations become more successful, fulfilled, and actualized? The following are six of the many applications for utilizing archetypal analyses (and PMAI and OTCI results) to foster greater fulfillment and success for individuals and groups:

1. Finding life/work purpose or organizational mission. This involves helping an individual, team, or organization find their core archetypes and then reflecting on which one best corresponds to their core purpose or mission. Different people talk about purpose using different vocabularies. James Hillman calls this the "soul's code," Jean Houston calls it the "entelechy," and Caroline Myss, the "sacred contract." Understanding such terms can revolutionize how we understand what it means to have an organizational "mission."

2. Authentic identity formation and branding. Once individuals and organizations know "what shrine they (naturally) worship at," I help them "brand" themselves in ways that help these values to show, thus attracting to them the people and resources they need to succeed in their sacred task. Doing this requires looking at the match between what is the most meaningful work to them and what the world wants from them (and will pay for or fund), just as each of us finds a match between our authenticity and social expectations in creating the personae (our personalities).

3. Promoting balance and wholeness. The next step is exploring other archetypes that play supporting roles in the individual psyche or organizational culture. These serve as allies, supporting wholeness, so that people and organizations have balance. In addition, working with subscores on the PMAI and OTCI, it is possible to assess the relative attention paid to the following essential human tasks: finding safety and security for oneself and others; relating to others and form-

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ing teams, families, and communities; developing mastery, achieving, and getting results; and growing, learning, self-actualizing and transcending oneself. Ignoring any of these key areas can undermine success and fulfillment, whether for an individual or an organization. (Without stability, things fall apart. Without community, people fail to cooperate and pull together, so efforts dissipate. Without results, nothing gets done. Without learning, the enterprise falls behind the times.)

4. Recognizing how our internal stories bias cognition. The same archetypes that provide us with meaning also structure our cognitive maps through the stories we unconsciously tell ourselves about our experiences. I'm in a group that is bonding around views that are not mine. I may, in a knee-jerk way, tell myself a Warrior story and become confrontational or start a debate. Or, I may tell myself a Seeker story and feel that once again I'm alienated and left out. In this case, I may just shut down and mentally or physically leave. Or, if I tell myself a Magician story, I may begin to think about how to transform the consciousness of the room, starting with mine. None of these is a particularly right or wrong way of responding. Each simply reflects the power of an archetype to affect what we think and do. Once we recognize the archetype, we can see how it may bias our perceptions.

5. Freeing the mind/expanding options. The great paradox is that the stories that give us our juice for living can also keep us from seeing other possibilities. If we are living a Hero story, for example, we may not be able to resist a challenge, even if it is not really ours to take on. Or, we may be so stoically committed to achieving our goals that we forget to laugh or smell the roses. Pretty soon we are not only burnt out, but boring to be around because all we know to talk about is work. Moreover, some stories are so embedded in consciousness, they put us in a kind of trance. Making this conscious can reduce or eliminate the hold the archetypal story has over you and/or your team or organization. Invoking the wisdom of the archetypes that score low for you or your organization on the PMAI or OTCI can help you tap into archetypal stories that you normally ignore or suppress, thus expanding your options.

6. Increasing emotional intelligence and systems savvy. It is only when we recognize the archetypal stories that form the basis of our most compelling thoughts and feelings that a new level of psychological freedom kicks in. We can then choose how we want to respond in situations and be less reactive to them. People can then be helped to understand the archetypes active in other people and in their families, teams, and organizations. When this happens, we can relate in ways that are kind and that facilitate the outcomes that are necessary for collective success. Sometimes, we can even further the ability of social systems to shift stories or move from a counterproductive version of a story to its more evolved form.

Meaning and Transformation

I cannot describe how transformative archetypal awareness can be. Whether I'm working with indi-

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viduals or whole organizations, I often find they are either floundering without a sense of why what they do matters or they are locked into a story in a compulsive way, so that whatever has given them meaning becomes almost like an addiction. For example, we all know people who cannot stop helping others (Caregiver) or stop achieving every moment (Hero). Yet, the simple ability to recognize the archetypes acting in our lives opens up the option of choice. The moment we can name the archetype, we are putting some distance between it and us. It is like watching one's thoughts in meditation. Suddenly we are not our thoughts. When we name the archetypes, we realize we are not our stories.

When we hold the gift of archetypes without being attached to them, we are able to see others more clearly and sympathetically. We can then move into a whole new way of functioning—one more accepting and aware of what is happening in and around us and that is simultaneously more empathic and savvy about human motivation and behaviors. The result is both greater business success and enhanced life/work satisfaction.

Carol S. Pearson is the President of the Center for Archetypal Studies and Applications, the Director of the Transformational Leadership Certificate Program at Georgetown University. She is the author of *Awakening the Heroes Within: 12 Archetypes to Help us Find Ourselves and Transform our World* and the Organizational and Team Culture Indicator (OTCI), and the co-author of *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes* (Mark and Pearson), *Mapping the Organizational Psyche* (Corlett and Pearson), and the Pearson-Marr Archetype Indicator (PMAI) (Pearson and Marr). For additional information on archetypes in individuals and organizations, go to www.herowithin.com or contact Carol S. Pearson at cspearson@herowithin.com. Carol and her associates offer depth consultations in the areas of leadership coaching; individual, team and organizational development; and authentic identity formation and brand building.

Carol will lead a module on "[Engaging the Hidden Dynamics of Success](#)" at the 2004 Authentic Leadership Summer Program.

To arrange to take the PMAI or OTCI go to www.capt.org and click on "Archetypes." There you will also find information on supporting books and pamphlets.