

Working in the Mythic: Transformative Archetypes and Their Place in Ethnographies and Focus Groups

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Ava Lindberg, SunResearch

Upon meeting the late President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, violinist Isaac Stern said, “I felt as though I were inside a golden coach drawn by four pure-bred white horses into the glitter of mythic Camelot.” Four decades later, presidential nominees, editors, and political pundits continue to draw upon the energy of this “shining moment” in American life that was known as “Camelot.” Stern was, of course, able to articulate very vividly a mythical archetype that usually lies buried in the subconscious. But how often do we as researchers and marketers dig deeper into the subconscious myths and creation tales relating to our brands, cities, or ideologies? Are we tapping into the strength and vision of our own individual archetypes that can transform or empower us as we step into another new phase of our lives and careers?

At a joint meeting of the New York and New England Chapters in January, **Ava Lindberg**, President of SunResearch, shared a fascinating presentation about understanding archetypes and ways to enrich our qualitative research and ethnographies by applying some of these rich principles. Immersed in the art and the science of cultural archetypes, Ava pointed out that this area is going to become the “wave of the future” and well worth cultivating.

Inspired by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung’s contribution of archetypes, i.e., universal truths that lie within the collective unconscious level, many innovative brand architects and researchers seek to explore the innermost depths of consumers’ emotions, behaviors, or mindsets to look for powerful hidden motivations and aspirations. On a hierarchy-of-needs continuum ranging from risk-taking ability vs. safety at one level and independence vs. belonging on the other, there are 12 universal archetypes to begin to work with. Special techniques must be employed, however, since regular focus groups by themselves, or short ethnographies where subjects are being merely observed and interviewed at the same time, cannot help in uncovering exciting archetypes that are embedded in the subconscious. The use of archetypal projective exercises like collage, stick figure drawings, visualization, storytelling, and archetype cards alongside observation within longer ethnographies helps to discern visual and sacred iconography that cluster into major archetypal brand personalities. The astute researcher should be aware of the potential influence of shadow sides of archetypes in problem detection

studies as well as number, color, and animal archetypes within creative and product concepts. Lindberg alluded to Margaret Mark, Carol S. Pearson, Kent Wertime, and the classic works of Joseph Campbell (*Hero with a Thousand Faces*) as good starting references, but suggested that qualitative researchers can glean much from studying TV commercials with a new eye, relooking at their own research projects for mythic elements, and heightening their awareness of archetypes operating underneath popular novels, operas, fairy tales, and movies... potent with cultural archetypes and mythical tales to unravel.

Lindberg has identified 22 universal transformative archetypes in her qualitative studies that expand on the basic 12 brand-oriented ones. Her talk opened up new possibilities to researchers on how to dive deeper into the minds, hearts, and then the mythical and spiritual corners of human beings to unlock a treasure-chest of mythical and universal archetypes to facilitate brand development.

The 22 transformational archetypes are:

- **Innocence**
- **Magician**
- Muse
- **Nurturer**
- **Ruling Power**
- Guide
- **Lovers-Siren**
- **Adventurer**
- Advocate-Justice
- **Mastermind**
- Wheel of Change
- **Superhero**
- Underdog
- Dark Force
- **Everyman**
- **Rebel**
- Iconoclast
- Star
- Dreamer
- **Artist**
- Reawakening
- World
- and
- **Trickster**

(The 12 in bold are those most frequently associated with brand development.)

The "Star Wars" movies replay the archetypal *Superhero* so eloquently conveyed by Campbell in his series on "the hero's journey," while *Superhero* is also the foundation of brands like Nike, FedEx, and the Marines. Apple Macintosh and Harley Davidson clearly represent the *Rebel* archetype. Volvo and Campbell's bring to mind *Nurturer*. Crayola conveys the *Artist*. The fragrance category is often illustrative of Lovers-Siren, while many skin care brands have archetypal tonalities that combine Innocence and Mastermind. Bud Light is most certainly the *Trickster*, whereas Budweiser and Verizon Wireless are *Everyman*. During this full-day workshop, Ava shared key examples of brands she's researched that identified mythical archetypes to tell their story to consumers through product, positioning, and promotion. But, archetypal insights are not only for large multinational brands. One intriguing case history was of a small packaged foods brand called Tasty Bite, that offers ready-to-eat Asian/Indian foods; Ava showed how archetypal research helped them determine a winning new brand strategy.

Ava Lindberg's experience of more than 25 years combined with the intelligence and interpretation of the works of numerous anthropologists, psychologists, researchers, authors and enlightened brand team leaders made her presentation a veritable magical elixir. From Jung to Carolyn Myss, from The Hero's Journey to shamanic teachings, Lindberg showed us how to move beyond the literal level that looks for the "why and the how," through the emotional level using projective techniques, and on to the mythic stage where the personal and the transcendent come together as one.