

# Birth as Metaphor: Childbirth as Initiation and Transformation

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*Benig Mauger*

Dublin, Ireland

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**Abstract:** Giving Birth and Being Born are archetypal experiences, and the birth experience itself creates an archetypal pattern which becomes a life pattern. This paper explores the way in which archetypal processes form part of the prenatal and birth experience. Furthermore, the experience of childbirth represents an encounter with the archetype of transformation. This paper considers how the birth experience is a metaphor for change and transformation both for mother and child. For the mother, pregnancy and giving birth represents a potential rebirth, a time of change and transition with opportunities for spiritual growth and transformation. For the child, being born is considered not simply as an initiation, but a formative and ego-enhancing experience which will influence its future life. It follows that the way in which this happens, the manner in which birth takes place, is of supreme importance to the health of both mother and baby. The author proposes that in order to change current birth practice to one more congruent with our continuum and archetypal expectations an acknowledgment of the initiatory and transformative nature of the birth experience is necessary. This involves a recognition not only of the importance of the prenatal and birth experience to human development, but also a consideration of the spiritual and psychological significance of the birth process itself.

The author additionally refers to the role of birth as metaphor as it applies to the analytic process involved in psychotherapy, in which the analogy of birth to the individuation process is implicit. Thus, the paper will focus on the psychological, spiritual and emotional dimensions of the birth process with particular emphasis on birth as a metaphor for change and transformation.

**Zusammenfassung:** *Geburt als Metapher: Geburt als Initiation und Wandlung.* Gebären und Geborenwerden sind archetypische Erfahrungen und die Geburtserfahrung selbst schafft ein archetypisches Muster, das ein Lebensmuster wird. Dieser Artikel erforscht die Art und Weise, in der archetypische Prozesse einen Teil der pränatalen Erfahrung und der Geburtserfahrung bestimmen. Darüberhinaus bedeutet die Erfahrung der Geburt eine Begegnung mit dem Archetyp der Wandlung. Es wird untersucht, wie die Geburtserfahrung für Mutter und Kind eine Metapher für Veränderung und Wandlung ist. Für die Mutter bedeuten Schwangerschaft und Geburt eine potentielle Wiedergeburt, eine Zeit für Veränderung

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Correspondence to: Mrs. Benig Mauger, B.A., Analytical psychotherapist, 69, Cowper Road, Rathmines, Dublin 6, Ireland

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und Wandlung, die spirituelles Wachstum und Transformation bewirken kann. Für das Kind bedeutet das Geborenwerden nicht nur eine Initiation, sondern eine formative und ichstärkende Erfahrung, die sein späteres Leben beeinflussen wird. Daraus folgt, daß die Geburtsbedingungen von höchster Bedeutung für Gesundheit von Mutter und Kind sind. Die Autorin ist der Meinung, daß die initiatische und transformative Natur der Geburtserfahrung anerkannt werden muß, damit der gegenwärtige Umgang mit der Geburt mehr mit unserem Bedürfnis nach Kontinuum und archetypischer Erfahrung in Übereinstimmung ist. Dies beinhaltet nicht nur die Anerkennung der Bedeutung der vorgeburtlichen Erfahrung und der Geburtserfahrung für die menschliche Entwicklung, sondern ebenso die Anerkennung der spirituellen und psychologischen Bedeutung des Geburtsprozesses selbst.

Die Autorin behandelt auch noch die Rolle der Geburt als Metapher im Rahmen des analytischen Prozesses, wie er sich in einer Psychotherapie vollzieht. Dabei besteht eine implizite Analogie zwischen der Geburt und dem Prozeß der Individuation. In diesem Sinne umfaßt dieser Beitrag die psychologischen, spirituellen und emotionalen Dimensionen des Geburtsprozesses, wobei eine besondere Betonung darauf liegt, daß die Geburt eine Metapher für Veränderung und Wandlung ist.

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The politics of childbirth practice have always been and still are, particularly emotionally charged. Entering this area of work, one cannot fail to be struck by how deeply women and those involved with childbirth feel about the experience, and where and in what way it should take place. Debates over place of birth, such as home or hospital, and childbirth practice in general generate heated arguments, with protagonists feeling passionate about their cause. It is easy to see why this happens if one remembers that birth is a metaphor for change. Giving birth and being born are supremely powerful archetypal experiences, within which it is possible to encounter the archetype of transformation, or psychological rebirth.

The dual nature of my work, namely, that of antenatal/birth teacher and also of analytical psychotherapist has meant that I have had access to, and been involved in the process of childbirth in a very interesting way. Not only am I involved within the context of birth teacher, in very real way with the experience itself, but I am also involved in a more indirect way as psychotherapist in analysing and giving meaning to the experience. In this way, I could not fail to become aware of the analogy of the birth process to the individuation process, and to see the process of birth as a model for the analytic process.

Having a baby is a normal biological function. Women have given birth since the beginning of time, and a woman's body is designed to carry, give birth to, and feed her young. For two million years, women have been labouring and birthing, according to the dictates of nature and the customs of their tribes and traditions. Many give birth alone, unaided by anything save their own instincts, others give birth assisted by other women. This is quite different to our birthing practice of today, where technology has largely replaced nature in a physiologically natural process.

In my role as birth 'teacher' I found myself in a curious position. I found myself running antenatal 'classes' in which I was 'teaching' women to give birth, something which they already knew. I later came to realise that what I was doing in

effect, was simply enabling women to get in touch with, and activate their own inner knowledge and instinctive abilities to give birth. This inner truth, this 'knowledge' had been eroded through years of conditioning and increased medicalisation of what is primarily a natural process. It seemed to me, that at some deep level we had lost touch with nature and so from the natural in us. At the same time that I was involved in 'teaching' women to give birth, I discovered Carl Jung, and what he had to say made a huge impact on me. In my own analysis (which I had started after the birth of one of my children), and later as I was training as an analytical psychotherapist, I began to give meaning to and understand the importance of the birth experience. I began to understand how important the experience of giving birth was for most women, and further, how feelings about this experience often filtered through into their lives and their relationships. I saw how the way in which birth happened, influenced both the mothers relationship with her baby, and the future development of that baby. In my therapeutic practice, I found that I was frequently working with the casualties of a medical system which it seemed, was unaware of the deeper dynamics of the birth experience. I saw bruised, depressed and traumatised women, battling to come to terms with an experience which fell far short of what they were expecting, and I saw battered, scared, confused and frightened babies. From my own experience I knew that there is a need in most women (conscious or unconscious) to experience something sacred when giving birth. From the many women who came to see me, I knew that most wanted to experience the birth of their child as a fulfilling joyous, and creative act. It seemed that all too often, this was denied them, as the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the birth process went largely unacknowledged.

When Jung talked about loss of soul, I knew what he meant. What he had to say about this, I felt, applied also to childbirth practice in the West. Giving Birth and Being Born are archetypal and potentially transformative experiences, and this dimensions of pregnancy and childbirth was being largely unrecognised, leading women and their babies to experience loss of soul, and to become sick.

When Jung began his journeys to North and central Africa and New Mexico, he was in search of what he called the 2 million year old within. Having entered the archetypal realm during his confrontation with the unconscious between 1914 and 1918, he sought to corroborate his introverted researches from the outside, throwing objective light on the prehistoric layers of collective experience and potential: "I unconsciously wanted to find that part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and the pressure of being European" (Stevens, 1993). These journeys provided him with valuable insights into age old patters of human life and confirmed his impression that Europeans had become alienated from their own humanity. This was because their rationalism had been won at the expense of their vitality, and thus their most primitive natures had been condemned to a more or less underground existence. Jung felt that this, and nothing else, lies at the bottom of our contemporary angst, man is in need of reconnecting with his basic nature, alienation from his nature has led him to lose his soul. Having lost touch with our souls, we have lost touch with our natures, and ultimately, with the meaning of life.

This is what had happened to childbirth. I realised, that all too frequently, the birth experiences of many of these women were unfulfilling, and that this led

them to feel loss of soul. What should have been a joyous, sacred event had become instead full of pain and loss. The 2 million year old wisdom, the wisdom of our ancient childbearing grandmothers was cut off from modern childbearing women. Pregnant women, alienated from their own natures, were alienated from their innate, instinctive ability to give birth. On a deeper level, their archetypal expectations had been frustrated, and everything each pregnant woman is primed to expect from her antecedents, had failed to happen. In order to understand this, we must look at the Jungian concept of archetypes.

In a lifetime of systematic clinical work, Jung demonstrated that the Freudian model of the human psyche was too narrow and limited. He amassed convincing evidence that we must look much further than personal biography and the individual unconscious if we are to even begin to grasp the true nature of the psyche. His concept of the collective unconscious, an immense pool of information about human history and culture that is available to us in the depth of the psyche, and his identification of basic dynamic patterns or primordial organising principles which he called archetypes, are fundamental to his work. Birth and death are archetypal experiences through which it is possible to encounter the archetype of transformation or rebirth. Birth is an archetypal event. It is through the experience of birth that the universal is made personal and individual. Moreover, the way in which that birth takes place and is experienced, creates an archetypal pattern which then becomes a life pattern.

### **Birth as Metaphor**

A consideration of birth as metaphor for change and transformation involves looking at the birth experience in a larger context than simply biological birth. Within Transpersonal psychology and also many spiritual traditions, birth is a transitional state and considered as a rebirth. A definition of rebirth reads thus: Rebirth: a psychic experience of transcendence and/or transformation that is not observable from the exterior perspective but is nevertheless a reality felt and attested to by those who have experienced it. It is the subjective result of an encounter with the archetype of transformation. (Samuels, 1987)

### **The Archetype of Transformation**

The concept of rebirth is archetypal and has existed since the beginning of time, and psychological rebirth involves an encounter with the archetype of transformation. What we are concerned with is the subjective experience of psychic transformation which can come about in a variety of ways. In writing about rebirth Jung included the concept of Individuation, which he called Natural Transformation. This is the natural movement towards change and renewal; just as nature demands a death and rebirth, and the human body moves naturally towards health, Jung saw that psychologically, there is a natural movement towards wholeness. In Jungian psychology, the individuation process itself is considered a potential rebirth in that it is a psychological experience in which transformation takes place. The individual in analysis will undergo a process which, if successful, will result in the birth of a new aspect of personality, namely the Self. This idea is contained

within the symbolism of the Hero myth. The 'questing Hero' the Ego, descends into the underworld, a metaphor for the unconscious, confronts his shadow and dies to himself in order to emerge transformed. Rebirth in this sense is seen as an initiation into higher consciousness, but in order for this to happen, there must first be a confrontation with metaphoric death. In the process of individuation, the transformation and subsequent evolution of personality takes place in the interaction between the ego (consciousness) and the unconscious, out of which a new unified being the Self, emerges. Inherent to the process is the conflict of and integration of opposites. Thus, as in biological birth, where the union of the two opposing forces (in this case, male and female) produces a third, a baby, we have the metaphor; biological birth becomes the metaphor for the psychological birth of the individual.

Inherent to the concept of transformation is the idea of death and rebirth. In nature and natural processes, regeneration involves a process of death and rebirth, the old giving birth to the new and so on. In this way, the archetype of Death is the shadow to the Birth archetype. On a personal psychological level, depressions and mental breakdowns represent the possibility of psychic death and rebirth. Breakdowns offer an opportunity for transformation, and change. A symbolic sacrifice is made and the transformation is then possible. This is also the case in childbirth, when a woman becomes pregnant there is a great potential for transformation. The pregnant woman has to die to herself as maiden to be reborn as mother. In order to do this she must undergo an 'ordeal' which seen in this way is in fact an initiation.

### *Pregnancy and Childbirth as an Initiation*

The Jungian analyst and author Murray Stein describes midlife transitions as periods of liminality, which is an excellent way to describe transitional states, or bardo states, that is "in between" states, states of becoming. These are states in which we are neither who we were or even who we are becoming, we are on the threshold, as it were. Such a state is pregnancy and childbirth. A pregnant woman is in the process of becoming a mother. Transitional states are generally difficult, turbulent times in which we are unusually vulnerable, but also, as is often the case, psychologically open to new growth. All transitional times offer opportunities for transformation and change and a rite of passage or initiation forms part of any potentially transformative experience. Death of the old form and new life or birth are fundamental to initiations. In pregnancy this happens on many levels. The pregnant woman's body changes, and as her maiden figure disappears to become that of a mother, symbolically the maiden dies in order for the pregnant mother to come forth. Like the Hero in mythology who must surrender and face metaphorical death in order to be reborn, the pregnant woman surrenders to the process of the pregnancy, labour and delivery in order to be reborn a mother. When a woman gives birth she faces her own metaphorical death, giving birth she is reborn; she both produces a baby, and gives birth at the same time to herself as mother. The pregnant woman like the analysand entering analysis, will undergo a process which, if successful, will result in the birth of both a live baby and a new self.

Within this psychological paradigm it follows that the way in which the transition or this journey into another life, the transition from one state to another takes place, is of supreme importance. Thus in childbirth, the way in which the mother experiences that birth as well as the birth itself will have profound implications for both the future life of the mother and also the development of her new baby. Pregnancy is for many women an initiatory experience, one which will change her forever. For not only will the pregnancy bring changes that will shape her body, it will also influence her emotionally and mentally, it will change her psychologically. No longer will she be daughter only, she is already beginning her transition from daughter to mother, for even before conception happened, the psychic idea of it existed deep inside her. Deep inside her too, resided the stories and mythic images of being a mother as handed down to her through the generations of her family. The pregnant woman will not only be influenced by the physicality of her new condition, she will be influenced by her inner mother. I refer to the inner mother as that part of her that lies inside, her psychic space, like her womb space, already pregnant with the potential to become a mother. Each woman will have in other words, an inside story which will influence how she makes the transition to motherhood. There are for example, social and cultural factors which in each woman, will operate differently depending on their interaction with her inner world. She will be influenced by her family history and her personal unconscious will be a storehouse of myths and stories relating to pregnancy and birth as handed down to her from her mother and generations of mothers in her family. From her 'mother imago' she will have conscious and unconscious images of what it is to be a mother. She will have prenatal imprints from her own birth which will be a reflection of her mother's thoughts and feelings during her pregnancy with her, and which will influence her in her adaptation to and transition to motherhood. She will also be influenced on a deeper level by the mythic images emanating from the collective unconscious on the Mother Archetype. Conception, pregnancy and giving birth represent an important threshold in the archetypal history of a woman. The physical phenomenon of pregnancy is almost miraculous in its essence, for woman multiplies herself into another being and becomes the channel for bringing another soul to life. For nine months she creates matter, shapes a body, brings substance within herself like an alchemist transforming essence into living matter. The way the mother archetype affects a particular woman's psyche will come through symbolically in dreams, fantasies and moments of intuition and insight. A pregnant woman will have access to unconscious images hitherto unavailable to her, and these images will inform her psyche and influence her transition to motherhood. Pregnancy is a transitional phase, and like all transitional phases there will be a reemergence and reactivation of old conflicts and traumas, particularly those associated with birth and childhood. The pregnant woman will become aware of unresolved conflicts with her family and her mother in particular, as her own experience of being mothered is remembered. She will have conscious and unconscious memories of her own birth and her early relationship with her mother. If her experiences have been negative, she may have a negative mother complex which will become activated and most probably projected onto her midwife or doctor or other person close to her. She will most often seek to project positive mother onto her birth teacher, midwife, doctor or therapist to help her through

the transition to motherhood hoping to somehow heal the wounds of the past. For many women, pregnancy and birth represents an opportunity to rewrite the story of the past.

On a deeper level, as I have already said, the pregnant woman is undergoing an archetypal experience. She is undertaking a rite of passage, an initiation. Like the Hero in myth and in Jungian psychology who must die to his Ego in order to be reborn to his Self, the pregnant woman is in the process of dying to herself as maiden and daughter, in order to give birth to herself as mother. Jean Shinoda-Bolen (1994) remarks that the inner pull of pregnancy as manifested in the behaviour of pregnant women, resembles what happens to people as they are about to die. They become less and less interested in the outside world as they are pulled inwards towards death and the next phase. In dying to their physicality they “pass on” to another world, just as pregnant women “pass on” to another stage of their lives. In undertaking this rite of passage, this initiation, women enter the realm of the Mother Goddess and experience one of the sacred women’s mysteries, experiencing what women have experienced since the beginning of time. For many women, the experience of pregnancy and birth may awaken a profound sense of kinship with all women throughout history who have ever gone through this ordeal and transformation.

### **Being Born: Birth as an Initiation**

Much more has been written about the birth experience from the point of view of the baby. We are all familiar with the concept of birth trauma, and there has been a substantial amount of psychoanalytic literature from Freud to the present which bear witness to the influence of the birth experience on the development of personality. The more recent work of pre and perinatal psychologists have served to broaden psychological boundaries to include the pre and perinatal level of experience. As I have said, birth is an archetypal experience and the way in which it happens creates in itself an archetypal pattern which becomes a life pattern. Birth is also an Initiation, and seen as such, a supremely powerful and formative experience which will profoundly affect the future life of that baby.

The sequence of birth is a natural one and should be allowed to flow. It is designed to be potentially positive, allowing the mother and her baby to work together, and if things are permitted to progress naturally and without disturbance, a potentially enhancing experience, fulfilling for the mother and formative for the baby. The massive propelling contractions of labour can be seen as a biologic necessity, ‘stroking’ the skin and helping to stimulate many systems in the body, particularly the urinary, gastrointestinal and most importantly, the respiratory. The final major contractions around the baby’s thorax help squeeze fluid out and initiate breathing. Taken psychologically, it is in Winnicott’s sense an ego enhancing experience. Going further still, it is an initiation. Birth is a struggle: one that the baby must overcome in order to survive. To cease to struggle is to die, to cease to exist. Seen as an initiation, a successful passing through and out into life, birth must lay the foundations of later behaviour, particularly the ability to deal with stress. The baby’s ability to survive the intensity and stress of the birth experience means at some fundamental level a successful initiation which teaches it about the

ability to struggle and survive in potentially life threatening situations. In the case of normal birth the learnt behaviour is 'I can do it, I have the resources necessary'. Conversely, a birth in which there has been some degree of medical intervention, for example, the baby having to be 'rescued' by forceps or caesarean section, the learnt behaviour is 'I cannot do it alone, I am helpless'. This may then be considered as a failed initiation, which will have implications for the later behaviour of the baby, particularly the ability to handle stressful difficult situations in later life. Often the birth struggle is continued throughout life, particularly where there has been a difficult birth where the struggle as it were got nowhere, where the child was born not by its own or its mother's efforts, but with the help of medical and/or surgical intervention. An example of this is a baby born by caesarean section. A child born by caesarean section will, like its mother, be robbed of a joint birth process. The infant is suddenly and violently removed from its mother and has no time to prepare for the experience. Additionally, non-labour caesareans unlike their labour peers have no sense of struggle or of a process beginning and/or in progress. This is a very important point and has profound implications for their later development. They are simply suddenly 'pulled out'. In thus being born they are denied the struggle to be born. We know that many cultures and spiritual traditions include a symbolic birth as part of their initiatory rituals. This usually takes the form of a struggle through the forces of darkness and an emergence into the light and 'new life' and is a symbolic acting-out of the psychological processes involved in psychotherapy. The client will, with the help of the therapist, enter into the dark world of the unconscious and struggle to bring the light of consciousness into the darkest recesses of the psyche and emerge into a new life – a new integrated Self – a rebirth born of the struggle to individuate. Nature itself provides us with numerous births, as even a flower has to struggle and push upwards through the earth, using a tremendous life force to break through the dark earth to flower and blossom into the sunlight. A caesarean section baby is denied this life-giving struggle, and so he or she may be born with an enormous frustration as this life force – this emotional energy – is unexpressed. The (successful) struggle to come into life is a vital aspect of the birth process. The baby has lived its life in the womb expecting and preparing to be born. What happens if this need to struggle into life is unexpressed? It is undoubtedly carried by the baby into postnatal life and given expression in later behaviour and relationship patterns.

### **Psychopathology: The Sickness of the Soul**

What do we expect when we are born? We can say that each new baby is born with an expectation of being held close to his mother. For hundreds of thousands of years newborn babies have been held close to their mothers straight after birth. And although babies in the last few hundred years may have been deprived of this all too important experience, this has not lessened each new babies expectation that he/she will be in her rightful place. Jean Liedloff (in the Continuum Concept) says that the violent tearing apart of the mother/ child continuum, so strongly established during the time in the womb, may understandably result in depression for the mother, as well as agony for the infant.



Psychopathology results when the environment fails to meet basic archetypal needs in the developing individual. Bowlby, applying himself to the mother baby relationship, stated that the further the rearing environment deviates from the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, the greater the likelihood of pathological development. (Bowlby, 1973) Further to this, non correspondence between the developing needs of the child and conditions prevailing in its environment contributed to its susceptibility to neurosis. Winnicott and others have pointed the finger at the failure of the facilitating environment as in maternal holding, to provide the child with the conditions necessary for healthy development. Bowlby went further, and essentially agreed with the Jungian formulation that neurosis is liable to occur when the archetypal program unfolding in the psyche of the child is not met by correspondingly appropriate figures and situations in the environment. Thus, neurotic anxiety results from the frustration of archetypal intent. Stress is a key factor in most psychiatric illness, and the probability is that the greater the gap between archetypal needs and the environmental fulfilment of those needs, the greater the stress and the more incapacitating the illness. Similarly, Jung noted that in his private clinical practice, the people who came to consult him were not, on the whole severely mentally ill, but rather suffering from the aimlessness and futility of their lives. He came to regard this as a malaise typical of the 20th century, which he called "the general neurosis of our age". He attributed this contemporary malaise to the emergence of social institutions that alienated us from our archetypal nature. Similarly, the modern obstetric institution, in its denial of the instinctive and the natural, alienated women from their instinctive, archetypal nature, and led many to experience loss of soul. Modern values it seems, interfere with our perception and recovery of the archetype.

Having strayed from our cultural inheritance, having lost touch with the wisdom of our ancestors we have lost touch with our own natures, we have become depressed and debilitated. Giving birth and being born has largely been stripped of its spiritual significance. The medicalisation of childbirth, focusing as it does on the physical, has often meant the loss of soul in the experience itself. Women, daughters of the past as we are, with all our expectations of having our archetypal intentions fulfilled, expecting birth to be a sacred and joyous event; we are all too often disillusioned and depressed as we struggle to come to terms with an experience which often falls far short of what we have been expecting. As Jung found in his time, alienation from our natures has meant we experience loss of soul, and we become sick. Sick with a nameless disease, we struggle on, but we never really let go of it. As we psychologists and psychotherapists know, we return to these wounds again and again in our lives, just as our children return to their births again and again, unconsciously hoping to heal the wounds of the past.

Have we come to fear life so much that we need to be anaesthetised from it? Our birth and death practices, cloaked as they so often are, in a haze of drugs and technology, have served to remove us and cut us off from life. Is it not possible that coming into, and leaving life in a drugged, unconscious state teaches us that life ultimately is such that we need to be anaesthetised from it, that we could not possibly manage to deal with the raw reality, and worse still, that others cannot contain this for us when we are at our most vulnerable. Do our birth and death practices teach us to be afraid of living? What kind of an initiation is this that we

must be drugged to experience it and what kind of a transformation is this that we must be protected from it by fear? Recognition of the archetypal and transformative aspects of the birth process, awareness that giving birth and being born are experiences which change and influence our lives in a deep and profound way is necessary in order to bring about changes in the way they happen. This acknowledgment must be inherent to any system which will change birth practice. Birth is a metaphor for change, do we want our mothers to experience this time as one of desecration, pain and disillusionment, and our babies to experience their initiation into life cloaked in a fog of fear and pain, or do we want our women and babies to experience the birth process as a positive and fulfilling soul experience?

I believe that the way we birth is the way we live. We need to address the ways in which we give birth if we want to change society and if we want to become healthier human beings. I think that the way to do this is to become more aware of the deeper dimensions of the birth process and of the experience of birth itself. Birth is an archetypal event, it is through our own individual births that the universal is made personal. It is only through becoming more conscious of the deeper dimensions of the birth process, and gaining an understanding of the archetypal nature and psychological and spiritual aspects of birth that we will be able to alter our birth practice to one more congruent with our continuum, and thus to begin to change the way we live and to create a time to be born.

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