

Creative Project: A Psycho-Spiritual Self-Reflection Tool

‘Facing Death’

This essay provides a critical overview of my spiritual journey in the design of a psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool. I will begin by looking at the rationale behind this creative project and why I believe it is important from a personal and global perspective to heal the illusory boundary between life and death. I will then explore the concept of death and why it is essential to understand and accept in order that individuals heal this deep-seated fear. I will also discuss the impact this has had on myself and why it has been the catalyst to my own psychological healing. Finally, I will end by discussing how this project has provided the impetus to move my career into helping others at a much deeper level. My inspiration has come from many authors, but the one who particularly resonated was Peter Kingsley through *In the Dark places of Wisdom*. Kingsley observed that, “we only move into the future when we turn to face our past and become what we are’ (2017, p. 10). As Robert Moss explains in *The Dreamers Book of the Dead*, developing a practice to face our past is essential to remembering what life is all about, ‘reclaiming the knowledge of the Soul, and moving beyond fear and and self-limiting beliefs’ (2005, p. 4).

The research for this essay has emphatically led to the belief that individuals must turn around to meet their shadows so that they can access a hidden power that resides within them. Edward Whitmont in *The Evolution of the Shadow* observes that ‘the shadow is the door to our individuality’ (1991, p. 16). John Sanford in *Parenting And Your Childs Shadow* observes that ‘confronting your shadow is essential for the development of self-awareness’ (1991, p. 60). In further support of this belief, Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams observe in *Meeting the Shadow*, ‘everything with substance casts a shadow. The ego stands to the shadow as light to shade’. Metaphorically these have been termed over the years as, ‘meeting our demons, wrestling with the devil, descent to the underworld, dark night of the soul’ (1991, p. 3). Interestingly, my research has indicated that to

access this hidden power, we must turn to face death so that we can meet the underworld to bring this power into the light. I made this descent and I will seek to illustrate the various stages of my spiritual awakening through my psychological death.

My descent will be outlined through the seven stages of spiritual alchemy that Aletheia Luna and Mateo Sol have identified in *The Spiritual Awakening Process* (2016). Luna and Sol (2016) identify seven stages of awakening; calcination, dissolution, separation, conjunction, fermentation, distillation and coagulation. Until studying this subject, I did not realise that my descent began many years ago and that I have been progressively building the foundations to work within. Sol & Luna (2016) classify this stage as 'Calcination'

Stage 1: Calcination

Over the years, I have opened many doors to connect to my inner self. Each time I have attempted to heal dysfunctional patterns of behaviour, as well as to try and understand the existential questions of who and why I am here. I have trained in several fields, such as yoga, sound healing, reiki, shamanism, but nothing was touching the psychological turmoil that I was denying. I began to realise that I had a lot of experiences, but I was just scratching the surface, hence I can now see why my life was repetitive in its life lessons.

On reflection, I concluded that I was in a stage of denial and that I was 'spiritually bypassing'; a term coined by John Welwood. Welwood in *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, describes this as 'spiritual seekers to use spiritual ideas and practices to avoid dealing with their emotional unfinished business' (2000, p. 5). I acknowledge that my various training was not a waste and that I had created a strong skill set, but there was no depth to these healing modalities. As John Babbs observes in *New Age Fundamentalism*, these are 'wonderful evenings of beautiful people, soft, gentle, spiritual, visionary, fascinating...but underlying all of this beauty lurks a darkness', that many are not willing to admit (1991, p. 160). The next shift in the transformation came through the

dialogues that I created within my learning journal on the master's programme, which provided further insight. Luna and Sol (2016) observe this alchemical stage as 'Dissolution', which is about taking responsibility enabling spiritual awakening.

Stage 2: Dissolution

Within this stage, I could see through my enquiries and the various texts that I had been drawn to, that there were repetitive key words and concepts coming through. These being; death, pilgrimage, healing, darkness, shadow, labyrinth, hurt, pain, confusion, transition, fear, surrender, forgiveness and rebirth. These key words launched my own intuitive inquiry. As I progressed with my various enquiries, so was my desire strengthened to greater understanding of this topic. As Rosemary Anderson observes in *Transforming Self and Others Through Research*, 'an intuitive enquirer may feel like she is chasing a moving target and that she is likely to wonder if she is or the data are changing before her eyes' (2011, p. 17). I was beginning to become aware that this was not only about my own descent but how I could bring this work to others to develop their own self-awareness. I strongly believe that there is a call to heal on an individual basis thus allowing the collective too heal. In the words of C.G. Jung 'a change in attitude of the individual can bring about a renewal in the spirit of the nations' (cited in *The Wounded Healer of the Soul*, Claire Dunne, 2015, p. 226).

Stage 3: Separation

Through this journey I realised I had created the next shift allowing me to reach the third stage of 'separation'. Within this stage, as Sol & Luna (2016) observe, thoughts and feelings around the topic become more defined and a part of an individual's reality. My fascination was in understanding my own archetypal darkness, as I felt that was where my answers were buried. As James Hillman observes in *Dream and the Underworld*, it is a place that is 'repressed darkness...which has been and is rotting', but 'that which is not yet and is germinating' (1979, p.

61). Intriguingly, I had a dream which provided insight and gave further clarity to my creative project and in the words of Hillman, 'each dream is working at the soul's fate in its own style' (1979, p. 81).

At times I was becoming frustrated with my project, flitting from one idea to another. Within this period of frustration, I dreamt I was in a pool of water surrounded by other people. Each of us had a set of instructions floating on the water and the first step was to immerse ourselves. I took a deep breath, held my nose and tried to go under, but I failed to get the top of my head wet. Interestingly, Hillman argues against dreams being 'translated into the ego's language' and that dreams have a much deeper role to play (1979, p. 11). From a Freudian perspective, Hillman observes that dreams are a form of reclamation work 'an instrument' to bring through what has been repressed. Whereas, from a Jungian point of view, it is a bridge to interpret the inner symbolic language of the unconscious 'psyche' to compensate for the 'inadequate attitude' of the conscious 'ego'. From the Freudian and the Jungian point of view, Hillman summarises that they view the dream as 'requires translation into waking-language either to extend waking-consciousness or to serve nature's demand for the more broadened and balanced quality of consciousness' (1979, p. 12). On waking, I instantly knew that I had to move my project to a deeper level, as well as to further my research around the dream to help give clarity.

Hillman suggests dreams hold much more depth than can be translated, reclaimed or compensated, that dreams are the bridge to a consciousness 'that stands on its own legs' (1979, p. 66). In respect of my own dream identified above, Hillman points out a significant alchemical motto around water which is, 'perform no operation until all has become water – then the opus begins in dying' (1979, p. 152). He further describes 'moistening in dreams refers to the soul's delight in its death, its delight in sinking away from fixations in literalized concerns' (1979, p. 152). I knew from my own dream, the level of immersion that was needed for this project. I needed to experience my

own death from a psychological perspective. As Aniela Jaffè (cited in Hillman, 1979, p. 89) observes, 'psychological path of individuation'¹ is ultimately a preparation of death'.

Intuitively, I knew that I had to move into deeper work; I just did not know how and that brought forth what I believe to be a spiritual nudge. Michael Newton in *Destiny of Souls* observes that there is a belief that before souls are reincarnated, souls are taken to meet the other souls that will be join them in a lifetime on earth. During this time souls are given essential reminders that will guide souls along their chosen path (2001, pp. 355-394). However, Newton does acknowledge that 'all the accounts of life after death... have no scientific foundation to prove the statements of these subjects' (2018, p. 274). Nevertheless, I believe that I had my own spiritual nudge through hearing what were to be two transformational key words, 'sweet tracks'. Within a short space of time, I had booked onto a counselling course at Sweet Tracks Counselling school in Glastonbury. My journey of descent to my unconscious was continuing.

Stage 4: Conjunction

The move to counselling became the backdrop to the fourth stage of my spiritual transformation, 'Conjunction'. This is the simmering stage of transformation where all the preparation as described above, provides the inner space to allow unconscious thoughts and feelings into the light of conscious awareness (Sol & Luna, 2016). This space appeared through creating a timeline of my life and by the end of this exercise I had a strong sense of gratitude for my past life events, even the ones that were painful. I appreciated that each life event is in some shape and form a little death and that to appreciate life we must learn to accept the consequences of each event. The counselling experience highlighted that I was holding onto psychological scars that were manifesting themselves through patterns of behaviour. Interestingly, Rollo May observes in

¹ 'individuation process', a term coined by C.J Jung (1968). This individuation process is connecting to and understanding the background to our unconscious (Dunne, 2000, p. 105).

Existential Psychology, bringing issues to a conscious awareness allows a level of 'psychological freedom' (May, et al., 1969). It is through this work that I had begun to create a dialogue with my own shadow to bring out the repressed parts of my personality.

My continuing research led to the work of Ken Wilber in *No Boundaries*, who observes that 'suffering is the first grace...suffering is almost a time of rejoicing, for it marks the birth of creative insight' (2001, p. 76). Wilber also observes that our current 'problem of living' is based on our cultural ontological position that there exists a boundary between life and death and so we have created a set of opposites (2001, p. 27). Culturally, we have separated life and death when in fact 'all opposites are actually aspects of one underlying reality' (2001, p. 27). Wilber points out that it is not to 'separate the opposites...but to unify and harmonize the opposites, both positive and negative...to encompass both', enabling peace and to be able to transcend (2001, p. 27). Society shows this separation through our fixation with anti-aging messages as well as the separation of our elders from the family home. As Ram Dass observes, society has a perennial fear of change and 'that we need to 'accept the terrible beauty of nature's wisdom' (cited in Phil Cousineau, *Once and Future Myths*, 2001, p. 156-157). In terms of the shadow, Wilber observes that we need to befriend and integrate the negative aspects of our personalities. It is through the 'playing of our opposites...giving the shadow equal time, that we eventually extend our identity...the split between the persona and the shadow is wholed and healed' (1991, p. 273).

Wilber observes humanity has created an 'ecological catastrophe' and unless the world becomes more 'holistic, integrative, earth honouring and less arrogantly human-centred...humanity is committing to a slow and gruesome suicide' (2000, p. 12). I believe that we all have a part to play in this and the first change comes when we start to honour our own reality of life and death so that we can integrate and appreciate our own reality. Anderson notes that 'intuitive inquirers 'explore topics that require attention to the culture at large...a topic may be the tip of an iceberg of a call for

change from the culture at large' (2011, p. 17). So, when one person brings change into their lives it has a rippling effect on those around. This so important because as a society 'our culture is singular for its ignorance of death' (Hillman, 1979, p. 64).

William Bloom in *Soulution* points to the dawn of a new holistic spirituality, one that is better prepared at working with the contemporary issues of the 21st century from a practical viewpoint (2005, pp. 3-4). He suggests that we need to integrate the scientist and the philosopher; to open a 'third way' of knowing' (2005, p. 260). Felicity Warner in *The Soul Midwives Handbook* observes that 'in both living and dying we make our choices to feed our soul's requirements for evolution' (2013, p. 228). Newton observes that 'in western society...our belief in the finality of death is an obstacle to healing' (2001). To understand and be able to work with the illusion of death, we need to understand the journey with an open heart. Warner describes three distinct psycho-spiritual phases of the dying process; chaos, surrender and transcendence' (2013, p. 229).

In current times, chaos is all around and the negative shadow is surfacing to be healed as it has been repressed for too long. Humanity has the opportunity now to embrace this chaos to enable their souls to ripen. As Kingsley observes 'If we want to grow up, become true men and women, we have to face death before we die. We have to discover what it is to be able to slide behind the scenes and disappear' (2017, p. 6). I imagine that if we turn around to face death, it is within this space that we will find our greatest insights and acceptance to our natural selves. I also consider that we need to practice the art of non-being so that we can face our inevitable death with grace and compassion rather than fear. My understanding gave birth to my psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool.

My ontological position around the transition of life and death is that it is an illusion, we simply move from one reality to another. However, even though this is my belief, I am very apprehensive and scared of the impending day. I am also aware of the family and friends around me that will also go through the pangs of grief from the loss. This has been the fundamental reason why this work

has been so important; so that I can strengthen my connection with death, as well as to soften the impact of my departure and allow others to grieve healthily.

Stage 5: Fermentation

It is within the 'fermentation' stage that I have experienced my own death through use of the psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool; as illustrated in figure 1 below. This stage can be split into two phases 'Putrefaction and Spiritization' (Sol & Luna, 2016). Putrefaction is the disintegration of our former selves. The self-reflection tool allowed my own inner death about a particular life transition that I had experienced. It was coming through the self-reflection that I moved into the 'Spiritization'. I began to see that I did not need to continue suffering through an old wound, thus moving into self-acceptance.

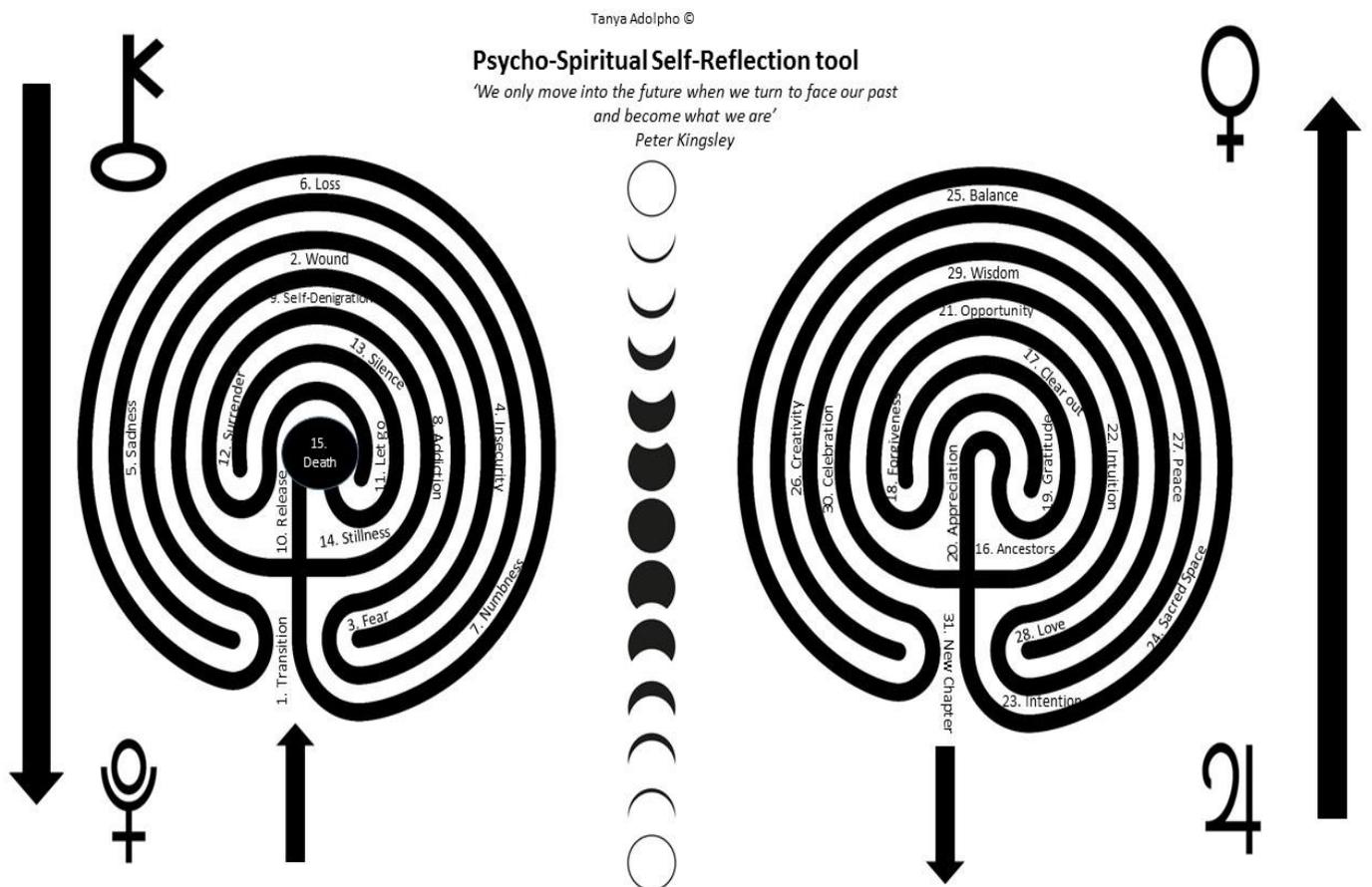


Figure 1: Psycho-spiritual Self Reflection Tool - Tanya Adolpho ©

The development of the psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool was designed within the epistemology of Existentialism. It is through the work of Rollo May in *The Discovery of Being* (1983) that my own ontological position has been confirmed. I need to be able to have a healthy relationship between being and non-being, essentially life and death. Death of self is essential to awakening our true potential. I believe that we must learn to let go and honour what we are no longer. May discusses that 'anxiety is the experience of the threat of imminent non-being' (1983, p. 109). May further suggests, existential analysts 'hold that the confronting of death gives the most positive reality to life itself' (1983, p. 107).

It is of note that my intuition at the beginning of this programme, led me to undertake the certificate in Counselling simultaneously. I understood that both were going to be important for my own development. I am aware now of the different theoretical aspects around therapy and how each therapy has developed over the years. With this, I can see a spiritual perspective, that humanity over decades has been on a forward trajectory of self-awareness. This is illustrated by Wilber below (figure 2), who discusses the fact that therapy has evolved by 'directing our awareness to the entire organism and not just the disembodied psyche'. Wilber suggests that we are 'approaching different levels of human awareness from different angles' (2001, p.78).

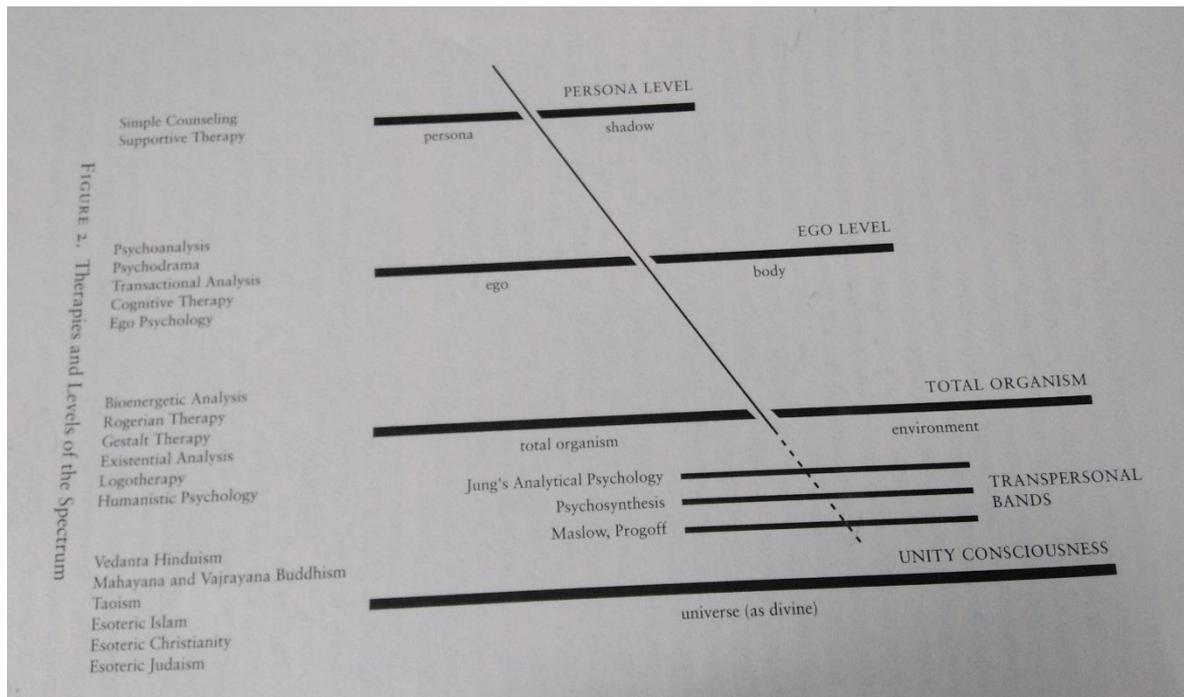


Figure 2: Therapies and Levels of the Spectrum (Wilber, 2001, p. 14).

In further support of Wilber's theory, Welwood's approach to therapy suggests that the eastern philosophical and the western therapeutic approach are essential for the 'full realisation of the potentials inherent in human existence' (2000, p. 4). With the eastern approach we can access 'the essential nature of reality, which lies beyond the scope of the conventional conceptual mind' (2000, p. 4). The influence of eastern philosophical practices can be seen through the rise of yoga and meditation within western cultures but as Babb's (1991) mentioned earlier in the essay, there is this idea that these concepts are just skimming the surface of the truth.

Western therapeutic practices are based on 'clinical practice and conceptual analysis, which allows us to trace specific causes and conditions' (Welwood, 2000, p. 4). However, as Ernesto Spinelli in *Demystifying Therapy* argues, within western therapy we have succumbed to 'notions and hypotheses gleaned from theories that have either originated from psychotherapeutic assumptions or have been extrapolated from more general theories... in order to substantiate therapeutic claims' (1994, p. 2). Welwood believes that true healing comes from connecting with the philosophical and

psychological theories of the East and the West, which 'ultimately represent two different aspects of ourselves' (2000, p.4). I have designed a tool that brings these two aspects together, to bring an understanding that paradoxically, is to accept pain and suffering which will then ultimately lead to joy and liberation.

It is through the eastern and western therapeutic principles as well as the connection to archetypal psychology that the foundations for the psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool is created. Hillman observes within archetypal psychology, 'myth lives vividly in our symptoms and fantasies and in our conceptual systems' (Hillman, 1979, p. 23). Hillman further explains, 'myth is a psychology of antiquity' and psychology is a mythology of modernity' (1979, p. 23). The foundation myth behind this project has been the myth of Chiron, the wounded healer. This myth offers a mythological way of psychologically understanding, that through any wound an individual has the capacity to move from suffering to a place of healing (Kearney, 2007).

This psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool asks a person to acknowledge and work with a life transition, so that the stages of grief and the repressed parts of personae can be fully appreciated and accepted. Michael Kearney in *Mortally Wounded*, observes that when individuals are ready to move from the known to the unknown, 'they experience a new peace, a richness and a depth in their living and their dying...they come into the meaning of the soul'. However, he further observes that individuals that withstand the shift to descend become 'disconnected and alienated from the deepest and most fundamental aspects of him or herself' (2007, p.45). Kearney describes this place as a space where you can develop 'soul pain' (2007, p. 31).

Soul pains are the scars that are created through the wounds of life and as Warner (2013) and Kearney (2007) observe, these can come out within the first stage of the dying process. It is here that people will meet their shadows for the first time. Soul pain is the cry of the oppressed personal qualities, the shadow sides of ourselves that need to be heard and usually come through

just before we die. This soul pain coming through at this time of our lives can create turmoil causing the darkest hour of our lives. I believe that to die should be a time to rejoice rather than be full of regrets and questions. I view meeting the shadow as the door to finding true healing and to create understanding on our past. The opportunity to meet the shadow needs to come before death.

Stage 6: Distillation

The impact of this experience has been profoundly deep. The integration of the aforementioned stages has created an understanding and acceptance of who I am. This brings the essay to the 'distillation' stage where all realisations remain permanent (Sol & Luna, 2016). Claire Dunne (2000) in her illustrated biography of Carl Jung, brings insight into Jung's psychology theories around the conscious and unconscious which resonate with what I am experiencing. Jung observes, as cited in Dunne, that 'people live on only one or two floors of a large apartment building which is our minds, forgetting the rest' (2000, p. 105). Dunne explains that there is an unconscious background that works covertly and that plugging into this can deepen our experience of ourselves and how we relate to the world (2000, p. 105).

Dunne highlighted that the individuation process involves observing and accepting the shadow to reach into the next layer of the psyche. Zweig and Abrams observe that the 'personal shadow develops naturally in every young child' through how our environment, people and events shape our self-image (1991, p xvi). It is the personal attributes that we feel do not fit into our desired self-image at the time, that can be buried into our shadow and so become qualities that we do not explore and remain hidden. Hence, 'all the feelings and capacities that are rejected by the ego and exiled into the shadow, contribute to the hidden power of the dark side of human nature' (Zweig & Abrams, 1991, p. xvii).

Importantly, Welwood observes psychological healing is the 'indispensable element that allows us to leave, old, self-destructive patterns behind and turn in a new direction' (2000, p. 137).

He further indicates that the nature of our 'dis – ease is that we continually judge, reject and turn away from certain areas of our experience that cause us discomfort, pain or anxiety'. It is this inner battle that he suggests, 'keeps us inwardly divided, creating pressure and stress and cutting us off from the totality of who we are' (2000, p. 135). My self-reflection tool asks the individual to turn back to experience the pain and discomfort, in order to ascertain what they are struggling to understand about themselves and what is being repressed. Mark Manson observes in his article *The 3 Levels of Self-Awareness*, that 'self-awareness is wasted if it does not result in self-acceptance'; which links back to Welwood's concept of spiritual bypassing (2018, p. 4).

Stage 7: Coagulation

The last stage 'coagulation' is where you break free from all constraints, finding the essence of the alchemical process, the 'materia prima: the spirit' (Sol & Luna, 2016). The alchemical process within this experience has been the catalyst to the start of my own individuation, the materia prima is the connecting to my Soul and the dialogue to my shadow. I firmly believe that we all possess an innate ability to heal and that we all have a spiritual responsibility to access this space for the greater good of both our higher selves and humanity. I have progressed to studying the Level 4 Integrative diploma in counselling deepening my understanding within the research. My destination is unknown, but I know that my work with death and the shadow is unfinished and needs more attention. I plan to further explore this in my dissertation. As Manson observes 'the desire for more positive experiences is itself a negative experience. Paradoxically, the acceptance of one's negative experience is itself a positive experience' (2016, p. 9).

In conclusion, this essay has provided an overview of my alchemical spiritual transformation. I have gone through the seven stages illustrating how my self-reflection tool has come into existence. The various philosophers and psychologists quoted, lend strength to the self-reflection model shown in figure 1 above. This project has had a powerful impact on both my personal and professional

worlds. On a personal level, I have begun to access parts of my psyche that have been repressed. I have begun the work to unite the shadow and the persona so that I can bring a wholeness to my personality. On a professional level, I have created a psycho-spiritual tool that has the capacity to allow people to take agency for their own healing, helping them to move into a deeper level of self-awareness and acceptance. I intend to move this tool into my yoga and meditation sessions providing both support and time to help people meditate on a deeper level. My aim is to bring eastern and western principles together into one room to help find unity, bringing psychological health back into our psyches to ripple out into the world.

Word Count: 4379

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