

Learning Journal Review

“The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it”

(Stevens, 1971, p.446).

Introduction: Beginnings

This essay is my attempt to piece together a coherent narrative from my entries in my Learning Journal. For me the Learning Journal has been at the heart of the MA, holding together all the disparate reflections and questions relating to the programme material, a blank page onto which I could write down my thoughts and untangle my ideas. I have always kept a journal so the act of writing each day was not a difficult one for me, rather I found it more challenging to stay afloat in the ocean of images, poems and reflections that came to me during this time.

I start the MA with a dream. In this dream I am on a small boat, sailing close to the shoreline. I can see the harbour and I know that I will arrive safely. I feel protected. In our first learning journal group I share this dream with the other students in my group. Someone



Figure 1: My dream image

mentions Jung and the “night sea journey”. I write this down and highlight it for emphasis. I know this is something I will come back to. Indeed, in the preparatory reading for the MA I am particularly drawn to Jean Gebser’s discussion on the motif of the sea voyage with respect to the emergence of ego consciousness. He writes that such myths:

begin to take shape as man becomes aware of his soul ... Every such voyage is a symbol of man's gradual mastery over the soul ... *every voyage is a discovery of self.* (1986, p.69).

This turning inwards to see the depths of the personal soul is something which appeals to me as I embark on the MA. I fancy that I am setting out on my own voyage of discovery, uncertain of what I might find as I look inwards and how it might manifest in the exterior world. I sense that deep experiences are available to me as I study on this MA, but of course at the moment of beginning I am unsure of what these might be.

Autumn 2018 - Fire

The autumn of 2018 passes quickly as we immerse ourselves in the material of the first module. The work is exciting, but difficult as we are introduced to key philosophers, theologians and theorists. I have moved to Canterbury on a whim to study this course and I feel overwhelmed by many aspects of my new life. Nevertheless, I feel that the MA satisfies a deep longing in me, namely my desire to combine spirituality and intellectual endeavour. I sense that I am being initiated into the secrets of the heavens. Re-reading my journal I am struck by one entry from October 11, 2018:

My grandfather was a fire-watcher on the rooftop of Shell during the 2nd World War (William Thomas). T.S. Eliot was also a fire-watcher on the rooftop of Faber & Faber. 'Little Gidding'. Spiritual fire – transcendence and resolution?

I am intrigued by this entry, and this connection although vague to the great poet and also to the fire of spiritual awakening which is described in this fourth and final poem of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It seems so strange and out of place in my journal and I have no recollection of writing it. Nevertheless, it seems to express somehow a yearning for spiritual transformation and for "fire which consumes and purifies" (Gardner, 1980, p.45).

Aside from this, I become deeply interested in the writings of C.G. Jung. So much so that I decide that I will write my first essay on his work. In particular, I have a strong connection to Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961).

I feel that reading this work connects me to my “other” self, the part of me that is drawn to the numinous and the workings of the inner life. I immerse myself in his work. I read and learn for the first time about alchemy, synchronicity, the collective unconscious and archetypes. This material also seems to bring up many questions and doubts in my mind about the course of my own life and my spiritual practice:

My main feeling today has been that perhaps I'm living too much in the literal world... with no reference to the divine or the sacred in my daily life... The only thing I seem to do without fail is light my candles as somehow, they bring comfort to me. (November 3, 2018).

I clearly sense a split between my inner and outer worlds, between the secular and the sacred in my life. I often feel divided and yearn, like Jung, for the relief of “psychic wholeness” (Jung, 1961, p. 192). This longing is manifested in the pivotal event of my MA which occurred just a few weeks later: the fire. The fire, which swept through my room one evening in late November 2018, seems to awaken me as if from a deep sleep. It bursts forth with immense power from a single tea light. It is both breath and lightening. Despite the danger, the flames, which lick at the ceiling like the tongues of magnificent dragons, capture my imagination. I stand motionless. The only thing I can see through the flames and the thick smoke is a small print of the Virgin Mary on the opposite wall. My mind is filled with Mary. I feel presence and I know that I am protected. Distracted, my left foot is badly burned, severing my intimate connection to the world. For a while at least, I am cast adrift.



Figure 2: The fire

In all cultural traditions, fire is the principle of transformation, the purest element. Fire is initiation, an explosion, a release of energy, the spirit of rebirth. In the Christian religion it is a symbol of the Holy Spirit or divinity. This experience, although terrifying, seems to be laden with meaning. I ask myself: what is

the purpose of this event for my soul? Why has this happened to me?

The task of arriving at an adequate explanation for the “meaning” of the fire begins with my understanding of the event as synchronistic. Jung defines synchronicity as “the coincidence of a psychic state in the observer with a simultaneous, objective, external event” (as quoted in Main, 2007, p.16). Indeed, I come to see the fire as a physical manifestation of powerful emotions and energies which reflect “unconscious issues or concerns seeking to gain voice” (Dirkx, 2000). I understand that the work that I am doing on the MA is causing me to face certain personal wounds that I have long tried to ignore. Seen in this light, the fire is an explosion of these repressed energies. This explanation also seems to fit the MA’s grounding in transformative learning practices, and in particular with the Jungian approach put forward by John Dirkx. Dirkx writes:

we are all influenced and shaped by the forces of individuation going on unconsciously within our lives...Transformative learning refers to processes through which we consciously participate in this journey of individuation. (2000).

I wonder if I am entering on such a journey. Certainly, my participation in this event seems to suggest a shift in the way in which I dwell in the world. It is as if the MA has seeped out of my head and through my fingers and into the physical or literal world. The lines between the internal and the external have become blurred, bringing into question the subject/object divide which is the legacy of

Enlightenment thought. Finally, such a synchronicity seems to suggest the interconnectedness of all things, the *Unus Mundus*. I feel a sense of relief to know that I am not as separate from the world as I once believed.

As Jung, points out, “Whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly on the attitude of the observing consciousness” (2017, p.435). Immersed in my reading for the MA and guided by our lectures on the four senses hermeneutic, I quite naturally come to see the fire as a powerful symbol in my life, one which points to a deeper reality co-existing alongside the literal or rational world which our senses perceive. In my journal I copy the following quote from my lecture notes, “The symbol makes the impossible happen, it becomes the node on which the transcendent can meet the mundane” (Struck, 2004, p.75). Indeed, it does feel as though spirit has entered briefly into my world demonstrating a more “universal and enduring level of being” (Main, 2007, p.31).

In touching my soul in this way, and moving me out of the literal sense of the world, the fire also arguably signifies a sort of tropological turn. I am changed by this event, and have a deeper understanding of the numinous, or the divine, as immanent and working in and through all things. In this mood I record the following section of William Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* into my journal and understand, perhaps for the first time, the feeling which he is attempting to articulate:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (1798).

Interestingly, on the night before the fire my best friend has a dream in which I am standing on the edge of a sailing boat when a whale emerges from the sea water and engulfs me. This is all she can recall of the dream. I look up the meaning of whale symbolism and find two interesting explanations which I write down:

1. A whale may symbolise your mother, or femininity in general.

2. Being swallowed by a whale may symbolise a descent into the unconscious ... the result may be the discovery of your true self. (Ackroyd, 1993, p.305-306).

I am encouraged by these interpretations, and by the fact that my close friend (who lives in another country) has had a dream which so clearly connects to my current experience. Again, this further synchronicity gives me a powerful sense that things are as they should be.

Spring 2019 - Water

Such was the strength of this experience, that it becomes like the spring from which everything else in my life flows. Indeed, the rest of the MA is spent trying to recover from and untangle myself from this event. It is followed by many dreams about water: swimming in rivers, streams, standing by the sea, drowning, floods. It is the water sent to clean and purify. I am beset by emotion and seem to sink away from the world. I long only for sleep and my dreams. I find the work of James Hillman through a friend I make on the MA course. I copy the following, which strikes me as significant, into my journal:

Moistening in dreams refers to the soul's delight in its death... Entering the waters relaxes one's hold on things and lets go of where one has been stuck... Literalizations that kill the flow and bury the soul always need dissolving... This is an ever recurring process, as in alchemy, describing a cycle of soul making (1979, p.152-p.153).

Water here is the “counterpart of spirit”, the natural complement to my fire (Jung,



Figure 3: My watery underworld

1995, p.198). Certainly, it feels very much as though I am stuck in some kind of watery underworld, wading through the murky, silty depths of the River Stour, which runs in two channels on either side of my house in Canterbury. I feel removed from “everyday” life. I

compose the following during this period:

Heavy, overcast skies. It was like Hade's Underworld. Black shadows cast against a green, grey landscape. Spindly branches and wisps of once vibrant plants litter the ground. It is almost as if I were walking under the 'real' world. This was the dead world.

I come to understand this time as a sort of “night sea journey” of my own. I am out at sea, alone, far from all known landscapes and people. I return to Jung at this time who writes that this voyage “is a kind of *descensus ad inferos* – a descent into Hades and a journey to the land of ghosts somewhere beyond this world, beyond consciousness, hence an immersion in the unconscious” (1995, p.198). I feel this deeply. I write the following rather sombre lines on the 25 January, 2019:

Sleep, the deathless dream.
Like black ghostly figures from the underworld
Bare trees rise up to haunt the landscape
Forgotten presences who stand exposed in the cold air.

They remind me that I am living in this “other” world
An ethereal figure roaming these rooms
A barren space,
Dark ashes stain the white walls.

Another image from this time: a young woman sits and weeps. Her heart breaks and breaks again. A thousand times. It is as if she is crying for all the sorrows of the world. The river of tears that never ends, a loneliness which she feels deep in her bones, an ache for another world. She doesn't want to be here. Again, I return to Hillman, who writes that the soul, “tortured and crying for help, comfort and love ... is the soul in the neurosis trying to make itself heard ... for the symptom is the first herald of an awakening psyche which will not tolerate any more abuse. Through the symptom the psyche demands attention” (1989, p.18).

I respond to this demand for attention by engaging with images and ideas that soothe me. I enjoy the material of the second module as it appeals to my aesthetic sensibility. In particular, I am fascinated by the lecture given by Wilma Fraser on Sophia, Divine Wisdom. We discuss our reasons for being on the course, the way in which this MA, in giving us space to pursue transcendence in our everyday lives, is a rare exception in adult education. She talks eloquently about “gathering in the

floating parts” of ourselves and I sense that the MA, in forcing me to look at my past experiences, is in fact helping me to make sense of my “life worlds” and the myths that I personally live by (Fraser, 2019). She also emphasises our need to be “translators” of our experience, to bring back the jewels of our past and to polish them (Fraser, 2019). This image is one which stays with me as I consider more deeply my reasons for deciding to undertake this MA. I realise that I have always longed for transcendence, to escape the mundane and the ordinary, and that through this desire for transcendence I have often become ungrounded. The MA thus becomes the space in which I can articulate some of that longing, loss and melancholy through concrete language and expression. This move towards a more balanced response to the world and an acknowledgment of the power of both immanence and transcendence is an important one for me as I have always struggled with feelings of disembodiment. It is almost as if the learning journey of the MA is calling me to return to the world and to an embodied expression of experience.

In desiring a more embodied experience of spirituality and inspired by Wilma’s words, I thus decide to focus on Sophia for my second essay. I also have further personal reasons for this. Since the fire, I have imagined Mary as a sort of guide and protector and I hope that in drawing closer to Sophia I will understand more of Mary’s essence. I am also drawn to working with the Divine Feminine as a means of reclaiming the power of the feminine in my life. Above all, though, I hope that she will release me from some of the psychic pain that I am experiencing. I write in my journal:

Everyday I want to honour the Goddess somehow. Divine Wisdom. I move from my vision of Mary, the elevated light, purity and goodness to Sophia, who seems to offer many aspects, many faces. The mother, but also the seductress, the Wild Woman...I grow tired. Is the Goddess Sophia what I have been looking for? The likeness I seek? I have always sought...

In this last part, however, she eludes me. I grasp after her as a symbol of the Divine Feminine, the female goddess, the seductress, the Great Mother, but she slips through my fingers. I copy down the following in the hope that it will inspire such a revelation in relation to Sophia, “each individual needs to discover the indwelling source of authentic conscience and spiritual guidance, the divinity within” but my personal experience is mostly one of emptiness and of loss (Whitmont, 1982, p.x). In my journal I record my resistance to this work, to the essay and to Sophia herself. I feel abandoned. Moreover, I grow

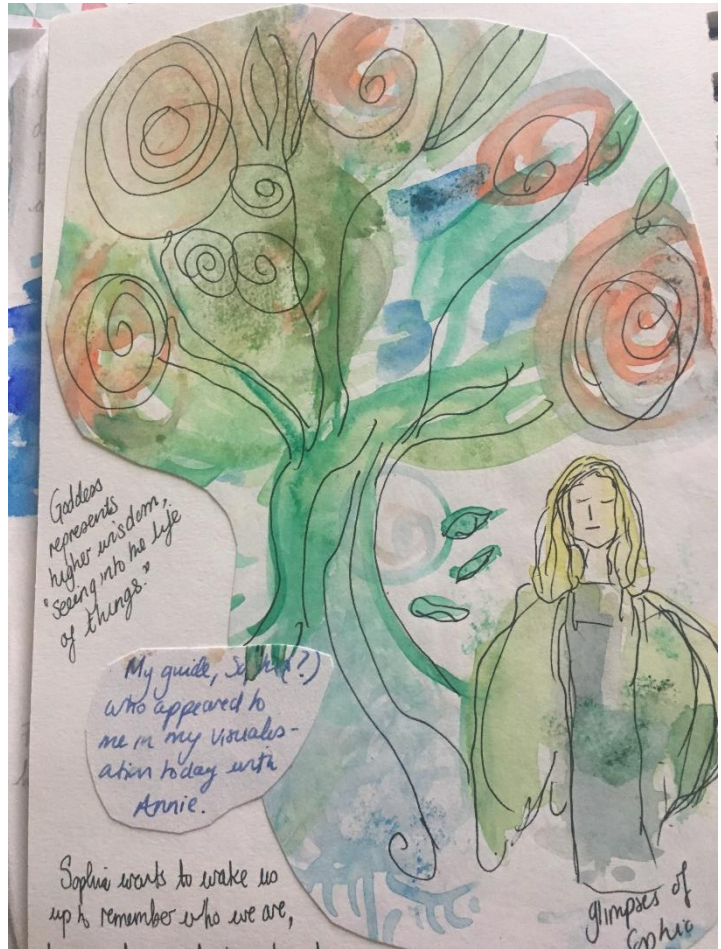


Figure 4: My musings on Sophia

confused about the source of my internal guidance and my connection to Christianity. I had assumed before starting this MA that I was an Anglican with Catholic sensibilities. I find, however, that with my growing knowledge of Sophia, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe in a patriarchal God:

5 March, 2019. I feel as though I'm suffering a crisis of all things spiritual. I don't know what to think anymore, about anything. I just long for blankness, or emptiness. Or a garden.

I clearly yearn for a more embodied connection to the divine, a connection which is not only thought, but deeply felt. I ache to feel the presence of Sophia in my life, just as I had felt Mary to be with me as I stood watching the blazing fire. Despite this, I feel nothing. It is almost as though whilst I can see the symbol of Sophia and recognise its truth and its beauty, I cannot connect to her in a heartfelt way. Her story does not reach me. Somehow, in her otherness, in her ineffable qualities, I lose her.

Out of this confusion, however, come moments of piercing clarity. Brief, but illuminating nevertheless. Through my reading, I begin to sense a deeper truth, veiled perhaps in dogma, which is echoed through all the great religions and spiritual traditions, which is the knowledge of our own divinity and unity with God. This truth, which I have perhaps always known intuitively, speaks to my soul. This dawning sense of understanding marks a shift in my restless search for Sophia. I realise that I need to move in another direction. Another apogee of the MA:

10 March, 2019. Between waking and dreaming I was in a strange state. I breathed fire, I imagined myself dancing, naked, clay oozing between my fingers. Delight and death rolled into one. The problem is I don't know what to do with myself, with my creative energy. I feel most acutely the desire to go out into the world.

And beneath those words I note down Romanyshyn's lines, "one's work is bounded by one's life, which is the larger circle. The researcher has to go back into life" (2007, p.199). I repeatedly record in my journal at this time the desire to return to life, to energy, to fire and light, away from this watery underworld. To take the enchantment of the MA and venture out into the unknown.

Summer 2019 - Earth

As spring slips into summer, we enter into the final modules of the first year of the MA. I feel profoundly unsettled and I come to realise that following the fire, I cannot stay in my room or in the house. I finally move home to my father's house in Somerset, and then in June to London, a place which I feel is bursting with energy and youthful fire. Nevertheless, my feeling of homelessness persists. It is, I believe, both literal and metaphorical. For not only do I encounter a sense of rootlessness in my lack of a safe and stable home environment, but also more broadly in my experience of the separation of my consciousness from my felt self. I know now that my work is to find a true home in my body:

While I have always thought that I am seeking transcendence I am perhaps looking for descent into myself. For an earthy and wholesome connection to myself. A sense of being here. Of being in my body. (10 April, 2019).



Figure 5: I paint mandalas in a drive towards wholeness

It is therefore to the sustaining earth and thus to my body, that I return to as I come full circle in my quest for meaning. Or, as in the words of T.S. Eliot, “In my end is my beginning” (1940). This move is a radical one for me as I have always been a decidedly cerebral person, dreamy and “stuck in my head”.

It seems to require a renewed commitment to myself and to a new way of being. In my journal I note down at this time:

The opening required ... is a simultaneous inner and outer opening – a sacred agreement not to shut down and hide anymore, a conscious decision to become more fully embodied on every level (Pearce, 2016, p.187).

I decide that I would like to incorporate this in some way in to my Creative Project. In particular, as I have always struggled to articulate my needs and desires, I feel that this project should include my voice. I like the idea of using the voice as a tool of presence and empowerment. This becomes like the germ of an idea that incubates in my mind over the following months. I am drawn to texts that deal with embodiment, the Divine Feminine and the goddess.

The final module of the MA is particularly enjoyable. I like the sense of enchantment it gives me and the joyful and playful nature of the material. We are encouraged to employ not only our rational intellect, but also our imagination and our intuitive faculties as we explore a wide range of topics including ufology, spirit possession, discarnate beings and holistic science. This acknowledgment of the need to bring together both the eye of reason and the eye of imagination, the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere, seems like a fitting end to the first year of the MA. A high point for me is William Rowlandson’s lecture devoted to fairies, angels and other imaginal entities. I am delighted by this honouring of the

imaginal space within the academic sphere and am encouraged by the suggestion that we should move past the questions of whether these beings exist or not, to behaving as if they are already present in our lives. Finally, I feel that I am honouring my whole self, my rational mind and my imagination, in writing my final essay of the year on angelic beings. In my journal I record a sense of wonder that through their presence in my imaginal life, the experience of angels might live on. Again, I am intrigued by the idea that our exterior and interior worlds are intermeshed. I highlight the following words in my notes “possession begins at the moment you decide to follow the ritual!” (Rowlandson, 2019). In my journal at this time I draw on this lecture as I think about the fire as an interaction between my mind and the imagination. It becomes a moment of magic because I have chosen to see it that way.

At the end of the first year, I have new questions to ask, better questions. I no longer ask what is the meaning of the fire, but rather, what did the fire want me to leave behind? What remains after the fire has died out? I enter into a conversation with the fire. Through this conversation I see how the outer casing which I have built up over the course of my lifetime is crumbling. I have experienced pain, sadness and depression over this year. Yet, despite this, I sense that this time of endings will give me space to grow and move into the next phase of my life. It is an emptying out and a washing clean, “he will baptise you with Holy Spirit and fire” are the words that come to mind (Matthew 3:11). I copy into my journal:

Endings are terminations of particular phases and trends; they are indications of change due...What inwardly is in need of being killed, destroyed, dissolved, or radically changed or overcome? The dying of an obsolete self-image. (Whitmont, 1982, p.203-204).

This is finally the meaning of the fire for me, an ending and a beginning. Or in the words of Jung, “the vision of the symbol is a pointer to the onward course of life” (2017, p.114). I certainly sense as I write these words that I am closing a chapter of my life and looking forward into the future.

4,195 words.

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